

Voters apathy and democracy in Nigeria: perspectives on 2019 and 2023 presidential elections in Kaduna State

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Abstract

Democracy is widely regarded today as one of the most universally accepted forms of government. It is often equated with, or seen as synonymous with, good governance that fosters socio-economic and political development. As a political system, it provides a framework through which public policies are formulated by a political class that remains open to both recruitment and exit, while maintaining the trust and confidence of the entire citizenry. On the other hand, voter apathy poses significant challenges to democracy, as it is perceived as a lack of affection and commitment toward the state. It reflects citizens' indifference towards political processes, including elections, public opinion, and civic duties. An apathetic citizen, therefore, shows little or no interest in the social and political affairs of the nation. This paper aims to explore the impact of voter apathy on democracy in Nigeria. The study relies predominantly on secondary data sources. It recommends that a dynamic civil service and strong state institutions are essential for the sustenance of democracy. Moreover, the success of democracy depends on the ability of both government and citizens to fulfill their mutual expectations. While citizens look to the government to provide basic social amenities, the government expects citizens to uphold their civic responsibilities. Failure of the government to meet these expectations often results in voter apathy.

Keywords; Voters' Apathy; Democratic consolidation; Civic Responsibility; Nigeria's Presidential Elections; Nigeria's democratic challenges

1. Introduction

The survival of democracy, as a key driver of sustainable development, peaceful coexistence, unity, and integration in any society, largely hinges on the conduct of credible, free, and relatively fair elections. In democratic systems, as pointed out by Rattanaseevee, Akarapattananukul & Chirawut (2024) elections play a pivotal role in ensuring the representation of the popular will, thereby fostering confidence in the legitimacy of the political system. The centrality and significance of elections to the endurance and consolidation of democracy have led many scholars, such as Rattanaseevee, Akarapattananukul and Chirawut (2024), Jega (2014), Codrington III, (2025), and Abumbe, and Owa (2024) to argue that elections are synonymous with democracy, asserting that without elections, representative governance cannot thrive. However, despite the fundamental role of elections in democratic societies, voter turnout in Nigeria has been on a steady decline since the return to civilian rule on May 29, 1999, particularly from the 2007 general elections to the present day. This downward trend becomes evident when examining voter turnout percentages. In 1999, voter turnout stood at 52.3%, rising to 69% in 2003. Since then, the figures have consistently fallen: 58% in 2007, 53.68% in 2011, and 43.65% in the 2015 general elections. A similar trend continued in 2019, where only 35% of registered voters participated (Yusuf, 2023).

The decline became even more pronounced during the recently concluded 2023 general elections. Despite various efforts and heightened calls for participation, voter turnout dropped further to 24.9%. Out of the 93.4 million registered voters for the 2023 elections, 87.2 million collected their Permanent Voters Cards (PVCs), but only 24.9 million voters cast their ballots on Election Day. According to Yusuf (2023), this marks the lowest voter participation rate in Nigeria's six decades of independence (1999 to date).

Further highlighting the extent of voter apathy in Nigeria, Yusuf (2023) noted that prior to 2023, the 2019 elections held the record for the lowest turnout, with only 34.75%. In 2019, merely 28.6 million votes were cast out of 82 million eligible voters. President Muhammadu Buhari secured re-election with just over 15 million votes in a country of over 200 million people. However, the 2023 presidential election set a new record low, as President Bola Tinubu was elected with only 9 million votes to govern a population of 220 million Nigerians (Yusuf, 2023). This indicates that between the 2019 and 2023 general elections, approximately 3 million Nigerians withdrew from the electoral process. This steady decline in voter turnout underscores the significant challenges facing democracy today. Low turnout suggests that fewer citizens view elections as the primary mechanism for legitimizing political parties' control over governance. It may also reflect a diminishing public interest in political parties as central institutions of democratic representation. Clearly, voter apathy in Nigeria has reached a critical and deteriorating stage (Abubakar and Bashir; 2025).

Consequently, there is an urgent need to explore alternative measures to reverse this alarming trend in Nigeria's democratic landscape to sustain and strengthen the country's nascent democracy. Democracy derives its meaning from broad-based participation, and voter turnout serves as a measure of inclusivity and meaningful engagement. In essence, citizen involvement in the political process is a vital indicator of a healthy democracy. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to examine the effects of voter apathy on democracy in Nigeria, focusing on the 2019 and 2023 presidential elections in Kaduna State.

2. Literature

2.1 The Concept of Democracy

Political and social scientists have provided various definitions and interpretations of the concept of democracy. According to Ramos (2024) and Johnson (2023), democracy signifies "power of the people." It represents a form of government where the governing body constitutes a relatively large segment of the entire population. Claassen et al (2025) further conceptualizes democracy as not only a form of government but also as a form of state and a way of life. As a form of government, it implies that the legal authority within the community resides with the people collectively, and governance is determined by majority rule through voting within the electorate and the community (Ogunbanjo; 2024). Okafor et al. (2022) describe democracy as a system of governance in which the people wield governing power either directly or through representatives elected periodically.

Drawing from the above definitions, democracy can be seen as a governmental system where the sovereign authority of the state resides with the people, who serve as the source of all state power, participating in governance either directly or through elected representatives. In simpler terms, democracy is governance by the people. It encompasses fundamental human rights, including freedom of expression, the right to life, human dignity, personal liberty, fair hearing, freedom of thought, assembly and association, movement, and political participation. Additionally, democracy may also refer to the control of an organization by its members, who actively engage in decision-making processes.

2.2 The Concept/Word Apathy

The term "apathy" originates from the Greek language, meaning "without feelings." In essence, apathy refers to a lack of interest or a complete withdrawal from one's civic responsibilities, resulting in non-participation at any cost. Some scholars define apathy as an absence of individual engagement, marked by inactivity and indifference towards a state's political activities (Paltieli; 2023) and (Moez; 2024). From

another perspective, apathy is characterized by a lack of awareness and interest in the electoral process (Agaigbe, 2015).

2.3 The concept of Voter Apathy

Voter Apathy is therefore a state whereby the voters shun away to exercise their franchise right and civic responsibility in casting vote(s) to any candidate of their choice despite their political participation on supporting political party, candidate and possession of voters' card or permanent voters card (PVC). Alahira, and Harisu (2025) viewed voters' apathy as decline to vote by the electorate. Agaigbe (2015) submitted that voter apathy goes above passivity or inactive of electorates to vote, but it is insensitivity of voter to electoral process especially voting that characterized with disenchantment due to lack of confidence and satisfaction to political system and sometime ignorance and absence of proper education. Indeed, voters' apathy led to low voter turnout (Agaigbe, 2015; Agu et al., 2013).

Thus, voter apathy is a situation in which the person who is legally and constitutionally empowered to exercise one of his/her civic duty, right or obligation (voting) during an election shows an absence of interest in, or concern about of partaking during the voting processes. In other words, it is a situation whereby the substantial numbers of people who are legally and constitutionally supposed to participate in voting in a given consciously or otherwise refuse to vote during electoral processes. Voter apathy is therefore absence or lack of enthusiasm of the people towards the electoral process, particularly voting. The resultant effect of voter apathy is poor voter turnout

It is clear from the foregoing analysis that Voter apathy has become a great challenge to sustainability of democracy especially among developing countries (Agu et al., 2013) and has the tendency of affecting the political system of both developed and under developed nations. Though, there are several factors that may lead to voter apathy, in Nigeria, Amanye et al. (2015) asserts that, most of the electorate believed that their vote do not count. Agu et al., (2013) indicates that violence related to electoral process had created unfriendly environment of fear to voters. They also perceived that poor handling of elections like lack of adequate security measures contributed to poor turnout and voters' apathy (Agu et al., 2013; Amanye, et al 2015). In this respect, fear and anxiety by the political thugs and absence of adequate security instill into the mind of electorate the desire to shun away from elections.

Amanye et al (2015) submitted that lack of trust on corrupt politicians; absence of adequate security at polling centers; the use of militants by the politicians to harass and intimidate the electorates; illiteracy and poverty; failure of the elected leaders to account for their electorates and hoax news by the Nigerian media on political criticism are among the factors exacerbating voters' apathy.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

In order to provide a logical framework for explaining and interpreting the findings of this research, and to critically assess its central argument, the *Rational Choice Theory* developed by Downs in 1957 has been employed. The core proposition of this theory is that voters participate in elections to maximize their personal benefits Martin and Swisher (2024). This implies that voters, prior to any given election, weigh the potential benefits of voting against abstaining. If the perceived benefits of voting surpass the associated costs, the voter is more likely to cast a vote. Conversely, if a voter believes they cannot significantly influence the election outcome or perceives that their vote holds little weight, they are more likely to abstain from voting (Ebenezer, 2017). Downs' (1957) *Rational Choice Theory* thus underscores the cost-benefit

analysis involved in the decision to participate or not in the political and electoral process, which can ultimately result in political participation or voter apathy. In essence, voter apathy is embedded in the very calculations voters make when considering the expected benefits of voting versus abstaining.

According to proponents of this theory, voter abstention (apathy) stems from a sense of alienation, where voters feel disconnected from the policy proposals of political parties. Others argue that factors such as the absence of political accountability, feelings of powerlessness among voters, hostile electoral environments, and political manipulations by officeholders contribute significantly to voter apathy in any society (Wollesen; 2025).

Applying this theory, its advocates contend that voter apathy emerges when the prevailing democratic system or governance structure fails to deliver meaningful democratic dividends—such as accountability, protection of lives and property, sustainable development, and improved living standards. When these expectations are unmet, citizens respond by withdrawing from electoral and political engagement, resulting in political apathy. This phenomenon is clearly observable in Nigeria, where, after 24 years of democratic governance, the initial hopes and aspirations tied to democracy - hopes for responsibility, unity, social cohesion, and development across diverse social groups - appear to have diminished, giving way instead to widespread feelings of disillusionment and resignation. As a result, voter apathy is increasingly evident both in the study area and across the nation.

Although the arguments put forth by Rational Choice Theorists have been criticized for their inconsistency in explaining real-world voter turnout and for failing to account for the role of information in shaping voting behavior, especially in today's digital age of social media and technological connectivity, the value of the theory remains significant. In spite of these criticisms, the theory is employed in this research because it offers valuable insights into how voter apathy is intrinsically linked to the cost-benefit calculations voters undertake when deciding whether to participate in elections. In other words, the theory aids in understanding how the failure of democratic governance to positively impact citizens' lives through infrastructural development, empowerment, and sustainable development discourages voter participation, leading to widespread voter apathy during election periods.

3. Methodology

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to select the target population for this study, primarily due to constraints of time and logistics. This technique involves a series of successive sampling stages, wherein at each stage, selection is carried out using one of the established probability sampling methods (Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2006). In the first stage, cluster sampling was applied to divide the study area into three Senatorial Zones, ensuring equal geographic representation. The three Senatorial Constituencies (Zones) are Zone I (Northern Senatorial Zone), Zone II (Central Senatorial Zone), and Zone III (Southern Senatorial Zone).

The second stage cluster sampling was also used to subdivide each of the three Senatorial Zones into Local Government Areas, again to maintain balanced geographic representation. At the third stage, Simple Random Sampling Technique was utilized to select two Local Government Areas from each of the three Senatorial Zones comprising the study area. The procedure involved writing the names of all Local Government Areas within each zone on individual sheets of paper, folding them, and placing them into separate containers for each zone. The researcher then thoroughly shuffled each container, selected one

paper at random, recorded the selected Local Government Area, refolded the paper, returned it to the container, and repeated the process to select the second Local Government Area. This procedure was consistently applied across all three Senatorial Zones, resulting in the selection of the following Local Government Areas: Zaria LGA with 308,747 registered voters, Ikra LGA with 128,830 registered voters, Giwa LGA with 132,817 registered voters, Kaduna North with 369,590 registered voters, Kaura LGA with 91,146 registered voters, and Kachia LGA with 162,489 registered voters (INEC, 2022). Subsequently, Simple Random Sampling Technique was again used to select five political wards from each of the six selected Local Government Areas.

The fourth stage involved calculating the sample size from the total population of the political wards selected in the previous stage, using the Morgan and Krejcie table (Morgan and Krejcie, 1970). The determined sample size for this study is 364, which is deemed sufficiently representative of the total population of the six selected Local Government Areas. This conforms to Morgan and Krejcie’s guideline, which states that a sample size of 364 is appropriate for a population of 1,000,000 (Morgan and Krejcie, 1970).

The fifth stage involved determining the number of questionnaires distributed in each of the selected wards, using the following formula

Using the above formula, the Ward’s sample population size was obtained by dividing the number of

LGA Sample Population	=	$\frac{\text{No. of LG Registered Voters}}{\text{Population of selected LGAs}} \times \frac{\text{Desired Sample Size}}{1}$
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registered voters per Ward with the total population of registered voters of the selected LGA multiplied by the desired sample size of the study. This is what gave the size or number of questionnaires that was administered to each of the selected Ward in proportion to its population.

The last stage involved the administration of questionnaires to sampled respondents in all the selected political wards using Systematic Sampling Technique. Here the household population data was used to determine the selection interval of the respondent and onward administration of the questionnaires. The first respondent was randomly selected and followed by selection interval in proportion to the wards’ sample population size.

Both Primary and Secondary sources of collection was used. Under the primary sources, questionnaires was administered within the six (6) selected LGAs of the study area, while on the other hand, the Secondary data was gathered from the existing literature documented in books, journals, published articles, magazines, newspapers and internet materials. The data generated through both primary and secondary sources were analyzed using simple percentage method and frequency distribution tables.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Respondents’ Opinions on the manifestations of Voters Apathy in 2023 when compared with 2019 Presidential Election in Kaduna State

S/N	Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
	Yes	327	90

No	27	7
Undecided	8	3
Total	362	100

Source: Author's Analysis (2023)

The Table 1 presents the respondents views on the manifestations of Voters Apathy in 2023 presidential election when compared with 2019 Presidential Election in Kaduna State, the table shows that out of 362 as the total sampled respondents, 327 respondents representing 90% affirmed that there clear low turnout of voters, 27 respondents representing 7% disagreed while 8 respondents representing (3%) shows no idea with the question asked. This shows that majority of the sampled respondents agreed that there is low voters turnout during the 2023 presidential election in Zaria Local Government in particular and the state (Kaduna State) at large when compare with that of 2019 presidential election.

The above stance of the majority of the sampled respondents corroborates with findings of Tauna (2023) which revealed that in Kaduna state, the number of registered voters was 4,335,208 while accredited voters are 1,418,046. This means that out of the 100% of the registered voters, only 33% show-up on the Election Day. This is a clear sign of voters' apathy in 2023 presidential election. Another data to buttress the level of voters' apathy in 2023 presidential election when compare with 2019 presidential election, according to Busari (2019) in 2023 presidential election, the ruling party (APC) scored 321,691 votes in Kaduna State (www.stears.co.2023-inec-presidential-election-results-kaduna) which is lower when compare it with the scores APC got in 2019 presidential election (which is 993,445 votes) (www.punchng.2019-inec-election-result). Put it differently, APC in 2019 was declared party with highest votes with total score of 993,445 votes in Kaduna State while in 2023; PDP was declared the party with highest votes with total scores of 445,671 votes (www.punchng.2019-inec-election-result).

The researchers further asked the respondents the possible factors they viewed as responsible for the voters' apathy (low voters turnout) during the 2023 presidential election when compared with 2019 Presidential Election in study area. The respondents were able to identify a number of factors which they believed were the contributory socio-political factors responsible for the voters' apathy during the 2023 presidential election when compared with 2019 Presidential Election in study area. The statistical analyses of the respondents' views are presented in the table below:

Table 2. Respondents' Opinions on the factors responsible for the Voters Apathy (low voters turnout) in 2023 presidential election when compared with 2019 Presidential Election in Kaduna State

Item Statements	SA	A	U	SD	D	TL
Bad governance and injustice the have voters' experienced between 2019 and 2023.	114 (31%)	146 (40%)	2 (1%)	65 (18%)	35 (10%)	362 (100%)
Lack of political accountability demonstrated between 2019 and 2023.	205 (56%)	111 (31%)	3 (1%)	15 (4%)	28 (8%)	362 (100%)
inconsequentiality of voters as shown in most of the policies made by the government between 2019 – 2023 and which the voters viewed it as inhuman	201 (55%)	125 (34%)	2 (1%)	20 (6%)	14 (4%)	362 (100%)
None fulfillment of the promises made by the politicians during 2019 campaign.	198 (55%)	131 (36%)	5 (1%)	18 (5%)	10 (3%)	362 (100%)

Level of insecurity	179 (49%)	150 (42%)	1 (0%)	22 (6%)	10 (3%)	362 (100%)
Election malpractice	159 (43%)	184 (51%)	2 (1%)	12 (3%)	5 (1%)	362 (100%)
Naira notes re-designation policy	200 (55%)	142 (39%)	4 (1%)	9 (3%)	7 (2%)	362 (100%)

The table above contains respondents' opinions on the factors responsible for the Voters Apathy (low voters turnout) in 2023 presidential election when compared with 2019 Presidential Election in Kaduna State. From the table above, the statistical analysis shows that:

- i. Majority of the respondents affirmed that the nature and manner the elected political officer holders managed the affairs of government between 2019 and 2023 made the citizens to perceived it as bad governance characterized with injustice. This according to them made many to make their minds not to respond during the 2023 presidential election and even beyond.
- ii. Majority of the respondents are of the view that the inability of the political office holders particularly the elected office holders to be accountable to the voters between 2019 and 2023 in the study area in particular and the country at large have played a significant role in rising the rate of voters apathy in 2023 presidential election.
- iii. The respondents affirmed that the regime between 2019 and 2023 have made voters to feel as inconsequential as a result of most of their policies have been viewed by the voters as inhuman and counterproductive to their sociopolitical progress, growth and development and consequently made them to be politically apathetic during the 2023 presidential election.
- iv. The respondents affirmed that the level of insecurity (fear of intimidation, harassment as well as maiming of innocent electorates/people) that characterized the period in the study made voters not to turnout during the 2023 presidential election in the study area. This finding corroborates with submission of Amanye, Bariledum, and Lucky (2015) and Agu, Sunday and Adeline (2013) who indicates that violence related to electoral process had created unfriendly environment of fear to voters. They also perceived that poor handling of elections like lack of adequate security measures contributed to poor turnout and voters' apathy.
- v. Majority of the respondents are of the view that their voters are not important in determining the winner in the election due to high level of election malpractice that has characterized the electoral processes. Buttressing this submission, some respondents argued that since the inception of this democratic dispensation INEC have conducted 7 general elections (i.e. 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023) but with the exception of 1999 all the remaining results does not reflect or represent peoples' choice and consequently people are losing interest in partaking in any election.
- vi. Majority of the respondents agreed that Naira resignation embarked by the CBN before the 2023 general election coupled with economic hardship majority of the voters are facing has contributed to low voters turnout in the study area.

Table 3. Effects of Voter Apathy on Democracy in Nigeria

S/N	SA	A	U	SD	D	
Loss of confidence in election results	159 (43%)	184 (51%)	2 (1%)	12 (3%)	5 (1%)	362 (100%)
Emergence of unpopular candidates and winners	200 (55%)	142 (39%)	4 (1%)	9 (3%)	7 (2%)	362 (100%)
Incompetent leadership	211 (58%)	123 (34%)	3 (1%)	20 (6%)	5 (1%)	362 (100%)

Source: Author's Analysis (2023)

The Table 3 above presents the respondents' opinions on the effects of voter apathy on democracy in Nigeria. From the above statistical analysis, it is clear that the respondents agreed that voters' apathy have negatively affected the sustainability and consolidation of nascent democracy. The respondents have identified loss of confidence in election results, emergence of unpopular candidates and winners and incompetent leadership. Buttressing the effect of voters' apathy Mohammed (2018) opined that when an election is characterized with voters' apathy, choices of the citizens are invariably annulled and the candidate or government that emerges cannot represent, protect, and affect positively the interest and aspiration of the people and the legitimacy of such government is in question

Summary of the Major finding

- i. The findings revealed that voters apathy have manifested in both 2019 and 2023 presidential election. The available data shows that in 2019, the total number registered voters was 84,004,084, but actual number of votes cast was 28,614,190 votes which is about 35%. This number also dropt down to less than 25% in 2023 presidential election. This is because out of the 93.4 Million registered voters in 2023 presidential election, 87.2 million people collected their Permanent Voters Card and the total number of actual voters on election day was only 24.9 Million which about 24.9%.
- ii. The 2023 presidential election had a lowest participation rate in the six decades of Nigeria's independence. This means that the rate of voters apathy was so alarming in 2023 presidential than all the previous elections conducted. This because available data confirms that the turnout was 52.3% in 1999, it grew to 69% in 2003; and it has fallen since then, to 58% in 2007, 54% in 2011, 43% in 2015; 35% in 2019 before dropping to 24.9% in the just concluded 2023 general election
- iii. That the voters react by not wanting to be part of the electoral and political process during the 2019 and 2023 presidential election in the study area as well as the other previous election nationwide arises as a result of the voters' perception(s) that the existing democratic dispensation cannot provide the needed democratic dividends (i.e. is not accountable, cannot protect lives and property of the people, does not guarantee sustainable development and lacks the ability to better the living standard of the people);
- iv. That in both 2019 and 2023 presidential elections, factors like lack of political accountability, inconsequentiality (powerlessness) of voters, absence of adequate security, the perception that vote does not count, total disconnect from political parties' proposed policies to mention but

- few have triggered the abstention of voting by a voters in both 2019 and 2023 presidential election in the study area
- v. That Naira resignation programme embarked by the CBN before the 2023 general election coupled with economic hardship that characterized the country's socio-economic environment have exerts a definite pressure upon majority of the voters contributed to low voters turnout during 2023 presidential election in the study area.

5. Concluding Remarks and Recommendation

This paper investigated the effect of voter apathy on democracy in Nigeria, focusing on the 2019 and 2023 presidential elections in Kaduna State. The study found that voter apathy emerges when the current democratic system or governance fails to deliver essential democratic dividends (such as accountability, protection of lives and property, assurance of sustainable development, and improvement of citizens' living standards); consequently, citizens (voters) respond by withdrawing from the electoral and political processes (political apathy). Additionally, the study revealed that voter apathy poses a significant threat to the sustainability of any democratic consolidation and has the potential to affect the political framework of any society, irrespective of whether it is developed or developing. The paper concludes that if the rising trend of voter apathy remains unchecked, the continuity and strengthening of Nigeria's developing democracy as well as democratic consolidation in Nigeria could be jeopardized. This conclusion is supported by the consistent decline in voter turnout during elections in Nigeria over the years.

The paper recommends the following:

- i. There is a need to foster a more dynamic and effective political culture that promotes responsible and responsive leadership while restoring transparency and accountability in governance at every level.
- ii. The implementation of civic and voter education: These programs should extend to rural communities and not be limited to television and radio broadcasts, as many individuals in these areas do not have access to or listen to these media channels.
- iii. Political elites and politicians, particularly those within the ruling party, should exhibit strong commitment in addressing election-related insecurity. In other words, political elites and ruling party members must demonstrate substantial political will to combat electoral insecurity. This recommendation is crucial, as the study revealed that insecurity significantly contributed to voter apathy in the study area, particularly during the periods under examination.

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