



A-Z about elections in your country and the world.

A Closer Look at Low Voter Turnout in Nigeria

September 2020
Review

Introduction

30.2
Million

Total number of voters
turn out in 1999

Since Nigeria's first election in 1999, voter participation and turnout has declined significantly from 30.2 million in 1999 to 28.6 million in 2019. This depletion in voting numbers is occurring despite an ever growing population which has doubled in the last two decades, and more citizens coming of voting age every election cycle - 25 million voters have been added to the voting population since 1999.

28.6
Million

Total number of voters
turn out in 2019

While the general data shows a decline, state by state analysis of voter turnout in Nigeria shows disparities in the voting culture with the North- Western part of the country having the highest numbers and the Southeast recording significantly low turnout during the 2019 elections. Data from the Premium Times also shows that Lagos, Nigeria's most populous city and the commercial capital of the country had the lowest voter turnout in the last two general elections- below 20%. Some studies have posited that separatists threats calling for election boycotts in the south eastern region of the country have pulled people further away from the polling booths.

A Closer Look at the Numbers

General elections in Nigeria usually constitute presidential elections, parliamentary elections, Gubernatorial elections and local government elections. Data from IDEA international shows that despite an increase in the number of registered voters, voter turnout has declined significantly across election cycles since 1999.

Year	Turnout for Presidential Elections (%)	Turnout for Parliamentary Elections (%)
2019	34.75%	32.14 %
2015	43.65%	43.65 %
2011	53.68%	28.66 %
2007	57.49% (estimated)	56.84 % (estimated)
2003	69.08%	49.32 %
1999	52.26%	40.69 %

Voter Turnout in Presidential and Parliamentary Elections since Nigeria became a democracy

Source: IDEA International. IFES

2019 elections

79%

were likely to vote

35%

turned out to vote



4000

up to 4000 people have died due to electoral violence between 2006 and 2015 alone

57%

of Nigerians believe that no matter who wins an election, things do not change very much for people in Nigeria

Why Are Nigerians Not Voting?

Voter apathy is at the heart of low voter turnout in Nigeria. This problem which is a subset of a larger issue - political apathy - is influenced by factors like a complete lack of trust in the government and the electoral system, a legacy of violence in Nigerian elections and poor election administration. An IFES poll of 2019 showed that up to 79% of Nigerians were likely to vote in the 2019 elections, but only 35% turned out to vote. So, why are Nigerians not voting?

Nigerian Elections are High Risk

When participation in a political process can easily turn into an ordeal, then involuntary boycotts should be expected. For many Nigerians who have the will to vote, there is the fear of what could go wrong when they go to the polling booths. A review of the number of deaths due to electoral violence in Nigeria shows that between 2006 and 2015 alone, up to 4000 people have died due to electoral violence. Heavy military and police presence which is meant to deter violence has not served its purpose. "Election security influences public trust in elections and voter turnout. When people feel there isn't security or sufficient security it discourages them.." Says Murtala Abdullahi, a security expert and journalist with HumAngle.

Poor Election Administration/Infrastructure:

The 2019 elections were postponed on the morning of the polls. This is after so many Nigerians had travelled to the polling units where they had registered to vote. The immobility of voter cards is another issue that has remained. One can only vote in the state where they registered, and effecting a transfer takes a lot of time and administrative process. This problem has disenfranchised many eligible voters alongside the poor state of Nigerian roads that makes travelling over long distances, not so appealing. The process of acquiring a voters card can also be very frustrating, long waiting times and technical issues make the process slow and difficult. To abate this problem, the electoral commission recently announced it will commence voter registration in 2021, early enough to prevent large and unending crowds when the elections draw closer in 2023.

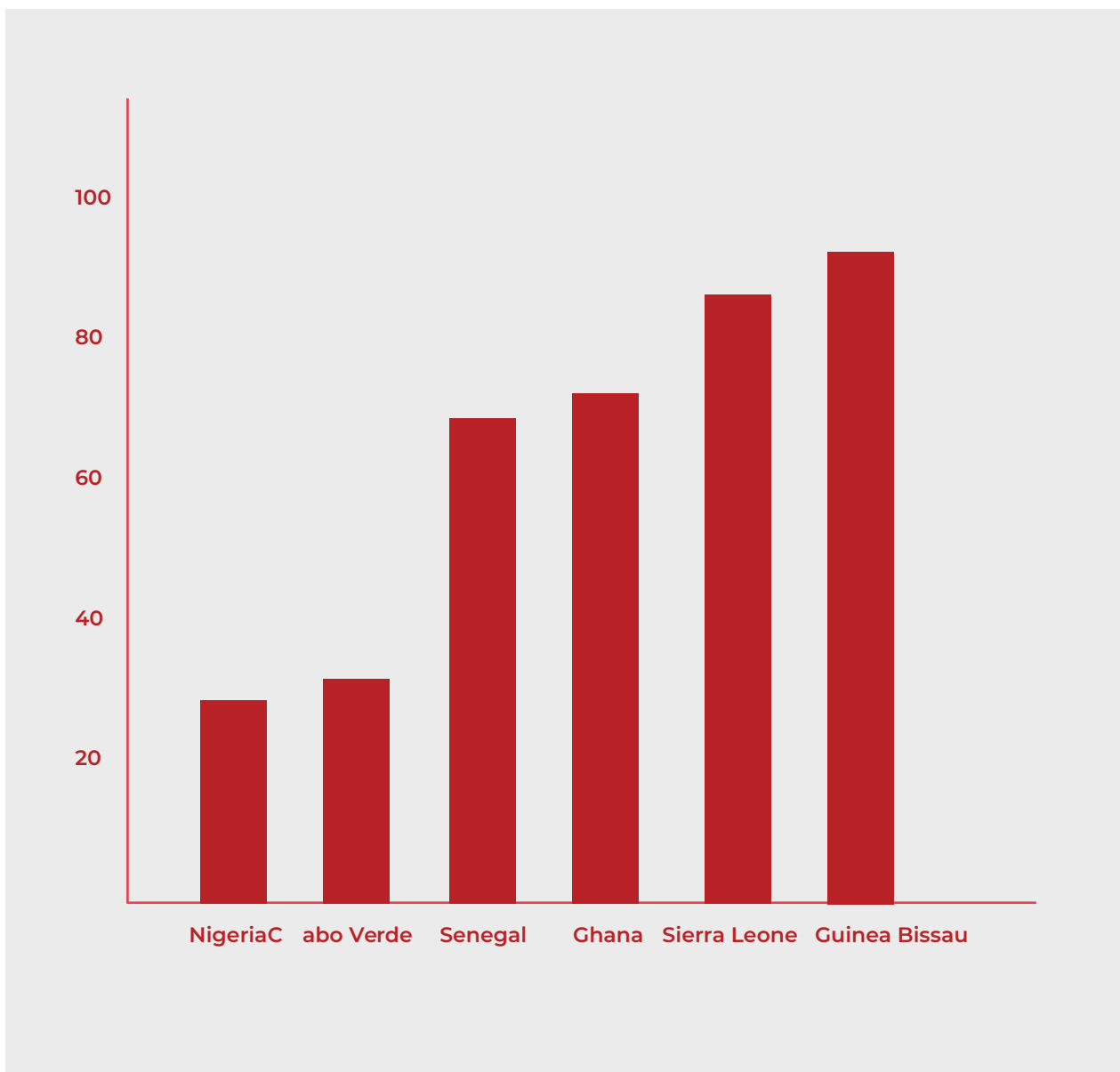
Nigerians Do Not Trust Government

Maybe people would take all the risks and go through all the hassle if they were sure their votes would count or that any change would come at all. A 2019 Pew Research Polls shows that 57% of Nigerians believe that no matter who wins an election, things do not change very much for people in Nigeria. This bridge in trust affects how people interact with the electoral process which raises questions about the legitimacy of the process. “The problem is that it is difficult for a system to maintain its legitimacy if only one in three citizens believe in it. This is the position Nigerian democracy now finds itself in” says Remi Adekoya, a political commentator.



The West African Story

Though it has the highest voter population in the region, Nigeria has the lowest voter turnout in elections across the West African region based on data from the most recent elections in the region. Guinea Bissau and Sierra Leone have the highest turnout - 89.3% and 84.2% respectively while Cabo Verde and Nigeria rank lowest at 35.5% and 34.85. Ghana scores 68.6% while Senegal has 66.2%.



Bottomline

Voter turnout is an important indicator of the vibrancy of any democracy. The numbers in Nigeria show that this key indicator is absent and the situation has exacerbated with time. The more people trust government institutions the more likely they are to participate in the political process. Many young Nigerians believe their PVCs are just a means of identification, not a means of selecting their leaders, hence their reluctance to participate. A lot of studies have been conducted, trying to understand the problem and recommend solutions. The Nigerian government has a very important task of testing out these recommendations and looking carefully at the numbers and their impact on the state of democracy in Nigeria. So, the process of restoring the trust of people towards its institutions can begin. An important step towards achieving this is transparency and accountability and the active engagement of citizens in decision making processes.