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## The 2015 General Elections: A Review of Major Determinants of Paradigm Shift in Voting Behaviour and Political Participation in Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

The paper examines the nature of political participation and voting behavior in Nigeria's 2015 general elections. It also analyses the determinants of the paradigm shift from hitherto religious, ethnic and regional affiliations vis-a-vis voting in Nigeria. The paper adopts the secondary methodology, which in the parlance suggests a descriptive research methodology from library materials. Findings show that, economic situations, fear, insecurity, expectations and political socialization among others are the major factors that determined the voting behavior and political participation of Nigerians in the 2015 general elections. The paper concludes that, albeit the pattern of voting behavior has grossly changed in Nigeria, the percentage number of voters in the 2015 general elections has decreased compared to those of previous elections since independence due to the nature of some intervening variables such as security and fear, but level of political participation has virtually increased. The paper recommends absolute legitimizing process by results, adequate political socialization, effective media orientation among other things in dealing with proper political participation and voting culture.

**Keywords:** political; participation; voting; behavior; elections; determinants

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### INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has been a country characterized by great history and great people of divergent culture and traditional values. These have initially been adopted to maintain unity in diversity and a strong federal constitution. But one major obstacle that has been in Nigerian federation is ethnicity, tribalism, regionalism and strong religious affiliations that embedded the political system, democratic processes, the civil service and even the economic sphere of the country (relating to employment, banking sector and other financial agencies and institutions).

It is pertinent to look at the nature of political orientation, parties and participation during the first republic. Political parties functioned along the lines of regional divide, having ethnic or regional connotations. For instance- the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) the Action Group (AG) and the National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroon (NCNC). The first, was clearly for Northern Nigeria, the second for Western Nigeria and the third for Eastern Nigeria respectively. This regional political culture and orientation was fully given to all people of Nigeria as political participation and voting behavior was conditioned by regional politics.

The years of military rule in Nigeria were not exceptional, as element of tribalism, regionalism and ethnicity was attached to even military coups and counter coups. With the first military coup in Nigeria which occurred on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 1966, the high ranking military officers of Nigeria felt that the coup was deliberately plotted against their own people, as prominent politicians and military officers were murdered in the coup. Among those killed was the then premier of the northern region, sir Ahmadu Bello Sardauna of Sokoto, the prime minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, and Chief Samuel Akintola among others. Another coup was plotted after six months that shoved Ironsi from office and brought Gowon to power. Gowon from the north was opposed by the Igbos of eastern Nigeria as the deposed Ironsi was an Igbo national.

Consequently, Nigerian politics continued to be the way it used to be, even though there were allegations of election rigging in the history of Nigeria's elections, but the 2015 general elections

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remained an exception in Nigeria even in Africa. Albeit there were cases of voting based on religious and ethnic ties, Nigerians have to a reasonable level voted democratically by ignoring ethnicity, religion and regional affiliation. The objective of this paper therefore, is to explore some of the factors that determined the shift in Nigeria's voting behavior and political participation during the 2015 general elections.

## **MATERIAL, METHOD AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The paper was written using the secondary methodology to arrive at its conclusion. The materials are library documented literatures from text books, journals, periodicals, newspapers, reports and other related sources. This is also supported by a theoretical framework called the "economic theory of democracy." The economic theory of democracy in the parlance called the "rational choice theory", sees the interplay between politicians and electorates, political parties and voters or consumers and producers as players within a democratic environment and each has an interest which he tries to achieve. According to this theory, a political party wants to maximize supports by defining its manifesto and programs in order to gain support. While electorates or voters expect political utility which is satisfaction of their needs. Voters will go for a political party or a candidate that will provide such utility for them.

Prominent among scholars of the economic theory of democracy are: Antony Downs (1957) and Kenneth Arrow (1951). They both believe that if rational choice can determine the level of market, it can also determine voting behavior. In the argument of Downs (1957, 295-296):

*Our main thesis is that parties in democratic politics are analogous to entrepreneurs in a profit-seeking economy. So as, to attain their private ends, they formulate whatever policies they believe will gain the most votes, just as entrepreneurs produce whatever products they believe will gain the most profits for the same reason. In order to examine the implications of this thesis, we have assumed that citizens behave rationally in politics.*

This theory is premised on three basic principles which are: (a) both political parties and voters are rational, because each has an interest to maintain, Political parties to maximize supports, while voters for political utility, which is the satisfaction of their needs as electorates (b) the political system implies a certain degree of consistency that supports predictions of decisions. This comes in where parties fulfill their promises and the electorates give their supports, which produces balance of trade (c) despite the degree of consistency, there exists uncertainty. Uncertainty as there is tendency for parties not to translate their programs into action, which will directly change the voting behavior of the voters (Downs, 1957).

It is therefore based on the above economic theory of democracy that this paper was written to analyze the determinant factors for voting behavior shift in the Nigeria's 2015 general elections.

## **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

For better understanding of the content of this paper, some basic concepts need to be clarified or reviewed. Some of these concepts to be reviewed are: the concept of voting behavior and political participation.

### **Voting Behavior**

Voting behavior is generally conceived as political behavior, because most political activities deal with voting. In a political approach to voting behavior, Goldman (1966) in his work on political behavior, believed that it determines decision making process especially with public decision makers, who are voted by the electorates. But in the work of Deiner (2000), voting behavior is largely related to democratic principles and individualism. In this assertion, the behavior of voters is determined by the level of individual freedom to vote in a society. Where such individual right is guaranteed, democracy will definitely take place.

In a process of typifying different levels of voting behavior, Andreadis (2005) has intellectually categorized areas through which voters can choose differently in an electioneering process. For him, under presidential and legislative elections, voters' orientation is to select representatives on the basis of their political beliefs. In local elections voters select candidates that can serve them better and they are

capable to do so. Under referendum, voters vote for or against a particular policy, relying primarily on the efficacy of the policy. The above typologies of voting behavior were identified by Andreadis (2005) in Cypriot referendum of 2004.

In a study carried out by Winkielman and Knuson (2007) of post war Japan, findings showed that, voting behavior was significantly determined by "affect" factor. It was also discovered that people in the rural areas favored socialist parties while people in the urban areas chose conservative parties. This shows that, rural people are likely not to take political ideology, campaigns and party programs, but psychologically deals with emotional ties especially of what affects them.

Scholars such as Healy, Malhota and Hyunjung (2010) are of the view that, voters may use affect as a result of political sophistication and have political stimuli that may result in an emotional political bias. Some of the mechanisms of affect as it relates to voting behavior may include: surprise, anger, anxiety, fear and pride (Gomez, Hansfor and Krauss: 2007).

Researchers such as Miller (2011), Gomez, Hans and Krauss (2007) have emphasized on affect as a determinant of voting behavior, believing that, anger may not allow people to vote for, especially the government in power whose policies or actions could not make them happy and take them out of anger. Anxiety would determine voting behavior in a manner making the voters vote for a candidate whose policy they "prefer" (Miller, 2011), while people with fear, may require in-depth analysis and explanations before they vote for a party or candidate (Ladd and Lenz, 2011; Gomez, Hans and Kraus 2007).

The influence of affect as it relates to pride results in a massive voters support. This psychological work stipulates that those candidates with pride (for example John McCain and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu) may mobilize a large number of voters in an electioneering process, because they feel the emotional attachment and political stimuli of such pride (Panagopoulos, 2010; Finn and Glaser, 2010).

## **Political Participation**

Political participation suggests a process through which individuals participate directly (conventionally) or indirectly (unconventionally) in the process of decision making and governance of the society. It is conventional when participation emanates through the formal organs or institutions of the state, while it is unconventional when individuals informally participate using the informal institutions to influence political decisions and activities of the government ((Almond and Verba, 1963).

Traditionally, majority of citizens ordinarily participate politically in the electoral process or communicate with their representatives or even criticize them. The last (minority) class of the population will remain apathetic, because their votes do not count, party programs not really translated into action, lack of multiple parties or candidates or even public hatred against the available candidates (Almond and Verba, 1963; Campbell, Giraldo and Miller, 1961; Erbe, 1964; Rosenberg, 1954).

In a trans-national research conducted by Lipset (1960) and Milbrath (1965), findings show that people in rural areas especially in Japan, France, Arab villages, Israel and other parts of Scandinavia participate more than in the urban areas in political elections.

Participation according to a psychological school could be active or passive based on its goals. The orientation of political participation is hinged on the idea that participation has a reward. The magnitude of the reward therefore determines the passivity or activity of participation (Davies, 1963; Milbrath, 1965). People are likely to participate because they have expectation from the government they want to bring to power. When participation attracts no rewards, people are likely to abstain from participating.

The social learning theory of participation especially as it appears in the work of Gough (1951), suggests that some of the major determinants of political participation are: (a) dominance (b) social responsibility and (c) confidence. People with the above qualities are likely to participate effectively in politics, while those who lack them will not participate. In an inference made in the works of Hennesy (1959), McClosky and Schaar (1965) people with the above personal and social traits are virtually more likely to participate than those without. The argument is that "participants are more likely than nonparticipants to show social conscience and concern and affirmative attitudes toward mankind" (Hennesy, 1959).

In the process of political participation a research by Michigan (1960:97), Converse and Dupeux (1962) shows that people who do not attach more party affiliation are likely to participate in political processes

than those who attach more party membership. Political communication and the delivery of campaign messages is another major area that determines political participation (Cutright and Rossi, 1958). When campaigners are able to communicate effectively with the voters and pass the campaign message effectively, this is likely to mobilize voters to participate and vice versa (Cohen, 1964; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The nature of voting behavior in Nigeria has remained constant from first republic with only little changes from 1999. From hitherto voting behavior, Nigerians’ choices were determined by ethnicity, tribalism, regionalism and religious affiliations. But from 1999, Nigerians fully monetized politics and money-politics shaped their voting behavior, as their votes went to the highest bidder. Poverty and lack of democratic consciousness and rigging nature of elections, have resulted in this political menace.

Nigerians were made to make a shift from this monetized voting behavior by some basic forces which we shall look into in our foregoing discussion. The new voting behavior is to consciously vote for leaders that can truly represent them, change their socio-economic and political statusquo. In this period, Nigerians refused to vote for money, religion, regional or tribal sentiments (even though some did). This was manifest in how Nigerians regardless of their state of origin, age, religion, region and occupation voted the incumbent government of President Jonathan out of power in the 2015 presidential elections, opted for the opposition party ( APC) under the charismatic and political popularity of Muhammad Buhari to govern the country-Nigeria.

But even with the changes in the voting behavior of Nigerians, other intervening variables have affected political non-conventional participation, due to the issue of insecurity and high level of tension and suspicion within the polity. This has engendered low voters turnout in the 2015 general elections, which is the lowest experienced (in percentage terms) since 1979 presidential elections. The table below, represents voter turnout, total votes and registered voters in Nigeria’s presidential elections from 1979 to the year 2015.

### **VOTER TURNOUT IN NIGERIA’S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, 1979-2015**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Voter Turn-out</b>	<b>Total vote</b>	<b>Regi- stration</b>	<b>VAP Turn-out</b>	<b>Voting age population</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Invalid votes</b>	<b>Compulsory voting</b>
2015	43.65%	29,432,083	67,422,005	32.11%	91,669,312	181,562,056	2.87%	No
2011	53.68%	39,469,484	73,528,040	48.32%	81,691,751	155,215,573	3.19%	No
2007	57.49%	35,397,517	61,567,036	49.85%	71,004,507	131,859,731		No
2003	69.08%	42,018,735	60,823,022	65.33%	64,319,246	129,934,911	6%	No
1999	52.26%	30,280,052	57,938,945	57.36%	52,792,781	108,258,359	1.40%	No
1993		14,039,486		27.79%	50,526,720	105,264,000		No
1979	35.25%	17,098,267	48,499,091	44.83%	38,142,090	77,841,000	2%	No

**Source:** *international institute for democracy and electoral assistance (IIDEA), 2015*

It can be seen from the above table that the 2015 general elections had the least (43.65%) voter turnout after 1979 presidential election with 35.25% in the history of Nigeria’s presidential elections. In the 2011 general elections, the percentage of voters was greater than that of the 2015, which had about 53.68% of the registered voters in participation. The voter turnout of 2007 (57.49%), 2003 (69.08%) and 1999 (52.26%) presidential elections, were still higher than that of the 2015 presidential elections.

One major observation that can be made from the above table similarly, is that, the total votes cast in the 2015 presidential election were 29,232,083; in 2011, the total votes cast in the presidential election were 39,469,484; in 2007, the votes were 35, 397,517; in the 2003 votes, it was 42,018, 735; in 1999, votes cast reached about 30,280,052; in 1993 presidential elections, total votes were 14,039,486 and; in 1979, it was 17,098,267. The above however, shows that the total votes cast in 1979 and 1993 and 2015 presidential elections were the lowest, while the total votes of 2011, 2007 and 2003 were the highest. Meaning, votes of the 2015 presidential elections were lower than those of 2011, 2007 and 2003 presidential elections.

In terms of political participation, it can be seen from the above table that, even though the number of registered voters in the 2011 general elections (73,528,040) was greater than that of the 2015

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(67,422,005) the registered voters of the 2015 are higher in number than those of 2007 (61,567,036), 2003 (60,823,022), 1999 (57,938,945) and 1979 (48,499,091).

With the low voter turnout in the 2015 general elections as indicated on the above table, there is a need to examine those factors that determined such trend and why more registered voters, low voter turnout, and why Nigerians voted for the opposition party against the former ruling party.

**FACTORS THAT DETERMINED THE VOTING BEHAVIOR OF NIGERIANS IN THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS**

Some of these major factors that determined a paradigm shift in voting behavior of Nigerians are as follows: fear, insecurity, expectations and political socialization.

**Fear**

Fear based on psychological literatures, especially in the works of Maddux and Rogers (1983), De-Hoog, Stroebe and John (2005) "is a persuasive message that attempts to arouse fear in order to divert behavior through the threat of impending danger or harm". Just as a natural impulse, it is aroused by an impending danger or harm. The danger here is what the Nigerians experienced in the previous government. The relationship between fear and voting behavior was intellectually provided by Ruiters and Abraham (2005) Walkers (2000) Peters, Ruiters and Kok (2014). Their argument is that, people change behaviorally as a result of risk and vulnerability against a particular action. If Nigerians were vulnerable for example, under the previous regime, their lives were then at risk and vulnerable. The inference of this relationship, was given by Witte and Allen, (2000), who believe that, fear "presents a risk, presents the vulnerability to the risk, and then describes a suggested form of protective action". The protective action here represents the shift or the change in voting behavior and pattern.

This will also make us understand why the low voter turnout during the 2015 general elections unlike in the previous elections which witnessed massive turnout. This was due to the fear of post-election violence, as people with voter cards fled without voting.

The fear of Nigerians not to go back to yesteryears of unemployment, armed robbery, kidnapping, economic difficulty and educational collapse, has made them to change in their voting behavior. The economic theory of democracy as explained in the theoretical framework above, indicates that, voters and politicians are rational players. Each will maintain his interest based on the profit he is likely to maximize. For the voters, political utility in employment opportunities, economic growth and development, increase in per capita income, social welfare, and infrastructure are basic needs. Nigerians changed in their voting behavior because they wanted not to experience the same treatment obtained in the previous government.

**Insecurity**

The issue of security is a sensitive one in every socio-economic formation. People must be strengthened to have sense of belonging and feel strong to withstand certain security challenges. According to Erich Fromm (2000) the feeling of inferiority is an integral part of insecurity. When Nigerians in the north-eastern part of the country began to feel inferior in their sense of living due to displacement, unavailability of food, water and medical facilities as a result of the insurgency, which represents insecurity. Security is also seen as a part of a societal basic needs (Alfred, 1964).

The insecurity situation in Northern Nigeria has caused about 10849 deaths, thousands injured and property of billions Naira lost (John, 2014; Mark, 2015)

Nigerians have experienced what they never did under the previous administration in respect to insecurity. People were dying in Nigeria as in Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Libya, south Sudan or Palestine. People were not protected, no Nigerian was safe and the government refused to put in place a formidable mechanism to restore order and build confidence in people. Nigerians therefore, were forced to make a shift in their voting behavior from the hitherto traditional voting behavior, to a more democratic one. People believed that from their campaigns, the opposition party stood a better chance to make a systemic transformation-hence the voting behavior drastically changed.

**Expectations**

The bounded rationality model somehow deals with forecast of even less sophisticated scheme (Evans and Honkapohja, 2001) as expected by a people under a particular government. This model may see

such people not to expect even more and higher deliveries from the government (Homes and Sorger, 1998) but little expectation as contained in the constitutional framework as the government should discharge its own duties according to the law. Even this was somehow lacking, hence-the behavioral change in voting process of Nigerians as the case may be.

The principles of social contract that hold the society between government and the people is the ability of the government to discharge its functions as it relates to: protection of lives and property, education, defense against external aggression, water, roads, power, hospitals and generally speaking, social welfare. The citizenry's expectations from the government are not beyond as mentioned. The citizenry in turn, obey the government, respect the constitution, pay taxes and remain good citizens in the society. It was evident that all the expectations of the people of Nigeria were not met by the previous government. Where it was met, just at peripheral level. This has shifted the voting behavior of Nigerians from ethno-religious and regional voting behavior to a democratic one, which is built based on legitimacy by results.

### **Economic Situation**

While adopting the structuralist position of economic crisis, failure and poverty, Rank and Herschl (2006) is of the view that, the government is at fault whenever there is unemployment, economic recession, poverty, low per capita income and other related issues. For example, when the Russian economy was crumbling, the Russians became very much concerned about the future of their federation. With the emergence of president Putin, who strengthened the economic structure of Russia, Putin was able to mobilize voters during elections (even though there were allegations of riggings). Putting continues to be a great political figure of Russia for his determination not to see Russia down.

In Nigeria, accordingly, the economic situation has not been good for Nigerians. The number of unemployed has waxed and rising level of inflation with decreased exchange rate of naira with other currencies. If a government structurally fails to protect the economy and allow for economic recessions, such government may force the people change their voting behavior from one pattern to another. This may also make the electorates vote against the ruling party in favor of opposition.

### **Political Socialization**

Political socialization as a process of molding individual's character, attitude and conduct to make him become a proper member of the society, plays significant role in election periods. Socialization as defined, is a "lifelong process of inheriting and disseminating norms, customs and ideologies, providing an individual with the skills and habits necessary for participating within their own society" (Clause, 1968). It is therefore, "the means by which social and cultural continuity are attained" (Macioni, 2010).

Socialization or re-socialization of the voting behavior of a people can be done by the family, per groups, religious institutions, schools, the mass media, political parties and other interest groups. The position of family leaders can easily change the mindset of the family members on who to be voted for, what political party should we vote for. Peer groups also have influence over their peers on voting. Schools play prominent role in analyzing moralistic political party structure and the students should be able to determine which government is moralistic and ethical politically which one is not. The media and musicians have really participated in shifting the voting behavior of Nigerians during the 2015 general elections. Children of very young age were clamoring "Sai Baba Buhari" as a mantras. When people are preconditioned, prepared or even taught how to vote, whom to vote and what symbol of political party should they go for, they adapt quickly to changes.

### **CONCLUSION**

It was apparent that the level of political participation in Nigeria has risen, due to involvement of people either directly or indirectly in political activities and decision making process or even influencing political decisions. A cursory look can be given to the number of university students who have become politically conscious in the 2015, having their voter cards and participated in the electioneering process as INEC ad-hoc officials who served at the polling units. University graduates were also used as youth corps all over the federation, vice chancellors and many people from different strata of the society.

One major area of spontaneous participation was the way and manner people of middle age and children were singing in favor of a presidential candidate, what people discussed through social media

and even the armed forces of their interest in the elections. It was a move consciously carried out by Nigerians to really determine their future.

But despite the level of political consciousness and interest of the election people had in Nigeria, the voter turnout was virtually low, especially as compared with the previous elections in Nigeria. This, was precipitated as a result of fear against post- election violence, as southerners who registered in the north, fled and went back to south, northerners who registered in the south also did exactly. Many people who registered were not able to vote, and many have lost their voter cards as a result of the insurgency.

We had internally displaced persons who were running for survival not even thinking of their voter cards (even though some voted) and the flash point areas of the insurgency where no INEC officials were present there. Security operatives who were deployed to states could not also vote due to the nature of their job. Consequently, the 2015 general elections saw increase in political participation, shift in voting behavior, but low voter turnout

## **RECOMMENDATION**

In a process of consolidating democratic principles and a modified political culture and orientation especially in voting behavior and political participation, the following recommendations are significant:

One, the culture of legitimacy by results must be maintained by Nigerians. Legitimacy by results here, it means people should vote for an individual based on his historical records, what he has been able to achieve before and what he is likely to achieve now, not to select representatives on the basis of religion, ethnicity, tribalism or regional affiliation.

Two, absolute political socialization is indispensable. Reorientation o people, more and proper political values of national interest and patriotism. Identifying with Nigeria first before your family is something that Nigerians lack and must be inculcated.

Three, the media must be strictly used in the dissemination and spread of such political culture and orientation. The media must teach political ethics and morality, it must be free from political control or interference.

Four, Nigerians must need to develop the culture of self-contentment to reject any political luring and intimidation. This will come in a way people refuse money-politics or money induced politics for better representation.

Five, votes of the people must count. The use of card reader must be consolidated, more technological support should be deployed and more election monitoring, observatory mission and election materials must be well protected and preserved. This is to allow for free and fair elections to hold, in order to attract more political participation and representation within Nigeria's political environment.

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