

# Electoral Participation and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: A Comparative Analysis of the 2015, 2019 and 2023 Presidential Elections

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## Abstract

The quality of democracy is largely determined by the level and nature of citizens' political participation. In Nigeria, however, democratic participation continues to face challenges linked to institutional weakness, electoral malpractice, insecurity, and elite dominance. This study examines patterns of political participation in the 2015, 2019 and 2023 presidential elections to evaluate voter turnout, electoral competitiveness, and citizens' trust in the electoral process. Employing a comparative descriptive research design, the study drew on documentary and quantitative data from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), national survey reports, and scholarly publications. Anchored on political participation and elite theories, the study explored how citizen engagement and elite control shape electoral behaviour and democratic outcomes. Findings reveal a consistent decline in voter turnout across the three election cycles, driven by widespread disillusionment, poor institutional credibility, and the perception that elections seldom influence governance outcomes. The study concludes that the sustainability of democracy in Nigeria depends on strengthening electoral integrity, deepening political accountability, and restoring citizens' confidence in electoral institutions. It recommends comprehensive electoral reforms, inclusive political processes, and civic education as key strategies for enhancing political participation and consolidating democracy.

**Keywords:** Quality of Democracy, Political Competition, Electoral Integrity, Voter Turnout, Political Trust

## Introduction

Despite the global spread of democratic norms, contemporary democracies face declining levels of civic engagement, voter turnout, and political trust (Zittel & Fuchs, 2007). In Nigeria, this trend is particularly worrisome. The nation's electoral history is replete with irregularities, vote buying, political thuggery, violence, and institutional weaknesses that undermine citizens' confidence in the electoral process (Falade, 2014; Ojo, 2014). Elections have often served as flashpoints for national instability, as electoral disputes frequently escalate into crises with far-

reaching consequences (Anifowose, 2011; Anyaoku, 1997). Consequently, Nigerian politics is often perceived as corrupt, uncertain, and unresponsive to citizens' needs; conditions that reinforce voter apathy and alienation. Voter turnout in presidential elections has consistently declined since 2015, reflecting growing disillusionment with the democratic process. The persistence of this pattern across the 2015, 2019, and 2023 presidential elections raises fundamental questions about the depth of Nigeria's democratic consolidation. Hence, when citizens disengage from electoral participation, the foundations of democratic legitimacy weaken.

Against this backdrop, this study examines electoral participation and democratic consolidation in Nigeria through a comparative analysis of the 2015, 2019, and 2023 presidential elections. Specifically, it investigates patterns of voter turnout, electoral competitiveness, and citizens' trust in the electoral process under the administrations of Presidents Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari, extending to the 2023 post-Buhari transition. The study aims to determine whether political participation in Nigeria is deepening or declining and to identify the institutional and sociopolitical factors influencing these trends. To address this, the paper first reviews relevant literature and theoretical perspectives on political participation and democratic consolidation. After methodological discussion, it presents and analyses the data and findings across the three election cycles. It draws the implications for Nigeria's democratic development, and concludes with recommendations for strengthening electoral participation and consolidating democratic governance.

## Elections in Nigeria

Elections are democratic instruments for holding politicians accountable (Powell, 2000; Rudolph & Däubler, 2015) as well as the indispensable tool of democracy (Annan, 2015). Elections and other political processes are pivotal to the quality of a country's governance and can either greatly advance or set back a country's long-term democratic development (USAID, n.d). The conduct of elections and electoral processes in the Nigerian Fourth Republic mirrored the historical context in which elections were conducted in Nigeria (Hassan & Yusuf, 2015). Political parties that contested the 1965, 1979 and 1983 elections had ethnic affiliations and were established to protect the political interests of their ethnic groups. The Nigerian political culture is parochial and shapes voting patterns along the lines of ethnicity, religion and sectionalism, which have continued to bedevil the successful choice of political leadership (Abdullahi, 2015). The political elites deploy kinship ties in forms of politicised ethnicity and religion to access state power because of their failure to deliver their responsibilities. Politics thus snowballed into a business venture (most lucrative investment) in Nigeria for primitive accumulation of wealth, thereby turning a 'do or die' affair, zero-sum and characterised by the use of all means (including the state apparatuses for force by incumbents) to secure power. At this instance, the state is captured and is in the hands of the populist elites and political brokers who care very little about the citizens (Chiamogu, Chiamogu, Nwokoye & Odikpo, 2021). Hence, election in Nigeria is marred with malfeasance, massive rigging, unbridled violence, manipulation of results and intimidation of opposition and their supporters using the apparatus of state security personnel and political thugs (Auwal, 2015). Anything and everything goes in Nigerian politics, including excessive use of money, where vote buying, godfatherism, bribery, corruption, overspending, violation of electoral rules and other irregularities have barely become conventional.

## Presidential Elections in Nigeria: 1979–2023

Nigeria became a republic in 1963 and conducted its first presidential election in 1979, following the collapse of the First Republic and the civil war. Since then, Nigeria has conducted nine

presidential elections. The first two were held during the Second Republic (1979 and 1983), the third occurred in the aborted Third Republic in 1993, which was annulled by the military president, Gen. Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, and the Fourth Republic has witnessed seven consecutive presidential elections: 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023.

**Table 1:** Presidential Elections in Nigeria (1979–2023) Showing Winners and First Runners-up

Year	Party	Candidate	Votes Obtained	Party	Candidate	Votes Obtained
		Winner			First Runner Up	
1979	NPN	Alhaji Shehu Shagari	5,668,857	UPN	Chief Obafemi Awolowo	4,916,651
1983	NPN	Alhaji Shehu Shagari	12,081,471	UPN	Chief Obafemi Awolowo	7,907,209
1993	SDP	MKO Abiola	8,341,309	NRC	Alhaji Bashir Tofa	5,952,087
1999	PDP	Olusegun Obasanjo	18,738,154	APP/AD	Olu Falae	7,907,209
2003	PDP	Olusegun Obasanjo	24,456,140	ANPP	Muhammadu Buhari	12,710,022
2007	PDP	Umaru Musa Yar'Adua	24,638,063	ANPP	Muhammadu Buhari	6,605,299
2011	PDP	Dr. Goodluck Jonathan	22,495,187	CPC	Muhammadu Buhari	12,214,853
2015	APC	Muhammadu Buhari	15,424,921	PDP	Dr. Goodluck Jonathan	12,853,162
2019	APC	Muhammadu Buhari	15,191,847	PDP	Alhaji Atiku Abubakar	11,262,798
2023	APC	Bola Ahmed Tinubu	8,794,726	PDP	Atiku Abubakar	6,984,520

**Source:** Compiled by the Researchers from INEC Reports and Existing Literature (2023)

Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, presidential elections have become pivotal events in Nigeria. Unlike the turbulent political experiences of the First and Second Republics (1960–66 and 1979–83) and the aborted Third Republic (1993), the Fourth Republic has successfully conducted seven consecutive elections, enabling peaceful transfers of power and gradually deepening the space for citizen participation. Across these elections, four parties: National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Social Democratic Party (SDP), People's Democratic Party (PDP), and All Progressives Congress (APC); have won the presidency, while six parties: Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), National Republican Convention (NRC), All People's Party (APP) in coalition with Alliance for Democracy (AD), All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP), Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), and PDP, have emerged as first runners-up.

Historically, the NPN dominated the Second Republic (1979–1983), the PDP held power for sixteen years (1999–2015), and the APC has led for ten years since 2015. The SDP never governed due to the annulment of the 1993 election. During the Third Republic, Gen. Babangida's adoption of a two-party system sought to mitigate ethnic and regional biases in politics. In contrast, the multiparty system of the Fourth Republic fosters political pluralism and offers the electorate broader choices, reflecting a more inclusive and competitive democratic environment.

### Presidential Elections and Political Participation in Nigeria

Electoral competition has long been theorised to improve the selection and performance of politicians by creating incentives for political parties to select high-quality candidates to run in elections, and for politicians to perform well once in office, thereby raising voters' welfare (Shaukat, 2019). Invariably, citizens' participation in elections constitutes the cardinal pillar of democratic political systems (Omotola & Aiyedogbon, 2012, cited in Chiamogu & Chiamogu, 2019, p.133). Unfortunately, in younger democracies like Nigeria, the permutations and combinations

of the state guided by the ruling party and its agents have generated superheated electioneering campaigns with numerous candidates that, in turn, impede democratic development (Omodia, 2010; Kura, 2011; Innocent, Yusoff & Rajanthiran, 2017). The state has continuously been used and made to participate in elections in ways that set it for and against some interests, groups, parties and sections of the country. Elections that fall short of providing an ambience for greater citizens' participation as a basic ingredient of democratic standards undermine the processes of democratic consolidation. Hence, the nature and rate of electorate turnout and participation in electoral processes define, in significant terms, the credibility of electoral democracy.

Nevertheless, flawed elections have continued to erode trust, transparency, participation and public accountability tests of citizens in the democratic process. As aptly observed by Annan (2015), electoral violence clearly demonstrates "how elections, which are meant to promote stability and facilitate the peaceful transfer of power, can become divisive if the process is not handled professionally, transparently and with integrity". Thus, when elections are considered as a mere technical exercise enabling a person or a group to accede to or remain in power in an otherwise wholly undemocratic context, they quickly become a source of disillusionment and violence. While no election is ever perfect, citizens want their elections to be fair, credible and capable of offering genuine choices to the people. The challenge facing nascent and established democracies alike is to ensure that elections are couched in a democratic spirit and backed up by strong institutions that can ensure and sustain electoral integrity.

However, despite the prime position of elections in democracy, their conduct and organisation have remained a real challenge in Nigeria (Reynolds, 2009; Ashindorbe, 2018). The National Human Rights Commission Report (2007), as cited by Oni, Chidozie and Agbude (2013, p.51), stated that "political process leading to democratic governance has been misconstrued by the majority of Nigerians as an opportunity to better one's livelihood and consequently, politics is seen as the gateway to paradise on earth". As a result, electoral politics has become one of the major causes of a great number of deaths in Nigeria through acts of violence, thuggery, political assassinations and crimes that are linked with the quest for power (Animashaun, 2010). In the course of all this, many criminal offences are committed; security personnel deployed to maintain law and order during elections are often mobilised to harass or intimidate political opponents and voters or take sides in undermining free, fair and credible balloting (Idowu, 2010). The 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria witnessed serial activities of electoral violence, malpractices and thuggery (Bekoe, 2011; National Democratic Institute, 2012). Election malpractices and violence have thus become a recurring decimal in Nigeria's political history and constitute an enormous concern to the survival of Nigeria's democracy (INEC, 2011).

What is more, something is critically awry with Nigerian democracy. Since the start of the Fourth Republic, the country has been deeply divided and unprecedentedly polarised in national elections and national policy directives. Somehow, except for the 2015 general elections, all other elections in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria are mere formal rituals; they are affairs of acclimation rather than intensely competitive contests that force conflicts over policies and ideologies to the surface and give voters meaningful choices (Pildes, 2006). This is true for presidential, national assembly, gubernatorial, state assembly and local government elections conducted from 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2019 under the watch of the PDP and APC, respectively. The conduct of the 2015 general elections, although suffering significant adept application of incumbency advantage (Chiamogu & Chiamogu, 2016), allowed greater freedom to the citizens and paved greater grounds for political competition, hence the unprecedented defeat of the ruling party in their elections. Countries with high democratic freedoms are more just, peaceful and stable—and their citizens

can fulfil their potential, while those with low political freedom have unresponsive governments that are alienated from the people.

### **Understanding Electoral Participation and Democratic Consolidation**

Electoral participation is one of the clearest indicators of citizens' engagement in democratic governance. It encompasses all actions through which people try to influence political decisions, including voting, campaigning, and public debates (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). Among these, voting remains the most direct and widely practised form of participation, particularly in representative democracies like Nigeria (Norris, 2014). The regularity, inclusiveness, and competitiveness of elections thus reflect the health and vibrancy of democracy (Dahl, 1971).

Democratic consolidation, meanwhile, is about more than just holding elections; it is the process through which democracy becomes stable, legitimate, and resilient against authoritarian tendencies (Schedler, 1998; Diamond, 1999). Linz and Stepan (1996, p.7) argue that a consolidated democracy is one in which democratic norms are fully internalised by political leaders, institutions, and citizens: in other words, democracy becomes "the only game in town." In such a context, strong electoral participation signals citizens' trust and confidence in the system, while widespread voter apathy can indicate weaknesses in democratic practice (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

In Nigeria, however, the relationship between electoral participation and democratic consolidation is complex (Chiamogu, 2021; Chiamogu, Chiamogu, Nwokoye & Odikpo, 2021). Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, the country has witnessed repeated elections, yet challenges such as declining voter turnout, election malpractice, and weak institutional credibility persist (Omotola, 2010; Jinadu, 2019). These issues cast doubt not only on the legitimacy of elections but also on the overall sustainability of Nigeria's democratic project.

### **Patterns of Voter Turnout and Electoral Behaviour in Nigeria**

Voter turnout is often used as a measure of citizens' engagement and confidence in democracy. In Nigeria, turnout for presidential elections has shown a steady decline: 53.7% in 2011, 43.7% in 2015, 34.8% in 2019, and around 26.7% in 2023 (INEC, 2023). This downward trend reflects an increasing disconnect between the electorate and the political class. Several factors contribute to this decline. Falade (2014, p.88) highlights political disillusionment, poor voter education, and the monetisation of politics as key drivers. Okolie (2018) and Ibrahim and Ibeanu (2009) further point to insecurity, logistical challenges, and manipulation of electoral processes as reasons why citizens increasingly doubt the impact of their votes. Even in the 2023 elections, innovations like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV) could not fully address controversies over electronic results transmission and allegations of irregularities (EU EOM, 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2023). Voter apathy in Nigeria is therefore both systemic and psychological. Historical patterns of election fraud, the poor performance of successive governments, and the perception that votes rarely translate into tangible change contribute to what Resnick and Van de Walle (2013, p. 142) describe as "participatory fatigue." Nigerians, like many Africans, often begin elections with enthusiasm but grow frustrated when the system fails to deliver accountability and meaningful representation (Chiamogu & Chiamogu, 2018; Awopeju, Adelaja, & Udele, 2012; Omotola, 2010).

### Voter Turnout in Nigerian Presidential Elections (1979–2023)

Voter turnout in Nigerian presidential elections has shown a persistent decline over the decades, raising concerns about the health of the country's democratic ethos. This trend suggests the emergence of a system where elections are held routinely, yet meaningful mass participation, the hallmark of democracy, is increasingly absent. Contemporary political leadership in Nigeria is often foisted upon the electorate because citizens have, at times, abstained from fulfilling their electoral responsibilities, reflecting a growing disconnect between the governed and the government.

The history of electoral participation since the Second Republic shows this decline. The 1979 presidential election marked the first time in Nigeria's history that all citizens of voting age exercised their franchise in a nationwide presidential contest. Out of 48,846,633 registered voters, representing 62.77% of the estimated population of 77,841,000, only 17,098,267 votes were cast, representing just 21.96% of the population (Ita & Edet, 2018; African Elections Database, 2011). By 1983, 65,304,818 voters were registered, representing 81.90% of the estimated population of 79,729,310; yet only 25,430,096 votes were cast, accounting for 31.89% of the total population.

Following decades of military rule, Nigeria returned to democratic governance in 1999, resulting in a brief revival of electoral participation. Voter turnout rose from 38.94% in 1999 to 52.26% and peaked at 69.08% in 2003 (Nwankwo, Okafor, & Asuoha, 2017). However, this upward trend was short-lived, with participation declining in subsequent elections: 57.49% in 2007, 53.68% in 2011, 43.65% in 2015, and 34.75% in 2019. This represents a 25.43% decline in voter engagement between 2007 and 2015 alone, signalling growing voter apathy and mistrust of the political process (Nwankwo, Okafor, & Asuoha, 2017).

The 2023 presidential election continued this downward decline. According to official Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) reports, only 26.7% of registered voters participated in the election, marking the lowest level of engagement since the return to democracy in 1999 (INEC, 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2023). Despite technological innovations such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV), the election was still overshadowed by allegations of irregularities and procedural challenges.

The historical pattern thus reveals a persistent disengagement of Nigerian citizens from presidential elections, reflecting both systemic and psychological factors, including electoral malpractice, insecurity, elite dominance, and a perception that voting has limited impact on governance outcomes (Awopeju, Adelaja, & Udele, 2012; Omotola, 2010). This trend underscores the urgent need for institutional reforms, civic education, and mechanisms that can restore citizens' trust and confidence in the electoral process.

**Table 2:** Voter Turnout in Nigerian Presidential Elections (1979–2023)

Year	Population	Registered Votes	VotingAge Population (VAP)	Votes Cast	Voter Turnout (% of Registered)	VAP Turnout (% of VAP)
1979	77,841,000	48,846,633	38,142,090	17,098,267	35.25	44.83
1983	79,729,310	65,304,818	—	25,430,096	38.94	—
1993	105,264,000	61,567,036	50,526,720	14,293,396	23.22	27.79
1999	108,258,350	57,938,945	52,792,781	30,280,052	52.26	57.36
2003	129,934,910	60,823,022	64,319,246	42,018,735	69.08	65.33

Year	Population	Registered Votes	Voting Age Population (VAP)	Votes Cast	Voter Turnout (% of Registered)	VAP Turnout (% of VAP)
2007	131,859,730	61,567,036	71,004,507	35,397,517	57.49	49.85
2011	155,215,570	73,528,040	81,691,751	39,469,484	53.68	48.32
2015	181,562,052	67,422,005	91,669,312	29,432,083	43.65	32.11
2019	200,962,417	84,004,084	106,490,312	28,614,190	34.75	26.87
2023	—	93,469,008	—	~24,900,000	~26.72	

**Source:** International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IIDEA) with some inputs by a Researcher from other Existing Literature

From Table 2 above, it can be observed that the 2023 presidential election recorded the lowest voter turnout in Nigeria's history, with only 26.72% of registered voters participating, followed by the 2019 presidential election at 34.75%. In contrast, the 2011 general elections had a significantly higher turnout of 53.68%, which was notably greater than the 43.65% observed in 2015. Similarly, voter turnout for the 2007 (57.49%), 2003 (69.08%), and 1999 (52.26%) presidential elections remained higher than in the subsequent elections of 2015, 2019, and 2023. Regarding the total number of votes cast, the 2023 presidential election recorded approximately 24,900,000 votes, making it the smallest in Nigeria's history in absolute terms. By comparison, the total votes cast in previous elections were: 28,614,190 in 2019; 29,432,083 in 2015; 39,469,484 in 2011; 35,397,517 in 2007; 42,018,735 in 2003; 30,280,052 in 1999; 14,293,396 in 1993; 25,430,096 in 1983; and 17,098,267 in 1979. These figures indicate that total votes cast were lowest in 1979, 1993, 2015, 2019, and 2023, while the 2003, 2007, and 2011 elections had relatively higher participation. This trend highlights a marked decline in voter engagement in the most recent elections.

Furthermore, it is notable that despite the increase in registered voters to 93,469,008 in 2023 from 84,004,084 in 2019, the number of votes cast decreased, reflecting growing electoral apathy. In fact, the votes cast in 2015 (29,432,083) and 2019 (28,614,190) were higher than in 2023 (24,900,000), despite the smaller pool of registered voters in earlier years. Looking at the broader historical context, from the 1999 general elections, which marked the start of the Fourth Republic, out of an estimated population of 108,258,350, 57,938,945 voters were registered, with 30,280,052 (52.26%) turning out for the presidential election. In 2003, despite a population increase to 129,934,910 and 60,823,022 registered voters, 42,018,735 (69.08%) participated. The 2007 elections, however, saw a significant drop in turnout, with only 35,397,517 votes cast from a population of 131,859,730 and 61,567,036 registered voters. Scholars such as Agu (2015, p.117) attribute this decline to the imposition of candidates and election irregularities, particularly by the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP).

Since 2007, voter turnout in presidential elections has declined consistently. The 2011 general elections had 39,469,484 voters (53.68%) turning out, reflecting diminished confidence in the electoral process due to concerns over the continuation of previous election trends. By 2015, voter apathy deepened, with only 43.65% participation despite 67,422,005 registered voters. The downward trajectory continued into 2019 and culminated in the 2023 election, which saw the lowest turnout of just 26.72%, signalling a profound disengagement of Nigerian citizens from the electoral process. Overall, Table 2 and the 2023 data demonstrate a clear pattern of declining voter turnout, particularly from 2007 onwards, despite a steady increase in Nigeria's population and the number of registered voters. The trend suggests that geometric population growth has not translated into increased electoral participation, indicating critical challenges in voter mobilisation, public trust in elections, and civic engagement. From the data, Nigeria's

population, the number of registered voters, and the voting-age population (VAP) have generally exhibited a steady geometric increase over the years. However, the total number of votes cast in successive presidential elections has largely declined, except for the 2003 and 2011 elections. In most cases, particularly from 2011 onwards, the total number of votes cast has been less than half of the voting-age population. This trend suggests that more individuals may register to vote for socio-economic reasons rather than active participation in electoral processes. Another plausible explanation is the potential inflation of voter registration figures by political actors, despite the introduction of biometric verification systems, similar to historical manipulations observed during population censuses. Additionally, elite tendencies to manipulate figures for political survival and consolidation may also contribute to the disparity between registered voters and actual turnout.

### Comparing Voter Turnout in the 2015, 2019, and 2023 Presidential Elections

Voter participation in Nigeria's presidential elections has exhibited a declining trend in recent cycles, despite continuous growth in the country's population and number of registered voters. In the 2015 presidential election, 29,432,083 votes were cast out of 67,422,005 registered voters, representing a national turnout of 43.65%. By 2019, registered voters had increased to 84,004,084, yet only 28,614,190 votes were cast—a decline of 817,893 votes from 2015. This corresponded to a turnout of 34.75%, or 26.87% of the voting-age population (VAP). Despite coordinated terrorist attacks on Election Day in Borno and Yobe States, turnout in the northeast exceeded the national average (EU EOM, 2019). Opposition parties alleged inflated voter figures in the north and voter suppression in the south due to violent incidents and security personnel's actions. The ruling APC, on the other hand, pointed to historical patterns of higher turnout in northern states and claimed effective measures had been taken to reduce electoral fraud in some southern areas. President Muhammadu Buhari (APC) was re-elected with 55.6% of valid votes, defeating Alhaji Atiku Abubakar (PDP), who secured 41.2%.

By 2023, registered voters had increased further to 93,469,008, yet total votes cast dropped sharply to 24,900,000, representing a turnout of only 26.7% of registered voters and 26.6% of the VAP. This pronounced decline relative to 2019, despite a larger electorate, indicates a deepening disengagement of citizens from the electoral process. The low turnout reflects a combination of factors, including widespread voter apathy, socio-economic pressures, heightened insecurity, and persistent perceptions of electoral malpractice. Compared to previous cycles, the 2023 election demonstrates a growing disconnect between voter registration and actual participation, suggesting that increases in the electorate alone are insufficient to boost meaningful democratic engagement.

**Table 3:** Voter Turnout Comparison (2015–2023)

Year	Registered Voters	Votes Cast	Voter Turnout (%)	VAP Turnout (%)
2015	67,422,005	29,432,083	43.65	32.11
2019	84,004,084	28,614,190	34.06	26.87
2023	93,469,008	24,900,000	26.64	26.63

**Source:** Compiled by the Researchers from Existing Literature

From Table 3 above, it is clear that between 2015 and 2023, Nigeria recorded a progressive decline in voter turnout despite a steady increase in the number of registered voters. Whereas registered voters grew by over 26 million (38.6%) within eight years, votes cast in Presidential elections dropped by over 4.5 million, from 29.4 million (2015) to 24.9 million (2023). Consequently, voter turnout fell from 43.65% (2015) to just 26.64% (2023), the lowest since Nigeria's return

to democracy in 1999. This pattern indicates deepening voter disengagement and widening disconnection between citizens and the political process.

**Table 4:** Registered Voters and PVC Collection for 2015, 2019 and 2023 General Elections According to Geopolitical Zones

Geopolitical Zones	No Reg. Voters			No Collected PVC			% No Voters with PVC		
	2015	2019	2023	2015	2019	2023	2015	2019	2023
South East	10,059,347	10,057,130	10,907,606	8,434,099	8,590,420	10,401,484	83.8	85.5	95.4
South-South	7,665,859	12,841,279	14,440,714	6,624,301	11,120,948	13,284,920	86.4	86.6	92.0
South West	13,731,090	16,292,212	17,958,966	9,250,041	12,814,246	15,536,213	67.4	78.7	86.5
North Central	10,648,883	13,366,070	15,363,731	8,230,685	9,472,404	14,603,621	77.3	70.9	95.1
North East	9,107,861	11,289,293	12,542,429	7,922,444	10,450,882	11,937,769	87.0	92.6	95.2
North West	17,620,436	20,158,100	22,255,562	15,999,398	18,231,193	21,445,000	90.8	90.5	96.4
Total	68,833,476	84,004,084	93,469,008	56,460,968	72,775,502	87,209,007	82.03	86.6	93.3

**Source:** Compiled by the Researchers from Existing Literature

The data show consistently high PVC collection rates across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, with a steady national increase from 82.0% in 2015 to 93.3% in 2023. This means that by 2023, nearly all registered voters possessed Permanent Voter Cards, theoretically enabling them to participate in elections. Yet, despite these impressive collection figures, actual voter turnout has declined sharply, from around 44% in 2015 to less than 30% in 2023. This gap between PVC ownership and voter participation reveals several structural and behavioural challenges in Nigeria's electoral environment. *Ἐπιπλοκή*, the data suggest a disconnect between electoral access and democratic participation. Nigeria's challenge is not voter registration but voter motivation and systemic credibility. Indicating that without restoring public trust and improving logistics, transparency, and security, high PVC collection will continue to mask low civic engagement. Electoral reforms must shift focus from merely registering voters to ensuring meaningful participation through civic education, institutional accountability, and easier, safer voting processes. In essence, Nigeria's electoral data (2015–2023) reveal a paradox: rising registration but declining participation. This pattern signals a crisis of political trust, inclusiveness, and engagement. Unless systemic issues of governance credibility, electoral logistics, and voter motivation are addressed, future elections may record even lower participation despite high registration figures.

### Electoral Integrity, Institutional Weakness, and Elite Dominance

Electoral integrity or the adherence of elections to principles of transparency, fairness and inclusiveness, is essential for building citizens' trust in democracy (Norris, 2014). Yet, in Nigeria, elections are frequently undermined by institutional weaknesses, elite interference, and manipulation by powerful interests (Onapajo, 2014). This has created what Ake (1996, p. 57) famously described as "a democracy without democrats," in which political power is often used to serve narrow self-interest rather than the collective good. Elite theory offers a useful lens for understanding this phenomenon. It posits that a small group of political and economic elites dominate power structures, often marginalising mass participation (Pareto, 1935; Mosca, 1939; Mills, 1956). In Nigeria, the political elite manipulates institutions, including INEC and security agencies, to entrench their control (Jinadu, 2019). Omotola (2010, p. 536) refers to this as "electoral authoritarianism," where elections occur regularly but rarely lead to true accountability or responsive governance. The limited autonomy of INEC, constrained by reliance on federal

funding and susceptibility to political interference, further weakens electoral credibility (Ibrahim & Ibeanu, 2009). Practices such as vote-buying, intimidation, and ballot manipulation have undermined public trust, with long-term consequences for democratic legitimacy (Obiora & Chiamogu, 2020).

### **Political Trust, Accountability and Governance**

Political trust, citizens' confidence in the fairness and responsiveness of institutions, is critical for sustaining democracy (Norris, 2011). When citizens trust that leaders and institutions act in their interest, they are more likely to participate in elections and civic activities (Hetherington, 2005). Conversely, corruption, insecurity, and ineffective governance discourage participation, often pushing citizens toward apathy or alternative, sometimes extra-legal, forms of political engagement (Dalton, 2004). In Nigeria, declining trust in electoral institutions is a key factor behind low voter turnout (Ojo, 2014; Falade, 2014; Chiamogu & Chiamogu, 2018). Afrobarometer surveys indicate that fewer than one in three Nigerians express confidence in INEC or political parties (Afrobarometer, 2022). This erosion of trust undermines political accountability and, ultimately, the process of democratic consolidation. Diamond (2008) emphasises that democracy thrives when citizens can hold leaders accountable through institutionalised mechanisms, with elections being the most critical of these mechanisms.

### **Political Inclusivity of the 2015, 2019 and 2023 Presidential and National Assembly Elections**

Nigeria's 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections were characterised by broad contestation, with multiple political parties and numerous candidates contesting for presidential, senatorial and House of Representatives seats. However, despite high numerical competitiveness, the level of substantive inclusivity, especially regarding gender, youth and persons with disabilities (PWDs), remains limited.

In 2019, 73 presidential candidates, 1,899 senatorial candidates, and 4,680 candidates for the House of Representatives contested under 91 registered political parties (European Union Election Observation Mission [EU EOM], 2019). By 2023, all 18 registered parties fielded presidential candidates. For the legislative elections, 1,101 candidates contested 109 senatorial seats, and 3,122 candidates contested 360 House of Representatives seats (International Centre for Investigative Reporting [ICIR], 2023). In total, about 15,309 candidates contested various federal and state offices, of which 91.7 per cent were men and 8.3 per cent were women (International Foundation for Electoral Systems [IFES], 2023). Of the 4,259 presidential and national-assembly candidates in 2023, only 381 ( $\approx 8.9\%$ ) were women (National Accord Newspaper, 2023). Specifically, 92 women ( $\approx 8.35\%$ ) contested for the Senate and 288 women ( $\approx 9.2\%$ ) for the House of Representatives. Only one female presidential candidate was cleared to contest among the 18 parties (ICIR, 2023). Following the elections, women's success rates remained very low: only 72 women won at the federal and state levels out of 1,553 female candidates, around 10.1 per cent (OduNews, 2023). Youth participation remains uneven. Although the 2023 register showed that 39.65 per cent of voters were aged 18–34, their representation among candidates and elected officials was significantly lower (IFES, 2023). Persons with disabilities also remain underrepresented, with only 85,362 PWDs registered to vote and minimal data on their candidacy (IFES, 2023). While 18 parties fielded candidates in 2023, internal party processes for candidate nomination remain opaque, exclusionary, and financially prohibitive, particularly for women and youth (International Republican Institute [IRI], 2023).

Despite quantitative competitiveness, the inclusivity of participation, both as candidates and officeholders, remains weak. Women continue to be marginalised, and the proportion of female

candidates in the 2023 National Assembly elections ( $\approx 9\%$ ) declined from about 12 per cent in 2019 (IRI, 2023). Youth and PWD representation is also minimal, highlighting a disconnect between Nigeria's largely youthful electorate and those occupying or contesting political office. The persistence of financial barriers, including multimillion-naira nomination fees, continues to exclude underrepresented groups. The fact that only one woman contested the presidency underscores enduring structural obstacles such as party bias, patriarchal norms, and limited institutional support.

Furthermore, the underrepresentation of women in elected offices, with only three women reportedly winning senatorial seats in 2023, weakens the diversity and responsiveness of the political system (Federation of International Women Lawyers [FIDA Nigeria], 2023). The 2023 elections demonstrated broad formal competition, but the process remains substantively exclusive. Political representation is dominated by men, older elites, and established party actors. The continued marginalisation of women, youth, PWDs, and internally displaced persons undermines democratic inclusivity and the representative character of Nigeria's electoral democracy. For genuine legitimacy and citizen trust, the electoral process must evolve toward equitable participation and representation of all social groups.

### Comparative Insights and the Nigerian Context

The decline in voter participation is not unique to Nigeria; it reflects a global trend of democratic fatigue (Dalton, 2016). However, in more mature democracies, declining turnout is often balanced by alternative forms of engagement, including civic activism, advocacy campaigns, and online political participation (Norris, 2014). In Nigeria, these alternative avenues remain limited due to poverty, illiteracy, digital exclusion, and restrictive political culture (Resnick, 2019). Thus, Nigeria presents a paradox of "procedural democracy without substantive participation", where elections are held regularly, yet they often fail to produce meaningful representation or governance accountability (Omotola, 2010; Jinadu, 2019). This reinforces the argument that democratic consolidation depends not only on regular elections but also on genuine citizen engagement and credible institutions (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Schedler, 1998). The literature clearly underscores the critical role of electoral participation in sustaining democracy. Yet, much of the research on Nigeria focuses narrowly on individual election cycles, primarily the 2015 and 2019 elections (Falade, 2014; Okolie, 2018; Jinadu, 2019). Few studies systematically examine trends over multiple cycles, including the landmark 2023 elections, the seventh consecutive civilian transition. Moreover, there is limited exploration of how citizens' trust and perceptions of elite dominance interact to influence participation over time. This study addresses these gaps by offering a comparative, theory-driven analysis of voter behaviour across the 2015, 2019 and 2023 presidential elections, linking patterns of turnout and political trust to the broader process of democratic consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is situated on two interrelated perspectives: political participation theory and Elite theory. Together, these frameworks provided conceptual lenses for understanding the persistent decline in voter turnout, weak political inclusion, and the dominance of a small political class in Nigeria's democratic process.

1. **Political Participation Theory:** offers a framework for analysing the level and forms of citizens' involvement in political processes. According to **Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995)**, participation encompasses all voluntary actions through which citizens influence the selection of political leaders and the policies they pursue. Similarly, **Milbrath and Goel (1977)**

view participation as a continuum, from the apathetic non-participant to the highly active political actor. The degree of participation, therefore, reflects the vibrancy and legitimacy of a democracy. Within this perspective, voter turnout is a key indicator of political engagement and democratic legitimacy. **Dahl (1971)** argues that a “polyarchy” thrives when citizens not only have access to political rights but also exercise them actively. Declining turnout, by contrast, signals a crisis of legitimacy and a weakening social contract between the state and its citizens. Empirical studies such as **Dalton (2016)** and **Norris (2014)** further link sustained voter apathy to declining trust in institutions, poor governance performance, and citizens’ perceptions that their votes do not influence policy outcomes. In the Nigerian context, despite formal opportunities for participation, such as universal suffrage and an expanded voter register, the consistent decline in voter turnout from 57.5% in 2007 to 26.6% in 2023 suggests a form of “participatory disillusionment.” This study adopts political participation theory to explain the paradox of high voter registration and Permanent Voter Card (PVC) collection rates but low actual electoral participation. The theory highlights how structural and perceptual barriers—ranging from insecurity and poverty to distrust of electoral institutions—reduce citizens’ motivation to vote, thereby undermining democratic consolidation.

2. **Elite Theory:** While political participation theory focuses on the behaviour of the masses, **elite theory** shifts attention to the concentration of power among a small, organised minority that dominates political and economic institutions. Classic theorists such as **Pareto (1935)**, **Mosca (1939)**, and **Mills (1956)** contend that in every society, a ruling elite inevitably emerges, controlling decision-making and preserving its dominance through manipulation of political structures and resources. In the Nigerian case, elite theory helps explain the monopolisation of the political space by a small class of wealthy and influential actors. Electoral processes are heavily shaped by elite interests through mechanisms such as the monetisation of party primaries, high nomination fees, vote-buying, and patronage networks. These factors create structural barriers that exclude women, youth, and marginalised groups from meaningful participation. As **Levitsky and Way (2010)** argue, such systems often evolve into “competitive authoritarianism,” where elections occur regularly but genuine competition is stifled. Applying elite theory to this study underscores how Nigeria’s electoral outcomes are less a reflection of popular will and more a contest among entrenched elites. Despite technological reforms (such as BVAS and IReV), elite manipulation continues to undermine public confidence in electoral institutions, contributing to the voter apathy and distrust observed in recent elections.

The integration of political participation and elite theories provides a comprehensive explanation for Nigeria’s democratic challenges. Political participation theory explains why ordinary citizens disengage; due to apathy, distrust, or disillusionment, while elite theory explains how systemic dominance by a few perpetuates exclusion and weakens institutional responsiveness. Together, they illuminate the paradox of Nigeria’s democracy: elections are regular and competitive on the surface, yet participation and inclusivity remain shallow. This theoretical synthesis guides the study’s analysis of electoral participation trends (2015–2023) and their implications for democratic consolidation.

## Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive and analytical research design. This approach was suitable for examining trends in voter turnout, political inclusivity, and institutional credibility in Nigeria’s 2015, 2019 and 2023 Presidential elections. Both quantitative (statistical data) and qualitative (documentary review) methods were used to analyse the relationship between electoral participation and democratic consolidation. The study relied entirely on secondary data obtained from credible institutional and scholarly sources such as official reports from the Independent

National Electoral Commission (INEC), European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), and relevant academic publications, policy papers, and Afrobarometer surveys. Quantitative data such as registered voters, PVC collection, and turnout rates were complemented with qualitative information on inclusivity and institutional performance.

The research focused on federal elections (presidential and national assembly) held in 2015, 2019 and 2023. These were purposively selected because they best reflect national participation and democratic performance. The scope covered Nigeria's Fourth Republic, emphasising patterns of voter behaviour and institutional integrity across three electoral cycles. Data were gathered through documentary review of official statistics, observer reports, and peer-reviewed studies. Analysis involved descriptive and comparative methods, using percentages and tables to show voter trends and participation gaps. Qualitative content was thematically analysed around key issues such as voter apathy, trust, inclusivity, and elite dominance. The interpretation was guided by political participation and elite theories.

### Discussion of Findings

The findings from the comparative analysis of the 2015, 2019 and 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria reveal a complex but consistent pattern of declining voter participation, persistent elite dominance, and weak institutional credibility, which together constrain the consolidation of democracy in the country.

1. **Declining Electoral Participation and Democratic Legitimacy:** The data show that Nigeria's voter turnout has been on a **steady decline** since 2007. From 57.49% in 2007 to 53.68% in 2011, turnout fell to 43.65% in 2015, 34.06% in 2019, and a record low of **26.64% in 2023**. Despite an increase in registered voters—from 67.4 million in 2015 to 93.5 million in 2023—the total votes cast fell from 29.4 million to 24.9 million within the same period. This pattern demonstrates a **crisis of democratic participation**, where electoral access (as reflected in PVC ownership of over 93%) does not translate into actual participation. This gap between registration and turnout reflects a profound **erosion of political trust** in Nigeria's democracy. Citizens increasingly perceive elections as inconsequential to governance outcomes, leading to mass disengagement from the process. Such disengagement undermines the **legitimacy of elected governments**, as leaders emerge from the votes of a shrinking minority. The results also reinforce Diamond's (2015) notion of a "democratic recession," in which formal democratic structures persist, but the substance of popular participation and accountability weakens.
2. **Political Trust, Institutional Credibility, and Voter Apathy:** The study's findings confirm that **low political trust** is a central factor driving declining voter turnout. Many Nigerians doubt the integrity of electoral institutions, especially the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and the impartiality of political elites who often manipulate the process for personal or partisan gain. Afrobarometer (2022) data indicating that fewer than one in three Nigerians trust INEC or political parties supports this conclusion. Even with technological reforms in the 2023 elections—such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV)—citizens' confidence did not improve significantly. Allegations of irregularities and delayed results transmission deepened scepticism. Consequently, **technological innovations without institutional transparency** have failed to reverse apathy. This aligns with elite theory, which suggests that a small political class monopolises power and manipulates institutions to maintain control (Pareto, 1935; Mosca, 1939; Mills, 1956). In Nigeria, this elite capture is manifested in vote-buying, intimidation, and administrative interference, which distort the democratic process and alienate the electorate.

3. **Inclusivity and Representation Deficit:** While the elections appear competitive in numeric terms, they remain **exclusive in substance**. The 2023 data show that out of 4,259 presidential and national assembly candidates, only **381 (≈ 8.9%)** were women. Specifically, **92 women** contested senatorial seats and **288** contested for the House of Representatives. Only **one female presidential candidate** appeared on the ballot. Post-election, women secured merely **72 elective positions** nationwide, about 10% of all contested seats. Similarly, youth participation remains marginal. Although young people (aged 18–34) constituted **39.65% of registered voters**, their representation among candidates was negligible. Persons with disabilities (PWDs) also remain underrepresented, with only **85,362 registered** and virtually no recorded elected officials (IFES, 2023). These trends suggest that Nigerian politics is dominated by older, wealthy men within entrenched party hierarchies. The prohibitive cost of nomination forms—sometimes exceeding ₦40 million—combined with opaque internal party processes, severely limits access for women and youth. Consequently, political participation remains **elitist rather than inclusive**, contradicting the constitutional and international commitments to gender equality and social inclusion (AU Protocol, 2003).
4. **Electoral Integrity and the Paradox of PVC Ownership:** Table 4 of the study shows that PVC collection rates rose steadily from **82% in 2015 to 93.3% in 2023**, indicating a high level of technical readiness among voters. However, the dramatic decline in actual voter turnout exposes what the study identifies as a **“participation paradox”**: high registration and card collection but low electoral engagement. This paradox underscores that Nigeria’s electoral challenges are **not rooted in access but in motivation and confidence**. Citizens appear willing to be counted as potential voters but unwilling to participate in an electoral system they perceive as corrupt, unsafe, and ineffectual. This aligns with Resnick and Van de Walle’s (2013) concept of “participatory fatigue,” in which repeated exposure to flawed elections fosters cynicism and withdrawal.

### Implications for Democratic Consolidation

The data and analysis collectively indicate that Nigeria’s democracy remains procedural rather than substantive. Regular elections occur, but their capacity to express the popular will, ensure accountability, or advance inclusion is weak. The steady disengagement of citizens, especially among youth and women, erodes the social contract on which democratic legitimacy rests (Osondu, 2014). This trend has several implications:

1. **Legitimacy Deficit:** Governments elected with the support of only a small fraction of eligible voters risk losing moral and political legitimacy.
2. **Elite Entrenchment:** Persistent dominance of political elites undermines leadership renewal and limits the infusion of new ideas and actors into the political system.
3. **Erosion of Accountability:** As voter participation declines, leaders become less responsive to citizens, deepening corruption and governance failures.
4. **Democratic Fatigue:** The repetitive cycle of flawed elections and unfulfilled promises reinforces apathy and cynicism, threatening the long-term viability of democracy.

### Comparative and Theoretical Context

While global democracies also experience declining voter turnout (Dalton, 2016; Norris, 2014), the Nigerian case is aggravated by structural and contextual factors: widespread poverty, insecurity, weak institutions, and a rent-seeking political culture. Unlike mature democracies, where lower turnout is offset by alternative forms of civic engagement, in Nigeria, political participation outside elections remains limited due to socio-economic constraints and repressive political environments.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings corroborate both political participation theory (Verba et al., 1995; Norris, 2014) and elite theory (Pareto, 1935; Mosca, 1939). Electoral participation in Nigeria is shaped less by rational civic engagement and more by elite-controlled structures that determine access, competition, and outcomes. Thus, the consolidation of democracy requires not just regular elections but a transformation of the underlying political culture to empower citizens and reduce elite capture. The study's findings demonstrate that Nigeria's democratic project is at a critical juncture. The steady decline in voter turnout, the persistent exclusion of women and youth, and the erosion of trust in electoral institutions collectively point to democratic fragility. Electoral reforms, civic education, and institutional accountability are urgently needed to reverse this trajectory. Without deliberate efforts to rebuild citizens' trust, strengthen electoral integrity, and promote inclusion, Nigeria's democracy risks further degeneration into what scholars describe as "electoral authoritarianism"—a system where elections are regular but democracy is hollow.

## Conclusion

The democratisation project concerns primarily the guaranteeing and enjoyment of civil and political rights by citizens. Democracies make these rights possible through citizen participation in elections and governance (Mahmud, 2015). Robust voter turnout and civic participation are fundamental to a healthy democracy. Voter turnout is one measure of citizen participation in politics expressed as the percentage of voters who cast a vote at an election. As low turnout is usually attributed to political disengagement and the belief that voting for one candidate/party or another will do much to alter public policy, voter turnout impacts the electoral process and its outcome. The history of voter turnout in Nigerian elections over the years reflects a significant dwindling of citizens' participation. At the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999, its turnout was appreciable at 52.26% with prospects of increment as shown in 2003 at 69.08% but greatly declined in 2007 following militarised tendencies and flagrant abuse of the process by politicians. Overall, the electioneering processes of Nigeria over the years have been characterised by several undemocratic tendencies ranging from malfeasance, corruption, unmitigated violence, intimidation of both opponents and potential voters, state interference, and lack of ideological conviction of the ruling class, which necessitate apathy (Fagunwa, 2018). There is a low level of political participation in Nigeria. Many Nigerians are not committed to the electoral process and other political engagements. It is then clear that the decline in voter turnout is nothing but a reflection of the failing authenticity of democracy in Nigeria. Those saddled with political power are persistently destroying the system of majority rule by weakening the institutions of checks and balances, suppressing opposition and undermining the rule of law. They have captured the Nigerian state and are using the paraphernalia of state forces against the people. Democracy is truly in danger in Nigeria because the political leadership has risen against the principles of democracy in their bids to sustain their rulership and consolidate power. The concern was showing how this interplay, grounded as it is in a presidential environment, with electoral politics and process supported by weak institutions, was hastening the collapse of Nigeria's democracy.

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