

Voter Turnout and Crisis of Legitimacy: A Critical Analysis of General Elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999-2023)

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Abstract:

Electoral democracy provides an impetus for citizens' participation and the act of choosing political actors across different democracies. Nigeria had transitioned from one civilian administration to another, beginning in 1999 and lasting until 2023. However, the practice of democracy and the conduct of elections appeared challenged even though the electorate "elects" the candidate of their choice in every election circle. Issues such as the imposition of candidates, violence, rigging, and a decline in voter turnout remain major issues of public concern. Previous studies have shown the challenges or factors affecting the conduct of free, fair, and credible elections, which include electoral rigging, imposition of candidates, violence, and low voter turnout, but they have not sufficiently shown how these factors affect the outcome of the election and the legitimacy of the regime change. This study examined how voter participation influenced the crisis of legitimacy in Nigeria's fourth republic elections. In conducting this investigation, the perspective of theorists was delved into as the theoretical foundation of this study, relying on a qualitative approach, using secondary data, and analyzing via content and historical analysis. The study found that low voter turnout influenced the legitimacy of the regime change. The paper recommended that the electoral body and civil society organizations should be more involved in voter education in order to encourage voter turnout and confer legitimacy on the regime change.

Keywords:

Electoral Democracy, Legitimacy, voter turnout, crises of legitimacy, Regime Change.

I. Introduction

The emergence of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999 marked a pivotal turning point in the nation's history, transitioning from decades of military rule to a democratic governance framework. As the nation sought to redefine its political landscape, the series of general elections conducted during this period became critical milestones in determining the course of Nigeria's democratic journey. However, amidst the backdrop of a transitioning political landscape, the concepts of voter turnout and legitimacy have emerged as key points of inquiry, reflecting the intricate interplay between citizen participation and the credibility of elected authorities. Nigeria's post-colonial history has been punctuated by episodes of military intervention and authoritarian rule, with democratic governance often hindered by coups and regime changes. The Fourth Republic ushered in with the adoption of a new constitution in 1999, marking a renewed commitment to democratic principles, human rights, and the rule of law. This era witnessed a series of general elections, ranging from presidential and legislative to gubernatorial, aimed at establishing a representative government that mirrored the aspirations of Nigeria's diverse population (Ibrahim, 2017).

However, this transition to democracy was not without its challenges. Political instability, corruption, ethno-religious tensions, and socio-economic disparities have tested the resilience of Nigeria's democratic institutions. Throughout the Fourth Republic, concerns have been raised regarding the adequacy of electoral processes, the integrity of election outcomes, and the responsiveness of elected representatives to citizens' needs. These challenges have given rise to questions about the legitimacy of governments emerging from the electoral process, and the role that voter turnout plays in either upholding or undermining that legitimacy (Ezeibe, 2015).

Voter turnout, as a measure of citizens' engagement with the democratic process, is a critical indicator of the public's willingness to participate in shaping their governance. High turnout is often interpreted as a sign of active citizenship, reflecting the belief that voting can influence policy outcomes and ensure representation (Franklin, 2004). Conversely, low turnout may point to disaffection, apathy, or disillusionment with the political system (Ojukwu, 2011). The impact of voter turnout on the legitimacy of elected governments is a central concern, as it raises questions about the extent to which those in power enjoy the consent of the governed (EU Election Observation Mission, 2015).

Nigeria's Fourth Republic has witnessed fluctuations in voter turnout across different elections and regions, reflecting a complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors. The varying degrees of engagement present a rich terrain for exploration, shedding light on the motivations and barriers that influence citizen participation. Furthermore, understanding how fluctuations in voter turnout relate to potential crises of legitimacy offers insights into the challenges facing Nigeria's democratic consolidation (Airaoje et al., 2023; Agaigbe, 2015).

Previous studies have shown the challenges or factors affecting the conduct of free, fair, and credible elections, which include electoral rigging, imposition of candidates, intimidation of voters, and low voter turnout, but they have not sufficiently shown how these factors affect the outcome of the election and how this stimulates a crisis of legitimacy in the Nigerian body polity. This study examined how voter turnout influences the crisis of legitimacy in Nigeria's Fourth Republic General Elections (Nwankwo, 2019; Aliyu et al., 2023).

Although the crises that engulf democratic elections are universal, Nigeria has had a relatively unfair share of electoral crises. The trends in voter behavior in Nigeria since 1999 suggest that the dysfunctions in the nation's electoral system have persisted. The high premium placed by political actors on winning at all costs and institutional failures are some of the factors that account for this situation. The resultant effect of all these challenges bedeviling the electoral process and outcome of elections in Nigeria is the crisis of legitimacy of the emerged leaders or the regime change which is necessitated as a result of continuous low voter turnout and refusal of the people to participate in most of the elections conducted in the fourth republic. This is because for any regime to be regarded as being legitimate, it must gain the majority's support since that is what democracy stands for.

This study is sectioned into seven. The first section focuses on the introductory aspect of the paper. The second section explains the theoretical foundation upon which the study hinges. The third section is the methodology employed for the study the fourth section is the clarification of major concepts, the fifth section is based on the review of major literature, and the sixth section discusses the major findings of the study while the seventh section is the conclusion and recommendations of the study.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Social Contract Theory

The social contract theory is a prominent philosophical framework that seeks to explain the origins and legitimacy of political authority and governance in society. Developed by philosophers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, this theory posits that individuals voluntarily enter into a social contract with one another to establish a political order that safeguards their rights and promotes collective well-being. The social contract theory was proposed in different forms by various philosophers over several centuries. The foundational ideas of the social contract can be traced back to the 17th century. Thomas Hobbes, an English philosopher, introduced a version of the social contract theory in his work "Leviathan," published in 1651.

John Locke, another English philosopher, developed his interpretation of the social contract theory in the late 17th century. His ideas were presented in works such as "Two Treatises of Government," with the Second Treatise being particularly influential. It was published in 1689. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a French philosopher, contributed to the social contract theory in the mid-18th century. His major work on the subject, "The Social Contract," was published in 1762. Each of these philosophers provided distinct perspectives on the social contract theory, but they all centered around the idea that individuals enter into a societal arrangement, either implicitly or explicitly, to establish a legitimate and just political order (Awopeju, 2011).

Hobbes (1651) presented a foundational version of the social contract theory, arguing that in a state of nature, individuals exist in a state of perpetual conflict driven by their self-interests. He claimed that people relinquish some of their rights and freedoms to a central authority, forming a social contract, in exchange for protection and order. This authority, often embodied in a Leviathan-like sovereign, ensures peace and prevents the chaos inherent in the state of nature (Olusola, 2015).

Locke (1689), on the other hand, emphasized the natural rights of individuals, including life, liberty, and property. According to Locke, people enter into a social contract to secure these rights and establish a government that operates with the consent of the governed. He argued that if a government oversteps its bounds or fails to protect citizens' rights, the contract is breached, and citizens have the right to rebel.

Rousseau (1762) added another layer to the social contract theory by highlighting the concept of the "general will." He believed that true sovereignty lies in the collective will of the people, rather than in a distant authority. Rousseau's emphasis on direct democracy and the idea that individuals should participate in the formation of laws aligns with his vision of a just society built upon consensus.

Critics of the social contract theory point out several concerns. One criticism is the historical accuracy of the theory's depiction of a pre-social contract state of nature, which often relies on hypothetical scenarios. Additionally, some argue that the theory overlooks the complexities of power dynamics and inequalities present in societies, particularly in the context of Hobbes' and Locke's writings.

Furthermore, the concept of consent in the social contract theory has been questioned. Critics argue that modern citizens are born into existing political structures and don't explicitly

consent to the terms of the social contract. This raises ethical and practical questions about the validity of such implicit consent. The social contract theory offers valuable insights into the foundation of political authority and governance. However, it has sparked critical debates surrounding its historical accuracy, the notion of consent, and the application of its principles to diverse societies with varying power dynamics.

2.1 Theoretical Application of the Social Contract Theory

According to social contract theory, citizens' participation in the political process, including voting, signifies their consent to the government's authority. Low voter turnout indicates a potential breakdown in this consent-based legitimacy. When a significant portion of the population abstains from participating in elections, it suggests that the government's legitimacy might be compromised because the tacit agreement between citizens and the government is weakened.

Applying the social contract theory as a theoretical framework highlights the intricate relationship between low voter turnout and government legitimacy. When citizens do not actively participate in the political process, the foundation of the social contract is weakened, potentially leading to a crisis of legitimacy. Governments must recognize the significance of voter participation in upholding their authority and should take proactive measures to address the factors that contribute to low turnout, thereby reinforcing the reciprocal obligations outlined in the social contract.

2.3 Players and Political Division of Labour in a Democratic Regime

Democracy has its origin in the city of Athens in the Greek city-state. Citizens have also been participating since then with the exclusion of slaves and women. Participation at the same time is as old as mankind and the practice of democracy has paved the way for citizen's participation in the political arena. However, the assertion of whether voter participation is important or not is of major concern to the theorists of democracy. Citizens' participation in any political system is paramount to the concept of democracy and participation remains the core value of democracy (Olusola, 2015). The debate on citizenship and their right to participate in any democratic regime could be found in the writings of Locke and Rousseau. This has caused great division among the theorists and actors of democracy and these include, 'participations' Social contract and 'elitists' (or 'elitists') Theories, these theorists or literature have different perspectives on the role and scope of civic participation (Nwankwo, 2019)

Literature has different views on the role and scope of civic participation in any state. This has been a long-running debate among different theorists of democracy. The first to be reckoned with among these theories of democracy is the social contract theory. According to this theory, the citizens of the state of nature agreed by submitting some of their rights to the Leviathan. At the same time, the Leviathan, or the constituted authority, had since then been given the rights and obligations to protect and provide for the social well-being of the citizenry. Also, from Locke's perspective, the citizens submitted some part of their inalienable rights to their representatives, which presupposes that the citizens have the right to choose their representatives in any election. These rights were guaranteed in the social contract theory of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. This implies that the representatives of any state must first seek and gain the consent of their citizens to gain political legitimacy. The issue of legitimacy is vital for the survival of any political regime. To ensure the political legitimacy of any regime, the citizens must support it. When citizens continue to withdraw their mandate and support from

their representatives, a crisis of legitimacy ensues, and a decline in electoral participation or turnout is an invitation to a crisis of legitimacy in such a political system.

2.4 Gap in Literature

While existing literature has provided valuable insights into the concepts of voter turnout, legitimacy, and the challenges faced by Nigeria's Fourth Republic in terms of governance and elections, there remains a notable gap that this study aims to address comprehensively. The specific gap in the literature lies in the nuanced understanding of how the relationship between voter turnout and the crisis of legitimacy manifests within the context of Nigeria's general elections in the Fourth Republic (1999-2023). Also, existing literature often addresses factors influencing voter turnout and legitimacy separately. However, understanding the interplay of these factors within Nigeria's unique context is critical. This study aims to explore how socio-economic disparities, political violence, institutional challenges, and other influences collectively shape both voter engagement and legitimacy perceptions.

III. Research Method

This paper employed a qualitative approach, using secondary data and analyzed via content and historical analysis. Data was thematically Analysed through secondary data and existing literature on the subject matter.

IV. Result and Discussion

4.1 Conceptualising Election, Voter Turnout, Legitimacy and Crisis of Legitimacy

This section delved into the review of major concepts such as Elections, Voter turnout, Legitimacy, and the crisis of legitimacy. Elections in democratic societies have always been seen as a peaceful means of changing leadership. It is the process of implementing a truly democratic system of governance. A true representative democratic election is one in which members of a society, community, or organization elect one or more people to represent their political interests (Albert, Ishola, Danjibo, & Faleti, 2011).

In other words, an election is a formal decision-making procedure by which a population chooses a person to hold a public position. Elections are how the people exercise their sovereign right to decide who governs them and what the political and other priorities of their government should be. As a result, democratic elections are invariably a chance for the people to express their sovereignty through the ballot to give legitimacy to their government, renew its mandate if necessary, or revoke its authority to rule. The foundation of accountable government is found in this (Elechi, 2019).

Elections have been seen as the major feature of democracy to the extent that not only is it possible to imagine a democratic regime without elections (Nnadozie, 2007), but there is also a real risk of confusing the holding of regular, reasonably competitive, and transparent elections with democracy (Hounkpe&Gueye, 2010; Adebogun&Adewumi, 2022). Indeed, in the direct democracies of Ancient Greece, elections were used to make decisions in various fields. For example, elections were used to nominate people to the most important positions for which a minimum level of competence is considered vital. The indispensability of election to democracy appears obvious in contemporary democracies described as representative democracy.

Contemporary representative democracy is defined as a system in which people are governed by their representatives, elections remain the most appropriate and widespread

mechanism for selecting their representatives, who will be responsible for governing on behalf of and for the people (Hounkpe&Gueye, 2010). Today, therefore, a political system that does not select its leaders through competitive, free, and fair elections can hardly be considered a democratic system or regime. Election has been defined by Osumah and Aghemelo (2010) as a process through which the people choose their leaders, indicate their policies and program preferences, and consequently invest in a government with the authority to rule. They see the election as one of how a society may organize itself and make specified formal decisions, adding that where voting is free, it acts simultaneously as a system for making certain decisions regarding the power relations in a society and a method for seeking political obedience with a minimum of the sacrifice of the individual's freedom. Eya (2003), however, sees election as the selection of a person or persons for office by ballot and choosing between alternatives. In the same view, Uduma and Emerole, (2015) opine that elections are the platform for attaining leadership positions in democratic governance. Also, Obakhedo, (2011) aptly defined election as a major instrument for the recruitment of political leadership in democratic societies.

Ozor (2010) provides a more encompassing and comprehensive definition of election when he states that the term refers to the process by which qualified adult voters elect their politically preferred representatives to a county legislature (or any other public positions) for farming and running the country's government. Thus, Osumah (2002) elucidates the core goal of an election, which is to select the official decision-makers who are intended to represent the interests of residents. Elections, he claims, increase and broaden citizen engagement in the political system.

The explanation of the concept of voter turnout or participation would be difficult without having an understanding of what democracy entails. The concept of democracy however implies that the ultimate authority of governance should rest with the people themselves. When these roles are sought to be implemented through the mechanism of representative democracy, people may become inactive after choosing their representatives, the community expands geographically and it includes a large population like Nigeria with over 180 million and a variety of compositions in terms of race, religion, language, and culture, the distance between the people and their representatives is likely so widened. This has made Schumpeter (1954) argue that the classical theory of democracy in which it was stated adult citizens contributed to the making of public policy was deficient to the point that it could not explain the concept of popular participation in modern terms. He goes on to argue that running government and framing public policies is the task of professional politicians, the role of ordinary citizens is confined to voting for the politicians, the political parties, and the programmers of their choice at the time of periodic elections.

Franklin (2004), conceptualized voter turnout as a pivotal metric within the realm of political science and electoral studies, serving as a barometer of citizen engagement and participation in democratic processes. It embodies the percentage of eligible voters who exercise their right to cast their ballots during elections, thereby actively contributing to the selection of political representatives and policy direction. In the same view, Oyegun(2021) opined that voter turnout is an essential yardstick for assessing the health and vibrancy of democracy and provides insights into the degree of citizens' involvement in shaping the governance of their nation.

According to Blais and Massicotte (2022), voter turnout involves calculating the proportion of individuals who have voted, typically expressed as a percentage of the total eligible electorate. This calculation takes into account the number of individuals who participated in the election and divides it by the total number of individuals who are eligible to vote. The resulting

percentage offers a snapshot of the electorate's level of engagement in a particular electoral event. However, it is crucial to recognize that voter turnout rates can significantly differ across elections and regions (Rose, 2012). Factors such as the type of election (presidential, parliamentary, or local), the competitiveness of the race, and the overall political climate can influence turnout rates. Furthermore, cultural, historical, and institutional contexts can also shape patterns of voter participation, underscoring the complex nature of this phenomenon (Idowu, 2023).

Though there is a symbiotic relationship between political participation and voter turnout, there are areas of divergence. Political participation is the basic principle of democracy. It is the active involvement of individuals and groups in the governmental processes affecting their lives. (Gaubu 2007). Put differently, when citizens themselves play an active role in the formulation and implementation of public policies and decisions, their activity is called political participation. The conventional mode of political participation includes, among others, voting, standing for office, campaigning for a political party, contributing to the management of a community project, etc. (Gaubu, 2007). He concludes by saying that an act of opposition or public protest also involves political participation. Such acts as signing a petition, attending peaceful demonstrations, joining a protest march, civil disobedience, and political violence are all forms of political participation.

Gaubu (2007) and Aytac and Stokes (2019) have explained various forms of political participation without necessarily differentiating them from voter turnout. Although they have helped us understand that voting is part of these conceptualized forms of political participation, their argument can be said to be insufficient because they have not adequately explained and conceptualized voter turnout. Hence, voter turnout entails every effort made by the electorate during the electioneering process to get their names registered with the motive of exercising their franchise on the election day but aimed at using the voters' card for other personal purposes. Also, it is a process whereby parts of the electorate who duly registered their names during the registration process cast their votes on Election Day for the candidates of their choice, Aytac& Stokes (2019).

At the same time, legitimacy is a central and multifaceted concept within political theory and governance, serving as a fundamental pillar for the acceptance and stability of authority (Beetham, 1991). It refers to the general perception and acknowledgment that a government, ruling entity, or system possesses the rightful authority to govern, make decisions, and enforce laws (Weber, 1947). Legitimacy is pivotal in ensuring the consent of the governed, as it establishes the moral and ethical basis for the exercise of power (Scharpf, 1999). In political science, legitimacy indicates respect for and acceptance of authority. In this direction, it implies people's acceptance of authority in power. In a political setting, legitimacy represents an established government that enjoys the mandate of the populace. This, according to Ojo (2007), is feasible through political succession that is devoid of violence and embraces the credibility of an electoral process acceptable to the majority of the people. This concurs with Stillman's (1974) perception of legitimacy as the possession and pursuit of right values. With this, legitimacy is centered on societal values that respect public opinion.

Legitimacy, broadly speaking, has to do with the moral appropriateness of how power is acquired and the purpose for which it is employed. Bentham (1991:4) expresses this when he writes: "When power is acquired and exercised according to justifiable rules and with evidence of consent, we call it rightful or legitimate." Essentially, legitimacy is concerned with the question of

how power relations within a society ought to be arranged and what would count as sufficient justification to require the support of the subordinate for them.

Thus, legitimacy is a political concept that is concerned with the justification of power relations between the rulers and the ruled. Max Weber, an authority on the concept of legitimacy (cited by Bentham, 1991:6 in Aluko, Adeniran, & Benjamin, 2013), expresses this when he defines it “as the belief in legitimacy on the part of the relevant social agents, and power relations as legitimate where those involved in them, subordinate as well as dominant, believe them to be so.” The point that is being advanced here is that if people believe that existing political orders or laws are appropriate and worthy of obedience, then those orders and laws are legitimate. In the context of legitimacy, orders, and laws emanate from authorities that the people recognize and believe in. This perhaps explains why legitimacy is referred to as the popular acceptance of a governing regime or system of governance.

Having said this, legitimacy as a concept can be seen from two perspectives: procedural or legal validity and performance legitimacy. Procedural legitimacy is earned by a regime or state power when the processes that produce a regime conform to established procedures and laws. In contemporary times, procedural legitimacy is earned when leaders and those saddled with the responsibility of managing state power are products of free, fair, and democratic electoral processes.

Moreover, procedural legitimacy is conferred on state power when the people freely choose their leaders and the processes are by or in conformity with established legal procedures. Performance legitimacy is gotten or earned by the state authorities when power is exercised in such a manner that the basic needs of the masses are met. Performance legitimacy, thus, is conferred on state power when institutions of the state manifestly promote the well-being of the generality of the people.

Finally, it is, however, expedient to conceptualize the crisis of legitimacy. This would go a long way toward helping us appreciate the content of this section of the paper. The legitimacy crisis is a multidimensional concept that has to do with the exercise of power and its justification. The concept of a crisis of legitimacy underscores the precarious state in which the authority, acceptance, and perceived rightfulness of a government or governing entity are questioned or undermined. It signals a rupture in the bond between those in power and the governed, often resulting from a perceived lack of alignment between the actions and decisions of the ruling entity and the expectations, values, and interests of the populace (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). Essentially, a crisis of legitimacy ensues when a political system cannot guarantee security and provide for the basic needs of the masses. Bensman (1988) captures this succinctly when he defines “legitimacy crisis as a problem emanating from the frustration of the expectations of the governed.”

Unfortunately, one of the problems confronting the Nigerian state today is how to establish a regime that will enjoy the support and administration of not only the masses of the people but also of the diverse groups that constitute the nation. It can be argued that a crisis of legitimacy is one of the key political problems affecting the Nigerian state today. The crisis is compounded by the fact that some groups and individuals are rabidly opposed to the nation’s extant political cum constitutional arrangement. Thus, such groups and individuals rather than comply with the laws of the state, engage, repeatedly in activities targeted at undermining state sovereignty and security (Aluko, 2013).

However, even though political legitimacy revolves around popular support for the authority, which in most cases is expected to be democratic, the subversion of electorates through flawed elections leads to a legitimacy crisis. As rightly pinpointed by Ibrahim and Ibeanu (2007:1), 'it is paradoxical that elections, which normally should be the epitomic expression of popular sovereignty, sometimes become its subversion. This is the abiding tragedy in Nigeria'. Electoral contests in a democratic setting enable an ideal and systematic transfer of power, but previous elections in Nigeria have been marred to the extent that votes were counted but nobody voted. Such questions raise the legitimacy of the 'elected members' occupying various political and elective positions (Omotola, 2007). According to Ojo (2007), the imposition of individuals on the people without a free and fair electoral contest not only exposes the illegitimacy of the representatives but also indicates the building of democracy without democrats. Considering this, the thrust of this paper is to assess the legitimacy crisis in Nigeria's political government resulting from fraudulent elections (Owens-Ibie & Aondover, 2024).

The concept of a crisis of legitimacy reflects a pivotal aspect of governance – the essential need for public acceptance and trust in those who wield authority. Factors such as contested mandates, loss of public trust, and civil unrest can trigger a crisis that challenges the foundation of a government's legitimacy. Understanding the causes and implications of a legitimacy crisis is crucial for policymakers and scholars alike, as it sheds light on the dynamics that shape the relationship between those in power and the governed.

4.2 Voter Turnout and Crisis of Legitimacy: The Matrix Examined

Voter turnout and the crisis of legitimacy are deeply intertwined concepts in the realm of democratic governance. Voter turnout serves as a litmus test of citizens' engagement and confidence in the democratic process. High turnout reinforces the legitimacy of elected governments, while low turnout can lead to a crisis of legitimacy by challenging the consent-based foundation of governance. Understanding the intricate relationship between voter participation and legitimacy is crucial for maintaining the health and vitality of democratic societies.

The relationship between voter turnout and legitimacy lies in the core principles of democracy. High voter turnout often signifies a robust democratic process, where citizens believe that their participation can influence political outcomes (Sambo, 2020). In this context, high turnout can contribute to reinforcing the legitimacy of elected governments, as it demonstrates broad-based consent and widespread engagement with the political system (Blais & McAllister, 2009). Conversely, low voter turnout can have adverse implications for the legitimacy of elected governments. When a significant proportion of the population refrains from participating, it raises concerns about the depth of consent underpinning the government's authority (Tukura, 2020). A legitimacy crisis can emerge when the perceived lack of representation and responsiveness erodes the public's trust in the electoral process, leading to questions about the legitimacy of those in power (Valdés, 2016).

In generic form, it is a truism that when the electorates are actively involved and participate in every electoral democracy, there is an assurance of democratic vitality, which is an engine room for legitimizing any elected leaders or political regime. This presupposes that when the majority of the electorate casts their vote for the candidates of their choice, this confers legitimacy on this very elected representative in any position of authority. On the other hand, it is often argued that low voter turnout is a threat to democracy. Wherever and whenever few people participate in the most basic democratic election, political scientists launch a debate on the democratic deficit, which simply implies that the elected representatives are unacceptable to

the people, and at the same time connotes a crisis of legitimacy, while at the same time, an increase in voter turnout is a way of legitimizing the political regime. (Hamalai, Egwu, & Omotola, 2017; Yar’Adua et al., 2021).

When electoral participation is in decline (which happens quite often in modern democracies), there is much ado about the crisis of legitimacy. However, low voter turnout is not a threat to democracy per se. Low voter turnout can matter in two instances: (i) firstly, when it overlaps with social and political inequalities; (ii) secondly, when it means delegitimizing a regime (Mikolaj, 2014; Yar’Adua et al., 2023). Often, these two situations take place simultaneously, which is not surprising since inequalities usually lead to the delegitimization of regimes. Contrary to the extant literature, which argues that low voter turnout is not a threat to democracy, this paper takes a different tack: low voter turnout is a threat to democracy and a means of delegitimizing a regime. This is because the legitimacy of any regime or representative is gained through the majority support of the electorate in democratic elections.

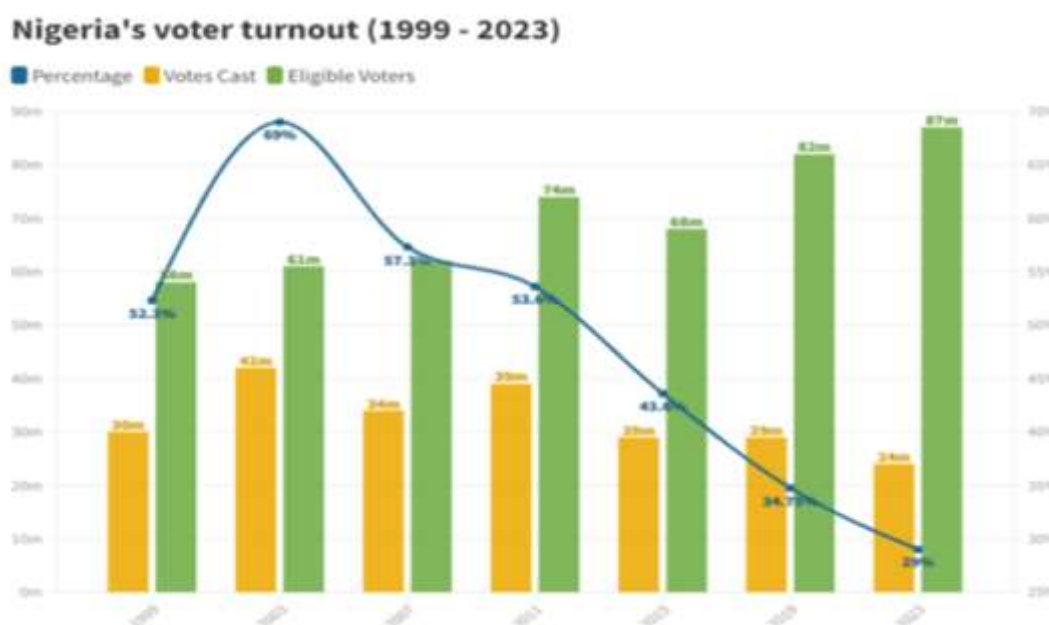


Figure 1. Nigeria's Voters Turnout in The Fourth Republic

Source: Premium Times, 2023

An important illustration is the 1999 presidential election, where only 30.2 million of the 57.9 million eligible voters cast ballots. Since the Nigerian populace was already weary of the military government, they turned out in large numbers to support the election of the then-former president, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, in the subsequent election in 2003, which saw an increase in both the number of registered voters and the number of votes cast (a 69 percent voter turnout). Since the end of the military administration in 1999, the participation rate in the 2003 election is still the highest. Even though there were 61.5 million registered voters by 2007, there were only 35.3 million votes cast overall (57.5% voter turnout), a considerable decrease. Voter registration and total votes both increased in 2011 to 73.5 and 39.4, respectively. Then, in 2015, the figures fell to 67.4 million and 29.4 million. According to these statistics, Nigeria is one of the ten nations with the lowest voter turnout worldwide. In 2017, Rwanda had the highest voter turnout in the world, at 98.15 percent (Premium Times, 2023). We can say a crisis of legitimacy ensued, particularly with the low voter turnout recorded in the period of the 2011–2023 general elections. This argument is supported by the result provided in the diagram above.

4.3 Electoral Irregularities and Crisis of Legitimacy in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic: An Assessment of General Elections

The spread of democracy to the entire world has been a significant achievement of modern society. Central to the philosophical tenets of democratic governance is the idea of ‘choice’ and ‘voice’ in the determination of who governs. Election provides the medium through which citizens make choices about the form and content of governance, and by implication, express their voice in the political process. Hence, the credibility of any democratic government is largely hinged on the quality of the electoral process and election outcomes (Msughter & Pate, 2021). Acceptability of election outcomes by the contending parties is a function of the transparency and quality of the electoral process.

Meanwhile, elections and their outcomes in each country are unique and reflect the country’s political and historical peculiarities. While no single electoral system is suitable for all countries, it is expected that the electoral process adheres to obligations and commitments outlined in international best practices and human rights instruments. Specific emphasis is often laid on building the capacity of the national electoral management bodies to implement credible elections in line with their respective legal mandates.

Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, Nigeria has organized seven successful elections (1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023). Evidence suggests that elections in Nigeria have been marred by violence ranging from vitriolic attacks and hate speeches to the assassination of politicians. From 1999–2011, general elections recorded pockets of violent conflicts, with the 2011 general elections being the bloodiest despite attracting local and international commendations for being well organized. Before the 2015 elections, the outcome of the previous elections had been subjected to controversy and litigation (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

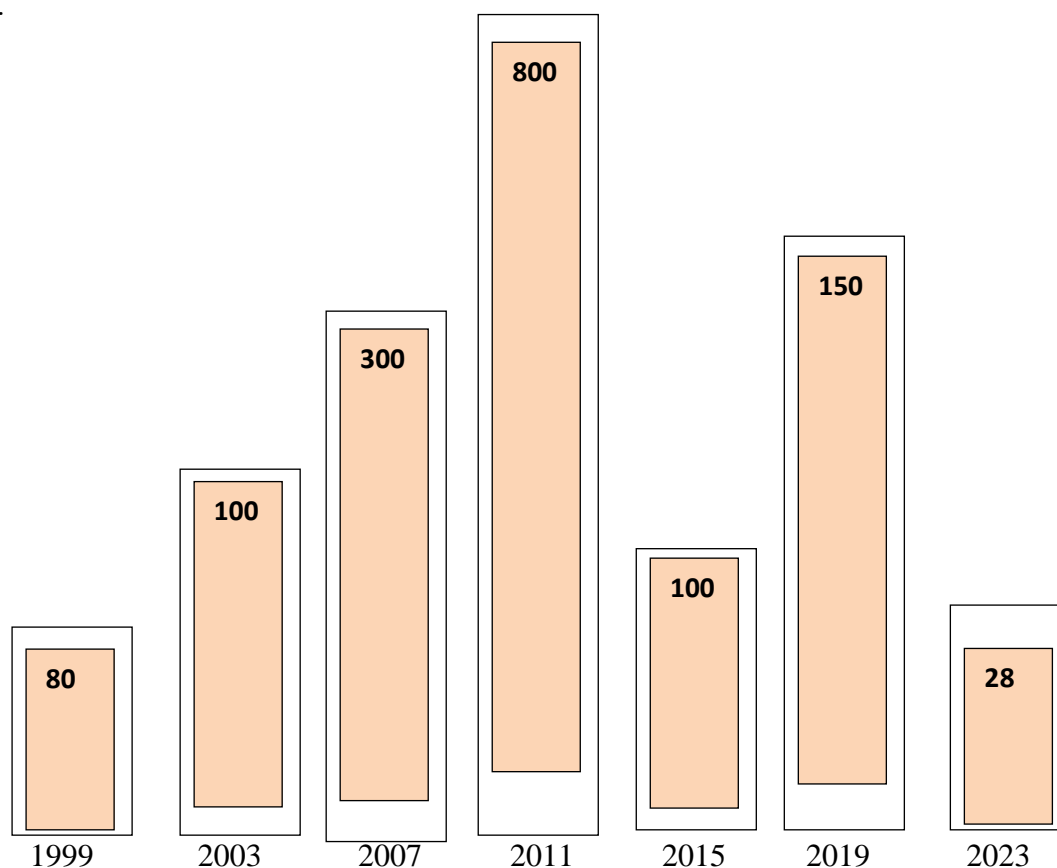


Figure 2. Lives Lost to Election Violence in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

SOURCE: HRW, ICG, CD, African Watch

According to data supplied by the Kimpact Development Initiative (2023), the recorded death rate of 28 individuals during the 2023 elections was the lowest since the 1964-65 elections. Election violence claimed the lives of 200 people in 1964-1965. The 1993 election had 100 casualties, the 1999 election had 80 casualties, the 2007 election had 300 casualties, the 2011 election had 800 casualties, the 2015 polls had 100 casualties, and the 2019 polls had 150 casualties.

At the height of the electoral malfeasance in 2007, there were 1,290 election petitions before the Election Petitions Tribunals across the country. The pre-2015 elections were characterized by a 'do-or-die' mentality, provoking various forms of electoral malpractice. Consequently, Nigeria's election has been described as synonymous with rigging. The desire to enhance the quality of the electoral process and boost the credibility and acceptability of the outcome has propelled a series of electoral reforms (Maikaba & Msughter, 2019).

Despite the plethora of reforms aimed at achieving credible electoral outcomes, some critical observers have expressed reservations about the outcome of the various elections. These reforms include, among others, a new biometric voter register, a remodified open ballot system (REMOBS), improved security features on sensitive electoral materials, such as serial numbering and color-coding of ballot papers and results sheets, as well as security coding of ballot boxes, a more transparent framework for results collation and making returns. They also include revised framework for the engagement of ad hoc staff, and more transparent procedures on Election Day, including the pasting of results at polling units and collation centers (Idris & Msughter, 2022; Msughter & Idris, 2023). Others are closer collaborations and partnerships with a range of critical stakeholders such as political parties, security agencies, civil society organizations, media professionals, etc. enhanced voter education and citizens' engagement.

Except the 2015 general election that was, for the first time in Nigeria's political history, won by the opposition party, (APC), previous elections threw up questionable outcomes as the ruling PDP continued to win a landslide victory. This situation weighed adversely on voter turnout and political participation in the country as several Nigerians lost confidence and trust in the system. The steady decline in citizen's participation in the electoral process may not be unconnected with the general perception that electoral outcomes are already predetermined and that involvement in the process is mere futility.

The occurrence of electoral irregularities in the annals of Nigeria's elections has always been a barrier to political legitimacy in the country. As was earlier said, the trend of electioneering politics in Nigeria has been marred with violence, malpractices, and the imposition of candidates. The inability of the political gladiators to conduct free and credible elections had led to a series of political instability. In the first republic (1960–1966), the first election under the auspices of Nigerian leaders was characterized by violence, which resulted in military incursions and the hijacking of power. Even though the outcome of the 1979 general elections was not free from criticism, Nigerians accepted its result to pave the way for democracy. But the 1983 elections that followed suit were problematic. (Oyediran, 1985), which questioned the legitimacy of the return of Sheu Shagari as the president-elect. Unfortunately, the crisis of the Ondo State Gubernatorial Election in 1983 and several occurrences of violence in other parts of the country became an excuse for a military coup. The 1993 presidential election, which could have been pronounced credible if the process had been completed, was aborted and nullified by General Ibrahim Gbadamosi Babangida. This affected the legitimacy of Chief Ernest Shonekan, who was

the Interim Government at the time, and this caused his administration to suffer a legitimacy crisis due to his rejection by the citizens.

The present fourth republic started in 1999, immediately after General Abdulsalam Abubakar handed over power to the civilian administration. The election conducted in this period (1999) was not in any way free from electoral irregularities like rigging. The subsequent elections conducted from 2003 to 2019 were not free from electoral manipulation. For instance, there were several cases of electoral violence during the 2003 general election. The total number of election-related cases filed at the Tribunal after the 2003 general elections was about five hundred and seventy-four (574). (Omenma, Ibeanu, & Onyishi, 2017; Garba & Msughter, 2023b). At the same time, the highest number of cases was recorded in the 2007 general election at the election tribunal. There were about a thousand, two hundred ninety (1,290) election petitions filed across the nation, and this was reduced to about seven hundred and thirty-one in the 2011 General Elections. (INEC, 2011).

Despite the electorate's commitment to ensuring legitimate elections in the 2015 general elections, there were some irregularities observed during the 2015 general elections, including violence, underage voting, and technical device malfunctions. These issues constituted a danger to the credibility of the election and had a significant impact on the legitimacy of the newly formed administration. The 2019 general election was not without violence, such as ballot box snatching and stuffing, which had a major psychological impact on the public, as evidenced by the poor voter turnout. For example, the 2019 general elections in Nigeria's fourth republic saw the lowest turnout in the country's history, at around 43% (Ojetunde, 2019).

Before the 2023 general elections, the former President, Mr. Buhari, and INEC chairman Prof. Mahmood Yakubu guaranteed Nigerians that the elections would be free, fair, and credible. The umpire authority, INEC, budgeted N355 billion for logistical expenses and the implementation of the innovations BVAS and the INEC Result Viewing, IREV, platform. This is to ensure that the elections are free of manipulation and rigging. The INEC chairman consistently told Nigeria that the use of BVAS would dramatically minimize all sorts of electoral malpractice during elections. Many Nigerians were looking forward to the 2023 general elections for a variety of reasons, including the fact that the polls were not the conventional two-horse contest; The commitments from the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC; the signing of the 2022 Electoral Act, which included the deployment of technology; and the more depressed status of the economy, among other things. So, the build-up to the elections was filled with a feeling of dread, apprehension, and hope that the time has arrived for us to set things right (Chidinma, 2023; Garba & Msughter, 2023a).

The desire to make Nigeria's elections more credible and transparent prompted INEC to put in place the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System. This BVAS implementation is expected to assist in eliminating instances of manual figure manipulation. It must verify the authenticity of voter cards and authenticate voters during accreditation. This technology was initially utilized at the Isoko South Constituency by-election in Delta State in September 2021, and it performed flawlessly. Unfortunately, the great BVAS failed miserably, despite guarantees from the government and INEC that all results would be posted instantly by the IRV during the accreditation and voting processes. The elections on February 25, 2023, were tainted by the things Nigerians were taught they had vanquished. The election was marred by irregularities, ranging from voter suppression, intimidation, raw violence, sporadic shootings, snatching of ballot papers, and vote buying, among others (Aondover et al., 2022; Nkemdelim, 2023).

Both international and local observers attested to the fact that the election was grossly below standard. A key factor in uploading results from the polling units to the IREV portal looked like the more you looked, the less you saw (Ezeador, 2023). Observation Mission (EU EOM), the Yiaga Africa, the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) West Africa, and IFRA-Nigeria had adjudged the 2023 elections as the worst election ever conducted in the history of Nigeria since independence. This observation was occasioned by the poor preparation and execution of the election by INEC, leading to disputed results in virtually all elections held for various political offices in 2023 (Ojukwu, 2023).

Throughout Nigeria's Fourth Republic, spanning from 1999 to 2023, a range of factors have converged to stimulate crises of legitimacy in the context of general elections. The following factors have eroded public confidence, triggered contestation over election outcomes, and undermined the acceptance of governing authorities, casting doubts on the credibility of the electoral process and the legitimacy of elected governments (Aondover, 2019).

- a. **Electoral Irregularities and Fraud:** Persistent allegations of electoral irregularities, including voter manipulation, ballot stuffing, and result tampering, have marred the credibility of several general elections (Lehoucq & Molina, 2002). Such irregularities not only raise concerns about the representativeness of elected officials but also fuel perceptions of an unlevelled playing field, diminishing citizens' trust in the electoral process.
- b. **Violence and Insecurity:** Widespread violence and insecurity during election periods have contributed to a crisis of legitimacy. Instances of political thuggery, intimidation, and even loss of lives have tainted election proceedings, leading to questions about the fairness of the process and the ability of elected officials to govern effectively (Isike, 2015).
- c. **Ethno-Religious and Regional Divides:** Nigeria's ethno-religious diversity has often intersected with politics, leading to identity-based voting patterns that reinforce divisions (Chang & Chu, 2006). When electoral outcomes are perceived as reflecting the interests of specific groups, legitimacy is challenged, as citizens from different backgrounds may view the government as favoring one group over others.
- d. **Lack of Accountability:** The perceived lack of accountability of elected officials to their constituents has contributed to legitimacy crises. When elected representatives fail to fulfill campaign promises or adequately address citizens' concerns, it fosters disillusionment and questions about the effectiveness of democratic governance (Dahl, 1989).
- e. **Economic Disparities and Corruption:** Persistent economic disparities and corruption have hindered public trust in the legitimacy of the elected government. The perception that elected officials prioritize personal gain over public welfare erodes the moral basis for governance and fuels a crisis of legitimacy (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006).
- f. **Media Manipulation and Disinformation:** Manipulation of information and disinformation campaigns have sown seeds of doubt about the validity of election results. Misinformation spread through various media platforms can lead to public skepticism about the accuracy and fairness of the electoral process (Graves, 2016).
- g. **Legal and Institutional Challenges:** Legal and institutional challenges, such as prolonged legal battles over election results, can lead to prolonged uncertainty and contested mandates. These challenges amplify perceptions of a flawed electoral system and a governance crisis (Treisman, 2007). This is evident in the case of Ogunyemi, a two-term state lawmaker and former secretary of the APC in Lagos, who had challenged the declaration of Sowunmi by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as the winner of the election on the grounds that the respondent was not duly sponsored and qualified to contest the elections

under the candidacy of Labour Party for Ojo Federal Constituency. In its judgment on the petition, the tribunal agreed with the petitioner that the candidate of the Labour Party was not qualified to contest the elections.

The Fourth Republic of Nigeria has witnessed a confluence of factors that have collectively stimulated crises of legitimacy in general elections. Electoral irregularities, violence, ethno-religious divisions, accountability deficits, economic disparities, media manipulation, and institutional challenges have contributed to a climate of skepticism, eroding public confidence in the democratic process and raising questions about the credibility of those in power.

V. Conclusion

Through a comprehensive analysis of general elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic spanning from 1999 to 2023, this research has illuminated significant insights into the intricate relationship between voter turnout and the crisis of legitimacy. The findings reveal a complex interplay of factors that influence citizens' participation in the electoral process and the subsequent implications for the perceived credibility of elected governments. The study revealed that monetization of elections, imposition of candidates, rigging, vote-buying, and violence are the challenges to achieving electoral credibility in most of the elections conducted in the fourth republic, and these factors have posed a tremendous threat to the participation of the electorates and the legitimacy of some of the regimes in the fourth republic. Findings from this study also showed that low voter turnout influenced the legitimacy of regime change.

The study concluded that in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, the intricate relationship between voter turnout and the crisis of legitimacy is both evident and consequential. Voter turnout influenced the crisis of legitimacy in Nigeria's fourth republic. Also, the findings underscore the significance of fostering an environment that encourages and facilitates citizens' participation in elections. Addressing the barriers to participation, promoting voter education, and enhancing access to polling stations are critical steps toward strengthening democratic legitimacy. The study also recommends fostering political dialogue and policies that promote inclusivity, reduce socio-economic disparities, and enhance representation, which can positively impact both voter turnout and legitimacy.

Also, the government and the electoral umpire should, as a matter of necessity, strengthen transparency in electoral processes, ensuring fairness and legitimacy. Address concerns about electoral irregularities to enhance citizens' trust in the system. The study recommended that the electorate participate more in elections as a way of boosting voter turnout and ensuring the legitimacy of the regime change. Also, the electoral umpire should implement measures to counter voter suppression tactics, including strict voter identification requirements, to ensure that all eligible citizens can exercise their right to vote. Finally, the study recommended that the electoral body and civil society organizations launch comprehensive voter education campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of voting, the electoral process, and the impact of participation on democratic legitimacy.

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