The role of stakeholders in promoting voter participation in elections in Nigeria

by

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Abstract
This article is a study of the role of election stakeholders in bringing about the current voter apathy in Nigeria, and what they can do to reverse the situation and promote voter participation in the country. Voter apathy is a relatively recent phenomenon in the country, and can be traced to a series of elections in the country that were adjudged to have fallen short of accepted standards. These tainted elections have also coincided with a long period in the country’s history when even democratic governments have shown high levels of irresponsibility and unresponsiveness, manifesting in permissive corruption, debilitating poverty and lack of real development in the country. This study utilizes the participant-observation, and the historical-descriptive methods to show that the phenomenon of voter apathy in Nigeria is the fallout of the actions and inactions of specific election stakeholders that have worked against free and fair elections in the country, as well as the failure of governments after every election to bring about good governance in the country. This situation has created the impression among voters, that their votes neither count nor does it matter whichever government is in place. This has then led to withdrawal of voters from the election process in the country, hence, voter apathy. The study discusses the role of every election stakeholder in creating this problem and goes on to argue that it is these roles that must be satisfactorily addressed by all election stakeholders in order to promote voter participation in all future elections in Nigeria.

Key words: Elections, voter participation, voter apathy, election stakeholders, electorate.
Introduction

The topic of Voter Apathy in Nigeria is a complex one. Elections in Nigeria for some time now, have evidently been marked by voter apathy. This is despite the huge figures often recorded as votes at the end of these elections. In fact, going by official statistics, it can even be argued that there is nothing like voter apathy in Nigeria. Voter participation is measured by the number of votes cast in an election as against the total number of registered voters. The average turnout at elections since Nigeria’s Fourth Republic is around 69% (Ojameruaye, 2011), and this surpasses the African average of around 60% of registered voters (Young, 2003) after most elections. The official statistics is, however, different from the actual events on the ground at these elections. On Election Day, watchers have usually observed that the numbers of people who come out to vote have generally been small (Obeakembe, 2011).

This observation has been corroborated by local and international election observers in various elections. Yet, each time results of the elections are released, it transforms to very large figures (Mole, 2003). In fact, this discrepancy was dramatized in the 2012 gubernatorial elections in Bayelsa state. While speaking after casting his vote, President Goodluck Jonathan pointed out that voter turnout was generally poor. But only a few hours later, a whopping figure of 417,500 votes out of a total of 467,004 votes cast, was announced as the figures for the winner. This figure translates to 72% voter turnout (Aziken et al, 2012). Voter apathy as used in this paper then refers to the trend of actual voting in elections in Nigeria over the years, a trend that continues to show declining number of real votes cast in succeeding elections in the country. It does not, thus, refer to the official figures of votes cast in elections in Nigeria, which in the main, usually show high voting figures.

This trend of declining voting figures is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the early years of elections in the country, there
was enthusiasm among Nigerians to participate. In fact, all through the elections in the years preceding independence, this enthusiasm actually led Nigerians to agitate for the right of participation, both as candidates and as voters. This ultimately culminated in the granting of universal suffrage in the country. Over the years, however, this overwhelming enthusiasm started dissipating, until at present, we have the general apathy that now characterizes the country’s elections.

**Background to voter apathy in Nigeria**

Voter turnout measurements are the most succinct denominator of participation in a democracy. Among others, it mirrors constituent satisfaction and general democratic effectiveness (Young, 2003). The vote is rightly to be seen as a means to an end. When people come out to vote, it is so that such voting will enable them to achieve a desired purpose. The history of elections in Nigeria shows clearly that the electorate has never participated in elections at any time just for the sake of it, but rather as a means to an end.

In the colonial times, elections were seen as the means to throw up leaders that would lead the people to independence and freedom. For as long as our nationalist leaders continued to challenge the colonial masters and demand for independence from Britain, elections were popular in the country and voters participated actively.

After colonization, elections were seen as the means to affirm (and even produce more) leaders that would bring about welfare and development in the country. Voter participation remained high throughout this time. The phenomenon of voter apathy in Nigeria can be appropriately traced to some events that took place in the First and the Second Republics, which clearly gave the impression that votes did not count and that elections in Nigeria could be subverted. After this time, other events took place that enabled the taking root of corruption as a feature of government in the country, and which has ensured that the average
Nigerian does not really benefit from government. It was all these that combined to impress it upon the Nigerian voter that it was not important, in fact, not necessary to vote. The result was widespread voter apathy in the country.

In the long years of military rule, when the nation actually degenerated in almost all terms, elections (and the agitations for and participation in them) became for the purpose of bringing up leaders who would put the nation on its feet once again and then move the country forward. It is in this wise that we can explain the enthusiasm that followed every election conducted to ease out the military. In the years following 1999, the story has not been exactly the same. In fact, voter participation has progressively declined since that year, and at present, is at its lowest level. If today there is voter apathy, then we can most correctly locate the causes within this history as sketched above. It has already been pointed out that the vote of the individual is actually a means to an end. If this were so, then the attainment of the desired end, which is the emergence of the most popular candidate as winner in a particular election, will logically ginger the people to vote in subsequent elections.

This conforms to Simon (Self, 1977) who before he proposed the rational-comprehensive model of decision-making, argued that traditional decision-making followed a ‘means-ends’ format. In this traditional decision-making model, means were chosen only because they will lead to an acceptable end. In other words, the end justifies the means. Seen this way, it means that the individual’s decision to vote is actually because he believes that his vote will bring about an acceptable outcome. This outcome is a popular government. Thus, the individual voter expects that his vote will help to produce a winner who is the most popular in the elections. This has not been the case however, over the years, in the country. Beginning from the later years of the First Republic, elections in Nigeria were blatantly rigged. In the Second Republic, the 1983 elections was also rigged massively (Diamond, 1988).
In the ill-fated Third Republic, the apparent manipulations of the transition programme by the Babangida regime (Diamond et al., 1997) disillusioned the Nigerian voting public. The decision of the election management body at the time to introduce the open-ballot system of voting at elections, however, revived interest among voters, culminating in the 1993 presidential elections, until the presidential elections was annulled by the government. The travesties called elections during the Abacha regime further disillusioned the Nigerian electorate until the military finally decided to hand over power in 1999. After the 1999 elections, other elections have been less than free and fair, and this has finally crystallized voter apathy in the country. The feeling then became widespread that notwithstanding the choice of the electorate, the powers that be would still declare whoever they wanted as winner, including in some situations when these preferred people were not even contestants at the elections (Amuwo, 2009).

If elections that are not free and fair have crystallized voter apathy in Nigeria, then non-performance in office by governments in the country has consolidated the phenomenon. This is also in conformity with Simon’s means-ends argument (Self, 1977). At the individual level, the individual’s vote is the means while the resulting government is the end of elections. At the aggregate level, the government that results from an election is the means to an end which is good governance. Ever since the First Republic, this end has increasingly dwindled. The mediocre performance of the Second Republic fell to even lower levels during military rule. In the Fourth Republic, even with stupendous revenues from oil, the quality of governance in Nigeria has continued to plummet. This has now created the widespread impression in the country that no matter the government that emerges from an election, performance in office will remain low. This has then reinforced the feeling of futility about elections in the country among voters, that irrespective of whatever regime is in place, the plight of the

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ordinary people will not improve, and so, there is no need to "waste time" voting for any of the options on offer.

The result of all these has been the widespread apathy among potential voters in the country. Interestingly, just as non-performance in government has crystallized voter apathy in the country, voter apathy itself has further reinforced bad governance in Nigeria. When the people lose interest in who governs them and then do not vote at elections as a result, bad leaders emerge, who do not have interest in the people's welfare. Ultimately, a vicious cycle develops whereby bad governance leads to voter apathy which also leads to bad governance, and so on.

The role of election stakeholders in bringing about voter apathy in Nigeria

Electoral studies generally show that the variables that determine voter turnout operate at 3 levels; namely: national, district, and individual levels (Young, 2003). National level determinants of voter turnout include the electoral system (whether it is simple majority or proportionality systems); voting rules (whether voting on election day is voluntary or compulsory, and the penalties); registration procedures (whether it is cumbersome or simple); and whether the number of parties and legislative chambers are many or few (Powell, 1982; Jackman, 1987; Lijphart, 1997). District level determinants include the competitiveness of elections- the more competitive the higher the turnout (Blais, 2000). Individual level determinants include party affiliation and interest, and demographic factors such as age, education and wealth (Wolfinger and Rosenthal, 1978; Powell, 1986).

While all the above factors work together to determine the decision to vote in an election, the decision to continue voting in subsequent elections rests on a number of factors; namely: whether the vote mattered in producing the winner in a previous election; whether the winner went on to satisfy the expectations of the people; and if not, whether there are possibilities of a positive
change in the future. This paper holds that election stakeholders in Nigeria by virtue of the above, are important in the decision to vote or not to vote by the Nigerian voter. How the various stakeholders in the election process in Nigeria perform the roles expected of them in an election has usually affected subsequent voters’ attitudes and behaviours in the country. Once the assessment is negative, subsequent elections will witness voter withdrawal (Bratton 2005), as has been the case in the country. The stakeholders include the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the voting public (electorate), political parties, the police and other security agencies, the press, civil society organizations, the government, and the International community.

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)
The electoral umpire in Nigeria has gone by various names over the years: in the First Republic as Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN) and later Federal Electoral Commission (FEC). In the Second Republic, the election management body was known as the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO). Afterwards, under the military, the body was known variously as National Electoral Commission (NEC), and as National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON). Presently, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is the umpire superintending over elections in the country. INEC has the responsibility for such duties as constituency delimitation, voters’ registration, registration of political parties, the conduct of elections and declaration of election results (Omotola, 2010: 540). The performance of the electoral commissions in the country has not been satisfactory in the long period since independence. A clear pointer to this is that most elections in this country have ended up being bitterly disputed. Apart from transition elections, virtually all consolidation elections in the country (Onuoha, 2003) have ended in disputes, with the losers claiming to have lost unfairly. Most times, the
electedate has also come out with the feeling that their votes were subverted. The result has been that the winners subsequently lacked legitimacy.

The fact that the laws allow the sitting government the power to appoint the officers of the election management bodies has compounded the feeling that election results will always be manipulated, thereby creating a sense of helplessness in voters. The important thing here is that the people at large have usually come out with the perception of a not-trustworthy, non-performing electoral umpire. The implication of this situation for voter participation has not been salutary. Once an election is not generally acceptable, subsequent elections will start witnessing voter withdrawal on the basis that voters will see their efforts as futile and to no effect and therefore not necessary, as they may believe that whatever they do will ultimately come to naught and fake results will still be declared. The logic is that once voters believe that election results do not tally with actual voting, they will find it unnecessary to vote. Voter disillusionment will take root and apathy then sets in.

It was the widespread disillusionment with the Post-independence elections in 1963-64 and with the Second Republic elections in 1983 that encouraged the military to topple those Republics (Anifowose, 2006). In the present Republic, the trend of non-credible elections has continued: The resulting disillusionment has not led to military intervention, perhaps due to some reasons outside the scope of this paper, but even the longevity of the Fourth Republic has shown clearly, a pattern of voter apathy that has become consequent upon the manner of conduct of elections in the country. After the 2003 elections, there were loud complaints of manipulation of the results (Jinadu, 2010). The disillusionment resulting from that election led to subsequent withdrawal by many voters from the processes of the 2007 elections. This then largely enabled the massive manipulation of the 2007 elections, which
even the winner at that election admitted that its conduct was flawed (Alapiki, 2011).

In fact, only the eventual appointment of Prof. Attahiru Jega, a man with a very high repute for integrity, ultimately saved the country’s elections from the extreme level of withdrawal that could have possibly followed the widespread disillusionment with the 2007 elections. Prof. Jega’s INEC went on to conduct the 2011 general elections in the country, which conduct has been praised both locally and internationally. INEC went even further in its conduct of the 2015 elections, in which the incumbent party lost power in the country. The performance of Jega’s INEC did much to encourage voter participation in the country, and it is obvious that if the electoral body continues on this path, voter apathy will ultimately be reduced.

Political parties

Nigeria has seen a whole lot of political parties in its electoral history. Each dispensation has usually thrown up its own parties, which have invariably disappeared with the dispensation. In the Fourth Republic, the country has seen more than sixty political parties. These parties have continued to resemble the parties of old, in almost every other term except the names they now bear (Agbaje and Adejumobi, 2006). The present parties also resemble each other in almost every feature. It is this similarity among political parties that has made them indistinguishable to the electorate and has then served to demoralize the people from getting actively involved in the competition of the parties for votes. Ordinarily, political parties are supposed to be at the centre of any democratic arrangement (Mair, 2005). In fact, it has been argued that “the condition of the parties is the best possible evidence of the nature of any regime” (Schattacneider, 1942: 1). In Nigeria, virtually all the parties lack clear-cut manifestoes or ideologies and as such, there is hardly any specific reason endearing any particular party to the people. Almost all the parties lack cohesion.
and commitment among the membership. Party supremacy is, therefore, generally lacking, and party discipline and loyalty are in short supply.

The structures of the parties are also deficient in internal democratic practice. Most times, party officials, government appointees, and even party candidates are routinely imposed on the parties by godfathers or incumbents of high office. The implication of this state of affairs for voter participation in Nigeria is that the members of political parties (who are really the potential voters) are alienated even before the general elections. If their party candidates are not their choices, then why will they vote? This trend has existed in Nigeria over the years, but in the Fourth Republic, the trend became suffocating. Just a few people have hijacked the various parties and only one party/or a few parties dominated the political space. This situation changed somewhat in 2015, with the formation of the All Progressives Congress (APC). The new party was able to mobilize enough resources for the 2015 general elections to make it a vibrant opposition party. The viability of the APC as an alternative platform evidently helped to spur many people to participate in the 2015 elections.

Even at that, most of the parties continue to lack capacity. They simply do not have, and cannot mobilize the resources to operate as full-fledged political parties. This is so obvious at times of elections, when most parties cannot even afford to station their agents at the various polling centres. Because of this, many parties cannot even prevent any attempt to rig elections at these centres. Worse, these parties unwittingly even become tools of rigging by the big or rich parties; who oftentimes cloth their own members as agents of the absentee parties, who then collaborate in every unwholesome practices at the polling or collating centres in their false guise, including vote buying and vote allocation, mop-up or padding.

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The Police and other Security Agencies

The Police and other security agencies project two dominant images upon the public - as providers of order and security, and, as wielders of the instruments of violence. In the civilized countries of the world, one of these two views becomes prominent at any point depending on the situation or circumstance at hand. Unfortunately in Nigeria, the Police and other security agencies are almost exclusively known for their possession and indiscriminate use of the weapons of violence. These weapons are most often directed against the people. At no time is this situation prevalent as during elections. It is now the practice for the police to provide security for powerful politicians and the 'anointed' candidates at elections, who then proceed to terrorize the electorate, especially in the areas where these politicians lack support. On election days, the police now routinely provide cover for election riggers and stand aside while all manners of electoral malpractice are taking place. Many of the electorate have eventually ended up in police cells for 'reporting' ballot box stuffers or snatchers to the on-looking police, while the criminals have gone away scot-free.

Some other intending voters have either died or sustained injuries at the hands of thugs who usually have a field day at our polling stations even with police and other security personnel present and doing nothing except seemingly to protect the criminals. Even the present trend of militarizing elections in Nigeria and saturating election areas with police and military personnel on election days, ostensibly to ensure free and fair elections, has mostly had the opposite effect. What these security personnel now do is to stand at check points, especially in opposition areas, to harass voters in the guise of security checks, and ultimately drive them home so that they do not cast their votes. These security personnel also serve to disarm opposition activists so that they cannot confront the thugs of favoured parties who then have a field day in rigging the elections. It is now even the case, as

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witnessed by this writer at the 2007 elections in Igbo-Eze South Local Government Area of Enugu state, that fake results of elections in some places where they are likely to be disputed, are actually carried to police stations for announcement. The situation was however, different in 2015 as the management of the election in that year was much more transparent.

The Press

The media is an important stakeholder in elections in Nigeria. The way the press reports elections and aspects of it can indeed make or mar the process. For instance, the way the press reports election violence in a place can discourage voters from going out to vote on Election Day. In the same manner, the press can deliberately give the impression that a party will win an election even when that party is not on ground. The press can also deliberately give the impression of a tight race (as happened in 2015) thereby heightening tensions. The problem is that when this happens, subsequent manipulations of the election can be hinged on the press reports. In the same vein, the Nigerian press obviously deliberately screened off every pointer to the discrepancies in the election results returned in 2011 from the Southeast and the South-south, as well as the fact of official involvement in attempts to manipulate the 2011 election results in the North being part of the reason for the post-election violence in that region (Oyelere et al, 2011). In fact, it has become the practice of the Nigerian press to screen off those things that the electorate needs to know in an election such as the character and antecedents of candidates in an election. Instead, they deliberately highlight those things that do not matter or are unimportant, such as claims that certain candidates (who have records of not being law-abiding that are suppressed by the Press) are ‘God-fearing.’ All these and similar actions of the press serve the interest of those who do not stand for free and fair elections, and discourages the people and enables the
emergence of bad leaders, which subsequently leads to increased voter apathy.

Civil Society Organizations

Ordinarily, civil society organizations are supposed to be the alternative voice of society, a sort of counter elite to those in government. In fact, the period of military rule saw them attain their heights as they led the struggle for the return to democratic rule in the country. In those days, it was possible for these organizations to ask the people out for purposes of democratic struggle and they will oblige. Since the end of that struggle, so much has changed. First, the civil society leaders showed signs of fatigue at the beginning of civil rule and actually became complacent even as there was every indication that it was not yet ‘Uhuru’ in the country. Attempts to revive civil society activism after this period was not so successful as Nigerians soon came to realize that many civil society activists themselves were no different from the politicians as they also engage in corruption, nepotism and selfishness, and those of them who ended up in government have not performed any better.

More recently, civil society activism has even become largely a tool to seek the attention of government for the purposes of securing political appointment. Many of these activists are now known to say one thing in the day and do another thing in the night, which is why most people do not take them serious any longer, including election riggers who do not reckon with the activists nowadays while planning and executing their nefarious activities. Because of all these, there is now a ‘disconnect’ between the civil society organizations and the people, such that they can hardly play their expected roles of mobilizing the people especially during elections.

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The Government

The whole purpose of elections is to put in place a government. Such governments are supposed to rule with the mandate of the people, which will then be periodically renewed if they performed well, or another government will be elected if they did not perform well. If things worked out this way, then elections will be popular affairs and voter participation will be high and enthusiastic. This is typical of the developed countries where the fate of governments is often tied with the level of public support, and many such governments have been known to collapse even before the end of their tenure, simply on account of losing confidence votes in parliament or losing in a referendum. In recent times in Nigeria, this has hardly been the situation as governments have regularly been put in place without the actual mandate of the people and subsequently, the people have had no say in whether such governments are retained or changed. Moreover, these governments, perhaps because they knew that the people have no say, have not provided for the people nor have they served the people’s interest, while in office. In reaction, the people, seeing the uselessness of their participation, have refrained from elections, which they saw as elite rituals that do not really change anything. The result was the vicious cycle in which voter apathy, resulting from the disillusionment from bad governance, has led to more bad leadership and vice versa.

The International Community

This is another stakeholder in elections in Nigeria. To start with, foreign countries and multilateral agencies help to fund the processes involved in the elections and they equally offer other supports towards achieving free and fair elections. Then, international observers regularly monitor the elections to ensure that these are free and fair. As a result of the prominence usually given to the role of the international community in Nigerian elections, a whole lot of attention is focused on them at such times.

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More often than not, their activities have ended up working in favour of voter apathy in the country. In the run-up to elections, these foreign bodies have often talked tough, even threatening that they will not accept anything short of a free and fair election. In fact, many opposition parties and other activists have often mobilized reluctant voters on the basis that even the international community, especially the powerful countries and agencies, will not condone a rigged election.

These elections have largely ended up rigged, most times in the very presence of foreign observers, and the international community has ultimately ended up doing nothing. In fact, the penchant of the international community to raise hopes that they will prevent election rigging and then do nothing when these elections are finally rigged, has brought further disillusionment on the part of voters, thereby creating more voter apathy in the country. Related to this is the tendency of many of these international bodies to define their stance on elections in Nigeria on the basis of their largely economic interests. It has become obvious that in rendering all the election support to Nigeria, there are other, not so altruistic, objectives which they hope to gain or achieve and these are not very often in the best interests of the country.

**The Electorate/Voting Public**

From the forgoing, it has become evident that the Nigerian voting public is the victim of bombardments from different quarters, each ultimately leading to public apathy towards elections and voting in the country. But it will not be correct to present the voting public just as victim in the sorry tale of Nigeria’s elections. The voting public is also at many times a perpetrator or willing tool in the activities that have made most Nigerians disillusioned and apathetic with regard to elections in the country. Thus, the people may be the victims of thuggery, but it is also true that these thugs are usually drawn from amongst them. The parties may have
become undemocratic, but it is the ordinary members that serve as foot soldiers and are beneficiaries in the factional fights and other unwholesome practices of the parties. Even as the people constantly accept monies from politicians and vote for the wrong candidates, they cannot claim that they do not know that the result of such elections will not be what they originally desired, or that the wrong candidates, when they win, will not produce good governance.

Even the claim that the people can hardly do anything to reverse the result of a particular rigged election, or even the situation in the country generally cannot hold. When the people acquiesce with election manipulators or refuse to stand up for free and fair elections, the outcome is logically the situation that existed for long in the country, whereby elections became routines that changed nothing, and elections in the country more or less became warfare and bazaar.

**What the various stakeholders must do to promote voter participation in Nigeria’s elections**

In the past, most stakeholders failed in their roles in elections in the country. It is important to note this, because a correct location of the causes of the country’s voting and election woes will enable viable and sustainable recommendations for a way forward. In this regard, it is important to recall the earlier contention that elections were popular when it was believed to be the avenue for producing leaders that will achieve popular goals. In the same vein, it has been observed that the purpose of elections is to put governments in place, and that governments are supposed to achieve the goals which the people desire. The cumulative meaning of all these for elections in the country is that the first thing to do to bring about high voter participation is for leadership and government to return to their original meaning and purpose. Until leadership and government become ‘for the people’, the voting public may not see reason why they have to ‘waste’ their
time going out to vote. Once leadership and government are driven by the interest of the people, voting will begin to make meaning once again to the people and voter participation will become high.

The role of the police and other security agencies in our elections cannot be overemphasized. In trying to cast their votes, the people certainly do not plan that they will come to any physical harm. The Police Force must, therefore, organize to ensure the security of voters at elections as well as the safety of their votes and voting materials. The absence of security personnel has greatly discouraged voter participation in elections, yet, their presence should not in any way become a scare to voters on Election Day. While it is important that as many policemen as possible should be engaged for Election Day duties and the various localities could even be saturated with policemen, it is important that most of these personnel should not be allowed to carry offensive weapons on that day. Instead, only some of them, constituted into mobile teams of at least five personnel, will carry weapons in their vehicles stationed at strategic positions and patrolling particular localities ready to be called into flashpoints at short notice. The rest of the security personnel posted to an area will then be unarmed, and can operate in twos, with the necessary communication gadgets so as to be in round-the-clock contact with the mobile teams. In addition, no private security arrangements should be allowed on election days at election areas, and any such security detail should be detained at the point of sighting until the election is over. The above security arrangement largely obtained in the 2015 general elections, and this largely accounted for the successes recorded in that election.

A major responsibility for promoting voter participation in Nigerian elections lies with the political parties. Their conduct must become civil and democratic such that they will truly serve as training grounds for their members on democratic practice. They must, therefore, subscribe to accepted democratic practices. They
must, for instance, accept internal democracy and set good examples for their members to pursue. They can also encourage their members to participate actively in the electoral process by championing distinct ideologies and programmes. The parties must try at all times to carry their members along in the competition for votes. This way, elections and their outcomes will make meaning to voters in the choices that are thrown up, such that there will be reason for members to work towards the success of their parties at the polls. The parties must, therefore, now put back the people at the centre of their activities, and seek to win elections through the vote and not by any other means. This way, voter mobilization will be high at elections and voter participation will be consequently high.

As for the press, they must be factual in their reporting of elections and related issues, with deliberate care taken to avoid sensations and falsehoods as well as misleading reports, which only go to make the voting public lose faith in the power of the vote. Accurate data on the performance of the different party governments and candidates in the country must regularly be made available to the people. And most importantly, journalists who report elections must take out time to understand the detailed processes of each election so that the devices of politicians and election stakeholders to manipulate the vote can be promptly exposed. Civil society advocacy must continue on the line of the sanctity of the vote and the sacredness of the mandate of the people. The international community must stand by what they preach, which is that non-credible elections cannot be condoned in any guise. As such, the international community must immediately reject elections that are not free and fair, and then refuse to recognize any governments emanating from such elections. The international community must further impose sanctions on such governments until the right thing under each circumstance is done.

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The support of the international community must, therefore, be rendered or withheld as they deem it to be promoting voter participation and free and fair elections in the country. They must not take sides with any of the competing candidates or parties and must always be ready to confront any stakeholder acting to curtail the people’s franchise, including taking out diplomatic actions against such stakeholders. Finally, the voting public must begin to move away from the cynicism and skepticism that pervade elections in Nigeria presently. It is this negative attitude that has made possible all the unwholesome practices that have combined to make for voter apathy in the country. The electorate must now adopt a more positive attitude towards elections in the country which will then enable them to cast their votes as appropriate and to protect these votes if and when necessary, such that their mandate will then hold always.

The role of INEC in promoting voter participation in Nigeria

INEC is certainly at the centre of the topic of voter participation in Nigeria. The sanctity of the votes cast in an election will, to a large extent, determine how much apathy or participation will characterize the next elections. If people vote but the results do not reflect their popular wishes, they may not vote subsequently. This means that the INEC must put everything in place to ensure free and fair voting, correct counting and the announcement of factual election results at every election. This will go a long way in promoting voter participation as the voters will then see reason to vote in subsequent elections. INEC performed creditably in the 2015 general elections. Since then, the body has not done much to promote its credibility, as most of the elections conducted since the 2015 elections have come short of even the 2015 standards.

The 2015 election was no doubt among the best in recent times. Yet, even that election was not devoid of malpractices and shortcomings, which must be corrected before we can boast of
elections that can promote voter participation in the country. Much of these shortcomings were observed in the states of the South-east and South-south geopolitical zones of the country. In most of these states, figures of votes cast were incredibly high even as actual voter turnout was noticeably low. In one of these states, where this writer participated during that election, voter turnout in the various polling centres was very low, but each time voting ended, almost all the electoral officials, including the party agents, usually agreed to apportion the remainder of the votes to a favoured party, which was then credited with almost all the unutilized votes. This also happened even in 2011, when in one instance, a favoured candidate obtained more than 900 votes as against the less than 30 votes he garnered originally, while the rest opposition candidates were left with their actual votes of less than 20 each (Anifowose and Onah, 2011).

It is these vote allocations at elections that serve to give the impression of large voter turnouts, and which usually distort voting records of the various elections in Nigeria. For instance, in Imo State in the 2011 general elections, ‘voter turnout’ in the presidential election was more than 1.3 million, but in the hotly contested governorship elections a week later, voter turnout was just a little more than half of that figure! (Ihiegbullem, 2011). This practice of vote allocations and vote padding have routinely continued to pass without incident in the two regions, and probably in other regions, and this must now stop. Elections that will promote voter participation in the country must be ones that only record the actual votes cast and do not permit the allocation of votes and padding of voting figures.

Apart from INEC officials and staff selling out to or compromising with politicians and government officials, INEC also has the peculiar problem of most of its high officials being appointed by the President, including the National Chairman, National Commissioners, and the State Commissioners. To compound this is the legal provision for a sort of collegiate
decision making among these officials on important issues, which has actually served to reduce the preeminence and ultimate authority of the National Chairman. Because of this fact, loyalty, especially to a National Chairman who is bent on credibility, could be low. Consequently, high officials of the INEC are observed to behave almost as if they were laws unto themselves.

The National Chairman must undertake to pin-point and expose all erring officials and put them up for lawful punishment. Until this is done, the penchant for certain officials to pretend to stay above board or even to exonerate themselves from the defects of elections that they have conducted cannot hold. In this regard, the National Chairman must ensure that no election is held in the country for which the logistics have not been certified to be ready. Then any election in which considerable logistics problems arise must be promptly halted and cancelled and new elections held.

The INEC must also take charge of the security arrangements during elections in the country. Particularly important in this regard is the control of the Police and other security agents during elections. Presently, the practice has been to retain the official protocols, whereby 'the Governor is in-charge of security in his state'. Routine security should be separated from 'electoral security', which must, on Election Day, be under the complete control of the electoral commissioner in-charge of the particular election. This is very necessary, even if, it may require amendment to the 1999 Constitution and the Electoral Act. Over the years, a major tactic of rigging elections has been to hand-over control of the police on election days to an incumbent Governor or a favoured candidate who will then proceed to use the police to ensure that the election is decided in favour of his party. This must now stop and the INEC must immediately take full charge of 'election related security' on election days in every part of the country. Only then can INEC take full praise for the success of such elections as well as the full-blame for any shortcomings.
Conclusion

What has been done in this paper is to historically locate the unfortunate phenomenon of voter apathy which now pervades the nation. It was not always the case: it came at a certain point in time because of certain reasons. We have also shown that those reasons are not immutable. They can be tackled and the events of the 2015 general elections give hope in this direction. Tackling voter apathy will involve stakeholders living up to their billing in the roles expected of them in elections, particularly in doing those things that will restore the power of the vote as well as give the power of the mandate back to the people. This will further involve stakeholders continuing to carry out their constitutional and routine roles as expected during elections, such as those that have to do with sensitization campaigns and programmes; to enlighten voters to their voting rights and duties. This paper has shown that when these bodies play their expected roles, voter apathy will recede, to once again be replaced by high levels of voter participation in elections in the country.
References


The role of stakeholders in promoting voter.................