

Public Distrust in Elected Officials and Political Appointees: It's Implication on Political Apathy in Nigeria

Moses Osamudiamen Izevbizua PhD

Institute of Public Administration and Health Services Management, University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State Nigeria.

moses.izevbizua@uniben.edu

John Osemwengie Osaghae PhD

Institute of Public Administration and Health Services Management, University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State Nigeria.

osemwengie.osaghae@uniben.edu

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Abstract

Trust is the foundation for the legitimacy of public institutions and a functional democratic system. It is crucial for maintaining political system that encourages participation and cohesion. It is important for the success of a wide range of public policies that depend on behavioural responses from the public. Political apathy has taken a wider dimension in Nigeria as a result of distrust on the government officials. This study therefore assesses public trust in various government officials, including elected executives, politically appointed officials and legislatures. The study deploys descriptive research design and secondary data were obtained from textbooks, journals, newspapers, radio/television news and internet, in carrying out the research and examines the impact of public distrust on government officials as it affect political apathy in Nigeria. The findings revealed that there is a correlation between citizens' participation in political activities and distrust for political leaders. Over the years, the political leaders have failed in their obligations to provide education, health, shelter, job, and food for the common person. So, the commoner who vote gets nothing, hence they are now voting with their legs, choosing to stay away from elections. Some recommendations were made to ameliorate the situation, among which was that Nigerian government must understand that it is duty bound to fulfill its expectations efficiently, as it will motivate the citizens to also discharge their responsibilities to overcome the danger of political apathy.

I. Introduction

There has been a steady decline in citizens' participation in the political and electoral processes from 1999 when the new wave of democracy started in Nigeria. At the dawn of the Fourth Republic in Nigeria in 1999, 58 million persons registered to vote

in the general elections. However, only 30 million voted, representing 52% of voters turnout in the election (Ebenezer, 2018). Though there was an increase in political participation (voters turnout) after four years of democracy where 42 million of registered voters of 60 million voted, representing 70% of voters turnout in 2003. This however declined to 35% in 2019 elections, representing 35% decline at the peak of electoral participation in Nigeria (Ebenezer, 2018). It is also expedient to point out that out of the total 93.47 million registered voters, only 24.9 million persons voted in the just concluded 2023 Presidential and National Assembly election. This represents a meager 26.72% voter turnout, the lowest since the return to democracy in 1999 (Amata, 2023). In the subfield of electoral democracy and political participation, political apathy represents lack of psychological involvement in public affairs, emotional detachment from civic engagements and obligations, abstention from political activity and general lack of passion in the electoral process (INEC, 2011). The difficulty in measuring general political apathy in a political system and process, made political scientists to focus on the electoral process and citizens participation in elections, to measure the presence or absence of political apathy in a democratic system. This research therefore, shall address political apathy in national elections in Nigeria. This is because, an active political system with citizens' political engagements in political discourse, civic obligation and public policy inclusiveness without the requisite increase in voters participation in the electoral process, especially in voting during national elections, such democratic and political system is still seen to have political apathy of the citizenry.

Voters turnout is simply the percentage of eligible voters who cast their ballots in an election. Pintor and Sullivan (2010) argued that voter turnout is usually expressed as the percentage of voters who cast a vote, including those who cast blank and invalid votes in an election. Geys (2006) insisted that it is the total number of people who vote in a given election. The level of political participation through voters turnout, according to Ebenezer (2018), determines the respect or disrespect such government gets from the people. Fortunately and unfortunately, political apathy can only be measured adequately in a democracy. A comprehensive understanding of the concept of political apathy requires an understanding of the intricacies of politics, governance and political inclusiveness in such political system. Politics in this context being the activities that relate directly or indirectly to influencing or redirecting the actions or inactions of government and the class especially in power relations and policy directions, formulation and implementations. The unwillingness of the citizens (especially the electorate) to be fully and actively engaged in the political system, results in political apathy. This could be due to disenchantments, indifference or contentment for or against the electoral or political system. Lack of political participation of most citizens in most democracies beyond casting of ballots during elections, is judged in the context of the empowerment and enablement of political representatives to actively participate in the process on their behalf.

In Nigeria, the cost of voting in an election may include the risk of being killed in coming out to vote through sporadic shooting by military personnel, political thugs, militants or insurgent's bomb targets and general insecurity on election day (Ebenezer, 2018). The perception of corruption, lack of accountability and lack of impact of a political dispensation on the lives of the citizenry in the areas of infrastructural development,

citizens' empowerment and sustainable development as benefits of voting in an election, could trigger political apathy. Downs (1957), in his Rational Choice Theory, emphasized on the profitability or unprofitability of voting that may result in political participation or political apathy in the political and electoral system. According to Downs, voters vote in an election to maximize benefits. Voters, before a particular election, calculate the expected benefits of voting and abstaining. If the benefits of voting exceed the cost of voting, the voter may likely vote. Again, if a voter sees the likelihood of not being able to influence the outcome of a particular election, with the perception that his/her vote will not count, the voter may likely abstain from voting (Ebenezer, 2018). The title of this paper is Public Distrust in Elected Officials and Political Appointees: Its Implication on Political Apathy in Nigeria. It aims to reveal the effects of distrust on political apathy in Nigeria and the reasons why the citizens have little or no trust in political leaders, either as elected or appointed.

II. Conceptual Clarification

Public Distrust

Public distrust can be defined as a relational attitude that reflects perceptions of untrustworthiness specific to the political system in its entirety or its components. The evaluative part of distrusting attitudes is distinctly negative and entails the expectation of harmful outcomes. Distrust is an attitude held by an individual citizen. The perceptions of untrustworthiness are the internal cognitive judgments that consciously or not, give rise to this attitude (Bertsou, 2019). Similarly, Clark (2016) argued that public distrust is a rational response of people to a system that is not working for the majority. Government can hardly govern effectively when large parts of the citizenry distrust them. Public distrust contributes to limiting citizens' compliance to government rules and cutting ties with political agents and processes (Bertsou, 2019). However, there are other factors that affect citizens' compliance to government rules and their cutting ties with political agents and processes. They include education, personal well-being, social status, dislike of politics and ideological positioning (Norris, 2011).

The major drivers of public distrust are poor quality of governance, technical incompetence, poor economic performance, manipulation of reports in government-owned media, mutual suspicions, lack of basic needs, political corruption and general exclusion (Bertsou, 2019). Iroghama (2012) also noted that incongruent ecological worldview could promote political distrust. In Nigeria, large-scale corruption and government failure to deliver on election promises and dividends of democracy worsen political distrust (Onapajo & Adebisi, 2020). Other factors that are fuelling public distrust in Nigeria are ethnic politics, class divisions and past government failures in responding to health emergencies (Ezeibe & Ikeanyibe, 2017).

Elected Officials and Political Appointees

Elected official is any person holding an office in a governmental entity which is filled by the vote of the appropriate electorate. It also includes any person appointed to fill a vacancy in such offices. There are three tiers of government in Nigeria, namely, the local, state, and federal governments. Local government is the third tier of government headed by an elected chairman. Every local government has local government council which comprises of councilors representing each ward in the local government. A state's

residents are represented by a governor and a state house of assembly member. The federal government which is the highest tier of government, has the executive which consists of the president and vice president as the elected officials, as well as its legislative arms which comprises the national assembly made of 109- member of Senate and 360-member of the House of Representatives as elected officials (EIENigeria, 2022).

A political appointee is any employee who is appointed by the President, the Vice President, or agency head (Christopher & Michael, 2017). There are many political appointment positions which every incoming administration needs to review, and fill or confirm, of which some require Senate confirmation (Piaker, 2016). In Nigeria, the presidency is one of the offices most responsible for political appointees and for assessing candidates to work at or for the presidency (Gallo & David, 2012). The system of political appointments came from history of the spoils system also known as a patronage system, which is a practice where a political party, after winning an election, would give government jobs to its supporters, friends and relatives as a reward for working toward victory. The term was derived from the phrase “to the victor belong the spoils” by New York Senator William L. Marcy (Tuutti, 2012).

Political Apathy

Political apathy can be defined as the indifference of an individual and a lack of interest in participating in political activities. This includes lack of interest in elections, political events, public meetings, and voting (Harder, 2008). Political apathy can lead to low voters turnout and stagnation in a state’s government (Frederick, 2012). According to North American Review, lack of participation can lead to political ills, such as corruption and dishonesty among politicians as they are not held accountable (Mosby, 1898).

When citizens are disappointed or frustrated by a pattern of government inaction or corruption, people can feel as if there is little benefit to dedicating their valuable time and resources to political action with limited results (African Development Choice, 2020). Political apathy can stem from a lack of understanding of politics and government that could make it difficult for that person to see any value in voting or from seeing the benefits and costs of the government policies being put forward. The individual might then see it as irrational to try to gain the knowledge as there would supposedly be no benefit to them. It is also pertinent to note that it is possible for a person to be fully educated and understand politics yet still be willfully apathetic towards it (Merrifield, 1993).

The reason political apathy is an issue is because it is believed that a nation’s development and for its laws to function to their fullest, there needs to be as high level of political awareness as possible. This political awareness leads to the ruled and the rulers serving as a check on one another. Therefore, political leaders who want their countries to experience socio-economic and political development must perform reasonably to build in the peoples’ trust in their government. Such leaders must avoid a deliberate decision by the people, not to vote or take part in the political process, as a way of sending a message to politicians.

Effect of Public Distrust in Political Leaders on Political Apathy in Nigeria

Political apathy represents an ugly trend in Nigeria’s electoral democracy. It is an

unpleasant situation which had in the recent year elicited serious concerns among scholars, electoral practitioners and election observers with regards to its adverse effects on the country's democratic process. Since its return to electoral democracy in 1999, Nigeria's elections have been characterized by voter apathy. A small percentage of the voting population actually vote, which is an affront to idea of 'majority rule' which is one of the basic tenets of democracy. It follows that instead of majority rule, there is 'minority rule' in Nigeria because, in a population of almost 200 million there were 84.0 million registered voters as collated by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) while merely 35% of the registered voters actually voted in the 2019 elections. Also on February 25 2023, Nigeria concluded its 7th general election. The result of the election, which was announced in the early hours of Wednesday by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), shows that only 24.9 million persons out of the 93.47 million registered voters voted in the election. This represents 26.72 percent voter turnout. Compared to the voter turnout of 35.66 percent in the 2019 general election, the turnout in the just concluded election declined by 8.03% (Amata,2023). The winner of that election was declared as president because he pulled majority of the vote. But does that really represent the opinion of the majority in the country? In simple terms, it means those that failed to vote tacitly transferred their voting rights to the few that voted and empowered them to make elective decision on their behalf (Akinyemi, 2019).

Trust is one of the essential foundations of society. Nigerians live in a low-trust milieu overall, which is worse with trust in government. The Edelman Trust Barometer reports that Nigerians do not trust their leaders. Respondents say, "Our governments leaders are purposely trying to mislead people by saying things they know are false or gross exaggerations". Trust level in Nigeria is as low as 49 percent overall for the four critical institutions of Government, Business, Media, and Non-Government Organization. A breakdown shows the distrust is highest with Government, with its poor scores pulling down the aggregate. Government scores only 24 percent trust with Nigerians (Nwakanma, 2021). Many Nigerians have lost interest in politics and elections because of the attitude of the political leaders (elected and appointed) who out of selfishness and corruption have mismanaged the socio-economic and political machinery of Nigeria, to the level that many now refers to as a failed state. Indeed, it is a paradox that Nigeria, the world's eighth largest exporter of crude oil, a country endowed with many resources, still has more than 70 percent of its population living below the poverty line as a result of corruption and economic mismanagement. Pathetically, the logic of the Nigerian political leadership class has been that of self-service as some of the leaders are mired in the pursuit of selfish and personal goals at the expense of broader national interests. Consequently, emphasis has been on personal aggrandizement and self-glorification with the result that corruption has become euphemism for explaining political leadership in Nigeria in relation to the management of national wealth (Okonkwo, 2007). History has shown that no nations of the world grew and enjoy steady development in virtually all spheres of its national life without experiencing good and selfless political leadership. This is largely because qualitative growth and development has always been an outcome of good governance. Commenting on the experience of the Nigerian nation, the renowned novelist, Chinua Achebe, insisted that the root cause of the Nigerian predicament should be laid squarely at the foot of bad leadership (Achebe, 1984).

Failed governance is one of the fundamental causes of public distrust in political leaders which by implications have accounted for voter apathy in Nigeria. Many Nigeria voters are disillusioned with failure of government and governance which has undermined the enthusiasm to participate in the election process. Insecurity obvious in Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East and banditry in the Middle Belt of Nigeria had displaced millions from their home. Today, millions of these vulnerable Nigeria voters are living in Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps with no prospect of livelihood. Weak state institutions, poverty and recessive economy have also over the years entrenched culture of voter distrust among the millions of Nigeria electorate (Kwon-Ndung, Erunke & Atsiya, 2015). Based on high scale corruption, which had sparked up distrust in the ruling class, there is a belief by the people that there is really no need to get involved in the politics of the country fighting for their needs and the enthronement of certain policies when the players involved would only get there and do something else. This belief is prevalent in Nigeria which have had series of bad leaders and have experienced bad leadership first hand. The people have seen the cycle of politicians promising heaven and earth and when they are voted in, forget and ignore the promises made by them during their campaign.

As a result of poverty, an average Nigerian does not have the time to socialize and criticize the government. His first instinct is to quell his hunger and that of his family and then proceed to provide basic amenities for them. Where poverty lies, there is unemployment, illiteracy, corruption and even electoral malpractice. This is because the average poor person would do anything to put food on his table, even if it means stealing or participating in the manipulation of election results. These poor people are often the thugs used to disrupt the electoral process, and even go to the extent of providing underage people to vote. All these trigger political apathy in Nigeria. Furthermore, elections sometimes end up with violence and people losing their lives in Nigeria. In a country battling with terrorism and insecurity, where people on a normal day fear for their lives, they will not turn up for an election where the chance of them losing their lives is tripled. Northern Nigeria for example where Boko Haram and bandits kill people for fun, the average northerner who is scared for his life is very likely to stay indoors and avoid places where he could be killed. Moreso, where politicians are prone to employing thugs to manipulate the election results or harm voters, there is low turnout in the number of voters, thus creating rooms for political apathy (Edeh, 2022).

Based on the above analyses, one can rightly state that Nigerians don't believe that the government is fair. This is not sentiment but reality. A Pew Research Centre poll in 2016 revealed that most Nigerians don't consider the political and economic system to be fair. To most Nigerians, the government doesn't exist for them, but for the privileged few. This psychological revolt against policies stems from a culture of mistrust built over decades. The inability of the government to secure the commitment of its citizens in policy implementation indicates that there is something fundamentally wrong with government – citizen relations. Consequently, the mistrust of government has therefore reinforces anti-social behaviours like political apathy (Fadesere, 2018).

Table 1: Voters turnout in Nigerian national parliamentary and presidential elections 1959-2023

YEAR	VOTERS REGISTRATION	VOTER TURNOUT
1959 National Parliamentary Election	9, 043, 404	79.5%
1979 Presidential Election	48, 499, 091	35.25%
1983 Presidential Election	Not Provided	Not Provided
1993 Presidential Election	Not Provided	Not Provided
1999 Presidential Election	30, 280, 052	52.26%
2003 Presidential Election	60, 823, 022	69.08%
2007 Presidential and National Assembly Election	61, 567, 036	57.49%
2011 Presidential Election	73, 528, 040	53.68%
2015 Presidential and National Assembly Election	67, 422, 005	43.65%
2019 Presidential and National Assembly Election	84, 004, 085	35.66%
2023 Presidential and National Assembly Election	93.47 million	26.72%

Source: Adapted from Omotola and Aiyedogbon (2012), Madubuegwu (2017), INEC (2023), and International IDEA:

<https://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?countrycode=NIG>.

Manifestation of Bad Governance as it Affects Political Apathy in Nigeria

Since 1999, the democratic space of Nigeria has been dominated by political elites who consistently violate fundamental principles associated with a liberal democratic system, such as competitive elections, the rule of law, political freedom, and respect for human rights. The outcome of the 2019 and the recently concluded 2023 presidential election further eroded public trust in the ability of the independent electoral commission to organize competitive elections unfettered by the authoritarian influences of the ruling class. This challenge is an indicator of the systemic failure in Nigeria's governance system. A continuation of the current system will only accelerate the erosion of public trust and democratic institutions.

In terms of ranking, Nigeria has consistently ranked low in the World Governance Index in areas such as government effectiveness, political stability and the presence of violence and terrorism, rule of law, and control of corruption. Nigeria is perceived in the 2021 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index as a highly corrupt country with a score of 24/100 while its corruption ranking increased from 149 in 2020 to 154 in 2021 out of 180 countries surveyed (Transparency International, 2021). While the All Progressive Congress (APC) party won the 2015 election on the promise of fighting insecurity and corruption, the promises went unfulfilled; Boko Haram continues to unleash unspeakable violence on civilians while the fight against corruption is counterproductive. At the core of Nigeria's heading towards failure is the crisis of governance, which manifests in the declining capacity of the state to cope with a range of internal political and social upheavals. There is an expectation for political leaders to recognize systemic risks such as terrorist attacks, herder-farmer conflict, and police brutality and put in place the necessary infrastructure to gather relevant data for problem solving. But the insufficiency of political savvy required to navigate the challenges that Nigeria faces has unleashed unrest across the nation and exacerbated existing tensions. The ENDSARS Protest against police brutality in 2020 happens to be one of the manifestations of bad governance (Okoi & Iwara, 2021).

The avalanche of violence in northern Nigeria in which armed bandits engage in deadly planned attacks on communities, leading to widespread population displacement, has become another grave security challenge that has sharpened regional polarization. Because some public officials are usually unaware of the insecurities faced by ordinary Nigerians, they lack the frame of reference to make laws that address the priorities of citizens. The crisis of governance is accentuated by a democratic culture that accords less importance to the knowledge and competence that political leaders can bring to public office. These systemic challenges have bred an atmosphere of cynicism and mistrust between citizens and political leaders at all levels of government. Political elites in Nigeria also exploit poverty and illiteracy to mobilize voters with food items such as rice, seasoning, and money. The rice is usually packaged strategically with the image of the political candidates and the parties they represent. The assumption is that people are more likely to vote for a politician who influences them with food than one who only brings messages of hope. The practice of using food to mobilize voters is commonly described as “stomach infrastructure” politics. It is undeniable that Nigerian political culture rewards incompetent leaders over inform-minded leaders who demonstrate the intellectualism and problem-solving capabilities needed to adequately address systemic issues of poverty and inequality (Okoi & Iwara, 2021).

III. Conclusion

The paper researched into public distrust on political leadership and concluded that the distrust has negatively affected political apathy that has bedeviled Nigeria’s political space. The research revealed that since 1999, the democratic space of Nigeria has been dominated by political elites who consistently violate fundamental principles associated with a liberal democratic system, such as competitive elections, the rule of law, political freedom, and respect for human rights. Corruption has attained an unimaginable height and is currently assuming a pandemic proportion in Nigeria. The lack of competent, responsible leaders with integrity, vision, high moral values has been the bane of the country. It is simply disheartening that Nigeria, a country blessed with natural resources and manpower is now doomed with uncertainty where abject poverty, high unemployment rate, unresolved assassinations, looting and squandering of public fund, all as a consequence of corruption, have become the order of the day. Consequently, the way politics and governance is being practiced in Nigeria discourages people from participating in the electoral process; to the extent that only 26.72% voter turnout was recorded in the recently concluded 2023 election. Governance in Nigeria is characterized by deceit and unfulfilled promises, which are mostly made by politicians at campaign rallies but remain unfulfilled even after they are elected into office. This has led to a lack of trust in elected officials. The failure of elected as well as their appointed officials to perform their responsibilities due to high levels of corruption and deceit is the main cause of the lack of trust in both the officials and the electoral processes displayed by citizens.

Nigeria lacks a system of governance in which leadership is based on capability. Rather, the political system in Nigeria is dominated by individuals who gain power through nepotism rather than competence, influence voters with food rather than vision, and consolidate power through intimidation or by incentivizing constituents with

material gifts which they frame as “empowerment” to keep them subservient and loyal political followers. By implication, the failure of governance in Nigeria is as a result of incompetent leadership. Nigeria needs a new model of governance in which political leadership is based on the knowledge and competence of both political leaders and the electorate.

IV. Recommendations

To forestall public distrust on elected and appointed officials, and bring about some level of encouragements at propelling the masses to participate actively in the political process and turn out massively to vote during elections, Nigerian political leaders should act as follows:

That aspiring leaders must demonstrate the intellectual pedigree to translate knowledge into transparent and accountable governance that leads to national prosperity.

That government must increase access to education through government sponsored initiatives that integrate civic education into school curriculums. This will help Nigerians to learn about their civic roles at the local, state, national, and international levels.

That government should engage the support of local NGOs to promote civic education across Nigeria in culturally appropriate ways.

That having grappled with governance challenges orchestrated by two decades of a failed democratic project, Nigeria will only have effective governance when the right people are saddled with the responsibility to govern.

That Nigerian government must understand that it is duty bound to fulfill its expectations efficiently, as it will motivate the citizens to also discharge their responsibilities to overcome the danger of political apathy.

That the political and higher bureaucratic appointments should cease to be a means to easy accumulation of illicit wealth, and create a new political culture that abhor corruption in public life and humiliates corrupt public servant.

That the conduct of the political class fueled by winner takes all system is disincentive, hence there is need for proportional representation where every party gets something in the end.

That there should be a very strong support for democratic reforms that ensure greater integrity and transparency.

Finally, the government should endeavour to secure citizens’ engagement by taking steps to gain their trust. Tools like social media interaction, periodic town hall meetings, effective campaigns and opinion polls, can be used to develop citizenship engagement.

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