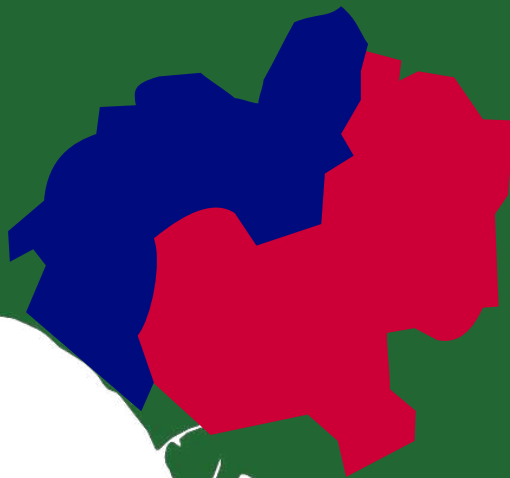


# BARRIERS TO CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA: THE **ONDO** AND **EDO** STATES CONTEXT



Goodluck Jonathan Foundation

# Table of content

**02**

Page

---

## ORGANIZATION'S PROFILE

- Who We Are
- What We Do

**03-05**

Page

---

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

**06-08**

Page

---

## INTRODUCTION

- Objective of the paper
- Methodology
- Limitations
- Ethical considerations

**08-10**

Page

---

## DEMOCRATIC PROCESS, ELECTION AND VOTING

- Voter Apathy

**11-14**

Page

---

## TRENDS OF LOW TURNOUT IN NIGERIA'S ELECTIONS: ONDO AND EDO STATES

- Image 1&2
- Graph 1 - 4

**15-18**

Page

---

## ONDO AND EDO STATE

- Background Information Ondo State
- Background Information Edo State
- Ondo and Edo State: Empirical and Observatory Analysis
- Observations from the Empirical Data

**19-21**

Page

---

## BARRIERS TO CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

- Institutional Barriers
- Political Barriers
- Economic Barriers
- Social Barriers

**21-26**

Page

---

## PERCEPTION SURVEY REPORT

- Surveyed Local Government Areas
- Demographic Analysis
- Perception Analysis of the Survey
- Trend Comparative Analysis
- Factor Analysis of the Survey

**26-29**

Page

---

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**30**

Page

---

## REFERENCE

## WHO WE ARE

The Goodluck Jonathan Foundation, founded by the former President of Nigeria, His Excellency, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, GCFR, GCON (2010-2015) is an independent non-governmental organisation established in 2015 for the advancement of peace and prosperity on the African continent. We are dedicated to promoting peace and reconciliation, advancing democratic governance, advocating for inclusive governance and economic development, promotion of citizen's rights, continental and national integration.

### OUR MISSION

It is our firm belief that sustained peace and political stability are essential for an environment where people can enjoy social, political and economic prosperity. We therefore work to forge a continent where we understand our differences and work towards a perfect union founded on transparency, equity and justice.

### OUR VISION

Peaceful, just and progressive nations of Africa

## WHAT WE DO

- Peace and Security
- Governance and Elections
- Women and Youth



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civic participation is a fundamental right which confers legitimacy on any government and promotes acceptance for government policies. However, a reduction in civic participation has become one of the biggest challenges to elections in Nigeria as demonstrated by concerning levels of voter apathy. This has become consistent in the Fourth Republic with the lowest voter turnout being 37.5 during the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. This is a situation that has the tendency to erode the very basis of governance.

Given the history of voter turnout during elections in Nigeria and in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Goodluck Jonathan Foundation undertook a research to understand the trends of voter apathy in elections in Nigeria, with a specific focus on Edo and Ondo States. This was aimed at understanding the underlying causes of voter apathy among Nigerians of voting age and to determine to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic would affect voter turnout in the two elections.

The research relied on both existing literature from relevant stakeholders and field survey conducted in three local governments (urban, semi-urban and rural) in each of the two States ahead of the gubernatorial elections. In particular, the survey was carried out in Egor, Oredo and Esan South East in Edo State, and Akure South, Ondo East and Ile Oluji/Oke Igbo in Ondo State. The sample size was 203 respondents.

This was also reflected in the elections in Edo State and Ondo State in 2020.

While there were some positive improvements in the Edo governorship election which conferred more credibility on the electoral process, the issue of low voters' turnout remains endemic, with just 25.5 percent of registered voters actually casting their ballots. This is lower than the turnout in the 2019 general elections (27.9%) and 2016 governorship election (32.7%) in Edo State.

The research identified some of the factors responsible for the persistent low voters' turnout in Nigerian elections to include the growing trend of violence in elections, perception of the citizens on the impact of governance on their lives, the low confidence of voters in the capacity and effectiveness the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the current health situation in the country, especially the current Covid-19 pandemic, relocation of voters from where they are registered, lack of interest in politics, economic factors (some voters wish to be monetarily mobilised or induced), ethno-religious politics, demography and level of literacy on the elections.

Despite all the challenges highlighted, there are positive developments. This is reflected in the surge in citizens' interest in the election based on findings from the survey report.

The major challenge and task is to translate this huge interest in elections into reality, by building citizens' confidence in, not only the electoral process. but also, governance and the political environment. To achieve this, the following recommendations have been put forward:

- Access and Inclusion for the marginalised demography, especially people with special needs should also be given priority. The absence of materials such as magnifying glasses, brail ballots and the inaccessibility of some of the polling units hinder citizens, and particularly those with special needs from participating in the electoral process.
- The EMB and other agencies of government like the Nigerian Orientation Agency, civil society organisations and political parties should embark on an aggressive voter education process by partnering with other government agencies, media organizations, community and religious groups, traditional institutions, trade associations, trade unions, student, youth and academic communities.
- EMB should work towards digitalizing the electoral process, especially the voting process. The recent step of INEC in institutionalizing electronic voting is a step in the right direction. This should be fast-tracked in order to make it effective and efficient for the 2023 general elections and off-cycle elections before it.
- Religious and Traditional leaders should also be engaged in programmes aimed at increasing civic participation in the electoral process.

- Government at all levels need to build citizens' confidence in governance by implementing pro-people policies that will elicit citizens' interest in the political and democratic process. Loss of interest in elections is usually preceded by citizens' loss of confidence in governance and government's policies.
- More attention and priority need to be given to the judiciary, particularly the election petition tribunals, as they have often been overlooked both by the civil society and development partners.
- Mobile courts should also be deployed to prosecute electoral offenders on election day and Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms should be explored in addressing intra -party grievances within political parties.
- Political parties should also be proactive in addressing electoral violence and other anomalies that prevent the full participation of citizens in the electoral process.
- The welfare of security personnel deployed for elections should be prioritised and adequately catered for, as their poor welfare makes them vulnerable and willing tools in the hands of politicians who are looking to undermine the electoral process.

**Ann Iyonu**  
Executive Director  
Goodluck Jonathan Foundation

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

"Our gratitude goes to Babatunde Oloajo, who led the research work and other partners who helped in validating and contributing to the research findings. The Foundation also expresses her profound gratitude to the respondents particularly for their patience and willingness to participate in the research. We also commend the relentless work by the project team towards the delivery of the research report. "

## INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Nigeria's return to civil rule in 1999 held high hope for majority of Nigerians, who felt that democratic rule will allow for informed decisions in governance that will lead to better living conditions. While democratic experiment in the fourth republic has provided opportunity for Nigerians to air their views on how they are being governed, decide who and on what programmes and policies they are to be governed; more challenges have been thrown up by the democratic process. Researchers and analysts have identified many challenges on the effectiveness of democratic system in promoting popular participation and engendering better governance. Such challenges are located in the general system of governance vis-à-vis the role of government institutions, policy makers, legislature and judiciary.

In recent times, the greater challenge has to do with the process of electing political leaders and representatives i.e., electioneering process. Regular election and the processes leading to such election are the peak of participatory governance in a democracy. It is where the citizens have the ultimate right and power to decide who and how they will be governed, as stipulated in the constitution. However, elections in Nigeria in the fourth republic have been dogged by various setbacks that have questioned the basis for them. The question of whether these setbacks have not undermined the power of the people to choose their leaders remain a subject of discussion.

One of the biggest challenges to election in Nigeria is the issue of voter apathy, which has also become consistent in this Fourth Republic. Voter apathy, for whatever reason, is a form of disinterest of citizens in the electoral process. It shows voters' aloofness towards participatory governance. This has the tendency of eroding the very basis of governance.

This paper therefore seeks to probe the extent of voter apathy in elections in Nigeria, with focus on Edo and Ondo States where Governorship elections held this year

### **Rationale**

This research seeks to address the issue of the barriers to civic participation in the electoral process in Nigeria with the focus on the two states of Edo and Ondo, where gubernatorial elections held this year. The aim of this is to probe into the causes of growing trend of voter apathy in Nigeria, with the focus on the two states, and to proffer viable solutions and recommendations, based on empirical analysis.

### **Methodology**

The research relied on three sources. First is the primary data obtained through direct interaction and engagement with stakeholders and residents of the two states of Edo and Ondo, and nationally. Second is the secondary data gotten from exploration of various information sources including from newspapers and official documents. Thirdly, the paper also relied on tertiary sources of information, which are processed

information from analyses by various researchers and analysts who have conducted similar work on the subject matter.

The interviews and interaction with the stakeholders and residents involved two processes. The first was the direct interview of 102 (one hundred and two) respondents from Edo State and 101 respondents from Ondo. The interviews were conducted in three Local Governments – urban, semi-urban, and rural – in each of the two states. This means the 100 interviews in each state are divided into three (at least thirty-five in each town). In all, at least 203 interviews were conducted in 6 Local Governments across the two states of Edo and Ondo States.

In Edo State, survey interviews were conducted in Egor, Oredo and Esan South East. Oredo, where the state capital is located is classified by this study as urban; Egor, which is located within the greater Edo City is categorized as semi-urban. Esan South East, which is located far away from the seat of government, with largely agrarian population and economy is categorized as rural. In Ondo State, the three surveyed local governments are Akure South, Ondo East and Ile Oluji/Oke Igbo. Akure South is classified by this study as urban given the fact that it is where the state capital and the seat of government is; Ondo East, which has some public facilities including a tertiary institution, is categorized as semi-urban, while Ile Oluji/Oke Igbo, which is largely agrarian is categorized as rural.

While the Edo survey was conducted after the elections, the Ondo survey was conducted after the survey. Inasmuch as there were expected differences in responses, some general trends can be deduced from the two surveys. The details and analysis of the survey is presented in the Survey Report.

The second process involved interaction with stakeholders including civil society practitioners, journalists and government officials within and outside the two focal states. This was with the aim of deepening the analysis of this work. All the interviews and interactions were anonymous, and they partly contributed to the final stage of this work.

## **Limitations**

This research was limited by availability of data on results of elections and distribution of key data such as demographical and geographical distribution of election data. It was difficult collating data especially of the earlier elections of 1999, 2003 and 2007. This is also a reflection of the level of organization of the elections. According to an Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) data in 1999 and 2003 were lost. Moreover, the paper was limited by time factor, which constrained the extent of field work including visits to various information centres. However, some data were gathered through previous work done on the topic, and through research (both online and physical i.e., interviews).



## **Ethical Considerations**

This research adhered strictly to the principles of research ethics by ensuring utmost transparency with respondents. The goals and objectives of the research was shared; consent and voluntary participation were obtained. All information collected were treated with

confidentiality and only used for purposes of the study. Study respondents' anonymity were protected. Finally, the survey instrument was administered to the samples across demographics without bias or discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, social status or ethnic affiliation.

## **DEMOCRATIC PROCESS, ELECTION AND VOTING IN NIGERIA**

Nigeria's return to civil rule was seen as a harbinger of hope and good future for Nigerians. It is seen as an opportunity to enrich the culture of participatory governance. The horrible years of military rule was characterized by wanton disregard for democratic and civil rights of Nigerians, mismanagement of the nation's economy, lack of scrutiny of governmental affairs, including absence of citizens' participation and engagement in the system of governance. It was an era characterized by culture of fear and uncertainty.

Even the so-called elections conducted under the military were fraught with various undemocratic practices. the 1979 elections were precluded by enactment of a constitution that was drafted through military decrees, while the drafted constitution by the handpicked 'wise men' was not voted upon by Nigerians, to give it necessary legitimacy. The 1979 elections also saw the military junta curtailing the democratic choices of Nigerians by limiting number of political parties.

The 1993 elections conducted under the military regime of Ibrahim Babangida was not different in terms of circumventing necessary democratic ethics including streamlining political choice to two, and banning of politicians, among others.

No doubt, the annulment of the 1993 presidential election result, after a clear winner had emerged was the height of disregard to democratic wishes of Nigerians. Given these records of the military regimes, it is not accident that many Nigerians from all works of life were eager for a democratic culture that values human dignity. Hence, the continuous and consistent clamor by Nigerians from all sections for a democratic government.

The emergence of civil rule since 1999 has posed different challenges to the democratic process set up by the military. Such issues include the conduct of politicians and political actors; connection and distance between electors and the elected; the process of separation of power.

However, the important challenge is the issue related to the process of electing leadership through genuine participatory process that involve the citizens.

Nigeria's elections since 1999 have been dogged by various factors such as violence, institutional weakness, political brigandage and lawlessness, monetization of elections and votes, electoral malpractices, ethnicity and voter apathy. These challenges have impacted on the credibility of elections in Nigeria and has defined the kind of leadership that have emerged through this process. The factors identified above are actually intertwined. For instance, political lawlessness and brigandage, and violence, among others, have affected voter turnout in elections.

However, the emergence of civil rule and democracy has thrown up new challenges regarding the level of involvement of citizens in the system of governance. Election according to Atanda et al (2018), “involve a democratic process of choosing who governs a particular group, society or state.” Therefore, election is an integral aspect of democracy, which has to do with the process by which the citizens exercise their democratic choices of determining not just who governs them, but also the programmes, ideology and policies upon which governance is going to be based.

Elections, while not being the sole aspect of democratic process, is at the heart of the process, as it sets the basis for all other aspects of democratic process. Other aspects of democratic process involve existence of instrument of democratic checks and balances on those elected to govern; the process of effecting the

programmes upon which electoral choices are made, and the citizens' right to have a say in how they are governed, i.e., whether the elected is abiding by the contracts of his/her appointment.

The process of election includes voting, but it is not limited to voting. While voting, according to Ujo (2008), “is the actual process in which individual choice is made from various alternatives”, election involves other activities before, during, and after voting, (Ujo, 2008) such campaign, voter registration, electoral planning, constituency delimitation, arrangement of the polling stations, polling procedure, vote counting, announcement of results and election result litigations.

Irrespective of definitions and classification, democracy, elections and voting as concepts are intertwined. There can be no genuine democracy without an effective electoral system and process. Also, if the voting process is flawed, the electoral process cannot engender a sustainable and truly representative democratic system. According to Fagunwa (2016), “Elections no doubt plays a vital role in democracies as they ensure representation of popular will, it is therefore not surprising that voting is the most visible and widespread of citizens' involvement in the democratic political process of a country.”

Taken in another direction, a flawed and non-credible voting process reflects an ineffective electoral process and system. Also, a faulty electoral system is an expression of faulty democratic process. Therefore, a democratic process that throws up an electoral process that cannot ensure a credible voting system, is a faulty democracy.

If people have no real power to affect their wishes in the voting process, there will be loss of confidence in the electoral process, and this will engender a democracy that is neither participatory or beneficial, as the elected will not enjoy the support and cooperation of the electors, while at the same time will see no reason to be accountable to them.

This will again be reflected in subsequent electoral and voting processes, thus generating a vicious cycle of wrongful, non-representative, non-participatory, ineffectual and un-beneficial democracy. This can be a recipe for bigger social and political tension and crisis, as the legitimacy of the state is eroded.

## **Voter Apathy**

Voter apathy is a major indicator of crisis of credibility of the electoral process and democratic system. Voter apathy is a situation defined by lack of participation in the voting process, especially that actual action of voting, by a significant layer of the voting population. Voter apathy defines the situation in which citizens who have capacity and responsibility to vote refuses or are unable to either register to vote or vote after registering.

The level of voter apathy is an indicator of the level of participation of citizens in the democratic process.

It is also an important factor in determining the credibility of the electoral process and the acceptability of the democratic system (Powell, 1986). According to Fagunwa (2016), “It is an undisputable fact that if the masses of a particular country refuse to fulfill their electorate obligation, then there is disconnect between the masses and the government, thus bringing to question the democratic right and acceptability of the government.”

# TRENDS OF LOW VOTER TURNOUT IN NIGERIA'S ELECTIONS: ONDO & EDO STATES

Elections in Nigeria have been dogged by voter apathy especially in this Fourth Republic which started in 1999. The level or degree of voter apathy is shaped by various factors or interplay of factors as analyzed subsequently. The 1999 elections, which ushered in the Fourth Republic, witnessed significant participation in the electoral process with as many as 30.28 million Nigerians, out of 57.94 million registered voters (constituting 52.3 percent), participating in the presidential elections. Aside the 2003 elections, which saw an increase in number of voters, the other elections, especially since 2011 have seen reduction in the number of voters. This is depicted in Image 1-2 and Graph 1-4 below:

Image 1: Voter turnout Versus Registered Voters, 1999 - 2019

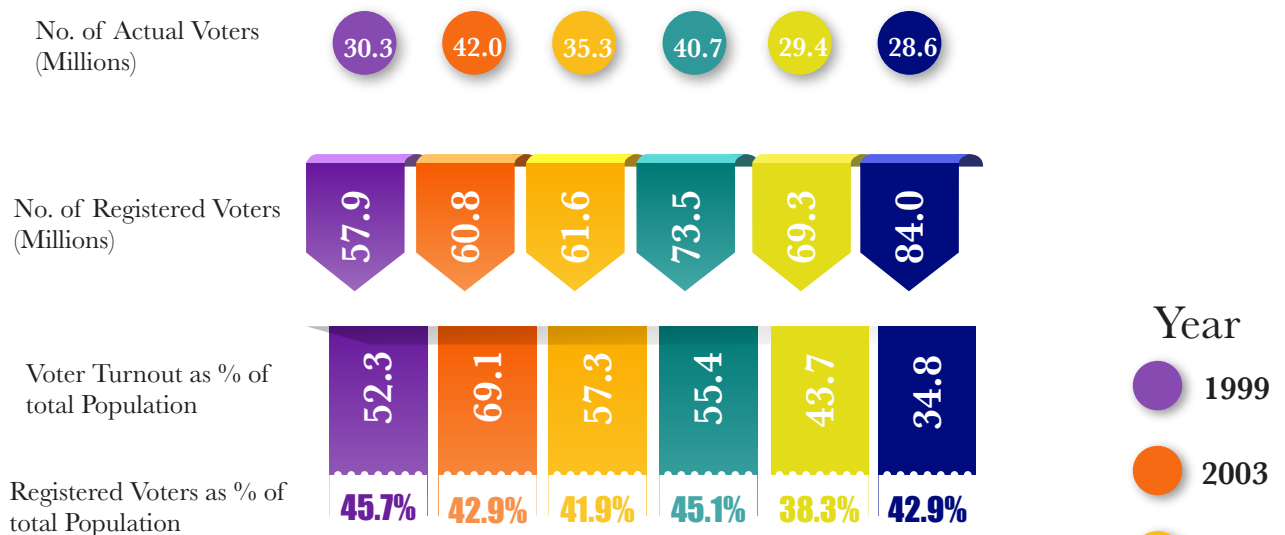
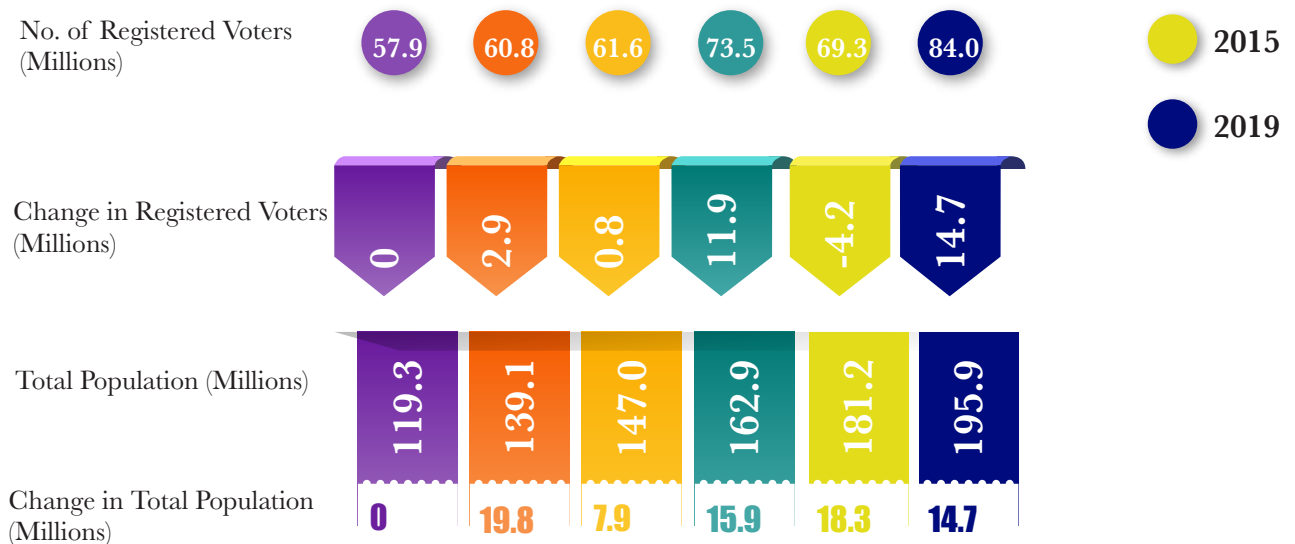
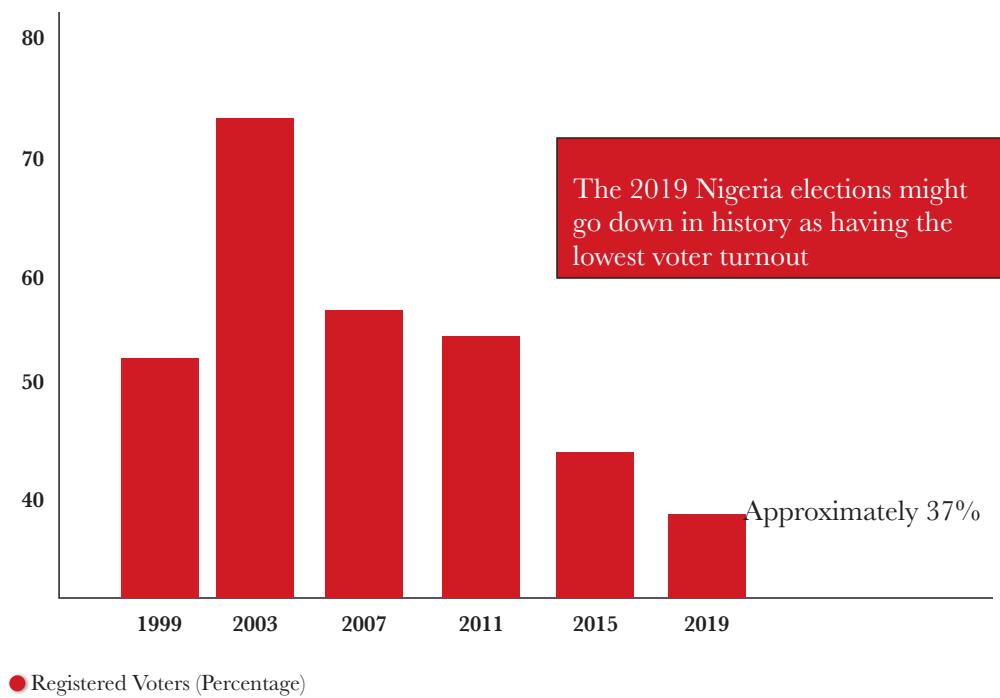


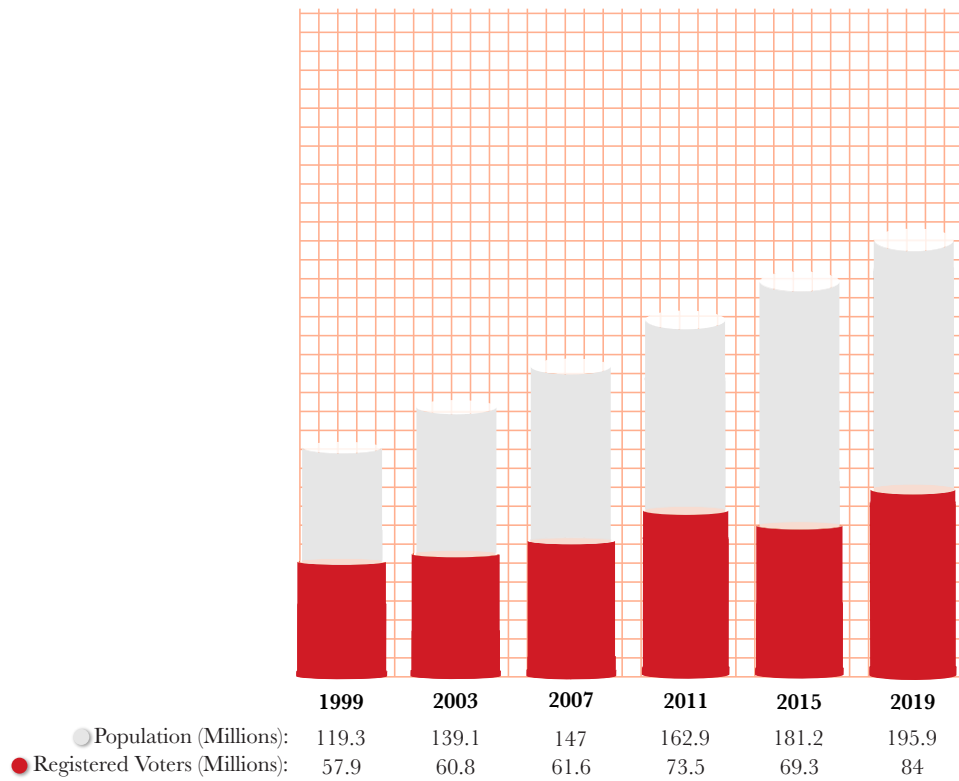
Image 2: Change in Registered Voters Versus Change in Total Population, 1999 - 2019



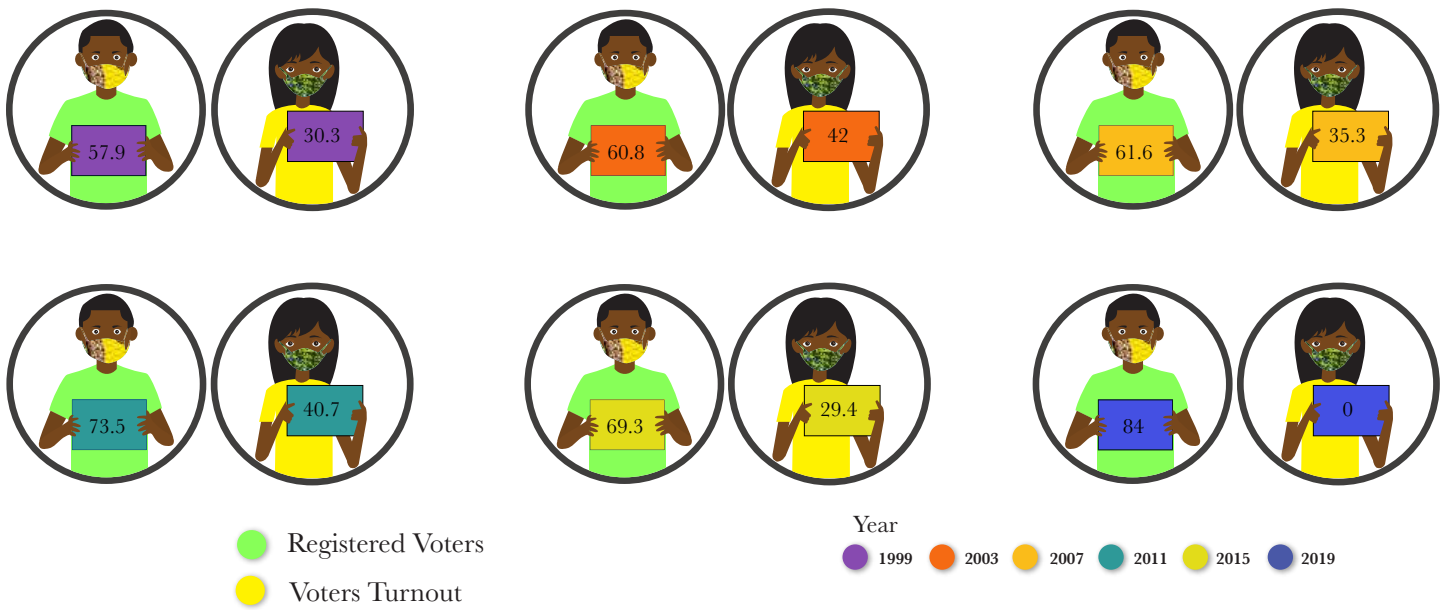
Graph 1: Trend of voters' turnout ... 2019 was the lowest



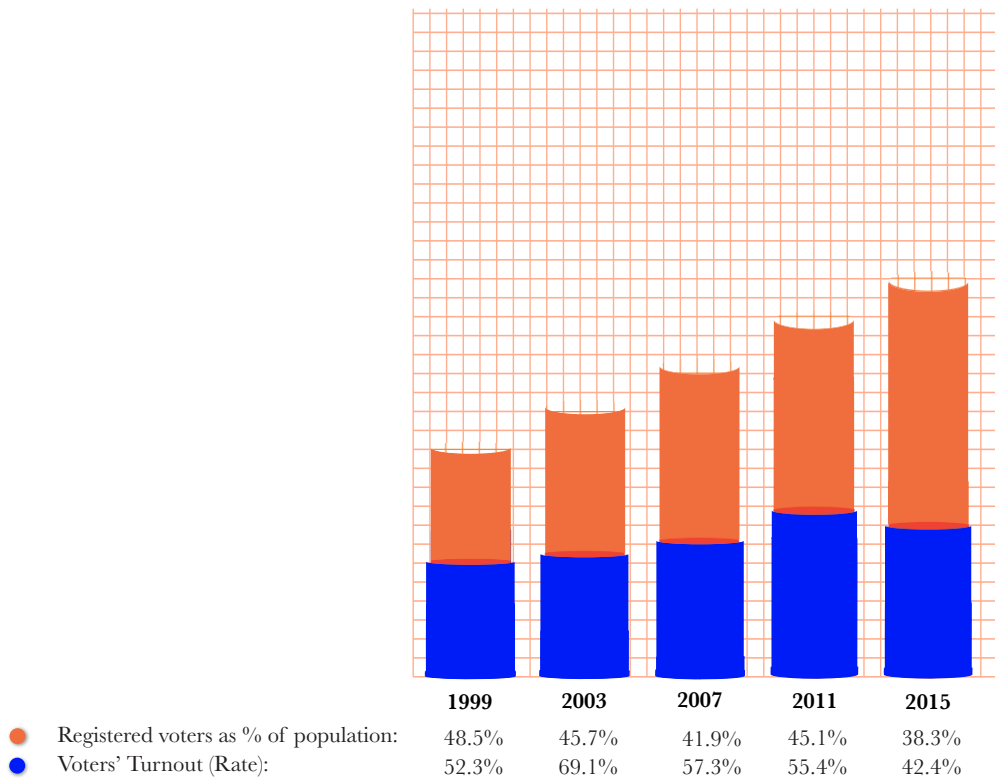
Graph 2: Registered Voters Versus Total Population (Millions)



Graph 3: Registered Voters Versus Voter Turnout



Graph 4: Graphical Illustration of Voters' Turnout Versus Registered Voters



## Trends of low voter turnout in Nigeria Elections: Ondo & Edo States

It could be seen from the table that there has been consistent reduction in the percentage of voters as well as number of real voters per number of registered voters, with the 2019 elections depicting the worst case.

In 2007, over 30 million people, out of over 60 million registered voters, cast their ballots. However, by 2019, 12 years after, when over 30 million people have been added to the total population and 24 million people added to the voter population, the number of actual voters shrunk to less than 30 million. In fact, the number of voters reduced by about a million between 2015 and 2019, though the number of registered voters increased from 69 million to 84.3 million within the same period.

This shows a consistent fall in the number of voters from 2007 to 2019. While voting population increased generally, number of people actually participating in the voting process fell. According to INEC data (Budgit, 2019), at least 50 percent of additional registered voters in 2019 were young voters (below 35 years). But the number of actual voters reduced in 2019, implying that majority of those who refused to vote are young people, whose future will be greatly affected by the electoral choices. Flowing from the empirical data above, it can be deduced that voter apathy has become endemic with Nigeria's elections, and indeed Nigeria's democratic experiment since 1999.

However, it should further be noted that the data on some elections has credibility problems, especially the 2003 and 2007 elections. For instance, the Supreme Court verdict in the election petition filed by the ANPP presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari in 2003, agreed that the election was fraught with irregularities, even though the presidential elections were not cancelled. Also, the 2007 elections were dogged by serial irregularities, violence and malpractices, such that the then president, Late Umar Yar'Adua had to agree that the elections that brought him was dogged by irregularities, which necessitated the electoral reform process through the Justice Muhammed Uwais-led Electoral Reform Committee, which effected to some changes in the electoral system. In fact, the election results posted on INEC website could not tally with those compiled at state levels.

Therefore, while the number of votes in the 2003 and 2007 elections may be taken for their face value, the impacts of the aforesaid irregularities cannot be totally disregarded if we are to make a more accurate account and analysis of the trend of voters' behaviour (IRI, 2007; EU, 2003).

# ONDO AND EDO STATE

## Background Information

### Ondo State

Ondo State is a state in Nigeria with the capital in Akure. The state was created in 1976 from the former Western Region and Western State. It formerly included the present-day Ekiti State, which was created in 1996. Ondo State is bordered in the north by Ekiti State, in the northeast by Kogi State, in the east by Edo State, in the southeast by Delta State, in the southwest by Ogun State, in the northwest by Osun State and in the south by the Atlantic Ocean.

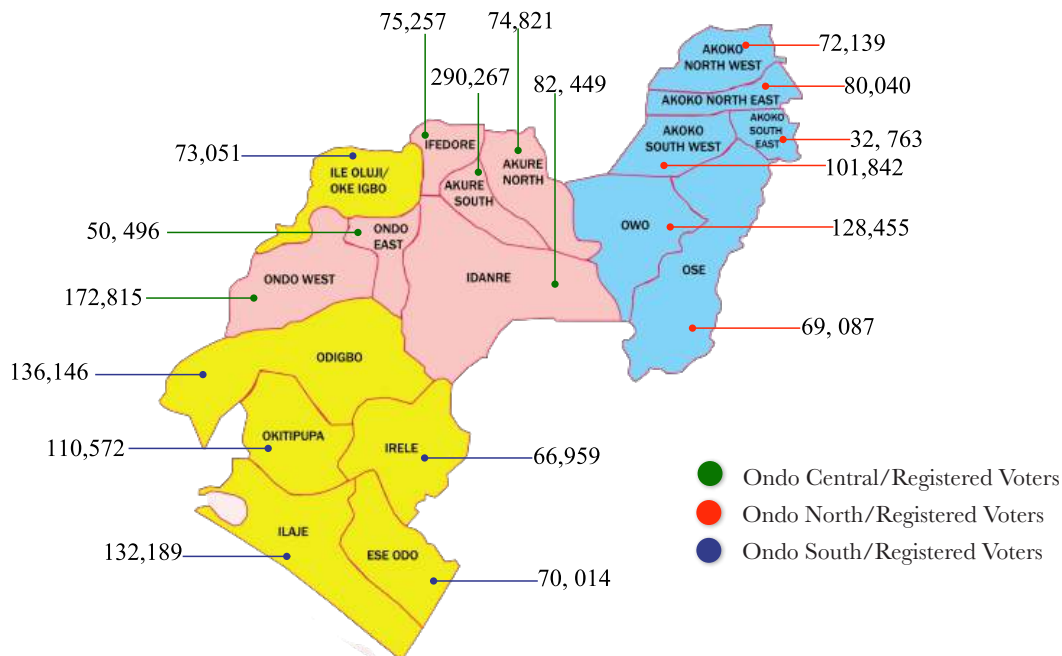
The ethnic composition of Ondo State is largely from the Yoruba subgroups of the Akoko, Akure, Ikale, Ilaje, Ondo and Owo People. Ijaw people, such as the Apoi, Furupagha and Arogbo populations, inhabit the coastal areas, and a sizeable number of the Ondo State people who speak a variant of the Yoruba language similar to the Ife dialect reside in Oke-Igbo.

The state has close to 5 million people. Akure South has the largest population with close to 486, 300 people, while Ondo East has the least population of 102, 700 people (2016 estimate).

The State has three senatorial districts and 18 local governments, with six (6) local governments in each senatorial district: Ondo South, Ondo North and Ondo Central. Ondo South has the largest population (35 percent); followed by Ondo Central (34 percent) and then Ondo North (31 percent).

According to INEC, there are 1,822,346 voters, 203 Registration Areas, and 3009 polling units in the state. The Senatorial Distribution of the local governments and number of registered voters per local government are given below:

**Ondo State local Government per Senatorial district/Registered Voters**





## Background Information

### Edo State

Edo State is a state in Southern Nigeria. Its capital is Benin City. It is bounded in the north-east by Kogi, Anambra in the east, Delta in the South-east, Ondo by the west, Niger River in the east. The State has its origin from the old Mid-western region, which was created out of the Western Region in 1963. The Mid-Western Region, which first changed into Mid-Western State in 1967, was changed to Bendel State in 1976. It maintained its composition and territory, which comprised of the Benin and Delta divisions, while its capital remained Benin City. However, the state was split into two in 1999, with Delta and Edo States created from the old Bendel State.

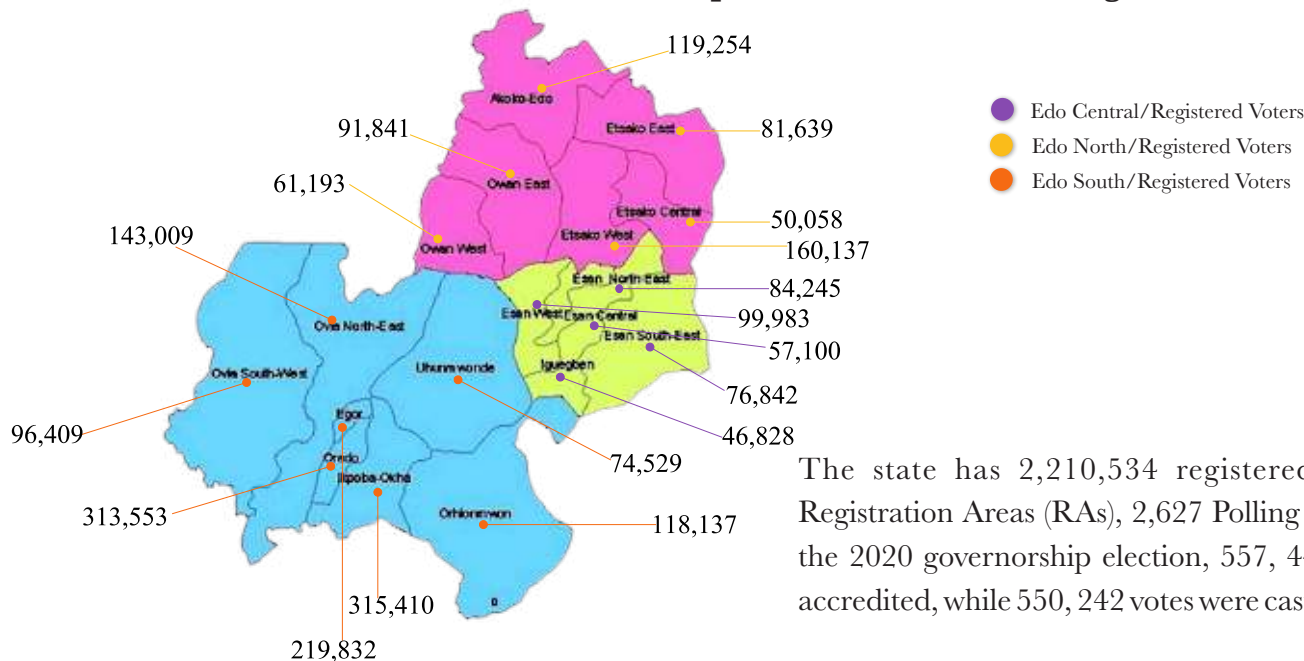
The state is estimated to have 5 million people. The State is made up of the following ethnic groups: Binis, Etsako, Esans, Owans and Akoko Edos. The Bini speaking people who occupy seven out of the 18 Local

Government Areas of the state constitute 57.14%; while others are as follow: Esan (17.14%), Etsako (12.19%), Owan (7.43%), and Akoko Edo (5.70%) However, the Igbira speaking communities exist in Akoko Edo as well as Ijaw Izons, Urhobos, Itsekiris communities in Ovia North East and South West Local Government Areas, especially in the borderlands. Also, Igbo speaking communities exist in Igbanke (Ika) in Orhionmwon LGA.

There are 18 local governments in Edo State which are distributed over three (3) senatorial districts: Edo South, Edo North and Edo Central. Edo South has the highest number of local governments (7), followed by Edo North, which has 6 local governments while Edo Central has five local governments.

In terms of population, Edo South has the largest populations with over 57.54 percent; followed by Edo North which has 25 per cent while Edo Central Senatorial District which constitutes 17.14 per cent of the populations.

**Edo State local Government per Senatorial district/Registered Voters**



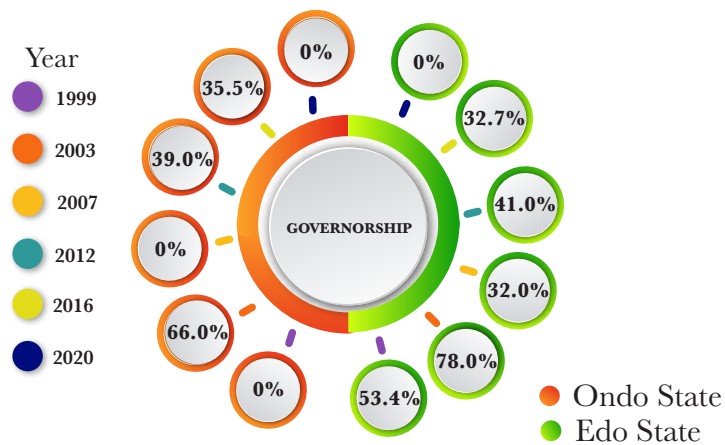
The state has 2,210,534 registered voters, 192 Registration Areas (RAs), 2,627 Polling Units (PUs). In the 2020 governorship election, 557, 443 voters were accredited, while 550, 242 votes were cast.

## Ondo & Edo State: Empirical & Observatory Analysis

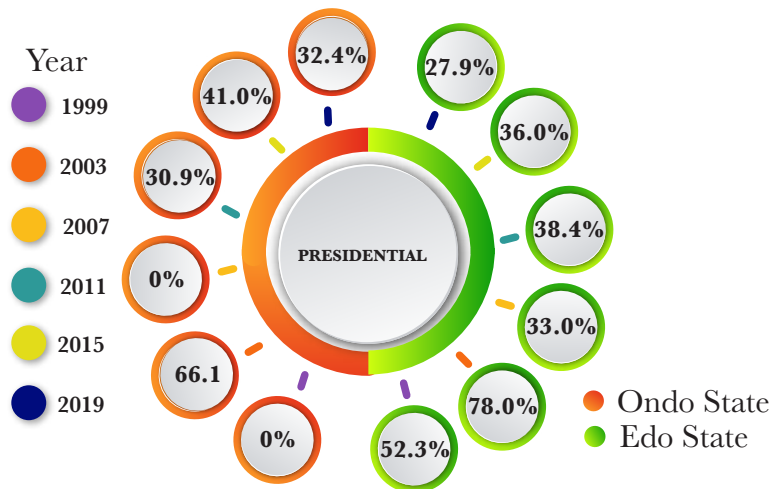
The trend of voter participation in the country gives a general picture across states, with of course some peculiarities. The main focus of this essay is on Edo and Ondo States.

Tables 2 and 3, gives the trends of voter participation in elections in the two states of Edo and Ondo, for the governorship and presidential elections.

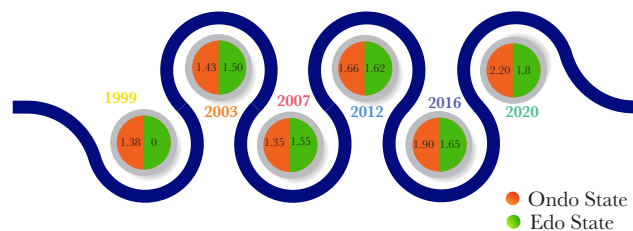
**Image 1: Voter turnout in the Edo & Ondo Governorship Elections 1999 - 2020**



**Image 1: Voter turnout in the Edo & Ondo Presidential Elections 1999 - 2020**



**Image 2: Number of Registered Voters (in Millions) 1999 - 2020**



## Observations from the Empirical Data

From the data provided above, the following can be deduced:

1. The elections in the two states of Edo and Ondo, especially the presidential and gubernatorial elections, show a trend of entrenched low turnout and voter apathy.
2. The turnout and voter apathy witnessed in the Edo and Ondo states dovetails with national trend since 1999. Aside the 1999 and 2003 elections, all other elections have seen falling turnout in elections and growing voter apathy.
3. It is worth stating that, aside the 1999 elections, the credibility of the 2003 and especially 2007 elections are still contested given various reports of irregularities, violence and malpractices.
4. The governorship elections in the two states of Edo and Ondo shows marginal improvement in turnout when compared to the general or presidential elections. This is most visible in the staggered governorship elections of 2012 and 2016.
5. While there is significant increase in the general population, the rate of increase of registered voters is still marginal compared to the increase in general population.
6. Despite increase in registered voters, there is decrease in actual voters, which points to increasing voter apathy.
7. Given the rural nature of most parts of the two states, the impact of social media on the 2020 governorship elections will be minimal. However, the impact of mass media, especially those domiciled within the state may have impact on the elections.
8. While the trend of the previous elections has not shown the impact of burgeoning youth population on the turnout in the elections, it is still possible that the 2020 governorship elections in the two states may witness increasing youth participation. Already, as much as 50 percent of voting population are youths (between the ages of 18 and 35) (YIAGA, 2019; 2020).
9. The Edo and Ondo State governorship elections are likely to be affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Given the various INEC regulations, including the Covid-19 regulations (INEC, 2020), many voters may not exercise their franchise or may be unable to vote.

# BARRIERS TO CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

Various factors affect and shape voter participation in electoral and democratic processes. These factors can be categorized as institutional; political; economic or social. All of these factors have impacted in differing degrees on voter participation and voter apathy in elections in Nigeria since 1999.

## 1. Institutional Barriers

**Public Trust and Perception of State Institutions:** This has to do with the role of state institutions and how far they have been able to gain public trust, such as to allow people see the election as representative of their interests (Amdi, 2014; Akinyemi, 2019). For instance, the role of the Election Management Body (EMB) is very crucial in determining how voters participate in elections. If voters feel that the conduct of EMB does not suggest that it will be unbiased and effective in protecting their votes, many voters may see the election as mere jamboree, and thus refrain from casting their votes.

**Operational Effectiveness and Efficiency of Government Agencies:** Operational effectiveness and efficiency of government agencies are also important. For instance, cases of late arrival of voting materials have been a recurring decimal in elections which has seen many people wishing to vote not able to exercise their voting right. In subsequent elections, some of these voters will definitely not bother to vote. Moreover, effectiveness of INEC has been called to question on issues such as voters' registration, voter's card distribution, management of voting and post-voting (election results collation) process. All of these have impacted negatively on the turnout of voters for election in Nigeria.

**Inadequate Provision of Security:** The role of other government agencies such as the security agencies has impact on voter participation in elections. Where the security agencies are seen to be helpless or incapable of securing lives and votes, many voters will obviously not risk it. Moreover, if security agencies are seen to be biased in favour of particular party or parties, people may consider voting as mere waste of time.

## 2. Political Barriers

**Conduct of Politicians and Political Parties:** This is directly related to the political climate in the country, especially as relating to the role of politicians, incumbency factor, and programmes of political parties as well as available options. The conducts of politicians have important role to play in voter participation in elections. Where politicians are seen as desperate to win at all costs or deploying violence and other extra-legal means to intimidate and win votes, many voters will rather prefer self-preservation (Falade, 2011). Moreover, the role of ruling parties has impact on elections. Where government is seen to be using state machine to manipulate direction of votes, or where there is history of ruling parties winning

elections, there is the tendency that many voters will abstain from voting, even supporters of ruling parties.

**Impact of Governance on Citizens:** The biggest political barrier is the perception of the citizens on the impact of governance on their lives, and moreover citizens' perception of the leading political parties and candidates. In the two states, there are still contestations about the performance of the leading parties, which have ruled the states since 1999. Worse still, the two leading candidates in Edo have just switched political parties, which create crisis of identity for voters, while also muddling up the political space. In Ondo, the two leading candidates have been part of previous governments and the question of their shortcomings will further confuse the voters. This will definitely lead to voter apathy, as voters see no fundamental difference among the leading candidates.

### **3. Economic Barriers**

This is the economic situation vis-à-vis the living conditions of the people, their economic status, impact of economic policies on the people, etc. The economic situation has a way of impacting voter participation in elections. Where there is high level of poverty, or where people feel there is no appreciable change in their living and economic conditions, there is high probability that they will abstain from participating in the electoral process. Moreover, economically dispossessed people are liable to being manipulated by political actors, as seen in the rapidly spreading trend of vote buying and monetization, which then raises the question of legitimacy of elections.

Voters not interested in vote buying and selling will most probably avoid voting altogether, as they will see the election as already bought. The growing trend of monetization of elections already witnessed in the previous Osun and Ekiti governorship elections in 2018, and the 2019 general elections is a pointer to what is possible in the coming elections in Edo and Ondo States. If this holds true, there is the very possibility that this may affect voter turnout.

### **4. Social Barriers**

**Ethno-Religious Politics:** Ethnic and religious factors affect voter participation in election (Falade, 2011; Akinyemi, 2019). Nigerian elections have had a history of manipulation of ethnic and religious diversity by politicians for political ends. This, coupled with low level of development and limited opportunities, has made many voters believe that it is only someone from their clan or ethnic background that can implement policies that are in their interest. This also flows from the colonial heritage where politics was tailored along the line of ethnicity and religion. Therefore, where candidates in elections are seen not to favour certain ethnic group, there is tendency that there will less motivation for voting. Also, the level of literacy has a way of encouraging or discouraging people from voting, as many voters may not understand only the politicians' programmes and promises, but also the voting process.

**Electoral Violence:** The growing trend of violence in elections will also impact on the voters' turnout. As noted by Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2019), Nigeria's elections since 1999 have been characterized by wanton violence; even the seemingly peaceful 2015 elections witnessed some levels of violence. Unfortunately, the gains of the 2015 elections seem to have been lost in subsequent elections held,

including the 2019 general elections. Worse still, the isolated elections in Osun, Ekiti and Kogi States have been dogged by serious violence, which against shows the trend that may be witnessed in the Edo and Ondo elections unless the various institutional frameworks are put in place to avoid a repeat. Already, there are accusations and counter accusations on who is stockpiling arms and thugs in Edo State.

## PERCEPTION SURVEY REPORT

The research survey which was conducted in the two states of Edo and Ondo, polled residents of both states on their attitude and views on the elections being conducted in the two states. The survey was conducted in three (3) local government areas of Edo and Ondo States. These three local governments used in each state for the survey were categorized as urban, semi-urban and rural.

### Surveyed Local Government Areas

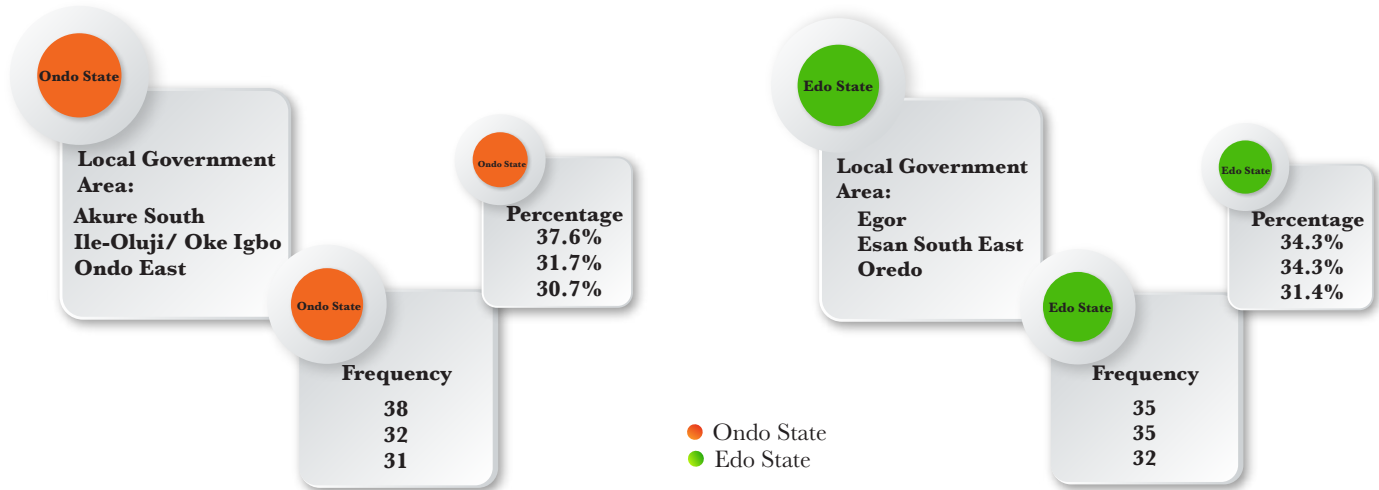
In Edo State, the three local governments used for the survey are Egor, Oredo and Esan South East. The three local governments fall within two senatorial districts: Egor and Oredo (Edo South) and Esan South East (Edo Central). However, the three local governments represent different geographical and sociological classification. While Oredo, where the state capital is located is classified by this study as urban; Egor, which is located within the greater Edo City is categorized as semi-urban. Esan South East, which is located far away from the seat of government, with largely agrarian population and economy is categorized as rural.

In Ondo State, the three local governments used for the survey are Ile Oluji/Oke Igbo, Akure South and Ondo East. The three local governments fall within two senatorial districts: Akure South and Ondo East (Ondo

Central) and Ile Oluji/Oke Igbo (Ondo South). The three local governments represent different geographical and sociological classification. Akure South is classified by this study as urban given the fact that it is where the state capital and the seat of government is; Ondo East, which has some public facilities including a tertiary institution, is categorized as semi-urban, while Ile Oluji/Oke Igbo, which is largely agrarian is categorized as rural.

While the Edo survey was conducted after the elections, the Ondo survey was conducted after the survey. Inasmuch as there were expected differences in responses, some general trends can be deduced from the two surveys.

The distribution of the survey respondents across the three local government areas is presented in the diagram below:

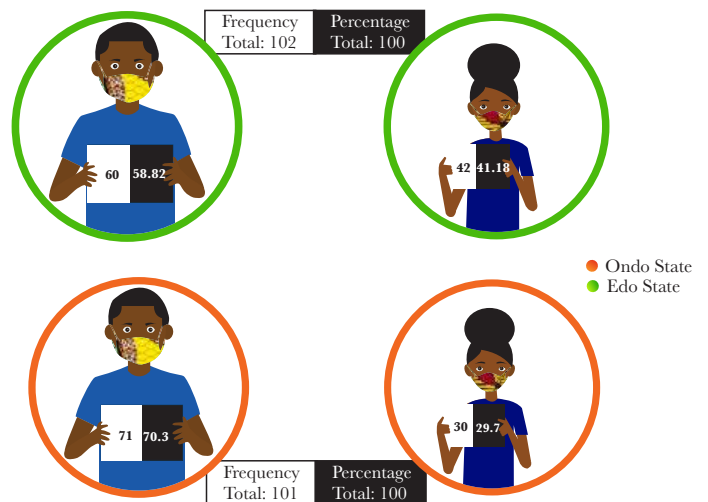


## Demographic Analysis

The surveys are distributed over various demographical levels. The demographics utilized are gender, age, occupation and educational level. The distributions across these demographics are given below:

### Gender Distribution

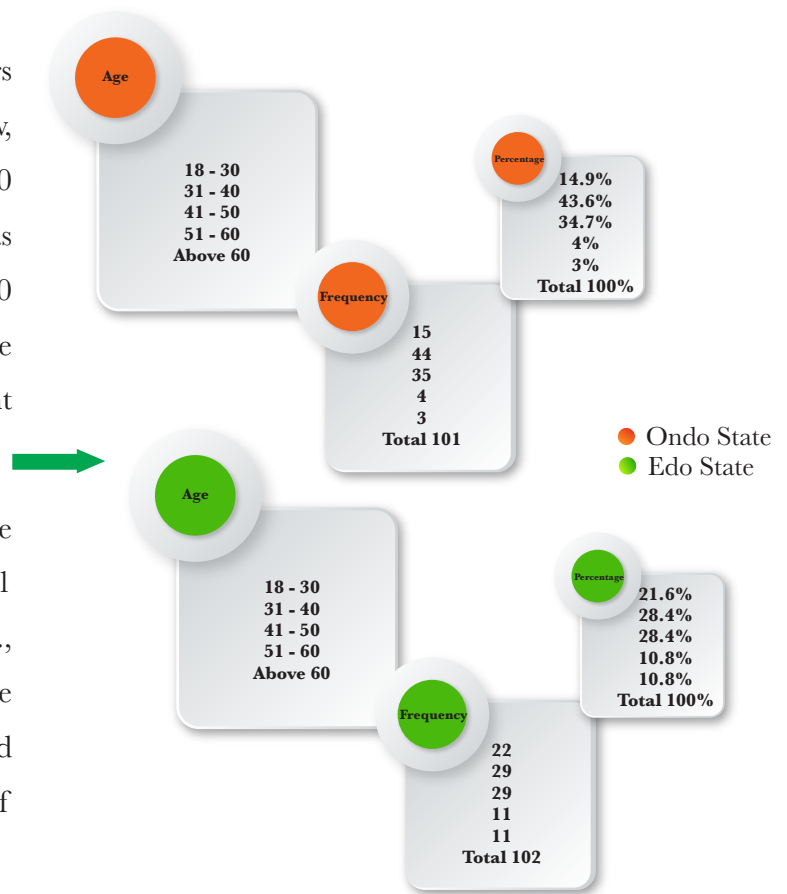
In Edo State, out of the 102 respondents, 60 were male, constituting 58.82 percent while 42 respondents, representing 41.18 percent, were female. However, in Ondo State, out of the 101 respondents surveyed, 71 respondents, representing 70.3 percent were male while 30 respondents, representing 29.7 percent were female. These trends are shown in the diagram



## Age Distribution

The age distribution of the survey ranged from 18 years to over 60 years. For Edo State, from the Table 3a below, 50 percent of the respondents are between 18 to 40 years, constituting those that can be categorized as youth. While those above 40 years also constitute 50 percent of the population. However, those within the age bracket of 18 to 30 years constitute 21.57 percent i.e., 22 respondents.

In Ondo State, as shown in Table 3b below, out of the 101 respondents surveyed, 59 representing 58.41 percent are between the ages of 18 and 40 years, i.e., those that can be categorized as youth; while those above 40 years are 42, i.e., 41.58 percent. It should however be noted that those within the age bracket of 18 to 30 represent 14.85 percent (15 respondents).



## Occupational Distribution

The occupational distribution of the respondents can be categorized as formal workers, informal workers, professionals, business executives, students, retirees, unemployed and others. The formal workers include civil servants, teachers, private sector workers, and health workers; while informal workers include artisans, farmers and traders. Professionals include lecturers, doctors, engineers, accountants and journalists; while business executives include small scale entrepreneurs, company directors, and company executives. Others include politicians, clergy, public office holders and security agents.

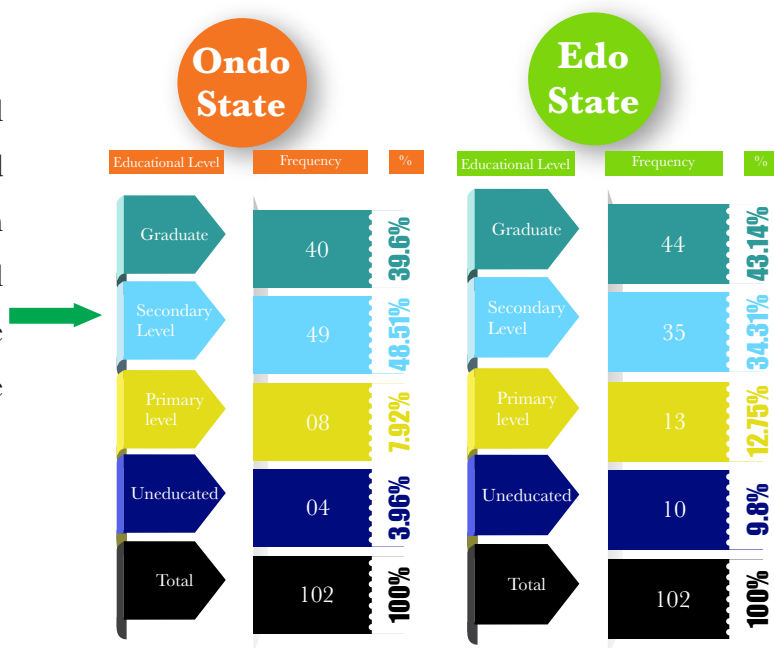
The distribution of the various occupations of respondents for Edo and Ondo States are presented.





## Educational Distribution

The survey is also analyzed on the basis of educational level of respondents. The respondents are classified into the following educational levels: tertiary institution graduate, secondary school leaver, primary school leaver and uneducated. The analyses of the educational distribution for Edo and Ondo States are given below:



## Perception Analysis of the Survey

From the responses gotten from the surveys, some analysis of the perception of voters or expected voters can be made. For instance, out of the 102 respondents in Edo State, 77 (75.49 percent) believe the 2019 elections were credible while 25 (24.51 percent) felt that the 2019 elections were not credible.

Generally, there is very high perception of the essence and importance of voting. In Edo State, 97 respondents (constituting 94.12 percent) felt that elections are either very important or important, while only 6 respondents, constituting 5.88 percent felt it makes no difference or unimportant. In Ondo State, we saw similar trend, with 99 respondents, representing 98.02 percent saying elections are important, while only 2 respondents, representing 1.98 percent said it made no difference. This shows high level of trust in democratic process, as better system.

## Trend Comparative Analysis

Notwithstanding this huge interest in electoral process, the number of people voting in election or interested in voting have been reducing. In the survey conducted in Edo State after the last governorship election, 80 respondents (78.43 percent) claimed to have voted, yet INEC records shows that only 557, 443 voters, out of 2, 272, 058 (representing 24.53 percent), actually voted in the 2020 Governorship Election in Edo State. This is even lower than those who voted in the 2016 governorship election (32.7 percent). Also, while 76 respondents, representing 74.51 percent, in the Edo State survey claimed to have voted in the 2019 general elections, the election result showed that the voters' turnout was only 27.9 percent. This is also reflected in the Ondo State survey, where 99 respondents representing 98.02 percent claimed to have voted in the 2019 general election; meanwhile the actual voters' turnout was 32.4 percent.

The disparity between election data and survey data may be due to geographical or locational factor. This means that while the survey report may be reflective of the voting pattern in the areas surveyed, they may not be representative of the whole state, as interests and participation may differ from one section of the state to another. Some of the reasons for this have been highlighted earlier in this study.

In Ondo State, 99 respondents (98.02 percent) said they intend to vote. However, the 2019 and 2016 election data show that only 32.4 percent and 35.5 percent of registered voters actually voted in the 2019 general elections and 2016 governorship election in Ondo State. The survey shows that there are adequate interests of the electorates in the election, nevertheless the low turnout of voters in previous elections of 2019 and 2016, may show that the limiting factors previously highlighted in this study (institutional, political, economic and social), may affect participation in the governorship election in Ondo State.

This again underscores the need for various stakeholders including election management body (EMB), security agencies, government agencies, politicians and civil societies, to work towards ensuring that popular interest in the election are reflected in actual participation in the election by the voting population.

## Factor Analysis of the Survey

The survey has further underlined some factors that have shaped election conduct and especially the civic participation in election. Some of these factors are:

1. **Insecurity:** The survey shows the impact of security in the elections. From the survey in Edo State, 39 respondents (38.24 percent) raise issues relating to insecurity as factor affecting participation in election.
2. **Political Barriers:** another factor identified is the role of politics, politicians, and political perception of potential voters. From the survey, it is revealed that as much as 24 (23.53 percent) respondents in Edo State consider political factors such as lack of trust in politicians, vote rigging and manipulation, electoral violence, lack of trust in government, etc. as affecting participation in elections. Related to this is the role of voters in the political process. For instance, in Ondo State, 19 respondents (18.81 percent) play roles in the activities of political parties such as community mobilisers, party leaders and volunteers, while 82 respondents (81.18 percent) are only voters. In Edo State, 19 respondents (18.63 percent) are associated with political party activities as mobilisers, volunteers and party leaders, while 83 respondents (81.37 percent) are ordinary voters. This reflects level of involvement in the political process and will reflect in voting participations.
3. **Institutional Barriers:** the role of institutions responsible for election including the INEC and security agencies also feature as part of the factors affecting participation in elections.

From the survey, as much as 15 respondents (14.71 percent) in Edo State linked participation in elections to institutional factors such as lack of trust in electoral body, inability to protect votes by the EMB and security agencies, and institutional loopholes, etc.

4. **Health Barriers:** the health situation in the country, especially the current Covid-19 pandemic, is a significant factor that affected voters' participation in the elections.

From the survey, 22 respondents in Edo State consider Covid-19 pandemic as a factor in participating in the election. In Ondo State, as much as 79 respondents (78.22 percent) believe Covid-19 pandemic will affect participation in the election.

5. **Personal and other Barriers:** Some other barriers identified by the respondents include relocation of voters from where they registered, lack of interest in politics, economic factors (some voters wish to be monetarily mobilized or induced), etc.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### CONCLUSION

There is no gainsaying the fact that election remain an integral part of democratic process. The integrity of elections has direct impact on the quality of the democratic process. When citizens lose interests in elections, it also reflects on their interests in governance. While low participation in elections is sometime caused by poor governance; citizens' estrangement from electoral activities, especially voting, further worsens the quality of governance, and undermine political legitimacy. This further emboldens politicians to undermine the electoral process and the governance. This further estrange citizens from the electoral process. This will become a vicious cycle at the detriment of the citizens and the democratic process. Therefore, there is a deep connection between citizens' participation in elections and the quality of governance.

The unfortunate situation in Nigeria, whereby citizens' participation in voting has been reducing in the last two decades calls for serious attention. As the study shows, voters' turnout in elections since 1999 has been reducing, save for some few instances. This is also reflected in the elections in Edo State and Ondo State. While there were some positive improvements in the Edo governorship election which conferred more credibility on the electoral process, the issue of low voters' turnout remains endemic, with just 25.5 percent of registered voters actually casting their ballots. This is lower than the turnout in the 2019 general elections and 2016 governorship election in Edo State. This study identified various factors responsible for the persistent low voters' turnout in Nigerian elections. Some of the identified factors include institutional factor which has to do with the role and conduct of election management body, security agencies and other government agencies involved in election conduct.

Other factors include political factor which involves the role of politicians, the political parties and government, and the political environment; social and economic factors. These factors are also reflected in the survey conducted for this study.

However, there are positive developments. This is reflected in the surge in citizens' interest in the election as reflected in the survey report conducted in three local governments each in Edo and Ondo States. The major challenge and task is to translate this huge interest in elections to reality, by building citizens' confidence in not only the electoral process but also governance and

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Flowing from the study, the following are suggested as recommendation for the improvement in civic participation in electoral process:

### **Election Management Body (EMB)**

1. The election management body (EMB), in this case, the INEC should improve on its conduct of processes leading up to election and voting. Access and Inclusion for the marginalized demography especially people with special needs should also be given a priority. The heavily impact participation, the absence of materials such as magnifying glasses, brail ballots and the inaccessibility of some of the polling units hinder citizens most especially those with special needs from participating in the electoral process.

2. The EMB should ensure a more transparent approach in its activities so as to earn citizens' trust in its activities.

3. The EMB should be as independent as possible of government of the day, as a way of preventing undue interference with electoral process by the executive.

4. The EMB should embark on aggressive voter education process by partnering with civil societies, media organizations, community and religious groups, traditional institutions, trade associations, trade unions, student and youth community and academic communities.

5. Given that the youth population constitute the majority of voting population, but are currently less represented, the EMB should have special focus on involving and educating the youth population on electoral process and activities.

6. The EMB should ensure prompt announcement of results as a way of limiting influence on results. The recent innovation in which result of elections in Edo were transmitted live from the polling unit to the national portal should be deepened and institutionalized by enacting law and regulations that make their usage or deployment legal.

7. EMB should work towards digitalizing the electoral process, especially the voting process. The recent step of INEC in institutionalizing electronic voting is a right step in the right direction. This should be fast-tracked in order to make it effective and efficient for the 2023 or elections before it.

8. EMB should ensure concrete synergy with other stakeholders, especially security agencies, national assembly and political parties, as a way of building citizens confidence in the electoral process.

9. EMB should enforce the cap on political campaign funding, while finances of political parties should be properly monitored to limit the impact of monetary inducement in the election, which ultimately discredit the election, and negatively affect citizens' participation in the voting process.

### **Government: Executive, Legislature and Judiciary**

a. Government should work towards limiting influence on the EMB and electoral process by ensuring total independence for the EMB and other agencies involved in the election process.

b. Government should give adequate support to EMB in conducting free, fair and credible elections. This includes ensuring quick release of money to EMB for operation.

c. The executive should institutionalize some of the positive changes made by the EMB towards improving the electoral process, such as electronic voting, real-time transfer of results, etc.

d. Government should embark on unbiased voter education that will involve all relevant agencies of government.

e. The Legislature should give adequate legal framework for the improvement in electoral activities. All relevant legislations that will improve the conduct of election must be given speedy consideration. For instance, the issue of punishment for election offenders such as vote sellers and buyers, violence perpetrators, etc. should be adequately legislated upon.

f. Also, the role of other government agencies involved in election matter should be clearly defined and systematized into the law, as a way of preventing arbitrary action or sabotage by some of the agencies.

g. More importantly, government at all levels, need to build citizens' confidence in governance by implementing pro-people policies that will elicit citizens' interests in political and democratic process. Loss of interests in elections is usually preceded by citizens' loss of confidence in governance and government's policies. Therefore, better governance elicits improved interests of citizens in elections.

h. More attention and priority need to be given to the judiciary, particularly the election petition tribunals as they have often been overlooked both by the civil society and development partners.

i. Mobile courts should also be deployed to prosecute electoral offenders on election day.

## **Political Parties**

- a. Political parties should also be proactive in addressing electoral violence and other anomalies that prevent the full participation of citizens in the electoral process.
- b. Alternative dispute resolution mechanisms should be explored in addressing intra party grievances within the political parties.
- c. Political parties should actively engage in voter education and mobilization.

## **Security Agencies**

- i. There is no doubt that the role of security agencies cannot be overemphasized in election matters. Therefore, the role of security agencies should be clearly spelt out and defined in our electoral law. The security agencies should not just have a code of conduct for its officers participating in elections, but these codes of conducts should have legal basis upon which offenders can be punished or prosecuted.
- ii. Security agencies should also improve their public image and better conducts in the discharge of their duties as a way of giving citizens confidence in their conducts during elections.
- iii. The welfare of security personnel deployed for elections should be prioritized and adequately catered for so as their poor welfare makes them vulnerable and willing tools in the hands of politicians who are looking to undermine the electoral process.

## **Civil Society**

- I. The civil society has important role to play in ensuring improvement in civic participation in electoral process, by supporting the EMB in enlightenment and advocacy.
- II. The civil society must serve as watchdog for EMB, government and security agencies by ensuring that they serve public interests and follow laid down rules and regulations of election.
- III. The civil society must raise advocacy for improved legislation that will deepen the transparency of the electoral process.
- IV. The civil society must also partner with the EMB and other agencies in regular review and research to improve the electoral process.
- V. The civil society must lead the campaign for better governance as a way of ensuring that democratic experiment better the lots of the citizens. This is necessary in building citizens' confidence in governance, which will also reflect in participation in elections.
- VI. Religious and Traditional leaders should also be engaged in programmes aimed at increasing civic participation in the electoral process.

## REFERENCE

- Akinyemi, S. (2019). Voter Apathy: A Threat to democracy in Nigeria. 24 April, 2019. Democracy in Africa. [www.democracyinafrica.org](http://www.democracyinafrica.org). Accessed 13 September, 2020.
- Amdi, S (2014) Democracy and Elections in Nigeria: A Study of Voter Turnout in the Fourth Republic. Ahmadu Bello University; Degree Project
- Budgit. (2019). 2019 Election Fact-book: What's at Stake? [www.yourbudgit.org](http://www.yourbudgit.org). Accessed 16 September, 2020.
- Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD). 2019. Nigeria Election Trend. [www.cddwestafrica.org](http://www.cddwestafrica.org). Accessed, 12 September, 2020.
- EU. (2003). Nigeria Presidential and Gubernatorial Elections 2003: EU Election Observation Mission Second Preliminary Statement. 22 April, 2003. EU Election Observation Mission to Nigeria 2003. [www.eueomnigeria.org](http://www.eueomnigeria.org). Accessed, 13 September, 2020.
- Fagunwa C.T. 2016. Voter Apathy and Nigeria's Electioneering Process: A Synopsis on the 2015 General Elections. Academic Paper. Accessed 12 September, 2020.
- Falade, D.A. (2015). Political Participation in Nigerian Democracy: A Study of Some Selected Local Government Areas in Ondo State, Nigeria. Global Journal of Human-Social Science Research, 14(8), 16-23.
- INEC. (2020). Policy on Conducting Elections in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic. May, 2020. [www.inecnigeria.org](http://www.inecnigeria.org). Accessed 16 September, 2020
- IRI. (2007). Federal Republic of Nigeria State and National Elections (April 14 and 21, 2007): Election Observation Mission Final Report. The International Republican Institute (IRI). [www.iri.org](http://www.iri.org). Accessed 12 September, 2020
- Isiaq, A. A; Adebisi M.O, and Bakare R.A. 2018. Ethnicity and Election Outcome in Nigeria: Interrogating the 2015 Election Outcome in Nigeria. *Journal of African Elections*. DOI: 10.20940/JAE/2018/v17i1a6
- Powell, G. B. (1986). American voter turnout in comparative perspective. *American political science review* 80(1), 17-43.
- Ujo, A. A (2008), 'The Meaning and Importance of Voting in the Process of Democratic Governance', *Nigerian Electoral Journal*, Vol. 2, no.1, pp. 62-72.
- Yiaga. (2019). Election Assessment Report: Understanding the 2019 Nigerian Elections. [www.yiaga.org](http://www.yiaga.org)
- YIAGA. (2019). Factsheet on Youth and the 2019 Elections in Nigeria. February, 2019. [www.yiaga.org](http://www.yiaga.org). Accessed 15 September, 2020
- YIAGA. (2020). What data tells us about the 2020 Edo Governorship Election. September, 2020. [www.watchingthevote.org](http://www.watchingthevote.org). Accessed 15 September, 2020.