

The dichotomy of electoral choice in fragmented societies: Prospects of 2023 Nigerian general elections

Dikotomi pilihan pemilu dalam masyarakat yang terfragmentasi: Prospek pemilu Nigeria 2023

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Abstract

Elections in fragmented states are usually contested along the divisive lines present within the geo polity, and this plays an important role in the emergence of political leaders. Nigeria, one of the most heterogeneous countries in the world, has exhibited predominantly ethnic voting since the consolidation of its fourth republic, and this has contributed to mixed socioeconomic and political fortunes. Using a qualitative approach based on secondary sources such as, books, journals, articles, this study highlights that mature democracies exhibit retrospective voting, through which objective scrutiny of government performance in the economy and other aspects of the state is done to determine whether to reward or punish political leaders at the polls. The limitations of primal and ethnic voting considerations in Nigeria, visible in development outcomes, call for a new guardrail to electoral choice. This paper argues the need for economic voting to predominate the ethnic considerations that determine electoral choice, as this can guarantee developmental outputs, and ensure political accountability that benefit the state. This study concludes that, if Nigeria is to experience significant changes in its fortunes going forward, the 2023 elections must change the narrative from non-evaluative considerations to evaluative voting considerations, for positive socioeconomic dividends.

Keywords: democratic consolidation; electoral choice in Nigeria; ethnic voting; political leadership

Abstrak

Pemilihan di negara bagian yang terfragmentasi biasanya diperebutkan di sepanjang garis perpecahan yang ada dalam geopolitik, dan ini memainkan peran penting dalam munculnya pemimpin politik. Nigeria, salah satu negara paling heterogen di dunia menunjukkan pemungutan suara yang didominasi etnis sejak konsolidasi republik keempatnya, dan ini telah berkontribusi pada kekayaan sosial-ekonomi dan politik yang beragam. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berdasarkan sumber-sumber sekunder seperti, buku, jurnal, artikel, penelitian ini menyoroti bahwa demokrasi yang matang menunjukkan pemungutan suara retrospektif, di mana pengawasan objektif terhadap kinerja pemerintah dalam ekonomi dan aspek lain dari negara dilakukan untuk menentukan apakah akan memberi penghargaan atau menghukum para pemimpin politik di tempat pemungutan suara. Keterbatasan pertimbangan pemungutan suara utama dan etnis di Nigeria, yang terlihat dalam hasil pembangunan, memerlukan pegangan tangga baru untuk pilihan elektoral. Makalah ini berpendapat perlunya pemungutan suara ekonomi untuk mendominasi pertimbangan etnis yang menentukan pilihan elektoral, karena hal ini dapat menjamin hasil pembangunan, dan memastikan akuntabilitas politik yang menguntungkan negara. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa jika Nigeria ingin mengalami perubahan signifikan dalam peruntungannya ke depan, pemilu 2023 harus mengubah narasi dari pertimbangan non-evaluatif menjadi pertimbangan pemungutan suara evaluatif, demi keuntungan sosial-ekonomi yang positif.

Kata kunci: konsolidasi demokrasi; pilihan elektoral di Nigeria; pemungutan suara etnis; kepemimpinan politik

Introduction

Nigeria's plural nature, particularly its ethnic and religious diversity, has often been used by the political class for maximum political gains (Agbaje & Adejumobi 2006, Otu et al. 2022). Prior to independence, nationalist leaders used their ethnic power base to rally support for independence and self-determination. This event, with epochal consequences, set a precedent

for political victory centered around divide and rule, using the religious and ethnic variety of Nigerian society. An important implication is that elite power play, while diverse, finds consensus when convenient so as to exploit Nigeria's heterogeneity for electoral gains. Babalola (2020) opines that politicians are always eager to use these primal impulses for mobilization during elections, since ethnic and religious identities are essential to the political elite's calculations of who gets what elective position. Garba (2020) also affirms this, reiterating that a recurrent theme amongst the Nigerian political elite is the uniformity in purpose and values that finds commonality in their acts, with the implication being the perpetual subjugation of the masses to elite manipulation, worsened by the abject poverty awash within the country.

As part of these political calculations, it is plausible to borrow the "elite theory," which contends that society is divided into an upper ruling class and the ruled masses. The ruling class is endowed with power, skill, and knowledge. At the same time, the ruled, constituting the majority, is apathetic and indolent, thus needing to rely on the elite for direction and control (López 2013). Unlike traditional systems in which leaders from the upper class are foisted on the masses, modern democratic systems allow the masses to choose leaders who represent their hopes and aspirations through institutional means (Walker 1966). The advantage of democracy is its fulcrum for increased political participation that allows citizens to appoint their leaders. The rationale rests on informed citizens scrutinizing the emergence process of political leaders to select the best fit for the country's administration. However, as Walker (1966) argues, a successful democracy feeds on citizens' political apathy, allowing for easy manipulation of issues that can be better managed within a small number rather than a collective majority.

Since the establishment of the fourth republic, particularly within the electorate, the Nigerian reality has been characterized by mass political apathy, while ethnic and religious sentiments manipulate the few who participate. According to Obi (2011), election participants are relegated to mere observers or worse, victims of a convoluted political structure that favors hegemonic elite factions and disempowers the majority. Detailing the magnitude of political apathy in Nigeria, Folu (2020) captures that Nigeria's voter participation was 52.3% in 1999, 69.1% in 2003, 57.4% in 2007, 53.7% in 2011, 43.65% in 2015, and 35.6% in 2019. Investigating the causes of political apathy in Nigeria's democratic sphere reveals that low trust in the electoral process, characterized by pre- and post-election violence, combined with disappointments with the government's past performance are some of the main reasons.

It is that apathy, like other divisive tools, is leveraged by politicians for electoral victory, as the indifference of the masses, particularly the educated ones, provides an uncongested pathway for the political elites to control and dictate the narratives that elevate them to political positions. As Walker (1966) states, "a successful politician is a man skilled in negotiation and bargaining various enmities against each other and able to forge temporary coalitions of support for particular programs in a fragmented society with numerous geographic, religious, and racial conflicts." Thus, the success of this scheming is based on citizens' failure to agree on the common good, as the rational common good is subjected to ethnic bias and sentiments, which play suitably for elite manipulation.

As Nigeria approaches another election year, a critical issue at this juncture is the contested question of voters' choice, which has predominantly exhibited ethnic considerations in the past, with little to show for in development. This study, therefore, calls for a new guardrail to making electoral choice, as exhibited in mature democracies which is the evaluative voting determinant reflected in economic voting with significant prospects for political accountability and improved socioeconomic and political development. This paper argues that there is a need for economic voting to predominate the ethnic considerations that determine the electoral choice, as this can guarantee developmental outputs that benefit both the state and society.

Research Method

A qualitative approach is adopted for the study, relying on secondary sources such as books, journals, articles, reports, etc., from Scopus, Google Scholar, etc., critically examined through content analysis, guided by the objective of the study. The study area is Nigeria, located in West Africa. It is the most populated country in Africa and the sixth most populous country in the world, with a land area of 923,769 square kilometers (356,669 sq mi) and a population of nearly 230 million. The country has operated a democratic system of government since 1999, which has seen six election cycles, i.e. from 1999 to 2019, with the 2023 elections set to make it the seventh election.

Results and Discussion

This section discusses the theoretical underpinnings of electoral choice in democracies, which is then followed by an exploration of the dominant factor of electoral choice in the Nigerian scenario. An argument is therefore made for a need to rethink the parameters of making electoral choice in Nigeria, which is the novel contribution of this paper.

Determinants of electoral choice in democracies

Electoral choice in democracies is explained by three major theories - the psychological theory, the sociological theory, and the rational choice theory. Psychological theory places emphasis on the psychological disposition toward individuals; the rational-choice theory of voting behavior sees the individual as a rational human being who is capable of performing a cost-benefit analysis of his voting action, while sociological theory focuses on the nature of the relationship between the individual and the context of the social structure within which he or she exists (Adebiyi 2021). Literature on the determinants of voters' choices in democratic electoral process contend that voters' policy goals usually mediate choice, and voters make choices to increase the likelihood that their policy preferences will be implemented as fully as possible. On the other hand, voters are controlled by emotional and socialized responses, which makes them susceptible to manipulation (in the case of fragmented African societies) (Moon 1990, Basedau et al. 2011). This dichotomy is aptly and holistically captured by Lindberg & Morrison (2008) as "evaluative voting behaviors" and "non-evaluative voting behaviors."

According to Lindberg & Morrison (2008), if voters' behavior is determined by non-evaluative rationales such as ethnic sentiments and patrilineal networks, then the purpose of self-rule by the representative government is defeated. And this perhaps explains the perpetual political underdevelopment of multi-ethnic African states, crippled by mismanagement of resources and the depletion of human capital without stringent consequences for the political class. But then also, the generalized assumption that ethnic and religious concerns predominate in infant/fragmented democracies is disputed in some findings, as Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier (2000) reveal that, when times are very bad, these non-evaluative measures are seconded for evaluative/economic reasons. Several studies on the determinants of electoral choice in Africa highlight the two factors above, with Bratton et al. (2012) summing up that the body of research on voting behavior in Africa is thus contradictory: in some studies, ethnic ties are reported to be more important than economic considerations, while in other assessments, public perceptions of government performance are shown to be more important than ties to language and tribe.

In Nigeria, non-evaluative conditions mediate more on electoral choice, although it does not emanate exclusively from the electorates but is preempted by the complex political arrangement of power oscillation, underpinned by ethnic considerations, particularly for example, the zoning and rotation formula. These arrangements set in motion citizen consideration for individuals

from their ethnic base, which continues to foster the primacy of ethnic consideration for electoral choice rather than the capacity and expertise needed to govern. This is not to say that the evaluative and performance conditions are not considered; if they are, they are submerged by the non-evaluative conditions of ethnicity and tribalism, and second, they appeal less to electorates when considering their choice for political office.

Evaluative/performance determinants

The evaluative/performance facet of voters' choice, according to Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier (2000) states that citizens vote for the government if the economy is doing well and vote against it if otherwise. Within the economic voter hypothesis, the argument is that voters evaluate macroeconomic indices such as inflation, unemployment, GDP growth, etc., and citizens' dissatisfaction with the government's economic performance increases the probability of a vote against the incumbent candidate of the party and the continuation of such a party in subsequent elections. Voters evaluate the state of the nation's economy and either reward or punish the politicians. Citizens consider several socioeconomic indicators when assessing the state of the economy to decide whether to reward or punish at the ballot box (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier 2000). This economic dimension, according to the economic voter hypothesis, provides the fulcrum for making decisions about whether to maintain continuity with a particular party or candidate or make a new choice that will better respond to the socioeconomic needs of citizens.

Lynge & i Coma (2022) explain two competing ideas in the literature on economic voting: the mobilization hypothesis and the withdrawal hypothesis. The mobilization hypothesis holds that severe economic circumstances prompt citizens to vote en masse. In contrast, the withdrawal hypothesis contends that economic downturns disenfranchise citizens from the electoral process. Similarly, the authors contend that African voters are more inclined to cast ballots during economic booms than during recessions, and this refutes the assertions that African voters do not react to changes in aggregate economic indices. The effect of the withdrawal hypothesis is that political accountability is decreased when individuals "leave" the election process, which prevents the government from being held accountable for its bad economic performance or allows for other means of dissent, such as uprisings (Lynge & i Coma 2022).

The economic basis for decision-making is informed by rational choice, with the stimulus for electoral preference determined not by partisan preferences or some constructed identity claims but by rational judgments of individual well-being situated within the government's overall economic performance. In this situation, the voter makes every effort to assure the victory of the party or candidate they believe would look out for their overall well-being, guaranteed by positive economic growth and development. Additionally, this behavior is compared to that of a consumer who makes a rational decision in the market. Therefore, the rational voter attempts as much as possible to invest his or her vote in a candidate who he or she believes can meet his or her wants, just as the economic consumer strives to maximize the utility of goods even when he or she is paying less (Adebiyi 2021).

Furthermore, as with economic posterity, Lindberg & Morrison (2008) argue that government performance under the rationale of evaluative voting behavior demands that citizens be prompted to vote for a government with a track record of performance over any primordial consideration. The criteria for performance measurement include postulations like "it is the best," "they are doing well," "we need them to develop further," or "the opposition cannot govern well." And the consistency of these is critical for aggregating citizen votes to elect capable candidates to power. In cases where the candidate is not the incumbent, the candidate's previous political performance can be evaluated and then projected to determine the candidate's

performance capability based on past accomplishments. Similarly, Wolfers (2002), using the principal-agent lens for evaluating performance, ascertains that to remove incompetent or rent-seeking incumbents and to provide incentives that encourage work, sensible voters would tie their vote to observable outcomes that reflect competence and effort.

Studying the link between economic downturns and voter turnout is essential to understanding how elections function in Africa from the standpoint of political accountability. Political accountability is diminished if low voter turnout is a result of bad economic performance. Therefore, African countries, particularly Nigeria, must adopt economic voting, as this is a necessary democratic tool for ensuring political accountability and a responsive government.

Inferred from the above economic/performance metric of analyzing voters' choices is that the economic voting dimension holds a prominent place in the decision of voters' preferences, which is usually a reward or punishment tool. Simply put, the economy determines whether an election is won or lost. A recession increases voter turnout, as citizens punish governments for bad economic performance but do not always reward success. And when circumstances are tough, economic conditions may be significantly more important, as a driver of the vote in developing countries than in developed countries (Bratton et al. 2012).

Non-evaluative/primordial determinants

Olasile & Adebayo (2016) contend that primordial factors such as ethnicity, despite the growing influences of westernization in both values and thought, form the basis of African society, influencing the way communities, cultures, economies, and political structures are organized. It also influences how Africans perceive the world, establishes their worldview, and determines their capacity to understand and interpret their surroundings. Thus, there is a deep-rooted affinity within the African man for his cultural and ethnic background, to the extent that this predominates his decisions, particularly in competition for scarce resources such as political power.

In elections, particularly within the African political space, Lipset & Rokkan (1967 as cited in Olasile & Adebayo 2016), argue that the number of political parties in a given polity is determined by cleavage structures, particularly ethnicity, which significantly influences voting behavior. In other words, political parties develop in response to social cleavages. This has been evident within the Nigerian political landscape since pre-independence, which shows that the historical emergence of political parties in the country followed ethnic cleavages. The NCNC, founded in 1944 by Dr. Azikiwe, represented Eastern interests, while the Action Group (AG) and Northern People's Congress (NPC) of the West and North, respectively, emerged from ethnic sociopolitical organizations. The NPC, founded in 1951, emerged from the Jamiyyar Mutanen Arewa, while the AG, founded in 1948, emerged from the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, a Yoruba socio-cultural group (Iwundu 2010). Despite the government's efforts to nationalize political parties and eliminate ethnically constituted parties, this pattern became the foundation of party formations in subsequent democratic republics, with ethnicity a principal factor in the country's electoral process, and a dominant signifier of electoral choice.

Ferree et al. (2009) maintain that ethnicity provides a strong predictor of vote choice in fragmented and nascent democracies, prompted by identity and policy favoritism. Given the nature of African fragmented societies, voting based on a strong identity can be viewed as a rational choice, given the fears of domination by another ethnic group, which primes individuals to play safe, and vote for their kin and kith. Voting off patronage or policy favoritism, on the other hand, festers patrimonial and neo-patrimonial networks that leave a few enriched and the majority disadvantaged. According to Adebisi (2021), African politicians use patronage and clientelism as tactics to allocate social and public goods and services to members of

their ethnic group for short- and long-term benefits, including electoral victory. Voters then choose representatives based on how effective they are as patrons, which breeds some forms of mutual allegiance. This creates undemocratic cultures, where, for instance, political leaders, particularly in multiparty systems in Africa, spend a significant portion of their campaign budget on individualized networks to reach the vast majority of the masses that these networks represent. These networks, in turn, influence the choice of the masses, particularly in rural areas, in a phenomenon that Lindberg & Morrison (2008) describe as “voting by proxy,” where a voter blindly follows the example of a close family member or kin, thus etching the preponderance of non-evaluative voting.

The dialectic between evaluative and non-evaluative voting, and the manner adopted above as mutually exclusives, should not be taken as absolutes. It has only been espoused for this study as contrasts, as there are still other factors like gender, charisma, social status, money, religion, etc., that determine the electoral choice. Furthermore, their classification as evaluative and non-evaluative is subjective, as it has been argued above that ethnic consideration can also be evaluative given the propensity for domination by another ethnic group in power against groups not in power, which then prompts locals to, in a bid to protect their interests, vote for their ethnic kin and kith, and this is rational in ethnically fragmented states.

One attests that democracy in heterogeneous societies is encumbered by factors that make the emergence of the “best candidate” difficult, which can fairly and only emerge when critical factors, not driven by sentiment, are used to scrutinize candidates. And these factors are those that properly evaluate the performance capacity, based on the ability to govern and derive results from past experiences or knowledge of proposed sound policy programs that respond to societal needs. Both evaluative and non-evaluative dichotomies, according to Ferree et al. (2009), present important insights into the behavior of African voters, particularly in Nigeria. Therefore, the next section takes a comprehensive look at the pattern of electoral choice determinants in the country since 1999, which to date makes up twenty-four years of uninterrupted democratic rule with six elections, four administrations, and mixed fortunes in the country’s political leadership.

Evaluative and non-evaluative voting in Nigeria since the fourth republic (1999 till date)

Isiaq et al. (2018) argue that not only ethnicity or economic factors determine voters’ behavior; other factors such as money, religion, social status, gender, political party affiliation, and charisma also shape voters’ decisions in Nigeria. For example, money politics in Nigeria is a significant determinant of electoral choice, which has dominated the political space since the fourth republic. Similarly, charisma, enabled by a special characteristic of political leaders, endears citizens to political candidates and determines electoral choice, the pros and cons of charismatic determinants and leadership are explored in depth by Osaghae (2010). While all of the factors mentioned above play a role in determining voters’ decisions and election results, ethnicity has a much more significant impact on voters’ choice and political affiliation (Babalola 2020).

Elections have been held in Nigeria six times since the fourth republic, with each electoral year preceded by socioeconomic and political conditions influencing apathy, turnout, and choice. Nigeria has had mixed socioeconomic fortunes under various administrations, oscillating between economic booms and busts. Economic condition has rarely determined the course of citizen choice at the polls, while largely exhibiting ethnic voting (Rhee 2021). This aligns with the ethnic voting arguments, of nascent democracies and fragmented states in Africa. As a result, this section examines the voting pattern since the 1999 elections to highlight how votes for winners and runners-up were distributed and the influence of evaluative or non-evaluative voting factors.

Ihonvbere (1999) contends that the 1999 elections manifested pathologies, such as a lack of political discipline, manipulation of primal identities and loyalties, corruption, etc. Events around the 1999 general elections, particularly the emergence of candidates, were mediated more by the choice of the country's political elites, mainly in response to events in the military years, and were more of an appeasement strategy than an actual democratic selection. The most remarkable event was the annulment of the June 12, 1993, general elections, interpreted as an outright denial of the citizen's choice, particularly given the candidate's southern background and western origin. Addressing it necessitated a unanimous acceptance within the political elite of the need for power to be shifted to the south and also to compensate for the long years of northern political hegemony (Yagboyaju 2015).

Nonetheless, the parties at the beginning of the fourth republic were ethnically diverse. The All Peoples Party (APP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AD) were aligned to the north and west, respectively, while the People's Democratic Party (PDP) was the only party with a federal spread. This national spread, therefore, guaranteed its victory, bringing Olusegun Obasanjo into power. According to Isiaq et al. (2018), only the PDP could secure a majority across all six geopolitical regions of Nigeria, giving it a Pan-Nigeria mandate.

Looking at the pattern of votes cast, the south-south, north-central, south-east, and north-east geopolitical zones provided the PDP with most electoral support. Most of the support for the AD/APP came from the south-west geopolitical zone, where Olu Falaye, a former Secretary General of the Federation, served as its flag bearer. The southwest region voted en masse for Olu Faale due to his popular acceptance, but denied Obasanjo their votes. This thus signified an ethnic determinant of choice for the AD/APP candidate, although, not sufficient to guarantee him electoral victory. As argued earlier, the national spread of the PDP and its political might, backed by the old Northern Military Oligarchy, guaranteed its victory, thus suppressing the outright emergence of a presidential candidate based on ethnic preference, and this corroborates Nwankwo's (2019) argument that ethnicity and religion were not dominant during the 1999 elections.

The 2003 elections marked a significant epoch in Nigeria's political history, given the continuity of democratic governance. The election, marred by wide-scale electoral malpractice (Ezeani 2005), was won by the incumbent president, Obasanjo, with Muhammadu Buhari and Ojukwu coming in second and third, respectively. The top three candidates from these elections represented the dominant ethnic tribes within the country, with Obasanjo representing the Yoruba, Buhari Hausa/Fulani, and Ojukwu the Igbo. The 2003 elections saw some homogenous ethnic voting reflected in the north-west geopolitical zone in support of Muhammadu Buhari. The PDP ultimately won all the states in the north-central zone and the south-east despite Ojukwu's contest. In the south-west and the south-south, the PDP received over 90% of the votes, signifying the preference of the south for one of their own (Nwankwo 2019).

The 2007 elections also had precedents similar to the 1999 and 2003 general elections. According to Omotola (2009), Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'Adua defeated his fellow northern candidates, General Muhammadu Buhari of the Action Congress (AC) and Alhaji Abubakar Atiku of the All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP). The results of the 2007 elections are not, however, available to analyze the pattern of citizens' electoral choices (Nwankwo 2019). The 2011 election, hailed as the best-run in Nigerian political history, turned out voters to cast their ballots in what was a straightforward race between President Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP and Muhammadu Buhari of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) (Okolo & Onunkwo 2011). The downside of this election was the post-election violence. Jonathan's emergence saw him win massive votes in the country's southern parts, particularly in the south-east and

south-south, as well as five out of the six states in the south-west geopolitical zone, including the PDP's dominant north central region, while the north-west and a significant portion of the north-east voted for the northern candidates, Buhari and Nuhu Ribadu, respectively.

The 2015 presidential election marked the first time in Nigerian history that an opposition candidate beat an incumbent president. The two front-runners were the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP, and Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressive Congress (APC), both well-liked in their corresponding geopolitical areas (Babalola 2020). It could also be fairly argued that the socioeconomic conditions surrounding the elections in 2015 contributed significantly to the loss of President Jonathan, fitting the evaluative voting choice determinant of retrospective evaluation. Jonathan's performance in the polls was impacted by problems with corruption, bad governance, poor economy, and security, which significantly contributed to his loss.

In the 2015 elections, Buhari received 54% of the total number of valid votes cast, Jonathan, the PDP presidential candidate, 45% of all valid ballots cast and Buhari received a total of 4,377,200 votes, including 1,127,760 votes in Kaduna, 1,903,999 votes in Kano, and 1,345,441 votes in Katsina. In contrast, Jonathan won 953,304 votes in Akwa-Ibom, 1,211,405 in Delta, and 1,487,075 in Rivers states. In total, 3,651,784 people voted. This suggested that Buhari received almost 28% of his votes from just three north-west states, including his home state of Katsina. Similarly, three states in the south-south geopolitical zone provided 28% of the votes that Goodluck Jonathan garnered overall. Bias, based on geography and ethnicity, might be said to be the cause of this (Isiaq et al. 2018). In Nwankwo's (2019) view, this election highlights that voters' decisions were greatly influenced by their religious and ethnic beliefs. Thus, Olusola (2015) concludes that the results of the 2015 general elections demonstrated unequivocally that ethnic and regional attitudes dominated voting patterns and political engagement across the board.

Ninety-one political parties contested the 2019 elections, while the two major competitors remained the ruling APC and the main opposition PDP. Both candidates were northern Fulani Muslims, with vice presidents from the south, Yemi Osinbajo and Peter Obi representing the west and east, respectively (Babalola 2020). Before this election, Buhari's administration had earned a reputation for being ineffective, manifesting in the economy's poor state, the farmer-herdsmen conflict, blatant nepotism, among others. Muhammadu Buhari, the nominee for the APC presidential nomination, received 55.6%, of all valid votes while Atiku Abubakar, his main rival, received 41.2%. The results of the presidential election revealed a voting pattern of bloc votes for each of the top contenders in particular geopolitical regions of the nation. The PDP candidate received the most of his votes from the south-east and south-south geopolitical zones. In contrast, Muhammadu Buhari received most of his votes from the north-west and north-east geopolitical zones. The north-central and south-west results revealed that these were primarily battleground states (Adebiyi 2021).

The 2019 elections show a complete lack of retrospective evaluation, given the dwindling state of the economy, and the general quality of life. President Buhari and the APC secured considerable victory at the polls, particularly in the north, which was also a victim of the ineptitude and inefficiency of the government. There were signs of retrospective evaluation in the north-central, ravaged by the herdsmen crisis, as well as in the south-west and south-south, which were battleground states between the APC and the PDP but were won by the APC. It shows, therefore, the preponderance of ethnic voting over evaluative rationales of economic and social well-being, which has only worsened since then, and makes it imperative to evaluate the current state of affairs in the country, and pattern the likely determinant option toward the 2023 elections.

Prospects for 2023

In anticipation of the 2023 elections, Sule (2019) predicts that the voting trend will change, with a southwestern candidate as a major contender for the first time since 2003, and a higher voter participation in the west than the north. He made this assertion on the impression of the prevalent ethnic voting that has become a popular phenomenon with Nigeria's elections, particularly with the manipulation of religion and ethnicity which has been a staple of politics for decades, reinforced by Lynge & i Coma (2022) that African voters are "unique," motivated more by informal institutions than by economic concerns. But given the unfortunate economic realities of the Nigerian people in the last eight years, it begs the question asked by Yagboyaju (2015) on the importance of economic factors in voters' decisions.

As stated earlier, economic voting is predicated on the idea that voters will evaluate politicians' past performance and decide whether to reward or punish them. Recent arguments on economic voting in Africa posit that economic voting involves a complex causal chain with at least four shifts which proceeds by objective assessment of the economy, subjective assessments of the economy and politicians' performance, and ultimately, political action at the polls. Moving from objective economic performance to individual-level political conduct and decision-making requires at least three phases in order to do this. To establish one's own subjective economic appraisal, one must first gather and interpret information about objective economic performance. As a result, the subjective economic assessment must impact how voters evaluate their representatives. In order for this to be the case, it is necessary to be able to accurately assign blame in addition to being able to connect economic performance to political performance. Last but not least, political actions such as voting and turnout must be translated with the performance evaluation of the politician. Therefore, for economic voting to be effective, subjective impressions should count at least as much as actual objective economic situations or vote choices (Rhee 2021).

The lived experiences of Nigerians, particularly in relation to the economic circumstance, manifest poor standards of living, corroborated by the 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index, which reveals that Nigeria is home to 133 million people, 63% of whom live in multidimensional poverty. The north is home to 65% of the impoverished (86 million people), whereas the south is home to 35% (almost 47 million people) (National Bureau of Statistics 2022). The data holistically capture the objective and subjective condition and, by extension, assessment by citizens of the dire state of the Nigerian economy. Popular opinion also ties this to the performance of the incumbent president, particularly with the administration's gross mismanagement of the economy, and the deteriorating levels of security, which hampers economic productivity. Thus the causal conditions for economic voting to take place are already set, expected to translate to action at the polls. Given the hypothesis of the economic voting, therefore, poor economic performance should be punished.

It is noted that the PDP's sixteen-year dominance was ended by the merger of the CPC and ACN, which became the APC in 2015. Several factors led to the end of the PDP's dynasty, particularly the sorry state of economic and political conditions, which necessitated a national demand for change. The country was ravaged by heightened levels of insecurity, particularly the insurgency in the north, wanton corruption, and weak leadership. The result of this at the polls was a defeat for the incumbent president and his party, the first time in Nigeria's democratic history that an incumbent president was voted out of power. Voter turnout at the 2015 elections was 43.65%, signifying a decline from the 2011 elections, which confirms the withdrawal hypothesis of the performance evaluation of an incumbent administration, and further confirms

the economic voting output, which could be withdrawal or mobilization. Nonetheless, this change in leadership heralded a growth in the consolidation of democratic practice in Nigeria, signaling a healthy democratic and political atmosphere.

Unfortunately, Nigerians' high hopes for the resuscitation of the perceived political and socioeconomic decline of the Jonathan years were dashed with the subsequent administration of the APC under President Muhamad Buhari, which has witnessed one of the worst fortunes in the lives of Nigerian citizens for the past eight years. Every sector of the Nigerian state and society became encumbered with atrocities of all sorts, including but not limited to corruption, highhandedness, blatant disregard for the rule of law, a poor economy, rising levels of unemployment, and inflation. The most perilous of all is the country's deteriorating security situation, which, in addition to the terrorism has seen new forms of security threats such as Fulani herdsmen, banditry, and kidnapping, accompanied by wanton destruction of livelihood. Its economic impact is glaring, which has partially contributed to citizen emigration from the country, low living standards and other unpleasant socio-economic and political conditions.

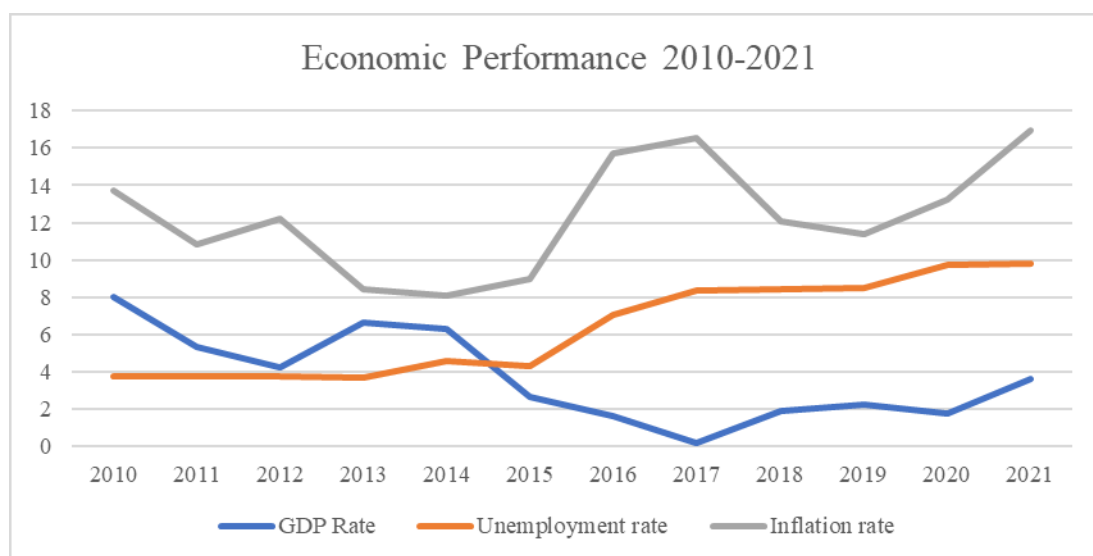


Figure 1.
Nigeria's Economic Performance Indicators 2010-2021
Source: World Bank Annual Macro Trends, The World Bank (n.d)

Figure 1 above presents World Bank data showing key economic variables in the past 10 years. There has been a steady decline in the country's GDP rate, an increase in unemployment, and a corresponding increase in inflation rate since the Buhari administration, which has driven a substantial number of the Nigerian population into severe poverty conditions and socioeconomic hardships. Response to this is expected through significant mobilization of voters toward the polls and the current data are glaring evidence of this, indicating an increase in voter registration, with youths making up 71% of the 12 million new applications for Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs), bringing the country's total number of registered voters to 96.2 million (Akwushola 2022).

A detailed breakdown of this increase compared to the 2019 elections shows that the north-west had 20.15 million registered voters for the 2019 elections. However, the most recent INEC report revealed that 2.5 million new voters registered, raising the total number of registered voters in the region to 22.67 million. With the addition of 2,039,982 new registered voters, the south-west had 16.29 million voters at the time; now it is 18.3 million. The south-south now has 15.2 million registered voters, an increase from the previous zone's 12.8 million. The north-east added 1.5 million additional voters to reach 12.8 million registered voters, while the north-central currently has 14.1 million voters. Registered voters in the Federal Capital

Territory climbed from 1.3 million to 1.5 million, the south-east has 11.49 million voters (INEC 2022). The increase in the collection of voter cards will not necessarily translate to action at the polls, as is well evident in the country's past election. Nonetheless, it signifies a potential for increased mobilization to vote, and also respond rationally to the outcomes of the past years.

Given the data, there seems to be an enthusiastic mobilization fostered by the need for a new change in the country's economic fortunes, of which the citizens have become the greatest victims. This has spurred a quiet revolution, strengthened by the emergence of a third political force with a record of prudent economic management. One would not still downplay the potential effect of ethnicity being a determining factor in the polls, but it would be fair to assume, from a rational point of view and from the lived experiences of Nigerians for the past eight years, that the primary condition for determining electoral choice in the approaching elections should be competence and performance capacity, particularly in the economic sphere, and a leader with capacity to deal with pressing national problems such as the lingering national security and the massive levels of corruption.

Conclusion

The 2023 election marks a probable turning point in the Nigerian democratic experience. The possibility of economic voting superintending ethnic and religious voting, which have been defining features of the Nigerian electoral scene, is heightened by citizens' conscious need for the economy to be resuscitated, given the dismal performance of the Nigerian economy under the previous administrations. Given that elections and the aggregate choice of electorates enable democratic transitions, the determinant factor in this choice plays a significant role in the emergence of a leader. Certain of the need to change the fortunes of the Nigerian political and economic scene, citizens' choice must exhibit elements of economic voting, by retrospectively evaluating the performance of the outgoing administration, and weighing the pros and cons of continuity under the leadership of same party, vis a vis options on the ballot. The potential of this is increased political accountability, which is key to regulating the conduct of elected officials and ensuring they deliver on their proposed mandates. This will also be key to their future electoral chances, as citizens will be more constrained in rewarding performance and output rather than primal considerations that contribute minimally to development and continue to be responsible for the perpetual subjugation of the masses to severe poverty and a general national underdevelopment.

The study discusses a new parameter for making electoral choices in Nigeria, and within the Nigerian political, academic literature, contributes to existing discourse on election choice determinants and the need to emphasise retrospective voting, which enhances political accountability and government responsiveness. Therefore, the recommendations from this study include the need to improve civic education and voter Awareness, as citizens must be educated on the importance of their votes and how their decisions affect the economy and overall well-being. Second, it is important to establish and empower independent electoral bodies responsible for organising and overseeing the electoral process to ensure free, fair, and transparent elections. These bodies should be free of political interference and appropriately supported to carry out their duties successfully. This will lead to a more accountable and responsive political system prioritising the nation's economic growth and development. Third, civil society groups should encourage citizens' objective performance and evaluation to encourage economic voting. Citizens can make more informed decisions during elections if the government's economic performance is open and reliable. Fourth, political parties should be encouraged to publish clear and extensive manifestos explaining their economic intentions and strategies, which should be freely accessible to the public. Finally, Nigeria can cultivate

a democratic experience that switches the focus from ethnic and religious voting to economic voting, resulting in more accountable leadership and, as a result, higher economic performance and growth possibilities for the country.

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