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TURNOUT DECLINE IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS
OF SUB-NATIONAL VARIATIONS IN VOTER PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA

ПРЕЗИДЕНТТИК САЙЛАУҒА ҚАТЫСУДЫҢ ТӨМЕНДЕУІ: НИГЕРИЯДАҒЫ
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АЙЫРМАШЫЛЫҚТАРДЫ САПАЛЫ ТАЛДАУ

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СУБНАЦИОНАЛЬНЫХ РАЗЛИЧИЙ В УЧАСТИИ ИЗБИРАТЕЛЕЙ В НИГЕРИИ

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Abstract

Voter turnout has been declining globally. This raises concerns for democracies, especially unconsolidated democracies as it speaks to the erosion of democratic institutions within the society. Presidential democracies place great power in the hands of the citizens, in a bid to ensure that the choice of the people is duly represented. However, turnout decline signals that there are democratic challenges faced within the country, which raises an issue as turnout is essential for representative politics. This study seeks to understand the factors that lead to voter turnout decline in presidential elections. By focusing on the role of the electoral commission, poverty and lack of trust in the electoral process, it makes the argument that turnout decline in presidential elections do not arise from simple disinterest of the electorates in politics but rather an interplay of the aforementioned factors.

This study identifies three major findings. Firstly, the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission inhibits voter turnout. Given the important role the electoral commission plays in the elections, failure to carry out their essential duties effectively serves as a barrier to voter turnout. Secondly, this study shows that poverty inhibits voter turnout, especially in rural communities, where the citizens have experienced issues with the electoral commission and would rather prioritize their personal gains and interest over civic engagement. Thirdly, the irregularities perceived by the electorates due to the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission, erodes the trust of the citizens in the electoral process, as they have doubts about the credibility and transparency of the elections. These findings emerge from series of interviews with political activists, party members, civil society members and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) officials. I carry out a comparative analysis of the selected cases utilizing a most similar systems design, where I identified these cases based on shared similarities and variations in the dependent

variable at the subnational level. This study develops a theoretical framework that accounts for turnout decline in presidential elections, contributing to a deeper understanding of the challenges and factors that impede voter turnout in presidential elections.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	i
LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	vi
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW	5
Institutional Variables	6
The Electoral System/Party-System	6
The Electoral Process	8
Cultural Variables	10
Ethnicity	10
Socio-Economic Variables	11
Population	12
Age	13
Gender	14
Education	15
Economy/Income	16
Urbanization	18
Violence	19
CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH DESIGN	21
Case Selection	22
Methodology	26
Grounded Theory Approach	27
Interviews	28
Sampling	29
Ethical Considerations	30
Limitations	31
CHAPTER 4. THEORY	32
Conceptualization of the Ineffectiveness of the Electoral Commission	33

Voter Registration Issues	35
Operation of Polling Units	36
Alternative Explanations	38
Lack of Trust in the Electoral Process	38
Socio-economic issues	39
Theoretical Framework	41
 CHAPTER 5. DATA ANALYSIS/DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS	44
In-depth Interviews	46
The cases of Adamawa and Borno	47
The Ineffectiveness of the Electoral Commission (INEC)	49
Lack of trust in the electoral process	50
Socio-economic Issues.....	52
Insecurity.....	54
The cases of Osun and Oyo	56
The Ineffectiveness of the Electoral Commission	57
Lack of trust in the electoral process	59
Socio-economic Issues.....	60
Insecurity.....	62
The cases of Imo and Abia	63
The Ineffectiveness of the Electoral Commission	65
Lack of trust in the electoral process	66
Socio-economic Issues.....	68
Insecurity.....	69
Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections: A Comparative Analysis across all cases.....	71
 CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION	74
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	77
 APPENDIX A. Interview Questions	82
 APPENDIX B. Interview Oral Consent Script	84

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1. Voter Turnout across All Elections Years in Nigeria.....	2
Figure 2. Voter Turnout Decline in presidential elections.....	42
Table 1. Voter Turnout Trends across four election cycles	23
Table 2. Similarities and differences between selected cases	24
Table 3. Number of respondents across cases and categories.....	46
Table 4. Respondents Identifiers	47
Figure 3. Emergent themes and sub variables.....	47
Figure 4. Voter Turnout in Adamawa and Borno	48
Figure 5. Respondents recurring explanations on causes of turnout decline	48
Figure 6. Voter Turnout in Osun and Oyo	57
Figure 7. Respondents recurring explanations on causes of turnout decline	57
Figure 8. Voter Turnout in Imo and Abia	64
Figure 9. Respondents recurring explanations on causes of turnout decline	64

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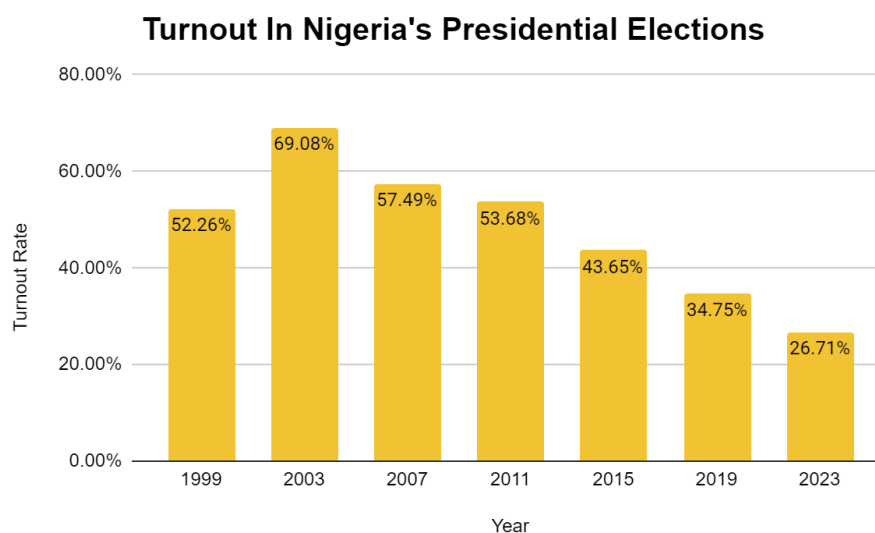
Chapter 1: Introduction

Voter turnout is a critical component of democratic processes, as it serves as an indicator of citizens' engagement in the electoral process and shows the legitimacy of elected leaders (Powell 1982). It also offers perspectives on individual behavior concerning political participation. Notwithstanding its central role in democratic functions, turnout has been declining in advanced democracies such as the US, Finland, France and in developing nations across the world, including Sub-Saharan countries like Nigeria. This phenomenon of low voter turnout raises concerns about the erosion of democratic institutions and the representation of the electorates, as the preferences of the people will not be translated into policies if they fail to elect their representatives through voting which is a fundamental part of a democratic process and the basic civic duty of the electorates. Out of 42 countries identified within the Sub-Saharan region, 13.3% have stable turnout rates, 24.4% have a consistent turnout decline and 62.2% have a fluctuating turnout rate, all within three consecutive elections (Voter Turnout Database).

Within these countries, Nigeria exhibits interesting variations in turnout rate, as there has been a consistent decline in five consecutive presidential elections, and at the sub-national level, similar trends are visible. Turnout decline in Nigeria's presidential elections point to a gross and significant underrepresentation of the electorates in the electoral process. It raises concerns about the vitality of the country's democratic processes seeing as it speaks to the erosion of democratic institutions and it also has far-reaching implications for the legitimacy of the elected leaders and the overall political landscape in Nigeria. Nigeria's economy holds a significant position as the largest in Africa, and economic stability is linked with electoral processes. Therefore, electoral outcomes does

not just have a direct impact on the citizens but also has a repercussion on foreign investment and trade. Nigeria also has the largest population in Africa, of over 200 million people, and diverse languages. Nigeria is able to spearhead policies within the region especially in West Africa, thereby standing as a regional power. Investigating this problem, is imperative given its significance within the Sub-Saharan Africa context as it plays an important role in shaping the democratic norms and practices within the region. Nigeria's leadership role in historically shaping regional organizations, its democratic health may also serve as a precedent for other nations to follow.

Figure 1. Voter Turnout across All Elections Years in Nigeria



The central focus of this study is continuous turnout decline in presidential elections, and the research question driving this thesis is: “What explains turnout decline in presidential elections?” This thesis identifies the underlying factors that result in a continuous voter turnout decline in presidential elections. Despite scholars in the field of voter turnout identifying several factors such as concurrent elections, the electoral system

which fall under institutional variables (Jackman 1987), and socio-economic issues like as voting age, gender, education level and the economy that potentially impact turnout, they do not explain the case of Nigeria. For instance, Blais and Dobrzynska (1998) acknowledge that younger individuals are less likely to vote when compared to older citizens, but simply lowering the voting age does not necessarily translate into an increase in electoral participation and voter turnout. This was evident in the 2023 Nigeria presidential elections, where there was an active engagement of youths in terms of campaigning and voter registration and more women participation in politics as opposed to the assertion that men tend to vote more than women (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1987). Likewise the concurrent elections of presidential and parliamentary elections in Nigeria does not increase turnout rate as evidenced in the turnout literature (Fornos, Power, and Garand 2004). They assert in their study of voter turnout in Latin American presidential elections that concurrent elections have a positive on turnout rate.

This study highly the important and crucial role the electoral commission plays in shaping voter turnout and its interplay with other explanatory variables building a theoretical framework that accounts for the multifaceted nature of voter turnout decline. It advances the argument that turnout decline in Nigeria's presidential elections comes from an interplay of factors such as the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission, poverty and lack of trust in the electoral process impeding voter turnout. In this study, I examine three set of cases at the sub-national level, Adamawa-Borno, Abia-Imo and Osun-Oyo based on a most similar systems design, utilizing criteria like ethnicity, historical ties, economic spending, religion, and geographical location. These are states in Nigeria, located in the North-East, South-East and South-West respectively. By carrying out a comparative

analysis within the pairs and across pairs, it helps to address the puzzling case of Nigeria, being the only country within Sub-Saharan Africa to have experienced significant voter turnout decline in five election cycles. These selected cases based on similarities all show variations in turnout rate over four election cycles. These turnout trends are different across all cases although decline. These cases provide an advantage to identify an overarching theme, while delving into contextual factors that help to answer the research question.

This thesis is organized as follows. Chapter Two reviews relevant literature on turnout. It outlines the main themes and variables identified in the literature, synthesizing and analyzing the ideas of scholars to understand what drives and impedes voter turnout. While numerous studies in the comparative turnout literature have focused on explaining turnout rate in legislative elections, there is a notable gap when it comes to understanding voter turnout in presidential elections (Dettrey and Schwindt-Bayer 2009; Fornos, Power, and Garand 2004). This gap is particularly evident in Africa where power is centralized majorly on the president who has the power to effect policies that directly affects the citizens. This study helps fill the gap and contributes to the turnout literature, by deriving insights from contextual factors to understanding why turnout declines in presidential elections.

It sheds lights on the lived experiences, motivations and barriers faced by individuals when deciding participate in the elections. In addition, this study offer insights as to why certain countries might exhibit a consistent voter turnout decline over an extended period. Chapter Three introduces the research design and methodology utilized in this study. Here I discuss my case selection for this study, the data collection methods, sampling strategy, ethical considerations and limitations. Chapter Four presents the theory

chapter. In this chapter, I build on the emergent themes and concepts from the data analysis. The primary explanatory theme is the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission which I conceptualize drawing insights from the turnout literature and empirical evidence. I also explore the alternative explanations of lack of trust in the electoral process and socio-economic factor. My findings based on the examined data, reveal an interplay of these factors, which underpins the theoretical framework for this study. The theoretical framework displays the pivotal role of the electoral commission, and its relationship with other explanatory variables and how they impede voter turnout. Chapter Five focuses on data analysis, and presents the findings from data collected from in-depth interviews with party members, civil society members, political activists and INEC officials. It carries an intra and inter case comparison that provides insights on the factors inhibiting turnout in presidential elections. Chapter Six provides the conclusion of the thesis.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

The determinants of voter turnout have been largely studied in western democracies, with not much focus on the African context. Understanding the discrepancies in levels of voter turnout amongst countries has facilitated the identification of variables that are generally acknowledged as well as those not completely acknowledged as having an impact on turnout. And so in line with understanding the factors that influence voters' turnout to better understand factors that result in turnout decline, I review general literatures identifying the factors that influence voter turnout and seek to explain the variations in turnout at both the cross national and individual level, under theoretical frameworks pertaining to institutional settings, cultural factors, and socio-economic issues.

Institutional Variables

The study of the role of formal electoral and political institutions to voter turnout is one that has been prevalent in the study of voters' turnout. Seen as a pioneer of voter turnout, (Powell) in his study on contemporary democracies asserts that institutions "severely inhibit voter turnout" (1986, 17) with focus on the American context. In line with this he notes the importance of attitudes in voter turnout, but posits that voting as a form of political participation is significantly impacted by institutional factors. Subsequent studies in this regard see political institutions as an alternative to explaining the factors affecting voter turnout, establishing causal effects of these institutions such as electoral laws, constitutional frameworks and party systems. Jackman's 1987 article presents a compelling argument for the adoption of an institutional perspective towards the phenomenon of voter turnout. He conducted an analysis of 19 industrialized democracies utilizing a regression model to examine and explain the relationship between voter turnout institutional variables such as, nationally competitive districts, multipartyism, electoral disproportionality, unicameralism, and compulsory voting laws. In considering institutional variables, I identify variables under the institutional setting that offers plausible explanations to turnout decline in the literature; the electoral system and the electoral process.

The Electoral System/Party-System

According to relevant literatures, the type of electoral system employed by nations in their elections has a significant impact on turnout rate, with the potential to either facilitate or inhibit it. The prevailing notion is that turnout is higher in proportional

representation systems. As identified by Blais and Carty (1990) in their study of the impact of electoral system on turnout rate, they report that turnout rate is 7% points lower in a plurality system and 5% points lower in a majority system when compared to that of the proportional representation system. They note that higher turnout rate in PR systems can be linked to three reasons, “PR expands the number of parties, increases competitiveness, and reduces distortions” ((1990, 177). The proliferation of political parties offers individuals in the population a variety of options amongst the citizens and ensures competitiveness with the myriad of candidates who also wanting to be victorious aid in the mobilization of the citizens to go to the polls.

In a decisive election, it is expected that when the electorates are presented with a range of political parties and candidates to choose from, the level of voter participation and turnout would be significantly influenced because of the variety of options presented to them. The argument here is that the higher the number of competing political parties, the higher the turnout. However there is also a counter argument which notes that a plethora of political parties makes the system more complex than it ought to be and can present a difficulty to the electorates who might find it impossible to settle on a choice of candidate or party. Some scholars note that plurality systems as opposed to the PR system is less complex and more transparent, and the heightened decisiveness of plurality elections may significantly increase turnout (Jackman 1987). In their study of turnout in Latin America, Fornos, Power, and Garand (2004) however note the lack of association between the proportional representation and turnout rate. Also, Lindberg (2006) in his study of one hundred and sixteen electoral processes across the African continent, observed that the level of political participation tends to decrease in a majoritarian system. Scholars assert

that multipartyism is antithetical to turnout in the sense that it depresses turnout as multipartyism in itself encourages coalition government (Jackman 1987; Kostadinova 2003).

In the African context, Kuenzi and Lambright (2007) note that a weak relationship exists between multipartyism and turnout in African elections, which they argue could be due to the fact that the degree of competitiveness in electoral contests may not have much impact on voters' decision to participate in the electoral process. Although the political parties and party system within the African continent have been said to be weak and lack institutionalization, scholars assert that they nonetheless remain pivotal agents of mobilization (Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2004; Kuenzi and Lambright 2001). They are relatively strong when compared to other institutions, and can drive voter participation in environments where information is low and not readily accessible, and that party identification is positive and significant as it increases the possibility of electoral turnout (Kuenzi and Lambright 2011).

The Electoral Process

The recurring theme on the impact of the electoral process on voter turnout is linked to the perception voters have of such electoral process. Lehoucq and Molina Jiménez (2002) posits that electoral malpractice has the ability to severely undermine citizens' capacity to constrain the actions of state officials. Therefore, the lack of trust in electoral institutions resulting from electoral malpractices can lead to an erosion of citizens' perceptions of the legitimacy of other political institution. In this regard, Birch (2010) argues in her study where she carries out a comprehensive multilevel analysis of a total of thirty-one elections that were conducted between 1996 and 2002 in in both established,

new and partial democracies that the level of trust and manner in which elections are conducted have a significant impact on turnout rate. It is such that when voters possess confidence that an election will be conducted in a manner that upholds the principles of freedom and fairness, they are more likely to go to the polls and exercise their right to vote. As opposed to situations where they harbor doubts about the electoral process and the competence of the electoral administrators to safeguard and uphold the tenets of democratic norms and values.

Similarly, Alvarez, Hall, and Llewellyn (2008) find a positive impact, as individuals who possess a greater sense of confidence in the integrity of the electoral process, and those who firmly believe that their ballot will be counted correctly are more inclined to vote. The case study conducted by McCann and Domínguez (1998) in Mexico, utilizing public opinion surveys conducted between 1986 and 1995, provides evidence of the adverse impact of citizens' perceptions of electoral fraud on their likelihood of turnout. They note that the expectation of fraud was directly proportional to the degree of reduction in the probability of citizens casting their votes. In essence individuals who held the belief that the electoral process was devoid of fraudulent activities and that their votes would significantly contribute toward the electoral result were more inclined to turnout and participate in the electoral process. Another factor seen to impact voter turnout in the turnout literature is voter registration.

Contrary to the notion in the turnout literature that registration laws can impact turnout positively if they are lenient, some scholars note that individuals who do not participate in the electoral process, are still not likely to do so if the barriers or difficulties linked with voter registration were lifted or eliminated (Highton 2004; Timpone 1998).

Therefore, it is a mistake to argue that if such barriers and difficulties associated with the registration process were removed, citizens who are yet to register would become interested in the process and vote at same high rate as their registered counterparts. However Burden and Neiheisel in their study on turnout with reference to other scholars note that the, “legal barriers to voting, coupled with the inability or unwillingness of the average citizen to pay the additional costs associated with such restrictions on the franchise, have been responsible for the low rates of voter turnout in the United States” (2013, 87).

Cultural Variables

Cultural postulations place emphasis on the sociological and psychological aspect of the individual, in a bid to understand the multifaceted reasons underpinning people’s decisions to vote. They speak to the distinct attributes of individuals that has the potential to account for their voting behavior. Such as their political outlooks, party association, trust and interpersonal relationships (Powell 1986). In this regard I identify cultural variables relevant within this study that affect voter turnout.

Ethnicity

This variable is one that has not really been paid much attention in the turnout literature. However, one’s sense of identity and belonging can indeed affect and shape such an individual’s voting behavior and political participation in general especially in multi-ethnic states and ethnically divided societies. Horowitz notes that “ethnic affiliations provide a sense of security in a divided society, as well as a source of trust, certainty, reciprocal help, and protection against neglect of one’s interests by strangers” (1993, 32). The propensity to stay away from the polls when one’s kinsman isn’t a candidate in the election is high. The African setting is unique, given the consequences of colonial rule in

African nations. Such as the unequal distribution of wealth, educational access and even job opportunities leaving room for a high level of competition between ethnic groups. Young (2009) asserts that ethnicity as regards African politics, stands out as a widely embraced theoretical preposition.

As far back as African history, ethnicity was regarded as a cleavage that structured the way individuals voted as rather than voting on a candidate's merit, voters were more inclined to support one from their ethnic group as a means of expressing their identity. It is therefore plausible that certain members of the populace would show their allegiance, support and solidarity with their respective ethnic or social groups by casting their ballot, and would abstain if they feel unrepresented. In the African context, the level of ethnic fractionalization is quite high, given for example the Nigerian nation, which possess a multi-faceted political owing to the heterogeneous and myriad of varying ethnic and religious factions within the country. However I Coma and Nai (2017) in their study, drawing comparative evidence from 650 elections across the globe, argue that there exists a negative correlation between ethnic diversity in a nation and voter turnout. Their comprehensive analysis reveal that societies which exhibit higher levels of ethnic fractionalization, by having a great number of distinct groups and polarization are generally associated with lower levels of turnout and political participation.

Socio-Economic Variables

Political participation in general, Powell (1986) notes is facilitated by greater socioeconomic resources, both at the individual level and cross-national level. As posited by Brady, Verba, and Schlozman (1995) in their resource model of political participation, they note that time, money and civic skills influence individual's participation in politics.

If these resources are unevenly distributed amongst the different socio-economic strata in the society, it is expected that individuals with higher socio-economic status have an advantage. They possess a wider range of resources that enable them to bear the cost of voting more effectively, thereby increasing the likelihood of political participation (Almond and Verba 1963; Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). There are numerous socio-economic issues as identified in relevant literatures seen to affect voter turnout rate, at both the cross national and individual level. Amongst these are Population, Age, Gender, Education, Economy and Urbanization.

Population

The running idea linking population size and turnout rate stems from the thought of how a large political environment would almost make it impossible for an individual to have any influence on politics within the country. In the turnout literature, the major postulation held is that turnout rate is higher in smaller countries as opposed to more populated countries. Going in this direction, Geys (2006) finds supports that turnout rate is lower in countries with a larger population as opposed to countries with a smaller population. A slightly different perspective owing to why turnout is lower in countries with a larger population as opposed to countries with smaller populations, suggests that the relationship between population and participation is not merely a matter of numbers. Rather the organizational difficulties that arise in the context of creating unified party systems and mobilizing large numbers of citizens at election time. These difficulties can be attributed to large countries whose population size and territory pose significant logistical and communication challenges (Powell 1982). In this sense, turnout is influenced not because the citizens perceive that they have little or no influence over political matters in their

nation, but rather the difficulty political leaders encounter in setting up organizational bodies in larger nations, gives smaller nations an advantage in organizing their citizens and getting them to turnout at their polling units.

Age

The predominant notion regarding the impact of age on voter turnout is that a reduction in the voting age leads to a corresponding reduction in the rate of voter participation. Simply put the lower the voting age, the lower the turnout rate. Blais and Dobrzynska (1998) observe that the younger demographic exhibits a lower propensity to participate in the electoral process compared to their older counterparts, largely due to their limited understanding and perception of politics. This limited exposure to the political realm is primarily attributed to their comparatively shorter lifespan. In the result of their study, Blais and Dobrzynska (1998) find a noteworthy impact in their study where they incorporated the voting age variable in their examination of elections from the 1970s.

Their findings suggest that a decrease in voting age from 21 to 18 leads to a decline/reduction in voter turnout rate by five points. Similarly, Franklin (2004) highlights the importance of voting age. He asserts that the decrease/lowering of voting age among most democracies has resulted in a three-percentage point decline in turnout rate. In addition to this, it is expected that as individuals reach the stage of adulthood they embark on a new phase of life. They tend to display a heightened level of engagement and commitment towards public affairs, accompanied by a greater degree of involvement and affiliation with the various communities they belong to, which is attributed to the cultivation of a deeper sense of civic duty. Consistent with the findings in advanced democracies, these scholars find that older individuals are more inclined towards

participating in the electoral process than youths (Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2004; Kuenzi and Lambright 2011). Kuenzi and Lambright state “a 50-year-old is almost 15 percent more likely to vote than an 18-year-old in Africa” (2011, 783).

Gender

Some scholars posit that gender has an influence on political participation. The prevailing notion is that men are more likely to vote than women are as women are thought to possess less political knowledge and resources when compared to their male counterparts. Although the traditional studies on electoral participation such as that of (Almond and Verba 1963; Verba and Nie 1972) report that women were less likely to turnout in elections and cast their ballots when compared to men. The explanation as to why women were less likely to turnout was seen as a consequence of late enfranchisement of women and the inequality in resources between men and women (Verba and Nie 1972). Atkeson (2003) notes that the engagement of women in politics may be spurred or motivated by the presence of other women vying for political positions thereby promoting in women’s participation rates and propelling them to go the polls to show support for their gender and a greater representation of women in politics.

However, in recent decades, there seems to be a dwindling demarcation between women and men as regards turnout and a shift in gender patterns pertaining to voter turnout in well-established democracies. As recent studies have shown, such as that of (Beauregard 2018; Inglehart and Norris 2003), they argue that the differences between men and women turning out to cast their ballot are not discernible, or that women are now more likely to turnout out to vote as opposed to men. In the African context, in their study comprising 10 African countries, at the aggregate level, found support for the hypothesis that women

exhibit a low propensity to vote and men vote at a higher frequency than women do (Kuenzi and Lambright 2011). However, in conducting country level analysis, they found specifically in Lesotho and Zimbabwe that women were significantly more likely to vote than men were, thereby concluding that the effect of gender on turnout rate is shaped by contextual factors at the country level.

Education

According to the theory of “civic education”, it is posited that as an individual progresses in their educational development, their acquisition of civic skills and knowledge will inevitably lead to a consequential increase in political involvement and engagement. The consensus in electoral studies in empirical literature assert that educated individuals are more likely to vote than less educated ones. Voting in itself represents the most undemanding form of political engagement. One that is not dependent on the acquisition of civic competencies or simply a possession of civic skills. Nevertheless, a certain level of skill might be necessary and that those with limited linguistic proficiency are less inclined to participate in elections (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 1995). A high level of illiteracy would be detrimental to political participation, having a dampening effect on voter turnout. Similarly, Rosenstone and Hansen posit that education plays a crucial role as it “imparts the knowledge and skills most essential to a citizen's task. Because of their schooling, the well-educated have the skills people need to understand the abstract subject of politics, to follow the political campaign, and to research and evaluate issues and candidates” (1993, 136). In this same line of thought Blais and Dobrzynska (1998) note that when a significant portion of the population have a high degree of illiteracy, achieving a substantial level of turnout is extremely difficult.

Education itself plays a paramount role in the process of socializing citizens into the norms of civic engagement. It does so by equipping them with the necessary cognitive skills that are required for active engagement, thereby facilitating participation in political activities. Furthermore, education serves a crucial tool for lowering the financial and time costs that are associated with acquiring information, this is particularly critical given that education is firmly linked to a conception of voting as a moral and civic duty (Almond and Verba 1963). Similarly, Blais, Dobrzynska, and Massicotte (2003) demonstrated that turnout is higher among university graduates, with it being 50% higher than that of non-graduates, within young Canadian citizens. Although some studies note that turnout is higher in countries where there is a large percentage of educated individuals, in the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, Holm (1978) discovered an intriguing inverse association between turnout and education in Kenya and Ghana. He contends that this relationship can be largely attributed to the heightened level of education that results in an increased level of cynicism and awareness towards corruption especially in the government. Furthermore, they posit that educated individuals in African societies are frequently removed from traditional communities that possess mobilization networks, which only serves to exacerbate the previously mentioned phenomenon.

Economy/Income

The impact of a country's economic situation the income level of individuals has had conflicting results in the literature. It is expected that countries with stable economies, equipped with modernized social structures will have greater levels of participation in politics. Blais and Dobrzynska (1998) in their study find that a high economic growth does

foster voter turnout. Countries possessing modernized social structures and developed industrial economies are predicted to exhibit heightened levels of political participation, stability and efficacy within their governing bodies, as well as diminished incidents of political violence when contrasted with countries that possess more traditional social structures and pre-industrial economies. Rosenstone (1982) posits a compelling argument regarding the impact of economic hardship on voter turnout. Specifically, he contends that such adversity can negatively affect political participation by disrupting the social bonds that foster political engagement. As a result, individuals may become disenchanting with politics and prioritize their personal interests over civic duties. Similarly, Solt (2008, 2010) shows that income inequality may likely impede electoral participation of individuals amongst the lowest income categories. Individuals facing issues of poverty are less likely to engage in the electoral process. Radcliff (1992) in his study recorded a positive relationship between economic performance and voter turnout in advanced industrial democracies. He also notes the plausibility of economic adversity having two outcomes. It may cause individuals to take action to address their concerns by going to the polls to vote or it may result in complete withdrawal and disengagement from the political sphere. Also, according to the withdrawal hypothesis identified in the turnout literature, which notes that high unemployment rates may make individuals apathetic to the electoral process and casting their votes.

Burden and Wichowsky (2014) assert that the withdrawal hypothesis might not be effective, as rather than unemployment making voters apathetic, it stimulates them to turn out and vote, as they are more likely to choose their candidates based on the premise of change and economic performance. Kuenzi and Lambright (2011), discover that income

has a negative relationship with turnout in the African context. Their study suggests that individuals, who regularly experience food shortage and food insecurity, are more inclined to participate in the electoral process by casting their ballots than those who do not frequently face such challenges. This they note could be interpreted that impoverished Africans have the tendency to turn out and vote in elections with the hope of initiating change, or that they are more susceptible to the enticements of clientelism and patronage from parties and candidates in light of their precarious economic status. Given the rise in economic difficulties and income inequality, these factors are likely to have contributed to turnout decline, but given the different postulations by authors, it suggests that these effects may not be straightforward, and are likely to be more complex.

Urbanization

Understanding the role urbanization plays in aiding political participation and fostering turnout has been met with mixed reactions and results in the turnout literature. According to Filer, Kenny, and Morton (1993) urbanization serves as a vital indicator of development across countries, which aids in the fostering of political participation as urban residents have better access to political information and knowledge and awareness through the media (diverse media platforms). In this light, they are more exposed to national issues and the candidates vying for political positions. Contrary to this, Kuenzi and Lambright found that urbanization has a negative impact on turnout in Africa. This they attributed to the role political parties play in mobilizing individuals especially those in rural areas to vote. They posit that governing parties in Africa frequently garner the majority of the support from rural regions and historically have directed their efforts towards mobilizing voters outside the urban areas. This is made possible because of “the lowered cost of

mobilization efforts, established patronage networks, ease of monitoring and punishing defectors and the high levels of group solidarity and pressure for conformity that pervade rural communities” (2011, 783).

However, it is plausible that individuals in the rural areas are less likely to vote. While the cost of mobilization efforts might be seen to be low within rural communities, the scarcity of the electoral commission’s offices within local areas is likely to make it difficult for them to engage in the electoral process. The cost of voting increases if they have to travel down to nearby cities or towns to register. The geographical locations of such rural communities also, might make it difficult for the electorates to engage in the electoral process and may rather focus on their personal issues and daily activities. This also suggest that gubernatorial elections and presidential elections have significant differences in the mobilization efforts of both political parties and the electoral commission. As identified by Filer, Kenny, and Morton (1993), it is likely that political information is more available to the residents of rural areas during gubernatorial elections than presidential elections. The gubernatorial aspirant might find it easy to visit the localities within the state, while it more difficult for a presidential aspirant to visit all the states and localities within.

Another factor seen to affect voter turnout in Sub-Saharan Africa that is not really documented in the general turnout literature is violence.

Violence

Elections in Africa over the years have been marked with voter intimidation and violence either by the incumbent or opponent in a bid to reduce competition, discourage voters or sway the voters’ choice in other for them to emerge victorious. Bekoe and

Burchard note that, “electoral violence even if it occurs simultaneously with other types of violence, has the particular purpose of attempting to harm or otherwise affect stakeholders such as candidates and voters ahead of or after an election” (2017, 2). In their study of pre-election violence and electoral violence in Kenya, they assert that electoral violence has been used as a means to intimidate, suppress, motivate and even punish voters.

They however argue that the impact of electoral violence on turnout is not uniform, being that voters react to such violence in varying ways. They may choose to either abstain from voting, adjust their voting or simply remain at home without casting their vote. The nature of their response they note is contingent on the factors such as the extent of the violence, the risk that the voters are willing to assume and their perception of the election. Such as was the case of the 2013, where the violence preceding it was higher than that of 2002 and 2007, yet the voter turnout rate was higher. They also argue that electoral violence does not translate into low turnout rate in countries across Africa. In this case, while pre-election and electoral violence may be present, it does not stand as the sole determinant of voter turnout decline

This chapter has highlighted several factors identified by scholars within the turnout literature that inhibit voter turnout. As evidenced, most postulations have two sides to them, as almost all explanations given are largely contested with not much effort given to the lived experiences of the electorates. This is particularly evident in the African setting given that most studies have been done on western democracies. For example, scholars show that education is positively related to education, but the increasing levels of education globally does not seem to reflect on voter turnout. The issue of age also shows that younger persons are less likely to vote in the elections. One would expect that an increased level of

youth interest in politics and elections would translate into an increase in voter turnout, but that seems not to be the case as evidenced by the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. This signals that voter turnout decline may not be fully captured by a simple explanation. By taking a look at the lived experiences of the electorates as regards electoral participation, we can identify underlying explanations that inhibit voter turnout in presidential elections.

Chapter 3. Research Design

In this chapter, I outline the methods used in this study to investigate the factors that account for turnout decline in presidential elections at the subnational level in Nigeria. I explain the qualitative methods utilized along with the challenges encountered during data collection and ethical considerations. As noted earlier, turnout rate has been declining globally, and the objective of this research is to understand causes of turnout decline in presidential elections. In examining the factors that affect voter turnout within the turnout literature, it becomes apparent that some of the commonly identified variables, including but not limited to economic growth, education level, poverty, unemployment, age, and gender do not offer up comprehensive explanations for turnout decline as most of these explanations continue to be contested. One would expect that an increase in literacy levels would positively influence turnout, but as identified by Blais, Gidengil, and Nevitte (2004), an inverse relationship exists instead. Likewise, one might anticipate a significant increase in turnout when there is heightened political interests among the youths and women. However, despite increased youth participation in the campaigns and electoral discourse, with both youths and women making up 75% of the registered voters in Nigeria's presidential elections, the turnout rate further declined. Notwithstanding these caveats, the

turnout literature has provided valuable insight into turnout decline. However, this phenomenon persists and our understanding of it is still limited. Hence the need to engage the populace to get their perspectives as to the challenges and barriers of voter turnout.

Case Selection

This study draws upon Nigeria that held its presidential elections in February 2023. The turnout expectation was very different from the outcome. With a number of 93,469,008 registered voters, turnout was 26.71% (Voter Turnout Database). This statistics shows that a significant portion of registered voters did not cast their votes during the election, resulting to a low turnout rate. Understanding turnout in presidential elections at the sub-national level in Nigeria allows us to shed more light on the issues surrounding voter turnout. With over 200 million people, diverse ethnic groups and languages, Nigeria has the largest population in Africa. Nigeria also stands as a leader in Sub-Saharan Africa, whose choices and decisions holds the ability to influence the decision of other nations. Nigeria is rich in human capital and natural resources, and is important not just to its citizens or region but also at the international community. Democratic elections play a crucial role in promoting good governance, socio-economic development, and political stability.

Therefore, this issue of turnout decline has the potential to affect foreign relations, trade and investment opportunities, pointing to the broader implication and importance of this issue. I identified the units of analysis for this study utilizing a most similar systems design. MSSD is a comparative design that helps us to choose cases based on certain similarities. Although a strict MSSD requires similarities across all independent variable except for the dependent and independent variable of interest (Anckar 2008). I employ the MSSD more loosely, identifying cases with both similar background characteristics, but

also exhibiting differences in some other independent variables. These similarities help us to identify commonalities and control for the similarities that can influence voter turnout, while observing other differences in other variables and the dependent variable. By carrying out a comparative analysis, likely associations can be identified, that helps with understanding the phenomenon under study and the examination of different factors and conditions surrounding each case.

I selected the paired cases for this study based on shared boundaries and other similarities, such as ethnicity, insurgency, electoral violence, party system, historical ties, religion etc., and variations in turnout rate. The primary unit of analysis are the individual states, which will be compared within their pairs. The secondary unit of analysis are the pairs of cases, which will be compared between themselves. These set of paired cases makes it possible to have a two-level comparative analysis, first within the three pairs of cases identified and then between the three pairs of cases. The pairs of states will be compared within themselves based on data that will be collected to understand local dynamics and then comparing findings across the pairs to identify overarching explanations, thereby capturing not just context-specific nuances but general trends that may explain turnout decline.

Table 1. Voter Turnout Trends across four election cycles

Dependent Variable	Adamawa	Borno	Osun	Oyo	Imo	Abia
Voter Turnout 2011	52.93%	43.13%	39.62%	33.50%	87.25%	80.22%
Voter Turnout 2015	43.55%	28.62%	48.14%	39.61%	41.87%	29.72%
Voter Turnout 2019	44.34%	42.63%	43.62%	30.84%	25.77%	18.71%
Voter Turnout 2023	33.29%	18.51%	37.51%	24.70%	19.31%	17.45%

The above table shows the turnout trend of the identified cases for the four election cycles. The cases identified show interesting variations for turnout through four election cycle years. The international IDEA turnout database shows variations in democratic nations like the US, resembling the trends observed in Adamawa and Borno. Adamawa and Borno experienced fluctuations in turnout, with a decrease in 2015, a slight increase in 2019, and a significant decrease in 2023. Similarly, Osun and Oyo, experience an increase in 2015 when compared to the data of 2011, followed by decline the 2019 and 2023 elections. The overall turnout trend in Nigeria has shown a decline since the 2007 presidential elections, which is particularly evident in Imo and Abia. I will further expand on both research design and case selection in the case selection section. The data table below gives an insight into the similarities between these cases, underscoring the grounds for their selection.

Table 2. Similarities and differences between selected cases

Independent Variables	Adamawa (NE)	Borno(NE)	Osun(SW)	Oyo(SW)	Imo(SE)	Abia(SE)
GDP Per Capita	\$1,341	\$698	\$1,030	\$980	\$2,996	\$2,048
Education spending per capita	\$1.86	\$6.03	\$6.82	\$9.64	\$0.83	\$3.14
Population	4,902,100	6,111,500	4,435,800	7,976,100	5,459,300	4,143,100
Ethnicity	Fulani	Kanuri	Yoruba	Yoruba	Ibo	Ibo
Insurgency	Boko Haram	Boko Haram	-	-	-	-
Multi-party system	PDP, APC and LP	PDP, APC and LP	PDP, APC and LP	PDP, APC and LP	PDP, APC and LP	PDP, APC and LP
Religion	Islam	Islam	Islam/Christianity	Islam/Christianity	Christianity	Christianity
Electoral Violence	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Pre-colonial states	Yes (formerly Adamawa emirate)	Yes (formerly Borno emirate)	Yes (formerly part of the Oyo empire)	Yes (formerly part of the Oyo empire)	Yes (Eastern Region)	Yes (Eastern Region)
Dependent Variable	Adamawa	Borno	Osun	Oyo	Imo	Abia
Voter Turnout 2011	52.93%	43.13%	39.62%	33.50%	87.25%	80.22%
Voter Turnout 2015	43.55%	28.62%	48.14%	39.61%	41.87%	29.72%
Voter Turnout 2019	44.34%	42.63%	43.62%	30.84%	25.77%	18.71%
Voter Turnout 2023	33.29%	18.51%	37.51%	24.70%	19.31%	17.45%

In the above table, Adamawa and Borno are states located in the Northeastern region of Nigeria. With similar ethnicity, three major political parties, these two Muslim dominated states show similar patterns in their turnout rate. The Boko Haram terrorist group has targeted both states. Although there are differences in their population size, education spending, GDP per capita, a similar pattern is identifiable in their turnout rate. A voter turnout decline in 2015, a slight turnout increase in 2019 and a significant decrease in turnout, in the 2023 election. Osun and Oyo are both located in the southwestern region of Nigeria. The dominant ethnic group within both states is the Yoruba ethnic group. Both states have experienced electoral violence. Historically, both states were part of the Oyo Empire before they were separated. Both Christianity and Islam have a significant presence in these states. Although there are slight differences in their GDP per capita and education spending, with a difference in their population size, both show a similar pattern in voter

turnout. A slight voter turnout increase in 2015, turnout decrease in 2019 and a further decline in 2023 elections.

Imo and Abia are both located southeastern region of Nigeria. Prior to this, they were all part of the Eastern region administration before Nigeria became an independent state in 1960, the Eastern central state in 1967 post independence. Imo state was created in 1976, and Abia state was carved out of Imo state in 1991. Both are home to the Ibo ethnic group, and have not faced any form of insurgency. Christianity is the primary religion of both states, and they both have reports of electoral violence. With differences in GDP per capita, education spending and population, both show similar trends in voter turnout. A significant turnout decline in 2015, given the data for 2011. From 2015 to 2023, turnout has been on a steady decline. All cases show interesting variations in turnout rate, with different patterns and trajectories. These patterns do not fit existing explanations as identified in the turnout literature, neither are there any apparent explanations, hence the need to carry out an inductive study. These cases hold the potential to provide valuable insights into the causes of turnout decline, offering explanations that can be applied not only to Nigeria, but also to other regions and countries facing similar challenges. By carrying out an analysis of the factors that contribute to turnout decline, a deeper understanding can be gained on the dynamics that shape political engagement. The case selection also helps to control for unobserved characteristics such as political attitudes, trust in the electoral system, ethnic and religious factors that have been identified in the turnout literature to have a potential impact on turnout rate.

Methodology

Grounded Theory Approach

This study utilized a grounded theory approach aimed at theory generation through a reiterative process. The discovery of grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss in (2017) created a part in response to the dominant use of quantitative methodologies, which helped to open up research opportunities in a new field. Classical grounded theory aims to develop a substantive theory, which aims to predict and explain behavior (Glaser and Strauss 2017). The purpose of this study was to develop a theory that offers a comprehensive explanation on the causes of turnout decline in presidential elections. In the identification of causal mechanisms from the data analysis and findings, I establish how the grounded theory methodology adopting a critical realist approach attempt to establish causal explanations from the experiences of individuals identified in the empirical data (Bhaskar 2013).

The approach of critical realism to grounded theory, considers the emphasis on being placed by critical realists, which provides a framework where epistemologically oriented experiences are traced backwards in order to establish and discern underlying social and ontologically framed mechanism which have resulted to the action (Looker, Vickers, and Kington 2021). This principle of critical realism is complemented by the methodological approach of grounded theory. Discovery and emergence are prioritized, given that theory emerges from the data, which is similar to the assumption of critical realists' assumption that an empirical phenomenon is not isolated but emerges from the real domain of reality identified (Bhaskar 2013). The convergence of both the critical realism position and the grounded theory methodology make it possible to identify causal mechanisms that emerge from the data rather than building hypothesis from existing theories. The reiterative process of grounded theory through open, axial and selective

coding, allow for a systematic approach where a core theme is identified and other emergent themes that relate to the core theme.

Interviews

To carry out this research, I utilized a qualitative approach, as it aids the exploration of issues, providing in-depth insights. Qualitative studies allow for in-depth exploration and interpretation of a phenomenon within real-world contexts, all based on individual experiences and perceptions. The method I used for data collection to answer my research question were in-depth one-on-one interviews. According to Yeo et al. (2014) in-depth interviews, as a method provide an avenue for acquiring comprehensive descriptions and insightful interpretations of the social worlds of individuals, in order to understand their unique perspectives and illuminate the topic or issue being studied. In-depth interviews allows the exploration of individual perspectives and their experiences. The interviews were semi-structured, providing more flexibility and range during the interview, and allow the possibility of probing and eliciting information from the participants.

According to Lune and Berg (2017) the data we want are the reactions and responses of the individual. The process of semi-structured interview is similar to having a regular conversation. The participant is active in shaping the research process and determines the flow of topics, with the researcher listening attentively, probing for further elaboration and adapting the interview to generate more insights and unexpected or unanticipated connections that are not likely to emerge in a structured interview. Given the location of the study and time constraints, I was not be able to travel down to Nigeria to carry out the research. All interviews were carried out online. Upon getting in touch with

participants, and introducing myself as a graduate student at Nazarbayev University, I explained why I contacted them and told them the purpose of my study. I placed an emphasis on the confidentiality of the interviews, ensuring them that ethical approval has been given for my study and explaining that personal identifiable information will not be used in my analysis.

Getting the desired number of participants proved futile despite constant communication, which is quite understandable given time differences and availability. In addressing my research question, I carried out the interviews via Google Meet. In certain cases where participants were unable to grant me an online interview, I sent the interview questions via email and WhatsApp. I had also envisioned carrying out focus groups interviews, but recruiting participants for the online focus groups proved futile, due to the different schedules and unwillingness of some individuals. Likewise, network issues proved to be a hurdle during the interview process. Flick (2013) notes that most scholars utilizing qualitative methods argue that the application of these methods enables researchers to avoid oversimplification, ensuring that they do not overlook the intricate aspects of how politics manifests itself in the real world. All interviews used for this study contributed to the overall understanding of the turnout climate in Nigeria and the factors affecting voter turnout.

Sampling

Sampling of units in qualitative research are typically made based on certain features within the population. For the individual interviews, the sampling of participants for this study from the population based on the unit of analysis (states) I utilized purposive sampling. In purposive sampling, the selection of sample units is predicated upon their

possession of distinct qualities or characteristics that facilitates and enables a comprehensive exploration of the question and theme the researchers aspires to investigate (Bryman 2016). To help widen the participant pool, I also utilized the snowballing method, by asking for referrals from already identified expert participants, to get more respondents. Although a potential disadvantage of using this method is the issue of bias, as participants may refer individuals with similar characteristics and opinions. Thereby limiting the diversity in the sample.

However as Patton asserts, by asking for referrals from key participants, the snowball gets bigger aiding in the accumulation of “new information rich cases” (2005, 298). For this study predicated on the criteria that they are well-informed individuals, the categories of respondents identified for this study are, party-members, civil society members, political activists and Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) officials. These identified categories offered up diverse perspectives concerning the research question. I initially planned to interview 54 individuals, 9 within each identified case. However, I was able to interview 34 individuals, 9 political activists, 10 party members, 12 civil society members and 4 INEC officials.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are important in human behavioral research, as it is essential that participants are fully aware of the research being carried out and are not harmed in the course of the research. I submitted an ethics application to the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) of Nazarbayev University, and I have received ethical approval. Before I began my data collection, I presented an oral consent script to the participants detailing the purpose of the research, research procedures, potential risks and benefits.

The interviewees were assured of confidentiality that no personal identifiable information will be used or revealed in the finished report. Given this, data stored did not contain their real names or other personal identifiable information. Some respondents did not mind being mentioned, while others stated their concerns with being exposed. To adhere to ethical standards and maintain confidentiality, results were reported using special identifiers generated by the researcher for each participant. This was done to ensure that any personal identifiable information of the participants' are not reported in the result. Observing these ethical considerations are essential especially when dealing with issues that are sensitive.

Limitations

While interviews offer valuable insights into the perspectives and experiences of the participants, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The sample for this study has its limitations. The initial sample strategy for this study was purposive, targeted to include individuals who are viewed to be well informed within the Nigerian populace. I further employed the snowball method, whereby I asked recruited participants for their recommendation to others who would be willing to partake in the study. This raises an issue of representativeness, as the snowballing method does not guarantee a representative sample of the population. Another identified limitation is the issue of data collection via online interviews. Recruiting participants in person, allows for face-to-face interactions, which provides a richer understanding of participants' behaviors.

While convenient, the dynamics of online interviews differ from that of face-to-face interactions. It limits the range of the researcher to capture non-verbal cues especially when respondents turn off their videos. I encountered network issues and scheduling these

interviews as willing participants had lots of engagement. Language was also a barrier especially within the North where Adamawa and Borno are located. Most of the contacts I had from Borno could not communicate in English language, so we could not proceed with the interviews. Despite these limitations, the interviews provided the opportunity to explore and answer my research question, generating valuable insights that can inform future studies. This sample may limit the generalizability of the findings to cases exhibiting similar variations.

Chapter 4. Theory

This chapter highlights the argument and findings of the thesis, and presents the theoretical framework developed from the data analysis conducted. I utilize grounded theory in order to provide a systematic approach, grounding theoretical insights in empirical evidence. Going through the process of open, axial and selective coding, I identify themes and patterns that emerged within the data. These serve as the foundation upon which my argument and theoretical framework is built, offering an explanation on the causes of turnout decline in presidential elections. From the data analysis, I identify the core theme of the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission, and other sub themes such as distrust in the electoral process, socio-economic issues, and insecurity. Each theme appearing in varying degrees in the analyzed data represents a significant aspect of the complex interplay that affects voter behavior and shape electoral outcomes.

First, I conceptualize the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission within the empirical evidence drawing insights from the turnout literature. Then I explore alternative explanations and how they interact with the independent variable. Lastly, I develop a

theoretical framework that takes into account the main independent variable and the alternative explanations to capture the multi-faceted nature of voter turnout decline. It is important to acknowledge that these concepts and ideas discussed are based on the experiences and interpretations of participants in this study. Despite efforts to garner diverse perspectives, the sample size is limited, which may not fully capture the phenomenon being studied. Acknowledging the limited sample size that is not representative of the population, this theoretical framework nevertheless provides valuable insights on the causes of turnout decline, while integrating it within the broader turnout literature to situate these findings and increase its validity.

Conceptualization of the Ineffectiveness of the Electoral Commission

The election administration has the capacity to shape participation costs of voters (De Kadt 2017; Harris and Dhahi 2018). Scholars and election observers have identified challenges within the electoral commission within low and middle-income countries such as the long queues on the day of the elections and voter registration issues. These issues are often viewed as minor barriers to voter participation (Martinez I Coma and Nai 2017). Other scholars in their study provide empirical evidence that shows the importance of these factors considered as minor and how they might serve to discourage voters from participating in the elections (Highton 2006; Stewart 2012; Stein et al. 2020; Pettigrew 2021). This highlights the significance of the election administration and its impact on voter behavior and voter turnout. Harris quoting other scholars shows that voter registration and lines on election days are not the only manifestations of the electoral administration. These includes “influencing citizens’ experience at the voting booth whether through the

identity of polling officers and party representatives, finger inking on election day, the number and location of polling places, or the kind of voting machine used to cast a ballot (2020, 624).

The electoral commission is specifically designed with essential functions regarding the elections, including voter registration, procurement of election materials, conduct balloting and tallying of votes (Lekorwe 2006). Carrying out its stipulated functions translates to the commission being effective, whereas its inability to adequately carry out the assigned function would mean such an institution is ineffective. This concept falls within the Institutional category of the determinants of voter turnout, encompassing several dimensions, which shows how the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission affects turnout. The turnout literature reflects the importance of institutional variables and how they affect voter turnout.

These institutional variables are often cited as the most powerful determinants of voter turnout (Jackman 1987). Variables such as easy voter registration, concurrent elections and compulsory voting have been seen to impact turnout positively in the turnout literature. However, the data analysis revealed voter registration issues, issues related to polling units encompassing limited machine and staff, timeliness of operations, and limited electoral materials as manifestations of the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission. I conceptualize the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission to be its inability to carry out its duties in an effectively, which results in deficiencies in the electoral process. To strengthen this conceptualization I draw insights from the turnout literature and the data, by addressing factors that sheds lights on the pivotal role of the electoral administration in affecting voter behavior and electoral participation.

Voter Registration Issues

Voter registration is one of the core duties of the electoral commission. Several studies in the turnout literature have cited issues related to voter registration as an impediment and challenge regarding voter turnout. Voter registration hurdles inclusive of cost and the complicated process, is likely to affect the decision of the voter to engage in the electoral process, especially individuals with lower levels of income and education (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). This study reveals that issues regarding voter registration stands as a barrier toward electoral participation. A civil society member had this to say:

During our youth mobilization exercise, we had an issue where people from rural communities had not been able to participate, had not been able to register for their PVCs. Because their communities are not accessible, the officials that have the mandate of registering them do not have an office there. In addition, for them to go down to the urban centers where those offices are to register for their voter's cards was something else.

The challenge to voter registration especially within the rural areas can sway their decisions in deciding to actively participate in the electoral process, when they calculate the cost of voting. This might lead people within rural communities to further believe that presidential elections are primarily for people in urban settlements, as there are no adequate efforts to ensure that they are registered and partake in the electoral process. Additionally, the long waiting period associated with voter registration, is likely to leave voters uninterested with the process, when they believe they can spend their time doing something more profitable, thereby resulting in low voter registration and ultimately turnout decline. Likewise, the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission is heightened when voters who have completed the registration process are unable to collect their PVCs, which gives them the right to vote in the elections. Respondents across the states note the difficulties involved

in collecting the voters cards before the elections. This inability of the commission to effectively distribute the PVCs disenfranchises a sizeable amount of voters, leading to turnout decline. A party member had this to say:

During the build-up to last year general elections, about 1.7 million people were disenfranchised from voting, according to INEC. Why? They registered for their PVCs. Unfortunately, on the day of the elections, their PVCs were not out.

Operation of Polling Units

Problems associated with the management of polling units highlights the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission. The interview data reveals that elections in certain polling units started late rather than the stipulated time, issues of limited staff managing the polling units and limited electoral materials. These problems highlights the lack overall poor management of the electoral process, which highlights its ineffectiveness and how it affects electoral participation. Delays in the commencement of elections by opening polling stations late, limited electoral materials and staff can frustrate voters, thereby discouraging voter turnout. Some respondents had this to say:

There are some polling units that there was no, what's it called, ballot papers. Moreover, in Nigeria electoral system, the last person on the queue by 2pm will be attended to.

In addition, the limited availability of the accreditation machines and staff further heightens the poor preparation of the electoral commission, leading to voter disenfranchisement and voter turnout decline:

Individuals came to the polling unit and the INEC officials did not come with the materials for election so they just came around the polling units that contains almost about uh five wards, with only one BVAS machine that was only for one polling unit and the remaining ones are not available. Another thing is what I call the deliberate act of coming late to the polling unit and closing on time. The ad hoc

staff came late and then they made sure that they finished at the same time that they claimed the voting should end, disenfranchising others.

Additionally, the respondents note that several voters had gone to their polling stations to vote, only to discover that their polling units had been changed. Voters had been relocated from their polling units without prior information. A respondent had this to say:

Another issue I observed is the availability of personal voter cards (PVCs) and relocation of voters. I realized that some people are transferred from their polling units to others without being aware. Many persons complained that they were supposed to vote, for example, in polling unit A and they ended up seeing their names or their relatives telling them that they have seen their pictures in polling unit B. If an individual goes from one polling unit to another looking for where he is able to vote, at the end of the day, if he is tired, he would decide to no longer engage in the process.

This lack of adequate information, highlights an aspect of the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission and how it could likely lead to a decrease in voter turnout. Therefore, the major finding presented in this study gleaned from empirical evidence, shows that the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission serves as a crucial factor driving turnout decline in presidential elections. The ineffectiveness of the electoral commission is likely to lead to voter disenfranchisement and low voter registration, which leads to voter turnout decline. This argument is based on the premise that the experiences of voters with the electoral process influence their decisions to vote. These scholars in their studies find that challenges encountered with voter registration such as stringent registration laws, lowers the voter turnout rate (Neiheisel and Burden 2012; Stockemer 2017). Instances where voters face challenges linked to the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission, such as voter registration issues and the overall ineffectiveness of the electoral commission on the day of elections, would result in low voter registration and voter disenfranchisement, consequently resulting in voter turnout decline as evidenced above.

Alternative Explanations

Despite acknowledging the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission as the primary explanatory variable on turnout decline in presidential elections with insights from the data to show how it operates, it is essential to explore other possible alternative explanations, expanding the understanding of the complex nature of voter turnout decline. Although insecurity emerged as one of the themes during the coding process, its impact is not significant on the dependent variable, and is less central to the emergent patterns. Its absence as a significant factor suggests that while violence and insecurity may deter voter turnout in certain contexts as evidenced in the turnout literature, it may not stand as the primary drivers of turnout decline. Its impact on the cases examined in this study are not as pronounced. Hence, I focus on other impactful and salient explanations. I identify explanatory powers of the lack of trust in the electoral process and identified socio-economic issues that emerged from the data analysis seeing as it offer some insights to the variations in the dependent variable within two of the pairs of cases. I explore how it interacts with the main independent variable, showing the multifaceted nature of turnout decline.

Lack of Trust in the Electoral Process

The ineffectiveness of the electoral commission can serve to erode the public trust in the electoral process. Perception of trust in the turnout literature is linked to the electorate's perception of trust in the electoral process. This perception of trust encompasses citizens' confidence in the credibility and transparency of the electoral process, inclusive of the way and manner elections are conducted. Challenges faced during

the registration process and the poor preparation of the electoral commission reflective in the logistics issues can inform the decision of the electorates. This could result in them questioning the fairness and legitimacy of the elections when adequate measures are not taken to ensure that the voting process is efficient. A party member had this to say:

Widespread distrust in the integrity of the electoral process, fueled by instances of electoral irregularities and lack of transparency, has further eroded confidence in the democratic system.

This prevailing distrust fueled by the ineffectiveness of the commission can drive turnout decline. Another finding from the study shows that citizen's distrust in the electoral process may be heightened by the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission contributing to voter turnout decline. This takes premise on the fact that the when voters witness the irregularities of the electoral systems as regards its operations like limited electoral materials resulting in voter disenfranchisement they are likely to doubt the credibility and transparency of the elections which serves to erode their trust in the electoral process, thereby resulting in voter turnout decline. This finding finds credence in the turnout literature as (Alvarez, Hall, and Llewellyn 2008; Birch 2010) asserts, when the electorates are confident in the way elections are held, they are likely to turnout, and when such confidence is absent, they are likely to stay away from the polls. In essence, when the electorates have doubts about the electoral process, including the efficiency and capability of the electoral administrators to uphold democratic values, they are likely to refrain from voting.

Socio-economic issues

The factors of poverty and unemployment offers an explanation as to why turnout rate declines. Although there are varying postulations within the turnout literature,

Rosenstone (1982) notes that economic hardship can have an adverse effect on political participation, as it could disrupt the social bonds that would foster political engagement. Similarly, the prevalence of income inequality suggests that individuals belonging to lower socio-economic categories within the society are likely to abstain from electoral participation (Solt 2008, 2010). These results in individuals' disenchantment with the politics, having them prioritize their personal needs and interests over civic duties. Consistent with the findings in the turnout literature, the impact of socio-economic can be detrimental to active participation in election as evidenced in the data analysis.

This study finds link by which the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission can aggravate socio-economic issues, when individuals consider the cost of voting and would decide to rather engage in personal activities than electoral participation. A respondent had this to say:

The Nigeria we have today things are not working well economically. No job opportunities for the youth and there is nothing anyone has to say about it. Then traveling from one city to the other. Some persons will say from the way Nigeria is, I do not think I will travel, leave my place to spend all that money to go just to vote where I am supposed to be voting. No, no, I cannot. Many people did not vote also because of that. What is the sacrifice for? If at the end of the day, it does not count.

Another respondent had this to say:

Considering the economic situation of the country, some people are living, like, far back in the grassroots level of communities. For them to transport themselves to the registration point, they find it difficult because we have experienced this in some communities. We will have to collaborate with INEC to go to those communities to register those people because some will complain to you that they went to the INEC registration center or INEC local government office twice or even three times without being registered. So imagine you spent 500 naira today and the next day 500 naira or even more than that. So for an average Nigerian or like a Nigerian earning very low, someone that maybe in a week he may just earn a

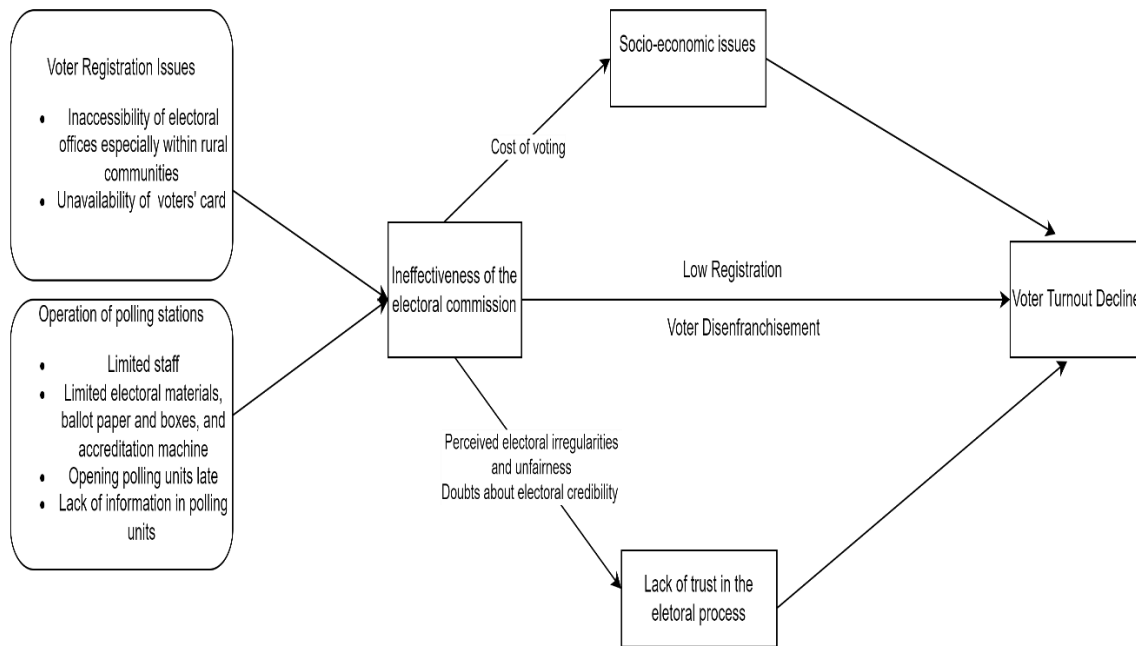
thousand naira. You do not expect him to be spending that money on transportation for him to be registered.

Here the electorate may be unwilling to bear the cost of voting especially when voter registration becomes costly due to the commission's ineffectiveness and when there is a prevailing perception that their votes will not count or make a difference in the elections. Another finding from this study shows that individuals with lower socio-economic status are less likely to bear the cost of engaging in the electoral process when they view the electoral commission as ineffective, resulting to turnout decline. This finding is supported by Bhatt, Dechter, and Holden (2015) whose study asserts that low registration and voter information costs, have a positive effect on voter registration and turnout. Their study emphasizes the significance of information and voter registration costs in relation to political participation, especially for individuals who have lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Theoretical Framework

Integrating insights from the literature interview and the identified alternative explanations above, it becomes more apparent that voter turnout decline is complex in nature. With all possible explanations identified in the turnout literature, they do not fully capture the complex nature of voter turnout decline. While these studies have created a great foundation for understanding turnout decline, it shows that turnout decline has not been fully accounted for, and this study aims to contribute to the growing knowledge of voter turnout decline. This theoretical framework showcases the likely associations between the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission, and how it interplays with other alternative explanations identified in the data analysis and the turnout literature to shed light on voter turnout decline in presidential elections.

Figure 2. Voter Turnout Decline in presidential elections



Drawing on the patterns and emergent themes from the data, the proposed theoretical framework shows the relationship of the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission and how it impedes voter turnout, with the lack of trust in the electoral process and identified socio-economic issues operating as mediating factors to further drive voter turnout decline. This framework establishing causal relationships from a comprehensive understanding of how these factors can affect voter turnout. It displays likely association with relevant factors and how they affect voter turnout. It integrates the core theme and alternative explanations showing the complexity involved with understanding voter turnout decline. It establishes a pathway whereby the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission apart from it resulting in turnout decline via voter disenfranchisement and low registration, breeds distrust amongst the electorates regarding the transparency and credibility of the election, further diminishing their motivation to vote, leading to a decrease in voter turnout.

This ineffectiveness of the electoral commission may also highlight the cost of voting when individuals have encountered issues with voter registration and believe that their votes will not count. Instead of engaging in an exercise seen as futile, they would rather not bear the cost and seek to satisfy personal interests over engaging in electoral participation. The turnout literature provides evidence for the identified factors seen to affect turnout, as highlighted in explanations above. By associating these explanatory variables with the main independent variable, this study shows how these factors could interplay to drive turnout decline in presidential elections. Additionally, the pronounced effects of the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission stems from its crucial role as the electoral administrator.

Unlike other potential drivers of turnout decline such as insecurity, socio-economic issues and the perception of trust, the electoral commission plays a fundamental role in shaping the electoral process. Socio-economic issues such as unemployment and poverty may exert an influence on individuals' decisions regarding electoral participation. Whereas the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission creates a systemic barrier, hindering voter registration, leads to voter disenfranchisement and undermines the credibility and integrity of the elections. If the electoral commission is efficient, it is likely to instill a sense of trust in the electorates as regards electoral outcomes. Its ineffectiveness breeds distrust in the electoral process.

The empirical evidence points to the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission as the primary explanatory variable for voter turnout decline in presidential elections, given its direct on electoral procedures and outcomes. This underscores its central position in shaping voter behavior and voter turnout. While other factors contribute to the variations

in the dependent variable, they do not exert a strong influence, as evidenced above. They intersect with, and are often mediated by the functioning of the electoral commission. The identification of associations and causal mechanisms are premeditated on the application of a critical realist grounded theory approach, that prioritizes the emergent of theory from the experiences of individuals and their interpretations which inform the place of causal mechanisms and how they affect voter behavior in electoral participation.

Chapter 5. Data Analysis/Discussion of findings

This chapter presents the results of the analysis of the interview data and the discussion of findings. These findings help to make the argument that the decline in voter turnout does not just stem from voter apathy, also addressing the research question what causes turnout decline in presidential elections. The aim of this study is to generate a grounded theory from the data collected that explains the causes of turnout decline. In order to develop a grounded theory, I utilize the three phases as of grounded theory methodology. The first step to this process is open coding. At the beginning of the data analysis process, I identified and tagged emerging themes that I deemed relevant to the study. The second step is axial coding. This process involves refining the category scheme by establishing connections between categories and properties. I categorized the emergent themes into clusters that enabled me identify sub categories. Lastly, selective coding, where a core category is developed or a central concept constructed that accounts for patterns within the data. Following the grounded theory approach of coding, by utilizing the Nvivo software, I show the emergent themes and patterns within the identified pairs of cases and between the three sets of cases cutting across different respondents.

This chapter comprises two sections. In the first section, I incorporate the discussion of findings and the results of the analysis of 34 interviews (9 political activists, 12 civil society members, 4 INEC officials and 9 party members) across the identified pairs and set of cases. This comparison within pairs accounts for the similarities and differences evident in the responses, which enables me to identify likely contextual factors and emergent overall pattern that accounts for turnout decline in presidential elections. The second section delves into the identified patterns across all pairs of cases that helps to build an argument and situate these findings within the turnout literature and how it accounts for turnout decline in presidential elections. I had initially planned to carry out nine interviews per case, but due to time difference and the difficulties involved in carrying out fieldwork online, I was unable to do so.

The analysis identified four themes, such as the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission (INEC), the lack of trust in the electoral commission, socio-economic issues and insecurity. I identify the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission as the main independent variable, as it shows consistent patterns across all cases that offers an explanation on the causes of turnout decline in presidential elections. Lack of trust in the electoral commission also emerges as a significant theme given its explanatory power. The results also show explanations of socio-economic issues and insecurity although limited in their explanatory power to significantly account for the variations in the dependent variable. Although the sample size used for this study is small and is not representative of the entire population, this study offers insights into the causes of turnout decline in presidential elections in Africa.

In-depth Interviews

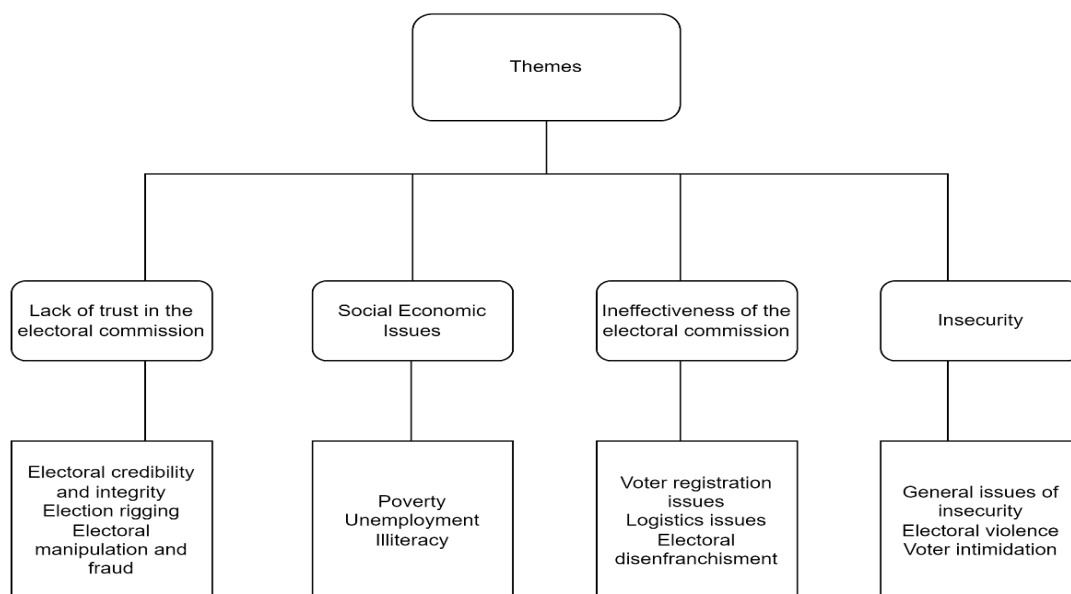
I conducted a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews in the study with well-informed individuals from the Nigerian populace, who are knowledgeable in Nigeria's electoral practices and the challenges encountered. They include civil society members, party members, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) officials and political activists. I interviewed 34 individuals, of whom 9 were political activists, 12 civic society members, 4 INEC officials and 10 party members. Their responses were assessed, and coded using Nvivo. I generated special identifiers within each category to ensure that all personal identifiable information are protected. The result of the data analysis presents an interplay of factors evident across all the selected cases.

Table 3. Number of respondents across cases and categories

Categories	Adamawa	Borno	Osun	Oyo	Imo	Abia
Civil Society Members	2	2	2	2	2	2
Party Members	2	1	0	2	1	3
INEC Officials	2	0	2	0	0	0
Political Activists	2	2	0	1	2	2

Table 4. Respondents Identifiers

Respondent categories	Special Identifiers
Civil Society Member	CSM
Political Activist	PA
Party Member	PM
INEC Official	IO

Figure 3. Emergent themes and sub variables

The cases of Adamawa and Borno

The pair of Adamawa and Borno are states within the Northeastern part of Nigeria. Both states share boundaries and dominant religion (Islam). Turnout rate across both states have been declining, with Adamawa having a higher turnout rate when compared to Borno. Both states were formerly precolonial states and have been affected by terrorist activities.

The variations in the dependent variables underscore likely contextual factors that drive voter turnout decline. Therefore, by comparing both states, I identify patterns that account for turnout decline. The results of the interviews revealed four major explanations of the causes of turnout decline within Adamawa and Borno. A total of 13 interviews were carried out, eight in Adamawa and five in Borno. Figure 4 shows the variations in the dependent variable in both cases, and figure 5 visualizes the frequently expressed explanations of the causes of turnout decline in Nigeria's presidential elections, identified by the respondents in the two states.

Figure 4. Voter Turnout in Adamawa and Borno

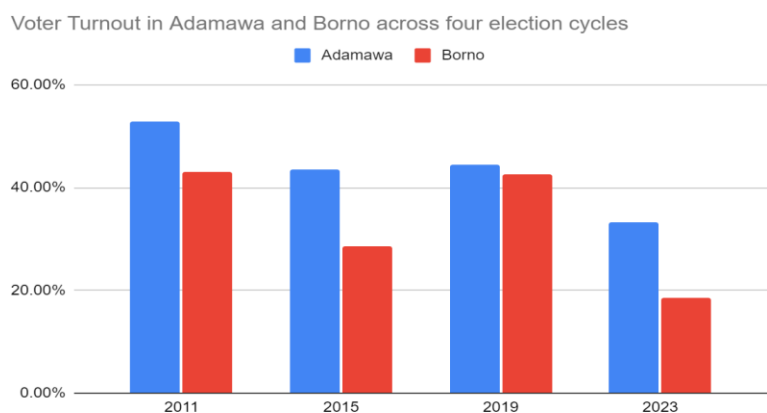
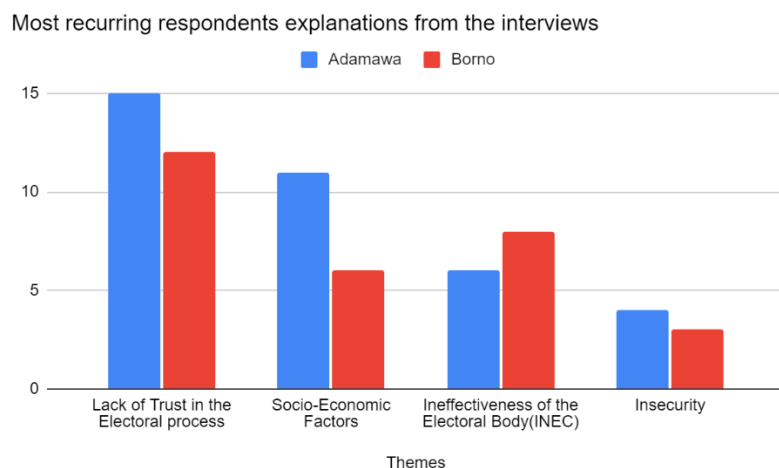


Figure 5. Respondents recurring explanations on causes of turnout decline.



The Ineffectiveness of the Electoral Commission (INEC)

The ineffectiveness of the electoral commission is presented as a factor that causes turnout decline within this pair and across all cases. The electoral commission is responsible for registering voters prior to the election, ensuring they collect their voters' cards and educate them on the need to vote. They also handle the electioneering process. The main challenges respondents cite which results in voter turnout decline, stem from voter registration issues. This is majorly evident in rural areas that are not easily accessible, thereby presenting challenges voters face related to the inclusion in the electoral process. Here INEC officials do not go all out to ensure that these people are registered and sensitized to ensure their inclusion in the process, a kind of systematic disenfranchisement. These issues pose significant challenges to individuals engaging in the electoral process, resulting in turnout decline. Also highlighted as part of these issues, is the poor preparation of the electoral commission. The failure of the electoral commission to adequately plan and prepare to ensure a smooth running of the electoral process as regards logistics, contributes to the decline in voter turnout. These are the viewpoints expressed by a civic society member in Adamawa and a political activist in Borno:

CSM 1 – AD: During our youth mobilization exercise, we had an issue where people from rural communities had not been able to participate, had not been able to register for their PVCs. Because their communities are not accessible, the officials that have the mandate of registering them do not have an office there. In addition, for them to go down to the urban centers where those offices are to register for their voter's cards was something else.

PA 2 – BO: Individuals came to the polling unit and the INEC officials did not come with the materials for election so they just

came around the polling units that contains almost about uh five wards, with only one BVAS machine that was only for one polling unit and the remaining ones are not available. It was to many extent systematic disenfranchisement so it was not the fault of the voters; it was from the side of the electoral umpire. Then another is what I call the deliberate act of coming late to the polling unit and closing on time. The ad hoc staff came late and then they made sure that they finished at the same time that they claimed the voting should end, disenfranchising others.

The logistics issues faced by the electoral commission with relation to limited staff, lack of electoral materials, network issues associated with the accreditation process. In addition, many voters were unaware of the changes in their polling unit and so had gone to vote, only to be made aware that that was not their polling unit. This shows a lack in the communication of the commission to ensure that voters are aware of where they should vote. Likewise, the respondents note that the electoral staff especially within Borno were not on time to commence the elections. Voters are likely to get tired of the process given that the commencement period was not adhered to, and when the electoral staff stick to the designed time for when voting should end, it is likely that many voters would end up not participating in the electoral process.

Lack of trust in the electoral process

The data analysis reveals a pervasive lack of trust of the citizens in the electoral process. This lack of trust is rooted in the perceptions of electoral manipulation and fraud regarding electoral outcomes and perceived efficacy of the citizens' votes. This distrust stems from the citizens' beliefs that electoral outcomes are predetermined, thereby creating an uninteresting political climate within the country, increased political disillusionment and dissatisfaction. This further drives a wedge between the electorates and elections.

These excerpts from the interviews underscores the importance of the public trust in the electoral process, since it could potentially drive voters to the polls thereby increasing electoral participation. Alternatively, it could serve as a deterrent when absent keeping voters away from the polls, resulting in turnout decline. This is what political activists in Borno and Adamawa had to say:

PA – AD: There is distrust in the electoral process. People are not satisfied with the outcome of elections.

PA – BO: People are actually losing hope in the system in Nigeria. Some even think that what they vote is not what they get to see. Whenever we are having a conversation with nonprofessionals, while carrying out our awareness campaigns for them to go out and cast their votes, some tell us that even if they have a friend contesting for any position in Nigeria, they will not go out to vote for him. Because when they vote for him, he is not even going to emerge as the winner. People are lacking hope and trust in the political system, and would not want to waste their time by going out to vote.

It is interesting to see a high level of lack of trust as a factor within Adamawa, which is rather counterintuitive, given that turnout in Adamawa, is higher than it is in Borno. Logically, a high level of trust in the electoral process would result in high turnout rates, however this paradox suggests that high level of distrusts in Adamawa would increase voter turnout rate probably because the citizens would want to show their dissatisfaction by voting. A possible explanation for this could be that the level of distrust in the electoral commission felt by the voters is mediated by voter mobilization efforts. Although respondents in both states mention the issue of failing mobilization efforts, there is the possibility that the scale and effectiveness of these mobilization efforts vary. A respondent from Borno acknowledged the mobilization efforts of the Electoral commission and civil societies, but noted that these efforts were unfortunately not enough.

PA – BO: The Independent National Electoral Commission have tried as much as they can to create awareness and sensitization online. Through radio programs through jingles and online platforms so that young people can be aware and citizens can be aware of their role and why it's important for them to go out and cast their vote most especially during the electioneering period but unfortunately I think this is not enough.

Although respondents in Adamawa also acknowledge the failing mobilization efforts, it is likely that voter mobilization by political parties was more successful in Adamawa than Borno, which mitigated the distrust in the electoral process. The presence of a presidential aspirant from Adamawa, Atiku Abubakar under the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) suggests that there was greater party mobilization within Adamawa compared to Borno. Although party mobilization was not directly mentioned in the responses given by the interviewees, it stands as a plausible factor that could influence voter behavior. This would contribute to the variation in the dependent variable.

Socio-economic Issues

The presence of poverty, unemployment, all round economic hardship and illiteracy associated with the lack of civic education are the prominent socio-economic conditions seen to influence individuals, communities and societies with their decisions to vote. Despite the respondents especially the political activists and civil society members acknowledging the fact there have been efforts to educate and mobilize voters on the need to vote, they also report that there is lack of civic education especially amongst the rural communities, as many individuals remain unaware as to why they need to vote. This in some ways show that mobilization efforts are not enough, especially in rural areas, at the level to which they will understand the need and value of their votes and how it contributes to a thriving democracy. Likewise, the economic situation of the country and the challenges

faced by individuals were opined to affect turnout. When people have to bear extra financial burdens to vote in the elections especially in the rural areas, it becomes an obstacle. Here are some viewpoints expressed by civic society members in Borno and a political activist in Adamawa:

CSM 1 – BO: Some persons that are in deep rural communities, in grassroots communities will go about their day, maybe go to their farms thinking it is business as usual, and that only people living in urban areas should participate in the election. There is inadequate sensitization and awareness campaigns about the importance of election.

PA 1 - AD: Considering the economic situation of the country, some people are living, like, far back in the grassroots level of communities. For them to transport themselves to the registration point, they find it difficult because we have experienced this in some communities. We will have to collaborate with INEC to go to those communities to register those people because some will complain to you that they went to the INEC registration center or INEC local government office twice or even three times without being registered. So imagine you spent 500 naira today and the next day 500 naira or even more than that. So for an average Nigerian or like a Nigerian earning very low, someone that maybe in a week he may just earn 1000 naira. You do not expect him to be spending that money on transportation for him to be registered.

However, this factor does not reflect on the dependent variable within this case, seeing that the turnout rate in Adamawa is higher than Borno, and the responses in line with socio-economic issues are more prominent in Adamawa than in Borno. This is interesting as Adamawa has a lower (0.283) Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) score when compared to Borno (0.315), which sheds light on the disparity in the quality of life within each state, considering factors such as education level, health, infrastructure and the overall wellbeing of the residents. This higher MPI in Borno suggests that there are huge challenges in meeting basic life needs when compared to Adamawa. This logically follows why turnout is higher in Adamawa than in Borno, but does not explain the variation in the

dependent variable, voter turnout decline. Additionally, it is likely that local elections resonate more with voters in Borno than presidential elections. Reason being that gubernatorial aspirants go to the grassroots level to engage the voters, telling them about their manifestos, the development they will bring and why they should vote for them. A respondent from Borno had this to say:

CSM 2 – BO: I just think one of the thing is people feel since it is the president whatever you people choose fine as long as it is not the governorship election or any other one. The president is there in Abuja so whatever you people choose is fine and not the governor that I am in the state that will affect me directly.

This is prevalent in rural areas where it might not be especially easy for presidential aspirants to go round all LGAs in Nigeria to canvass for their votes. This would contribute to the variation witnessed in the voter turnout. It is likely that voters in Adamawa ascribe a certain level of importance to the presidential elections than respondents in Borno, which would drive a higher turnout despite the evident decline. While socio-economic issues undoubtedly affect voter behavior, their independent influence is not evident in the variation observed in the dependent variable. These factors would likely interact with other contextual factors such as the dynamics of local politics and the importance placed on elections, which would shape the patterns observed in the dependent variable.

Insecurity

The data analysis identifies security concerns from threats of the Boko Haram insurgency and electoral violence, and how they affect voter turnout in Adamawa and Borno. This atmosphere of insecurity, creates fear and uncertainty in the mind of the electorates, as there are no appropriate measures to guarantee their safety if they decide to go to the polls to vote. As a respondent cited, people in some areas in Borno could not

vote in their polling units based on the issue of insecurity, and had to be transported down to the capital city of Borno. Individuals, who did not have these privileges of being transported to vote, automatically end up not engaging in the process. Being unsure of the activities that would transpire before and during the elections, had people skeptical about engaging in the elections. This prevalent issue of insecurity, coupled with the inability of the security agencies to effectively curb this menace contributes in refraining the electorates from going to the polls. A civic society member in Borno, a party member and political activist in Adamawa expressed these viewpoints:

CSM 1 – BO: Borno and other states in the North Eastern part of the country have been experiencing insurgency for the past decade and this has resulted in a setback for young people especially for young people in participating in electoral processes and democratic activities as well. This has also affected me because there was time there was some years back when a person or a young person like me would not be able to go outside and vote due to many issues that have been happening around democratic banditry.

PM 1- AD: The issue of insecurity made people afraid to travel, not knowing if there was going to be riots or chaos in these places.

The mention of democratic banditry by a respondent suggests that bandits would disrupt the electoral process by either destroying or stealing the ballot boxes, intimidating voters and in general engage in violent acts that would be detrimental to the voters and the elections. A rather interesting finding is the extent to which insecurity was mentioned in both states. This identified pattern comes as a surprise given that the Northern part of the country where these states are located are the prominent places for insurgent groups like the Boko Haram insurgency, especially in Borno. Despite the prevailing issues of insecurity and respondents in Adamawa resonating more with this issue, it is likely they were still able to access their polling units more easily than voters in Borno were. A

respondent in Borno stated that many individuals within the state could not vote in their polling units and had to be transported to another location to vote.

PA – BO: Even when we had the elections, many individuals that were in Borno state did not even vote in their own local governments. They were brought down to the state capital Maiduguri and they voted in the local government, in secondary schools, in various IDP camps.

However the data analysis based on collected data suggests that across Borno and Adamawa states, that although insecurity poses a threat to electoral participation, it does not stand as the most significant, which implies that its impact on turnout decline may be highly mediated by other factors.

The cases of Osun and Oyo

The pair of Osun and Oyo are states within the Southwestern part of Nigeria. Both states share boundaries, with Yoruba as the major ethnic group in each state, and Christianity as the dominant religion in both. Turnout rate across both states have been declining, with Osun having a higher turnout rate when compared to Oyo. Both states were formerly part of the Oyo Empire. The variations in the dependent variables underscore likely contextual factors that drive voter turnout decline. Therefore, by comparing both states, I identify contextual nuances and patterns that offers explanations regarding turnout decline. The results of the interviews revealed four major explanations of the causes of turnout decline within Adamawa and Borno. The data analysis of the interviews highlighted four major explanations of the causes of turnout decline in both Osun and Oyo state. A total of 9 interviews were carried out, 4 in Osun and 5 in Oyo. Figure 6 shows the variations in the dependent variable in both cases and figure 7 visualizes the most recurring

explanation of the causes of turnout decline in Nigeria's presidential elections, within the states of Osun and Oyo.

Figure 6. Voter Turnout in Osun and Oyo

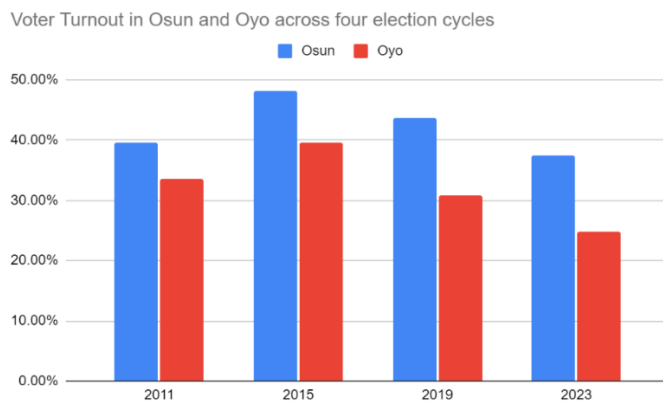
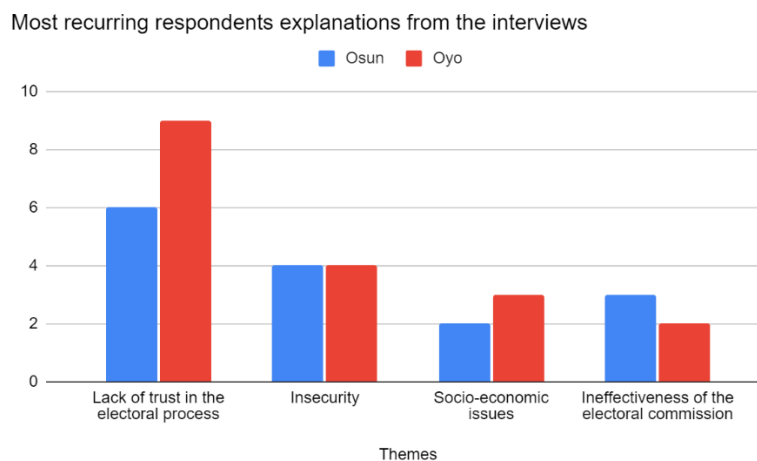


Figure 7. Respondents recurring explanations on causes of turnout decline



The Ineffectiveness of the Electoral Commission

Respondents in both states called the effectiveness of the electoral commission in electioneering into question. This emerged as a prominent theme, which explains the variation evident in the dependent variable. The introduction of the Bimodal Voters Accreditation System (BVAS) machine and IREV portal for result transmission were seen

as significant steps in the right direction to having credible elections. The main challenges respondents cite are the difficulties in collecting the voters' cards after registration. This hurdle often leads to voter disenfranchisement, as eligible voters are unable to partake in the elections despite having completed their registration. Additionally, challenges with the accreditation process including network issues further heightens the issue of voter disenfranchisement, as some individuals despite being registered and armed with their voters' cards are unable to engage and complete the voting process due to technical difficulties.

Likewise, respondents highlight the low mobilization efforts of the electoral commission, and the limited electoral materials and staff. The limited personnel and electoral materials does not help to facilitate the smooth operation of the elections, as it could result in some voters being unable to participate in the elections, thereby leading to a decline in voter turnout. A party member in Oyo and civil society members in both states had this to say:

CS – OSUN: So, some youth were actually disenfranchised. Like I said, they were not allowed to vote. There are some polling units that there was no, what's it called, ballot papers. There are some polling units that, because of the crowd, people were unable to vote.

PM – OYO: During the build-up to last year general elections, about 1.7 million people were disenfranchised from voting, according to INEC. Why? The registered for their PVCs, unfortunately, as on the day of the elections, their PVCs were not out.

CS – OYO: the mobilization effort is not enough, the effort is not enough. I think the people in charge should do more especially the national orientation agency the electoral body.

These factors as evidenced by the excerpts reflect the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission. It shows how this ineffectiveness can consequently result in low voter

registration and electoral disenfranchisement, thereby reducing the turnout rate. The ineffectiveness of the electoral commission, stands as an important explanation as to why turnout rates decline.

Lack of trust in the electoral process

From the data analysis, the respondents are of the view that the citizens express skepticism about the credibility of the electoral process owing to their lack of trust and confidence in the process. This lack of trust stems from issues of electoral manipulation and perceived electoral fraud, which threatens the transparency and fairness of the elections. Likewise, the perception that the outcome of elections are already predetermined heightens this lack of trust. Additionally, the failure of authorities to hold defaulters and perpetrators of electoral fraud accountable further erodes the trust in the electoral process, resulting in low voter turnout during elections. This also brings into perspective the increase in number of election petitions, which serves as an insight into the irregularities perceived in the electoral institution. Transparent and fair elections need not have the court decide the winner of the elections, especially when the interest of the citizens' are evident and adequately represented in the outcome. This only serves to generate more distrust of the process, thereby heightening the disengagements of the electorates from the elections. The belief that election results have already been decided before the elections happen further weakens the system, driving the electorates farther from the polls. Such an exercise is seen as futile, where votes do not count, but the election is set to run its course. A civic society member and party member in Oyo had this to say:

CSM – OSUN: Many people have lost trust in the leadership, many people have lost trust in the electoral system so it's all about trust so when we build trust definitely people will actually come out to vote it's all about building trust.

CSM – OYO: Most grievances is that everything has been pre-planned and they do not believe in the election, given the experience people have of election rigging. They do not have confidence in the electoral body as people believe that the election has already been conducted they are going to rig it.

This variable offers an explanation as it accounts for the variation in the dependent variable within Osun and Oyo. The responses given are resplendent with the issues about the credibility and fairness of the elections, especially within Oyo, which scores a lower voter turnout rate when compared to Osun. This explanation provides insight, which is in accordance with the turnout literature that when citizens distrust the electoral process, they are less likely to engage in it, which would consequently result in low voter turnout rates. This suggests that within Oyo and Osun, citizens perception of trust in the electoral process, stands as a crucial and pivotal factor that would account for turn out decline.

Socio-economic Issues

The data analysis highlights socio-economic issues causing turnout decline in presidential elections. These socio-economic grievances like poverty, unemployment contribute to the disengagement of the electorates from elections. High levels of poverty, lack of resources and unemployment can create a feeling of hopelessness, disillusionment and frustration. The struggle to meet basic needs and financial instability can create a sense of disconnection between voter and the political system. Additionally, the perception of government failure to address and meet the basic needs of the citizens contributes to voter disillusionment, as election are seen as futile exercises that do not lead to any tangible or meaningful change. These socio-economic issues create barriers that undermine the individuals' sense of agency and trust in the political system.

These issues shift the focus of voters from the idea of electoral participation to survival, as the concerns of economic hardship and their overall wellbeing take precedence over electoral participation. Thereby diminishing the motivation to participate in elections.

A party member in Oyo and a civic society member in Osun had this to say:

PM– OYO: Poverty is a big deal. It is a very big deal. The only people who are eager to participate in elections are people who are members of CSOs, NGOs, political party, and people who have vested interest.

CSM– OSUN: I would want to talk about high level of youth unemployment. The youths are not happy, and according to statistics, youth actually covered almost, if I am correct, it might not be exact, but almost 50% of the eligible voters. These are the set of youth who unemployed.

Going by the MPI score, Oyo has a higher score of 0.19 when compared to that of Osun 0.15. This logically follows given the responses of the respondents especially within Oyo, why socio-economic issues such as poverty and unemployment hinder the electorates from participating in the electoral process. This explanation finds support in the turnout literature, as individuals who have a higher socio-economic capacity are more likely to vote than those who do not. Despite respondents in Osun giving more responses with regards to socio-economic issues such as poverty and unemployment, it is likely that the presence of these issues are mediated by higher mobilization efforts within Osun than Oyo. An Inec official within Osun notes that political candidates and candidates often focus their mobilization efforts on areas where they can engage in vote buying. He had this to say:

IO – OSUN: The political parties you know like the candidates and all. They focus their mobilization efforts in places where they know they can easily buy votes so they do not spread to like the whole nation or like everybody but they focus on where they can buy votes.

A respondent from Oyo had this to say:

CSM – OYO: The mobilization effort is not enough the effort is not enough. I think the people in charge should do more especially the national orientation agency, the electoral body...

Vote buying won't motivate everybody to vote because people who are really principled will think fine so if I'm voting for a party and another party is there to buy the votes I'm just wasting my efforts.

This implies that while mobilization efforts might be low, the strategies employed by the political parties could drive or deter turnout within these states. It is likely that while voters from Osun might be motivated to vote based on the limited efforts of political parties by introducing vote buying, this factor might likely keep voters away from the polls in Oyo. This highlights the presence of contextual factors within the states, acting as contributing factors that would affect turnout decline, despite the socio-economic disparities and responses given by the interviewees in each state.

Insecurity

The prevalence of violence perpetrated by political thugs employed by desperate politicians, as stated by respondents citing issues of electoral violence, voter intimidation and snatching of ballot boxes, has left a sour taste in the mouth of the electorates. The political elites show desperation for victory, which leads them to jeopardize the security and safety of the electorates, by issuing threats to the opposing parties and their supporters, further diminishing voter engagement. It creates a hostile environment that discourages electoral participations, as voters may opt to abstain from voting, in a bid to avoid likely confrontations and violent encounters at the polling stations. This incitation of violence leaves the electorates afraid for their lives, as individuals are less likely to vote when they

feel intimidated and unsafe, seeing the electoral process as one not worth losing their lives over, thereby keeping them away from the polls.

IO – OSUN: “One major thing that affects turnout most times is insecurity. When people feel they are not safe, definitely, you will not see them on the day of election. They will either go to their farms or find some other things to absent themselves from the electoral process entirely. The idea of security, using of thugs, snatching of ballot papers. Desperation among political gallant leaders in Osun. So anytime election is coming up, you will start hearing eh... Anybody that comes out will kill you. You cannot come to my ward oh. There are threats.

CSM – OYO: I think the pre-election violence may also be a major factor so there was pre-election violence and this is actually causing a lot of issue. People have to turn back and say no I am not going for that election because I do not think I am safe. Moreover, the security officers are not enough. Where two police officers are supposed to be we have one sometimes and people feel they are not secure.

The theme of insecurity is not surprising giving that Nigeria has been plagued with insecurity and electoral violence over the years. This variation in both states suggests that the levels at which insecurity impacts turnout are different, likely due to the presence or absence of the security forces or the part local actors’ play as opined by an INEC official from Osun. However, this factor of insecurity does not offer up any explanations as to the variation in the dependent variable. However, it represents an important aspect of the electoral process, as it can serve as a moderating factor, affecting voter turnout decline.

The cases of Imo and Abia

The pair of Abia and Imo are states within the Southeastern part of Nigeria. Both states boundaries and are inhabited majorly by the Ibo ethnic group, with Christianity being the dominant religion in both. Voter turnout rate across both states have been declining, with Imo having a higher turnout rate when compared to Abia. The variations in the

dependent variables underscore likely contextual factors that drive voter turnout decline. Therefore, by comparing both states, I identify contextual nuances and patterns that offers explanations regarding turnout decline. A total of 12 interviews were carried out, 5 in Imo and 7 in Abia. The data analysis of the interviews conducted in both states highlighted four major factors that affect voter turnout. Figure 8 shows the variation in the dependent variable in both cases and figure 9 visualizes the most recurring explanation of the causes of turnout out decline in Nigeria’s presidential elections, within states of Abia and Imo.

Figure 8. Voter Turnout in Imo and Abia

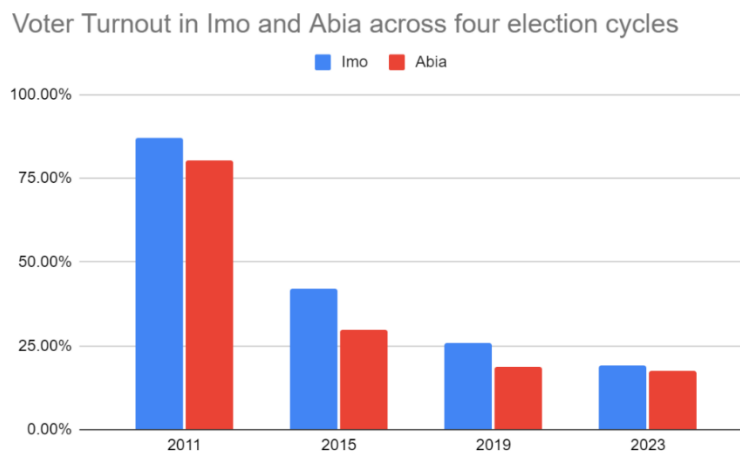
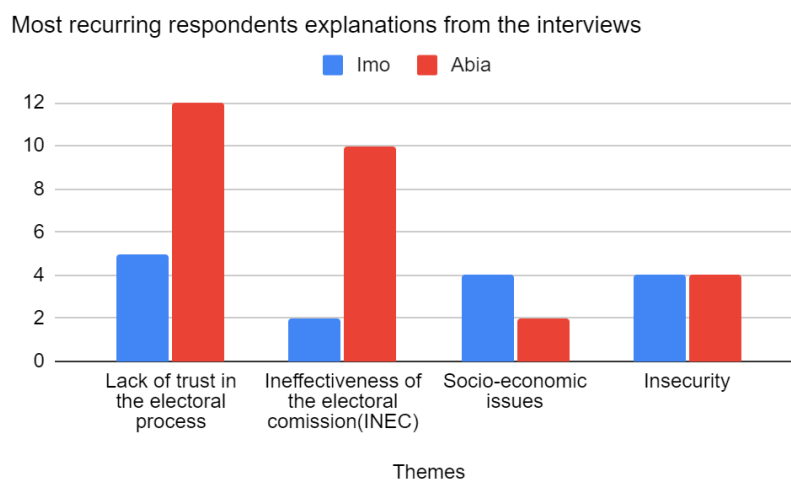


Figure 9. Respondents recurring explanations on causes of turnout decline



The Ineffectiveness of the Electoral Commission

The data analysis highlight voter registration issues and change of polling units without adequate information to the electorates as manifestations of the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission. It is interesting to see here that respondents felt that a great number of persons came out to vote, citing that the engagement of people in the electoral process in 2023 was greater compared to previous years, however due to the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission, many of the electorates were disenfranchised. This mismatch between the desire of the citizens to exercise their civic right and the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission highlights the administrative hurdles faced by the commission that results in the voter disenfranchisement. To quote some of the respondents from Abia:

PM - ABIA: Voter registration processes have been criticized for being cumbersome and exclusionary, particularly for marginalized groups such as women and rural populations. There was a better turnout in 2023 compared to previous years because many thought the electoral results would have been fairer because of the BVAS machines.

CSM - ABIA: So, I transferred my polling unit from Aba to Umuahia. That is the capital of the Abia state to enable me to follow the process. As I speak, I was not able to get my voter's card. Even up to now. But I went, I met the INEC chairman. They know me, but I could not get my card. This gives you a picture of what a whole lot of people suffered. Why? I know like during the election, I engaged some of the INEC staff, and they were bold enough to tell me, some who have conscience told me they paid them money. They got money from APC, and this was the task given to them. Do not issue out a voter's card.

This offers an explanation as to the variation identified in the dependent variable. It simply suggests that the inefficiencies associated with the electoral commission can significant voter turnout. As the issues associated with voter registration, the overall poor system to ensure smooth, fair and transparent elections could result in voter disenfranchisement thereby contributing to voter turnout decline.

Lack of trust in the electoral process

The data analysis within the states also revealed the citizens' concerns about the competency, credibility and transparency of the electoral commission in conducting elections. Respondents in both states reveal their distrust of the electoral process and system, believing that the system is compromised and as such, the vote of the electorates do not matter or count. The role played by political parties, who also serve as one of the channels of voters' mobilization influences the trust the electorates have in the electoral process thereby affecting voter turnout. The engagement of political parties in corrupt practices ranging from vote manipulation, the use of political thugs, snatching of ballot boxes, inciting violent acts has affected the integrity of the electoral process. A response gotten from the interview suggests that some staff of the electoral commission work with the political parties to manipulate the elections. These acts heighten the perception of distrust the electorates have, as they would question the credibility and fairness of the elections, likewise the impartiality of the electoral commission. A respondent from Abia had this to say:

PM – ABIA: There is something they call Obingwa magic in Abia State. It's where a particular zone in Abia state called Obingwa local government does this multiplication of voters sheet and they begin to give margins for votes from that area. They use that area to adopt any government in power. They will wait for other local governments to bring up their result. Whatever be the difference that is to give them winning, they will come out from that zone now and do the magic. Because they have materials with them. Who gives them this material? It's INEC. INEC makes this material available and sell to them. Because you don't do your magic without you having this material. So INEC makes this material available, give to this party. This party pays some amount of money and uses it for their pleasure.

When the voters become privy to the manipulation of the electoral process, it serves as a disincentive to electoral participation, further strengthening the perception that their votes are less likely to be of any impact given the prevalence of corruption and electoral manipulation. All these contribute to the citizens' lack of trust in the electoral process, serving as a signal for abstinence. These are the viewpoints expressed by party members in Abia and Imo:

PM – ABIA: The electoral process in Nigeria has been known for being inefficient and prone to manipulation. This has undermined public trust in the system and contributed to lower turnout. Some Nigerians feel that their votes do not matter, given the history of election rigging and manipulation. This has led to a sense of apathy among voters who believe that their participation will not make a difference.

PM – IMO: There is pervasive voter apathy stemming from disillusionment with the political system, exacerbated by persistent insecurity across certain regions, which has deterred citizens from participating in the electoral process. Additionally, widespread distrust in the integrity of the electoral process, fueled by instances of electoral irregularities and lack of transparency, has further eroded confidence in the democratic system.

This factor offers up explanations as to the identified variation in the dependent variables within the cases of Abia and Imo. The interview excerpts show that the skepticism that voters have about the fairness and the credibility of the electoral process, results in their disillusionment and disengagement from the elections. Given that respondents in Abia cite the lack of trust a great deal that is reflective in the dependent variable, as the turnout rate in Abia is slightly lower than that of Imo. This suggests that the perception of trust plays a significant role as a contextual factor. It influences the decision of voters, as where trust is absent voter turnout rate is likely to decrease. This explanation aligns with the turnout literature, offering an insight into the importance of trust in the electoral process.

Socio-economic Issues

The respondents cite that economic issues such as poverty, unemployment can stand as a detrimental factor to the electorates' engagement in the electoral process. Ranging from economic hardship, and the need to prioritize personal needs over electoral participation. This prioritization of personal needs over electoral participation becomes more pronounced when respondent believe that the money spent travelling to ones polling unit is a waste of effort owing to the perception that their votes do not count. In this regard, going out to the polls to vote during the elections can be seen as a waste of limited resources, as there is no guarantee of an improvement in socio-economic conditions after the elections, especially when the choice of the people does not reflect the outcome. Likewise, the issue of voter education was cited as an issue within these states and the South East region as issues causing turnout decline. Civil society members in Imo and Abia had this to say:

CSM – IMO: The Nigeria we have today things are not working well economically. No job opportunities for the youth and there is nothing anyone has to say about it. Also traveling from one city to the other, some persons will say from the way Nigeria is, I do not think I will travel, leave my place to spend all that money to go just to vote where I am supposed to be voting. No, no, I cannot. Many people do not vote also because of that. What is the sacrifice for? If at the end of the day, it does not count.

CSM – ABIA: The Southeast are more prone to low voter turnout. Reasons being that one, we talk about level of voter literacy. They are not literate enough on the electoral process.

Interestingly, the Multidimensional Poverty Index in both states, show Abia having 0.101 and Imo 0.142, aligning with the responses from the respondents within Imo. However, this does not explain the variation in the dependent variable as turnout in Imo is higher when compared to Abia. A likely explanation for the variation identified in the

dependent variable between these states is mobilization efforts. The difference lies in the strategies employed by the political parties apart from the electoral commission and civil society organizations that also engage in voter mobilization. A civil society member in Abia had this to say:

CSM – ABIA: Yes, I think we have a whole lot of people doing voter mobilization. I can tell you for sure that INEC and political parties do not do this mobilization. What we see instead, what they do is vote buying instead of mobilizing people to come out and vote. If political parties notice from checking the voter register that they don't have, more people like people in their political party registered, they don't care about that polling unit and are not ready to mobilize people and they do that.

This implies that political parties prioritize vote buying over genuine mobilization strategies and efforts, therefore the effectiveness of the strategies employed by political parties to mobilize voters can affect turnout. When less effort is given to mobilize voters based on party stronghold within such states, it might negatively affect the overall turnout trend. It is likely that there are better drivers of voter mobilization within Imo than Abia, which serves to mitigate the influence of socio-economic issues, explaining the variations identified in the dependent variable.

Insecurity

The respondents also cited the issue of insecurity as a factor that affects voter turnout decline. Although they mostly referred to states within the Northern region like Borno that are facing the Boko Haram insurgency. Given the fact that the Boko Haram insurgency has been predominant in the Northern part of Nigeria, nevertheless, Nigeria has been faced with many insecurity challenges. From kidnapping, banditry, the Fulani herdsmen issue especially within the South East has also raised security concerns. However, the positions of political parties, candidates and their use of thugs or even the

security agencies to ensure their victory has spurred some level of insecurity and election violence. A civil society member in Abia had this to say about his personal experience when engaging in voter sensitization:

CSM – ABIA: On two occasions, I had to go and meet the commission of police in the state that we want to go to this place. The commissioner told me, if you get to a place and it is not convenient for you, please, you and your team should pack your things and leave that place. Don't you know that a security officer is supposed to come there? What is the essence of the advocacy? I want to tell you, we are going here. You are there to maintain law and order. You are supposed to come. We have information that such a thing is going to happen. You know, thugs are going to come to attack us during the sensitization campaign. Please, can we get one or two persons? You tell me, please if you get there and you notice anything, please report to me. Then make sure you and your team leave that place. When we leave that place, how will those people be mobilized?

This finding within this case is quite interesting given that areas where issues of insecurity are more apparent especially within the North do not ascribe much importance to the issue of insecurity. It is likely that areas highly affected have become used to the scenario and therefore have become less aware of its impact. An interesting finding from the data analysis is the issue of marginalization. This feeling of marginalization stems from the fact that political candidates have always been known to come out from two major regions of the country, the North and South West, thereby creating a sense of marginalization within the South East, which also led to the agitation of the Republic of Biafra. This feeling of no representation has contributed to their low interest in electoral affairs thereby contributing to low voter turnout. A civil society member from Abia had this to say:

CSM – ABIA: The marginalization they Ibo people have faced over the years has affected their trust and their belief in the nation, Nigeria. We know the entire IPOB massacre and the IPOB dynamism. It has really affected them.

Giving a nod to this assertion were two respondents from Borno who stated that the South East are more susceptible to low turnout given their feeling of marginalization. However, this particular issue of marginalization was majorly resonated amongst respondents from Abia. This suggest that respondents in Abia are fully aware and resonate with the issues of marginalization and how it affects their level of electoral participation, as they are not fully represented in the government. It also implies that voters in Imo are less aware of this issue and are not hugely impacted by it when it comes to them making a decision to vote. This however, offers up an explanation as to the variations in the dependent variable given that turnout in Abia is lower when compared to Imo.

Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections: A Comparative Analysis across all cases

The comparative analysis between the set of cases highlights the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission as a consistent theme, which significantly affects voter turnout rate in presidential elections. The electoral commission plays a pivotal role in ensuring that elections are fair and transparent, from voter registration, effectively managing the polling units and accurate vote counting. However, when the electoral commission fails to carry out their duties in an efficient manner, it can lead to issues of voter disenfranchisement, election irregularities, erosion of public trust and ultimately turnout decline. The ineffectiveness of the electoral commission, poses a significant challenge as it undermines the credibility and integrity of the electoral process. The responses of the interviews underscores the pivotal role the electoral commission plays in affecting voter turnout decline.

The inability of the electoral commission to carry out its essential functions highlights its ineffectiveness and how it negatively impacts voter turnout. This shows that

notwithstanding the interests of the electorates in the elections, nor the eligible number of voters in the population, if the electoral commission fails to adequately carry out its duties, they would translate in barriers and challenges that would inhibit voter turnout. From issues of voter registration, to low registration and the unavailability of voters' cards after registration highlights the ways the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission can impede electoral participation thereby resulting in decreased turnout.

Likewise, the respondents cite issues such as the electoral commission hoarding voters' cards, the delays in opening the polling stations, and the shortage of ballot papers, which impedes the ability of voters to participate in the electoral process. The lack of electoral offices and low mobilization efforts in rural areas also suggests an unequally distribution of the election budget within the rural and urban areas. The unequal distribution of resources in the election preparation reflects in the cost impoverished individuals are willing to pay, when they feel that they were not taken into consideration during the planning process and therefore do not need to bother themselves with the elections. The emergence of this theme across all cases underscores its significance in affecting voter turnout.

Similarly, the lack of trust in the electoral process emerges as an explanatory factor across the pairs of Osun and Oyo, Imo and Abia. Nigerian elections have been marred with issues of electoral malpractice, electoral fraud and vote buying. These issues erode the trust the electorates have in the electoral process, as the elections are simply seen as a formality, while the winner of the election has already been decided. This simply translates to a waste of time, when individuals know that the electoral process is not credible as it lacks transparency. The findings from the data shows that citizens' perception of distrust in the

electoral system stems from perceived electoral unfairness and lack of transparency, which keeps electorates away from the polls (Birch 2010; Lehoucq and Molina Jiménez 2002). The responses given show that electoral irregularity can create doubt about the credibility of elections, there driving people further away from the polls. This perception of trust is mainly built from experiences with the voting process. Trust stands as an important driver of voter turnout. In its absence turnout is likely to decline and increase when the reverse is the case.

Although the impact of socio-economic variables such as unemployment, illiteracy and poverty on the dependent variable does not appear across all cases, it presents a propelling explanation within the pair of Osun and Oyo. It underscores the importance of socio-economic issues and the impact they have on individuals' decisions to engage in the electoral process. It follows with the turnout literature where individuals with a higher socio-economic status have an advantage, as they have the available resources to engage in the electoral process (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). When such resources are not available, especially amongst individuals with lower socio-economic levels, the likelihood to abstain from voting is high. They would consider and prioritize personal interests and needs above civic engagement. This becomes more evident when individuals do not see that their votes would bring any change to their socio-economic conditions, as there is no guarantee of economic progress after the elections.

The factor of insecurity although mentioned across all case, does not stand as a significant factor that impedes voter turnout, as it does not account for the variations in the dependent variable. This finding is quite surprising and intriguing, especially in the light of widespread insecurity, electoral violence and voter intimidation during elections in

Nigeria. Although the respondents mention cases of insecurity, it is likely that its effect on voter turnout is contingent on other factors. According to Bekoe and Burchard (2017), they assert in their study that the impact of violence on electoral outcome is not uniform and does not follow a consistent pattern. This shows that voters might choose to make their decision to vote on a range of factors such as the risk they are willing to take, the extent and severity of the violence and their perception of the election. In such scenarios, electoral violence, insecurity and voter intimidation may not act as dissuasive elements and deterrents in the decision-making process regarding electoral participation.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

This study explored the causes of turnout decline in presidential elections at the sub-national level, drawing insights from cases selected within Nigeria. The turnout literature has identified variables that impede and affect turnout rate. Many explanations identified in the turnout literature are widely contested given the caveats associated with them. Factors such as age and education have been said to impede voter turnout. However, the growing interests of youths in political affairs and increasing levels of education have not reflected in turnout rate, as it continues to decline. These factors do not account for turnout decline in presidential elections especially in the Nigerian scene suggesting underlying factors that are not captured by quantitative data.

This study has revealed that turnout decline in Nigeria's presidential elections does not simply come from disinterest but an interplay of factors identified such as the ineffectiveness of the electoral commission, poverty and lack of trust in the electoral process. Nigeria's electoral landscape has not necessarily been known for being free and fair. Beginning from the identified ineffectiveness of the electoral commission, it has been

marred by the presence of vote buying, election malpractice and rigging, which has led to an erosion of trust in the electoral process. The cases identified for this study offered an inferential leverage to understanding the underlying factors that inhibit voter turnout. The cases of Adamawa and Borno, Osun and Oyo, Imo and Abia show variations with the identified explanations of turnout, which illuminate the nuances of these influences. These variations underscore the importance of contextual factors and how they affect voter behavior.

Aligning the findings of this study to the turnout literature, by utilizing one-on-one interviews, I illustrate the importance of institutional variables in the turnout literature, and the explanatory power they hold. The electoral commission holds great importance as it provides the channel through which citizens engage in the electoral process. If the commission is ineffective in carrying out the basic and essential functions for its establishment, it could easily send a signal to the populace, an erosion of democratic institutions, as citizens are likely to lose the hope of achieving a democratic government, that is representative of the people's will. This study built a theoretical framework that highlights the complexities of electoral participation. These findings and theoretical framework highlight the importance of the electoral commission in shaping voter turnout.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the turnout literature by helping to bridge the gap on the limited study on voter turnout in presidential elections, more so within Africa. Most studies on voter turnout have been on western democracies and legislative elections, with less focus on presidential elections. Presidential elections are especially significant in democracies as the citizens hold the power to choose their representative. This study holds particular importance for developing nations, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa spotting

similar political landscape. Statistical data shows that turnout is declining in western democracies and democracies within Sub-Saharan Africa are exhibiting similar trends. Nigeria has recorded seven elections since becoming a democracy, 1999 – 2023, and the last five consecutive elections have consistently declined. Countries like Namibia, Kenya, and Cameroon have experienced turnout decline in two consecutive presidential elections.

This study focused on a small sample of respondents who are unlikely to be representative of the general population. In addition, it focused on cases at the subnational level in Nigeria. However, its generalizability might be limited to this scope of Sub-Saharan Africa, as its applicability to other settings might require further validation and a larger sample. Future studies may rather utilize a larger sample to ensure a representation of the general population, and consider doing an inter country study which could help account for different personal experiences and narratives in different political environments. Nevertheless, it has further implications for future research on voter turnout in developing democracies of the world. When electoral institutions are not effective in carrying out their essential duties, it could lead to a decline in voter turnout.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you tell me about yourself?
2. What is your profession/job duties?
3. State/Location?
4. How has your electoral experience been like?
5. What would you say is the current political climate in Nigeria and how does it affect turnout?
6. How many presidential elections you have participated in? What were your motivating factors?
7. Are you aware that turnout in Nigeria's presidential elections have been on a decline since 2007?
8. Were your expectations for the 2023 presidential election different from previous elections?
9. What do you think are the main reasons for the turnout decline in Nigeria's presidential elections since 2007? Are there any historical, social, economic, or political factors that have played a significant role in shaping this trend?
10. Based on your experience, what role do political parties and candidates play in influencing voter turnout? Any specific example?
11. Are there any specific demographic groups or regions in Nigeria that are more susceptible to low voter turnout? If so, what factors contribute to this? Youth, Gender, Religion, ethnicity.(There were indications that the youths were interested in voting)
12. An electoral reform was carried out by the electoral commission in 2022, with the introduction of Bvas machines and the new IREV portal and the transfer of voter details to their state of residence. Why do you think these actions did not translate

into increased voter turnout? Are these reforms effective? Do we need more reforms?

13. Are there any efforts to increase voter mobilization and do you think voter turnout is continually declining because these efforts are failing?
14. Based on your expertise, what policies or strategies could be implemented to reverse the decline in voter turnout in Nigeria? Are there any successful examples from other countries or regions that could be adapted to the Nigerian context? How transferable are these solutions?

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW ORAL CONSENT SCRIPT

Introduction:

Hello. I am Augustina Alegbe. You are invited to participate in a research study aimed to ascertain the root causes of the continuous decline of voters' turnout in Nigeria's Presidential elections.

I located/found your name by searching/having your name suggested for individuals who are well-informed in the area of politics and elections.

Study procedures: I'm inviting you to do a one-on-one interview for 60 minutes. Questions about voter turnout in Nigeria's presidential elections such as:

- Are you aware that turnout in Nigeria's presidential election has been on a decline since 2007?
- How would you describe your experience with voting in Nigeria's presidential elections?

Risks: In agreeing to participate in this study, the most likely risk to be encountered is discomfort from talking about your voting experience. This study will adhere to strict protocols for protecting your data, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity as the recordings and transcripts of your video will ensure to protect your identity and any information that might be used for identification purposes.

Benefits:

It is unlikely that there will be direct benefits to you, however, by better understanding the causes of the continuous decline of voter turnout in Nigeria's presidential elections, researchers and others may be able to draw on this to effect change and drive policies toward increased electoral participation.

I will keep the information you tell me during the interview confidential. Information I put in my report that could identify you will not be published or shared beyond the research team unless we have your permission. Any data from this research that will be shared or published will be the combined data of all participants/ reported using the category name with numbers assigned.

Voluntary participation:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary.

- If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences to you.
- If you decide to stop we will ask you how you would like us to handle the data collected up to that point.
- This could include returning it to you, destroying it or using the data collected up to that point.
- If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.
- If you have any questions about this study or would like more information you can email *Augustina Alegbe* at augustina.alegbe@nu.edu.kz

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact:

Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee
E-mail: resethics@nu.edu.kz

Consent questions:

- Do you have any questions or would like any additional details?
- Do you agree to participate in this study knowing that you can withdraw at any point with no consequences to you?