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# Exploring Voter Apathy and Political Participation: A Study of 2023 Gubernatorial Election in the Southeast Region of Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

Voter apathy and political participation in Nigeria have remained major concerns for many years. However, previous studies have been plagued by conflicting and inconclusive findings regarding the dominant causes of voter apathy. This study examined voter apathy and political participation during the 2023 gubernatorial elections in the Southeast region of Nigeria. Utilizing secondary data collection methods and guided by Rational Choice Theory, data were sourced from textbooks, journal articles, bulletins, working papers, and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) website. The findings revealed a generally very low voter turnout across the region, with Abia State recording the lowest turnout. The study further observed that the proportion of rejected votes was minimal in all three states (Abia, Ebonyi, and Enugu), and notably, over 75% of registered voters did not vote. The study concluded that several factors that contributed to the high level of voter apathy and low political participation, include disillusionment with political candidates and parties, fear of violence or insecurity, logistical challenges at polling units, mistrust in INEC and the overall electoral process, and the negative effects on political representation. Addressing these challenges is crucial for fostering a healthy democracy and promoting sustainable growth and development in Nigeria. Therefore, the study recommended the following: Increase voter education and awareness campaigns, Improve the credibility of the electoral process, insecurity and threats at polling units, Enhance accessibility to voting centres and processes, Monitor and address political disenfranchisement

**Keywords:** Gubernatorial election, Nigeria, Political Participation, South- East, Voter Apathy, Voter intimidation

### Introduction

Voter apathy is a worrisome issue in contemporary politics in Nigeria, low voter turnout has been a significant challenge and a major danger to the stability and authenticity of democratic governance. Voter apathy and political participation are significant issues in the southeastern region of Nigeria. Low levels of political engagement and voter turnout endanger the legitimacy and stability of democratic governance in the region. Even though Nigeria is the largest democracy in Africa, the southeastern region has witnessed a long-standing history of political marginalization, social tension, and economic inequality. This has led to a lack of trust and confidence in the political system and a sense of political disengagement among the electorate. This paper aims to explore the theoretical framework for understanding the causes of voter apathy and political participation in the southeastern region of Nigeria. By examining social capital theory, rational choice theory, and political efficacy theory, this paper seeks to shed light on the factors that contribute to low voter turnout and political apathy in this region.

Voter apathy and low political participation have been major challenges in Nigeria's democratic governance. For instance, in a study, Adepoju (2017), enlisted the reasons for voter apathy and low political participation in Nigeria to include voter disillusionment, political corruption, and lack of civic education, poverty, and violence during elections. These issues have led to low voter turnout, low political party membership, and low community involvement in political affairs. Similarly, Olekanma and Okafor (2016) found that a lack of trust in the political system was one of the prominent reasons for voter apathy in Nigeria. The study further revealed that the majority of voters did not believe their votes would change the outcome of the elections. The authors suggested that increasing trust in the system and improving the transparency of the electoral process could improve electoral participation.

In another study, Agbese and Egba (2016) revealed that poverty and illiteracy were the major factors contributing to low voter turnout in Nigeria. They noted that the inability of many Nigerians to access basic social amenities such as healthcare, education, and housing is responsible for voter's apathy. They recommended that the government should prioritize these basic needs to encourage citizens' participation in politics. Additionally, Kondowe (2016) found that a lack of civic education was another significant factor affecting political participation in Nigeria. The author suggested that providing civic education to individuals would enable them to understand the electoral system and the importance of their participation in the process. Civic education can also empower citizens to monitor their elected officials and hold them accountable for their actions.

Furthermore, Olatunji and Adeoye (2018) identified electoral violence as a significant barrier to voter participation in Nigeria. The authors further noted that the fear of violence during election periods could deter citizens from participating in the electoral process. They suggested that the government must provide adequate security for citizens during elections to ensure their safety and encourage them to vote.

However, Ngara and Udefuna (2012) examined low voter turnout in the 2019 general election in Nigeria. The study employed both quantitative and qualitative data, and the finding of the study revealed that the 2019 general election believed that votes do not count; again the study further revealed that the Non-Independence of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and inadequate security arrangements at the polling centers accounted for low voter turnout in the 2019 general election. In another study, Adeyemi and Salawudeen (2020) examined the causes of voter apathy among the electorates. Utilizing survey research design and descriptive statistics, the results suggest a moderate level of voter apathy among the electorates. They also indicated that the educational qualification is a key determinant of the level of voter apathy among the electorates. Again, Yakubu (2012) investigated democracy and political apathy in Nigeria between 1999 and 2011. Utilizing content analysis, the findings revealed that bad governance was the cause of political apathy.

On the contrary, Agu, Okeke, and Idike (2013) analyzed the cause of voter's apathy. Utilizing descriptive statistics, the findings indicated a significant relationship between voter age, occupation, gender and political apathy. The study of Omotola and Aiyedogbun (2012) examined political participation and voter's turnout in Nigeria's 2011 election. Using simple percentage and content analysis, the study found out that there were unprecedented significant spatial variants in the level of voter's turnout in the 2011 Presidential election. It further revealed that voters turnout were higher in the south-south and south-east than in other geopolitical zones leading to the accusation that the election were rigged in favour of the incumbent. However in another study, Oguchi and Jooji (2020) investigated voter's registration apathy and credibility of the Nigerian Electoral System. Utilizing secondary sources of data, and content analysis, the findings revealed that the electoral system in Nigeria is not credible as most eligible voters in the Southeastern states have lost confidence in the system. Similarly, Nwokike, Ezeneme and Alokwu (2022) examined voter's apathy in Anambra State Gubernatorial Elections from 2010 to 2021. Employing rational choice theory and secondary sources of data collection and the result indicated a decline in voter turnout; again, the study conducted by Okafor, Odogbo and Okeke (2022) examined voter apathy in Nigeria's electoral democracy. The study utilized documentary method of data collection and adopted decision making theory as the theoretical context on which the study was anchored. The study revealed that there was an increase in voter's apathy from year to year. Collaboratively, Chiamogu (2018) analyzed voter's turnout and the 2017 gubernatorial election in Anambra State. Employing secondary sources of data and descriptive analysis and the result revealed low voters turnout. In a related study, Ngene, Otu, and Nicholas (2024) examined the causes and implications of voters apathy in Ebonyi state. Utilizing social contract theory and inferential statistics, the findings suggested that political apathy is high in Ebonyi state and that factors such as inadequate political orientation and poor leadership are the main causes of political apathy.

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### Identified Gap Fragmented and Conflicting Findings:

The studies reviewed produced conflicting and inconclusive findings regarding the dominant causes of voter apathy. While some emphasize poverty, illiteracy, and lack of civic education (Agbese & Egba, 2016; Kondowe, 2016), others highlighted distrust in the electoral system (Olekanma & Okafor, 2016; Oguchi & Jooji, 2020) and electoral violence (Olatunji & Adeoye, 2018). This fragmentation limits generalizability and policy implementation.

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### Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Rational Choice Theory, this Theory propounded by (Downs, 1957; Green, & Shapiro, 1994 & Riker, 1996). This theory posits that individuals make decisions based on maximizing their own self-interest by weighing the costs and benefits of various choices. In the context of elections, voters are seen as rational actors who evaluate the costs and benefits of participating in the electoral process. Factors such as the perceived effectiveness of their vote, the likelihood of their preferred candidate winning, and the perceived impact of the election on their lives influence their decision to participate or abstain.

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### Application:

In the context of the Southeast Gubernatorial Election 2023, Rational Choice Theory analyzed how voter behaviour, and Factors such as voter perceptions of candidate credibility, past election outcomes, issues of corruption, and level of voter education can be examined in order to understand why some voters may choose to be apathetic while others actively participate in the electoral process

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### Justification.

**Cost-Benefit Analysis:** According to Rational Choice Theory, individuals make decisions based on a rational calculation of costs and benefits. In the case of voter apathy, voters may perceive the costs of participating in the election (e.g., time, effort, perceived impact of their vote) to outweigh the benefits (perceived influence on the outcome, candidate representation of their interests).

**Collective Action Problem:** Voter apathy can also be seen as a collective action problem, where individuals may believe that their single vote will not make a significant difference in the election outcome. This rational calculation can lead to apathy and low political participation.

**Information and Rational Ignorance:** Rational Choice Theory also considers the role of information in decision-making. Voters may choose to abstain from participating

in the election if they feel uninformed about the candidates or issues at stake. This rational ignorance can lead to apathy among voters.

**Opportunity Costs:** Rational Choice Theory also takes into account opportunity costs in decision-making. Voters may choose not to participate in the election if they perceive that their time and energy could be better spent on other activities that offer more immediate benefits.

**Strategic Voting:** In the context of political participation, Rational Choice Theory suggests that voters may strategically decide to participate or abstain from voting based on their assessment of the candidates' policies, the potential outcome of the election, and their own preferences.

**Relevance:** Voter apathy in the Southeast gubernatorial election 2023 may be influenced by a perception that individual votes have little impact on the overall outcome, leading voters to prioritize other activities.

Rational Choice Theory is particularly relevant to understanding voter apathy and political participation as it helped in evaluating individual decision-making processes in a systematic manner.

### Inadequacies of Rational Choice Theory

One of the key criticisms of Rational Choice Theory is that it assumed individuals always act in a rational manner, which may not always be true in real-world situations. Human behavior is complex and influenced by emotions, social norms, and a range of other factors that may not fit neatly into a rational decision-making model.

### Similar Situations where the theory has been applied

Rational Choice Theory has been used in various studies on voter behaviour and political participation around the world. For instance, research on voter turnout in national elections in the United States, European countries, and developing nations has utilized Rational Choice Theory to explain patterns of participation and apathy among diverse populations.

## Materials and Methods

This study obtained secondary data from textbooks, Journal articles INEC websites, magazines, and Newspapers. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics (simple percentages).

## Results and Discussion

Analysis of Voter's Apathy and Political Participation in the 2023 Gubernatorial election in the South East,

States	Total Number of Registered voters A	Accredited votes B	Valid votes C	Rejected votes D	Total votes E	% of total votes cast F	% of valid votes G	% of rejected votes H	% of those who did not vote I
Abia	2,120,808	384,468	370,003	11,648	381,683	18%	17%	0.5%	82%
Ebonyi	1,563,529	337,887	325,352	11,990	337,341	22%	21%	1%	78%
Enugu	2,112,793	482,990	456,424	12,467	468,891	22%	21.6%	0.59%	78%

Table:1

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Source: <https://www.inecnigeria.org/election-results/2023>

Table 2: Percentage Analysis of Voters Apathy and Political Participation in the 2023 Gubernatorial election in the South East

State	% Who Voted (Turnout)	% Who Did Not Vote (Apathy)	% Valid Votes	% Rejected Votes
Abia	18%	82%	17%	0.5%
Ebonyi	22%	78%	21%	1%
Enugu	22%	78%	21.6%	0.59%

**Authors Compilation(2025)**

State	Registered Voters	Total Votes Cast	% Who Voted (Turnout)	% Who Did Not Vote (Apathy)	% Valid Votes	% Rejected Votes
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Ebonyi	1,563,529	337,341	22%	78%	21%	1%
Enugu	2,112,793	468,891	22%	78%	21.6%	0.59%

**Findings**

**Very low voter turnout Generally.** All three states Abia, Ebonyi and Enugu had below 25% participation, indicating high voter apathy.

**Abia had the lowest turnout** at 18%, while **Ebonyi and Enugu had slightly higher** at 22% each.

**Rejected votes are minimal (below 1% in all states)**, suggesting that electoral education on proper voting procedures may not be the main cause of low participation.

**Over 75% of registered voters did not vote** in each state, showing severe political disengagement despite high registration numbers.

The above findings is in accordance with the Rational Choice theory ( Downs, 1957;Green, & Shapiro,1994& Riker, 1996), which posits that individuals make decisions based on maximizing their own self-interest by weighing the costs and benefits of various choices. In the southeast. voters evaluate the costs and benefits of participating in the electoral process. Factors such as the perceived effectiveness of their vote, the likelihood of their preferred candidate winning, and the perceived impact of the election on their lives influenced their decisions to participate or abstain.

**Implications****Possible causes of voter apathy in South East (based on literature and context):**

**Disillusionment with political candidates or parties:**when the citizens feels disappointed as a result of failed promises they loose trust in the political parties, leaders, and the system itself, leading to a sense of futility. This collaborated with Adepoju (2017), whose findings revealed possible causes of voter apathy and low political participation in Nigeria to include voter disillusionment, political corruption, and lack of civic education, poverty, and violence during elections.

**Fear of violence or insecurity at polling units:** The the fear of violence during election periods could discourage citizens from participating in the electoral process. This aligned with the findings of.Olatunji and Adeoye (2018),whose findings identified electoral violence as a significant barrier to voter participation in Nigeria..

**Logistical challenges** (transport, polling unit access, voter suppression tactics).Often times during elections especially in the remote areas,there are usually delays in the arrival of election materials occasioned by poor logistics , bad roads, Thuggery and the fear of being attacked by hoodlums at the polling units

**Poor voter education** about the power of their votes: When the citizens lacks adequate voters civic education ,it could lead to poor voters turnout which invariably result to voters apathy. This concurs with the findings of (Adepoju 2017 .Ngene,;Otu,and Nicholas 2024) , which suggested that political apathy is high in Ebonyi state and that factors such as inadequate political orientation poor leadership and and lack of adequate voters civic education are the main causes of political apathy.

**Mistrust in INEC and the electoral process**, leading to unwillingness to participate. Oguchi and Jooji (2020) , findings revealed that the electoral system in Nigeria is not credible as most eligible voters in the Southeastern states have lost confidence in the system.

**Effect on political representation:**Elected leaders represent only a small proportion of the electorate, Marginalized groups or dissenting voices remained unrepresented, perpetuating feelings of exclusion, thereby reducing the legitimacy of democratic mandates.

**Recommendations**

**1.Increase Voter Education and Awareness Campaigns:**There should be intensive Civic education on the importance of active participation and civic engagement beyond mere registration to campaign and vote casting. Religious, organizations, and youth platforms should also engage their communities in intensive voters education and sensitization

**2.Improve Electoral Process Credibility:**Strengthen INEC transparency, result management, and security to boost confidence. INEC should be very active and apt in terms of Result collation and announcement, there should be no delay in the collation. This is to enhance transparency and increase the trust of the electorates.

**3. Address Insecurity and Threats at Polling Units:**Distribute adequate security operatives to polling units, especially in known points. There should have security coverage in the areas or towns where votes are being cast, this is to ensure the safety of the electorates the, INEC, Adhoc staff, and the election materials

**4.Enhance Accessibility:**Provide logistics support, ensure proportional spread of polling units to enhance easy access of voters to their various units, and ensure facilities are voter-friendly.

**5.Engage Stakeholders:**Traditional rulers, Religious leaders , Chief Security Officers (CSOs), and youth groups, should organize members of their communities for active political engagement.

**6.Monitor and Address Political Disenfranchisement:**Address the issues such as vote buying, voters intimidation,Thuggery, ballot box snatching and all forms of violence, and suppression that discourage voters Participation in the political process.

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## Conclusion

The analysis of the 2023 voter turnout in South East Nigeria revealed a critical challenge of voter apathy, where despite relatively high voter registration, actual participation remained dismally low . This underscores the urgent need for multidimensional interventions focusing on electoral credibility, security, political trust, and civic orientation to strengthen democratic participation in the region.

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