

Addressing the Possible Barriers to Youth Participation in the Nigerian General Elections of 2023 by Terhemem Agabo

Introduction:

Nigeria goes to the polls between February and March 2023. Ahead of the coming elections, the country's youth have shown great interest in participating in the process that will determine the country's next leaders. Apart from openly campaigning for various political candidates offline and online, young people have registered to vote in the elections (voter registration is required in Nigeria). According to the records presented by the country's Electoral Umpire -the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)- youth aged between 18 and 34 constitute 39.3 % of eligible voters in the 2023 elections. This is the largest of five age groups captured in the voter register. Despite heightened interests in the coming general elections, certain external circumstances may limit youth participation in the elections.

Vote Buying

Vote buying is a thing in Nigeria, and it undermines the integrity of electoral outcomes. The Independent National Electoral Commission has set a fine of 500,000 Naira to be paid by offenders. The year 2023 has witnessed increased economic difficulty characterized by high inflation which has led to an increase in the cost of food and other amenities. With elections around the corner, young people will be approached by vote buyers posing for various party candidates, all seeking a chance to clinch the highest votes. For the youth, it will be a choice between short term survival and exercising faith in their preferred candidate.

Voter Apathy

Following historical data from the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance database, the percentage of registered voters who turn up for elections has declined since the 2003 elections. For instance, voter turnout for Nigeria's presidential elections was at 69.08%, 57.49%, 53.68%, 43.65%, 34.75% in the respective years of [2003](#), [2007](#), [2011](#), [2015](#), and [2019](#)¹. Considering the steady decline in voter turnout, it is on prediction that this trend might

¹ Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance database:
<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/231/40>

be replicated at the polls this coming Elections. Possible causes of a likely low youth voter turnout in the coming elections are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Distance and Accessibility to Polling Units

In Nigeria, [poorly accessible polling units affect voter turnout²](#). Distance to polling units has a similar effect. Hence, the decision of the Federal Government to close down tertiary institutions during the coming elections is commendable. This closure allows [3.8 million students in the eligible voter population³](#) to travel home to cast their votes. On the other hand, students in higher secondary schools who are aged 18 and above and who live on school property may not be able to vote unless their assigned polling units are in close proximity to their schools.

Security

Elections in Nigeria are often accompanied by violence ensuing in deaths. For instance, [the 2019 general elections witnessed 126 deaths, while the prior general elections of 2015 recorded 100 deaths⁴](#). Nigeria's history of electoral violence is a thing of concern to her citizens and could prevent eligible voters from turning up at the polls. It's also important to note that the current security challenges and unrest across the country is another worrisome factor that might deter or discourage young people may be discouraged from showing up at the polls.

Conclusion

The decision to vote or not to vote rests chiefly with the Nigerian youth. However, external circumstances may influence this decision. These external circumstances can be improved, thereby allowing massive youth participation in the coming elections. For instance, security agencies will do well to put violence in check during the elections. To supplement the efforts of security agencies, the electorate should be discouraged from perpetuating violent acts during the polls. In addition, sensitization against vote buying will go a long way to encourage young people to cast their votes lawfully.

²Independent National Electoral Commission (2021). The state of Voter Access to Polling Units. Retrieved from https://inecnigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-State-of-Voter-Access-to-PUs-in-Nigeria_mini.pdf

³ Henry Tyohemba (3rd February 2023) Just In: Federal Government Orders Closure of Varsities for Three Weeks Over Elections. Published in the Leadership Newspaper retrieved from <https://leadership.ng/just-in-federal-govt-orders-closure-of-varsities-for-3-weeks-over-elections/>

⁴ Kunle Adebajo (27th June, 2022) Nigeria's Deadly History of Electoral Violence in Five Charts published in Humangle. retrieved from <https://humanglemedia.com/nigerias-deadly-history-of-electoral-violence-in-five-charts/>

