

## **Election and Voting Behavior in Nigeria: A Study of the 2023 Presidential Election in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja**

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### **Abstract**

Voting behaviour in Nigeria has been characterised by various sentiments and emotions, which have prevented elections in Nigeria from serving as an actual test of candidate popularity and competency. However, instead, issues like ethnicity, tribalism, religion, and other unnecessary factors continue to shape the voting behaviour in Nigeria, with no exception to the 2023 presidential election. It was against this backdrop that the study examined the impact of voting behaviour on the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. The study adopted a survey research design and collected data through questionnaires and interviews with a sample of 400 participants, drawn from major election stakeholders in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The study findings showed that ethnicity has been part of Nigerian politics since the Nigerian democratic experiment started, and that the 2023 presidential election was not an exception; that religion has been a deep-rooted dynamic that shaped not only voting behaviour but also influenced Nigerian politics itself; and that tribalism was a major deciding factor in the 2023 presidential election. The study recommends, among others, investing in voter education programs to boost civic awareness and understanding of the political process. Political parties should promote inclusivity by incorporating candidates from diverse ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds to reduce the impact of ethnocentrism on voting behaviour.

**Keywords:** Election, Presidential Election, Voting Behaviour, Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

An election is a systematic process by which a population selects its representatives for public office, and it involves organised collective decision-making. Elections have been the primary means of governing in contemporary representative democracies since the 17th century (Manin, 1997).

Voting behaviour in an election refers to the act of casting a ballot. A voter's decision is influenced by an intricate interaction between their own perspectives and prevailing social circumstances. Voters' attitudes are shaped by several factors, including party allegiance, satisfaction with the current government, policy preferences, and evaluations of a candidate's personality. Social determinants include physical characteristics, social standing, religious affiliation and level of religious devotion, gender, race, and religion (Caplan, 2007). Voting behaviour is influenced by both an individual's social identity and their level of identification with a political party (Jenke et al, 2016).

The study of voting behaviour is a highly specialised subfield in political and social science. According to liberal democratic theory, elections are a practical mechanism for implementing representative governance, and voting is the primary means of political participation in democratic countries. Credible elections are, without a doubt, a key component of global democracy, democratisation, and good governance. In democracies, elections support the representation of public opinion and preserve the legitimacy of the political system (Odalonu & Obani, 2019).

The lack of psychological engagement in public affairs, emotional detachment from civic duty, and a somewhat restrained attitude toward political activities, even at the global level, are nonetheless telling indicators of the decline in voter turnout.

**The Nigerian presidential election was conducted on 25 February 2023. It was the most contested election in decades. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) (2023), on 1 March, Tinubu was declared the winner, followed by Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi in third place, while Rabiu Kwankwaso was in fourth place (INEC, 2023).**

Nigeria's diverse ethnic landscape is an essential aspect of its political landscape, and ethnically-based voting behaviour has been a recurring theme in Nigerian elections, influencing candidate selection and voter preferences (Akindele, 2019). In 2023, the ethnically driven voting patterns, tribal sentiments, and religious affiliations further complicated the electoral landscape and impacted political stability. Analysing voting behaviour in Nigeria provided valuable insights into the dynamics of the electoral process. It helped identify avenues to promote more inclusive, merit-based voting choices.

The study seeks to answer the following fundamental question: How has ethnicity as a factor contributed to voting behaviour in the 2023 Nigerian presidential election? **How has religion influenced the voting behaviour of electorates during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria? Moreover, what are the roles of tribalism in influencing the 2023 presidential election outcomes in Nigeria?**

### **Conceptual Issues**

The study reviews relevant concepts, including elections, voting, voting behaviour, and the nexus between elections and voting behaviour.

### **Election**

An election, as defined by the National Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, is the procedure by which the qualifying members of an organisation or group choose their officials or representatives by voting. Bain (2004) offered a more extensive explanation, defining it as "the official process by which the voting population selects representatives and determines the issues that are presented to them" (Okolie, 2004). Therefore, it allows people who meet the

legal requirements to participate in the election of authorities and make decisions that have legal force.

According to Okolie (2004), the technical and social aspects of election importance are separate. He defines an election as "the process in which a person is chosen for a position through a voluntary act that involves a large number of people expressing their opinions simultaneously." In addition, Okolie (2004) refers to a sociological definition of elections as "the procedure by which an individual is connected to a position of power, while ensuring sufficient opportunity for the participation of the constituents who are meant to be governed by the elected official".

### **Voting Behaviour**

A link exists between the emergence of behavioural political science and the growing scientific focus on voting behaviour. Given that voting is the most widespread and measurable form of political action, it quickly drew attention to innovative methods for sampling and survey design, as well as for statistical analysis. Several similar studies, such as Heywood's (2004) reference to Butler and Stokes' *Political Change in Britain* (1969), were influenced by *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960), a comprehensive research project conducted by the University of Michigan that later became the benchmark in the field.

During the peak of the behavioural revolution, voting might help create rules that control mass political psychology and uncover the inner workings of the political system. Psephology, the field dedicated to the study of voting behaviour, remains a crucial component of political research, notwithstanding any feelings of dissatisfaction. Voting yields a very extensive dataset that captures the intricate dynamics among people, society, and politics. An examination of the intricate pattern of voting behaviour may provide a deeper understanding of the forces that drive political and social change (Heywood, 2004).

According to liberal democratic theory, elections are a practical mechanism for completing representative democracy, and voting is the primary means of political participation in democratic nations, making the study of election behaviour a highly specialised subfield of political and social science. For democracy to flourish and for global governance structures to mature, credible elections are a must. In a democratic system, the will of the people is always represented in government through fair and open elections. A lack of emotional involvement in public affairs, a lack of connection to civic responsibility, and a generally restrained attitude toward political activities, even on a global scale, are all indicators of reduced voter participation in elections. Therefore, it is important to examine the reasons people are not voting and their personalities (Adejumobi, 2000).

Thus, voter electoral behaviour, a subset of political behaviour, has become a central concern in both well-established democracies and new ones, stable societies as well as unstable ones, big economies as well as struggling ones (Patel et al, 2014).

The voting system of a nation has been shown to affect public engagement in politics significantly (Okolo, 2002). How elections are run says a lot about a country's political culture, political participation, and government.

According to the sociological approach to voting behaviour, which emphasises the significance of social structure, participation in social organisations affects voting choices. Voters are seen as pragmatic because they choose politicians and parties they feel will best represent their interests. At the same time, another sociological classic contends that, in addition to group identities impacting voting behaviour, cleavage patterns determine the number of political parties in a particular democracy.

Divisions in society serve as the impetus for the emergence of new political parties. According to sociologists, group identities affect individuals' values and preferences. People's political leanings are influenced by how they feel about the world. In the party identification model, voter preferences are endogenous, whereas voter attitudes are exogenous; in the sociological model, voter preferences are exogenous, and voter attitudes are endogenous. A person's emotional attachments to a political party make it difficult for them to change their minds about voting for a different party, according to this hypothesis. These unwavering political views are rooted in one's upbringing, especially one's family (Gerbar & Green, 1998).

The sociological model holds that factors such as race, class, gender, religion, education, employment, social status, location, and regional connections or identities influence voting. In contrast, the party identification model argues that there is a causal link between views and voting.

Voters' choices at the polls are often determined by rational, self-interested considerations (Chandler et al., 2006) and awareness of the possible impacts an election may have on the voter's life and well-being. The record of an incumbent party, the stature of its leaders, and voters' economic outlook may all affect this type of voting behaviour (Sanders, 2003).

### **Empirical Literature on Voting Behaviour**

**Scholars have interrogated voting behaviour in Nigeria across the 1999-2023 elections. For instance, Suleiman's (2020) work, titled "An Analysis of Voting Behaviour in Nigeria's Presidential Elections since 1999," with a historical research design, showed that new trends in behaviour have impacted the electoral system in Nigeria.**

**Also, Agaba (2019) conducted "the assessment of voters' behaviour on 2019 general elections" and found new trends in voting behaviour among Nigerian electorates, such as ethnicity, tribalism, and vote-buying, which, according to the author, cast aspersion on the electoral processes in Nigeria.**

**Report on "vote-selling behaviour and democratic dissatisfaction in Nigeria": a mixed-methods research design found that the trend of vote selling and buying negatively impacts the voting process in Nigeria, thereby undermining the legitimacy of the political class and deep-rooted poverty, which influences vote trading.**

**In his own work, Idowu (2024) examined voting patterns and behaviour in the 2023 presidential election using a qualitative method and found that many variables have influenced voting behaviour among the Nigerian electorate. This behaviour is hitherto not known to the Nigerian political lexicon, such as the issues of godfatherism, money bag politics, violence, and vote trading.**

**Olowu and Folarin (2024) work examined the 2022 electoral act and the conduct of 2023 general elections in Nigeria. They found that the act did not reduce preelection and post-election litigations as different types of electoral petitions marred the conduct of 2023 general elections as stakeholders expressed desertification.**

### **Gap in Literature**

**Suleiman (2020). Agaba, 2019; Chathanhouse, 2022; & Idowu, 2024 studies are on voting behaviour and pattern in Nigeria, but only a few of them, to the best of my knowledge, have holistically investigated the impact or measured the outcome of voting behaviour on the 2023 presidential election, a gap which the study seeks to fill. Also, the study seeks to fill the gap in outdated data on voting behaviour in the Nigerian presidential election. The method used in the study was also unique in a way. With a descriptive survey research design, the work elicited in-depth and far-reaching information.**

## Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Social Action Theory. The study anchored its argument in Max Weber's (1964) theory of social action, which holds that people's reactions are influenced by their interpretations of the world. This encompasses both active and passive compliance, which may be targeted towards the past, present, or future activities of people. Weber (1964) argues that many human behaviours do not meet the criteria for being considered activities, and not all human acts can be categorised as "social" (Adeleke, 2016).

Consequently, it may be argued that voter participation in national elections is exclusively influenced by their rational understanding of the political process. The culture of every society is composed of its constitutions, laws, dominant political beliefs, educational practices, and norms, which are considered fundamental social realities. Culture has a significant impact on individual behaviour while also exhibiting noticeable patterns and consistency among groups and societies.

This study assigns equal weight to both internal and external factors, such as education, perceptions, age, sex, religion, and tribe, to elucidate the rationale behind voters' judgments. Consequently, it exhibits a high degree of compatibility with the social action theory. This theory remains relevant, given that electors are still seen as the epitome and exemplar of a democratic society, such as that in Nigeria.

Moreover, people vote for many reasons, including economic, social, and material benefits. Voting, in this sense, is the act of officially expressing one's choice for a candidate or political party during an election by combining individual choices into a collective decision.

## Methodology

**Research Design:** This study adopts a descriptive survey design. According to Nworgu (2006), a descriptive survey is one in which a group of people or things is investigated by gathering and evaluating data from a small number of individuals or items, which are considered representative of the sample.

**Population of the Study:** The study used registered voters in the Federal Capital Territory as its population, totalling 1,570,307.

**Sample Size and Sampling Technique:** Taro Yamane's technique for determining the sample size needed to make statistically significant claims about the study's population.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

n = Sample Size

N = Population Size

1 = is constant

e = Margin of error

$$n = \frac{1,570,307}{1 + 1,570,307(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{1,570,307}{1 + 1,570,307(0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{1,570,307}{1 + 392.7675}$$

$$n = \frac{1,570,307}{392.7675}$$

$$n = 399.86 \text{ approximately } = 400$$

Sampling selects a representative sample from a broader population to find general trends and outliers. Probability and non-probability sampling methods are used. The population was too large to poll everyone. Using a two-stage sampling approach, the research sample was found

to be statistically significant. The first step involved rigorously sampling the study's population. Each of the four categories gets a prototype frame in the final phase.

**Method of data collection:** This study's primary data sources are two. These sources include: Primary Source: Statistical inquiry materials, which the researcher acquired for a specific objective. Surveys, observations, interviews, and questionnaires can all be used to gather them. A questionnaire will be used for the investigation's purposes. A total of 400 questionnaires will be issued. Secondary Data: Data that has been previously gathered. These facts have been taken from books, periodicals, and the web. They were all combined as by-products of different types of research. These were used along with other unreleased writings and works.

**Methods of Data Analysis:** To assess the frequency and proportion of respondents and their defining traits, the researcher used frequency tables and percentages. The study analysed data descriptively using tables and numbers; the tables are structured in a simple format that shows respondents' frequencies and percentages. The tables containing the data are presented at the bottom, and the researcher uses deductive reasoning to draw sound, informed conclusions for each table. Also, the study adopts content analysis, which relies on the researcher's ability to analyse data deductively through logical reasoning. The data are analysed according to a thematic structure highlighting the central findings.

### **Discussion of Findings**

**Ethnicity:** A key predictor of vote choice in culturally diverse and emerging democracies. Elections in these nations result in group voting in which party support overlaps with a country's census because voters pick co-ethnics or block-vote in multiethnic alliances. Elections in Nigeria are not necessarily about issues but about ethnicity, religion, and regionalism. It is the first time in Nigeria's recent history (Fourth Republic) that the election result has exposed the huge division between the Muslim north and Christian south. Incumbent Goodluck Jonathan had won in nearly all southern states, which are predominantly Christian, except for one (Osun). In contrast, his primary challenger, Muhammadu Buhari, had won in the Muslim north-east and north-west.

Ethnicity and voting behaviour are as old as Nigerian politics itself. This response buttresses the point that: The issue of ethnicity and its relationship to political behaviour in Nigeria can be traced to the 1914 amalgamation, which forced the ethnic groups of the northern and southern protectorates to become a political entity. It resulted in competition, prejudice, and conflict among ethnic groups in Nigeria. The 2023 presidential election was keenly contested, with each candidate having strong ethnic support. Tinubu (APC), a Yoruba Muslim, chose Kashim Shatima, a Kanuri Muslim, as his running mate to draw support from the South-West and North-East. There is an informal agreement between political parties to rotate power between the North and the South, and Christians and Muslims, raising concerns about the competence of candidates versus ethnic alignment

This conclusion implies that ethnicity has been part of Nigerian politics since the Nigerian democratic experiment began, and that all elections are colored by ethnicity. In contrast, the 2023 presidential election was a glaring manifestation of the ethnic factor as a formidable force in Nigerian voting behaviour.

**Religion:** Religion can significantly influence individuals' voting decisions. Numerous studies have highlighted the impact of religious beliefs and affiliations on political preferences and voting behaviour. Research has shown that individuals often align their voting choices with candidates or parties that they perceive as compatible with their religious values and moral convictions. Religion has been a dominant factor in Nigerian politics, particularly in the post-

independence era, threatening the country's secularism. Whatever one believes about religion, the fact that it interacts with politics in Nigeria cannot be denied. Their open support has demonstrated the clout of religious organisations in presidential elections. In 2023, religious leaders with their congregants covertly and overtly endorsed presidential candidates, which was the height of it.

The implication is that religion has played a significant role in voter behaviour in Nigeria, and its influence in the 2023 presidential election cannot be denied.

**Tribalism:** As for the tribes of the leading 2023 candidates, Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC) is a Muslim and a Yoruba man from the South West region. His running mate is Senator Kashim Shettima of the Northern Kanuri tribe, a Muslim from Maiduguri in Borno State in North East Nigeria. The dual Muslim-Muslim ticket has raised concerns despite Tinubu's claims to judge him and Shettima on their merits. Atiku Abubakar of the main opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) is a Muslim Fulani from Nigeria's North-East. Governor Ifeanyi Okowa of the South is his running mate. He is a medical doctor by profession, and he hails from Owa-Alero in Ika North East Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. Peter Obi, the Presidential candidate of the Labour Party (LP), is a Christian and an Igbo man from Anambra State in Nigeria's South-Eastern region. His running mate is Yusuf Datti Baba-Ahmed, a former Senator for Kaduna North. He is a Muslim from Kaduna State in Northern Nigeria.

Ethnic ties were a key indicator in swaying voters in the upcoming election, as seen in Atiku Abubakar's claim that "those from the North don't need candidates from the South during the 2023 elections." At present, Northern candidates such as Atiku and the less popular Rabiu Kwankwaso of the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) have been actively framing their campaigns as "them vs. us" along the North-South dichotomy. Notwithstanding, Southern sentiment alleging current President Muhammadu Buhari's "preferential treatment" of the Fulani North at the expense of other tribes also indicates this mindset in the South.

Tribalising tactics were employed to polarise the election situation, perpetuate ethnic stereotypes, and create divisions among Nigeria's ethnic groups. One viral tweet alleged that an "Igbo man" had won the election but was robbed by a "Yoruba man" and the electoral commission. This was more than a grievance about fairness. It framed a narrative of ethnic betrayal. Another statement from a major party candidate went even further, declaring that Northerners did not need Yoruba or Igbo candidates. That was not a campaign strategy; it was tribal gatekeeping, aired on national platforms. These were not fringe voices.

By implication, tribalism has been a major deciding factor in Nigeria's political experience, and the 2023 presidential election is no exception. The three popular presidential aspirants' reliance on tribal sentiment and the South-versus-North dichotomy was echoed. Even though it was practically impossible to bank on the votes of a single region, Nigerian politicians are tribally rooted in their regions.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study findings showed that ethnicity has been part of Nigerian politics since the Nigerian democratic experiment started, and all elections have a colouration of ethnicity. In contrast, the 2023 presidential election was a glaring manifestation of the ethnic factor as a formidable force of voting behaviour in Nigeria.

The study also established that religion has been a deep-rooted dynamic that shaped not only voting behaviour but also influenced Nigerian politics itself. In other words, the role of religion in the 2023 presidential election cannot be underestimated.

Findings revealed that tribalism has been a major deciding factor in Nigeria's political experience, and the 2023 presidential election is no exception. The three popular presidential

aspirants' reliance on tribal sentiment and the South versus North dichotomy was echoed, even though it was practically impossible to bank on the votes of a single section of the country.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Invest in voter education programs to boost civic awareness and understanding of the political process. Emphasise evaluating candidates based on policies and qualifications, not ethnic or religious affiliations. Emphasise critical thinking about media coverage and endorsements to encourage independent decision-making.
- ii. Political parties should promote inclusivity by including candidates from diverse ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds, reducing the impact of ethnocentrism on voting behaviour, and ensuring representation for all citizens. Prioritising policies that address the economic concerns of diverse demographic groups broadens their appeal.
- iii. Implement robust anti-corruption measures, such as transparent campaign financing, stringent ethical standards for candidates, and mechanisms to hold politicians accountable for corrupt practices, to address concerns about the integrity and credibility of candidates, positively impacting voter trust and engagement.

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