

Local Government Autonomy: A Way of Discouraging Political Apathy among the Electorates in Nigeria.

Abstract

This study examines the role of local government autonomy in addressing voter apathy in Nigeria, focusing on the relationship between grassroots governance and electoral participation. Despite the significant increase in registered voters from 1999 to 2023, voter turnout has steadily declined, reflecting deep-seated political disengagement. Local government autonomy, which emphasizes decentralization and grassroots engagement, is pivotal in bridging the gap between governance and citizens. However, systemic challenges, including state government interference, financial dependence, and administrative inefficiencies, undermine local councils' ability to function independently, leading to voter disillusionment. Using a qualitative approach, the study integrates secondary data to explore this phenomenon. Thematic analysis was employed to identify trends and uncover the socio-political factors driving voter apathy. Findings revealed that empowering local governments with financial and administrative autonomy enhances service delivery, rebuilds trust, and fosters greater electoral participation. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of addressing systemic barriers such as corruption, logistical inefficiencies, and voter suppression, which exacerbate political disengagement. By emphasizing the connection between responsive grassroots governance and voter turnout, the research underscores the critical role of local government autonomy in revitalizing Nigeria's democratic processes. It concludes with actionable recommendations, including constitutional reforms to ensure financial independence, enhanced civic education campaigns, and improved transparency in electoral systems. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on decentralization and its potential to foster inclusive governance, reduce voter apathy, and strengthen democratic participation.

Keywords: Local government autonomy, voter apathy, grassroots governance, decentralization, electoral participation, Nigeria, political engagement, democracy.

Introduction

Local government autonomy fosters democratic participation by bringing governance closer to the people, enabling decision-making, and improving accountability (Amah, 2018).

Decentralization empowers grassroots communities and promotes tailored public service delivery. However, systemic challenges like legislative and financial control hinder full autonomy, necessitating reforms to enhance grassroots development and democratic engagement (Amah, 2018). The centralization of power and state encroachment on local authorities undermine voter engagement in Nigeria. State governments dominate local governance, manipulate elections, and appoint caretaker chairpersons, stripping local councils of autonomy and eroding public trust. This interference fosters systemic corruption, hindering local government's ability to deliver services. As Page and Wando (2022) note, kleptocratic control over local governance discourages grassroots democracy, alienates citizens, and reinforces voter apathy.

State-controlled electoral commissions and rigged elections further disillusion voters, exacerbating political disengagement and weakening democratic participation at the grassroots level. Political apathy in Nigeria, reflected in declining voter turnout, stems from governance failures, corruption, electoral violence, and broken promises. This distrust in institutions erodes citizen engagement, weakening democracy and hindering national development (Nwambuko et al., 2024). Studies reveal that this apathy stems from poor governance, broken political promises, electoral violence, systemic corruption, and weak institutional frameworks, all of which erode trust in the democratic process. Additionally, the militarization of elections and manipulation of outcomes further alienate voters, undermining confidence in elections as a means of expressing popular will. These factors collectively discourage political participation and weaken democracy (Nwoba et al., 2022).

Decentralization is key to empowering local institutions and mobilizing citizens for governance and development. It enhances the capacity of local institutions to mobilize citizens by creating platforms for inclusive governance and participatory decision-making. It emphasizes a bottom-up approach to development, ensuring that policies reflect local priorities and promote ownership and sustainability of initiatives (Donkor, Achanso, & Majialuwe, 2020). Local government autonomy includes legal, financial, and administrative control, enabling local governments to create and implement policies tailored to the needs of their communities. The ability of local governments to manage their finances, execute developmental projects, and make decisions independently places them in a better position to address the needs and aspirations of their

communities. This, in turn, can rebuild trust and foster a sense of ownership among the electorate. Local government autonomy is intended to empower communities, bridge communication gaps between citizens and higher government tiers, and foster political education (Arum & Likinyo, 2024).

However, in Nigeria, true local government autonomy has remained elusive due to systemic challenges. Lack of autonomy undermines the effectiveness of local governments as tools for grassroots development and democracy (Ata-Agboni et al., 2023). Before now, before the Supreme Court judgment on the autonomy of the local government, the appointment of caretaker committees in place of democratically elected officials has weakened local governance, disenfranchising citizens and reducing political engagement. These practices have fostered political apathy and eroded trust in local government institutions, further diminishing their capacity to deliver essential services and development initiatives (Ata-Agboni et al., 2023). Political engagement at the grassroots level is critically hampered by the lack of autonomy. Interference from the state, particularly in financial matters and policy execution, has led to inefficiencies and misaligned priorities. This intrusion has weakened service delivery and discouraged political participation at the grassroots level (Arum & Likinyo, 2024). For instance, state governments often compel local governments to engage in joint projects that fail to address the specific needs of local communities (Ata-Agboni et al., 2023). The study conducted by Richey (2023) found a strong “positive correlation between loving one’s municipality and participation in local politics, civic participation, and trust in local government”. This affirms the general notion that politics is local and for political participation to occur; the locals must continually feel the impacts of grassroots development. Local government autonomy is therefore the bridge between the government and the political participation of the locals. Hence this study aims to examine the role of local government autonomy in addressing voter apathy in Nigeria by investigating the relationship between grassroots governance and electoral participation. Using the trend of voter apathy evident in Nigeria's presidential elections from 1999 to 2023, the research will assess how the decentralization of governance can revitalize public trust and engagement in democratic processes.

Literature Review

Local Government

Local government is the third tier or lowest level of government in a federal system, established by law to manage local affairs and empowered to exercise political and administrative authority within a geographical area. It is an institution with a resident population occupying a defined area, a locally authorized governing body, and a substantial degree of autonomy, including the legal or actual power to raise revenue (Ogunnubi, 2022). Local government is a governing body at the grassroots level, established to exercise specific powers, initiate and provide services, and implement projects to complement state and federal activities. This level of governance is designed to maximize local initiative and respond effectively to the needs of the community. Key characteristics of local government include the election of officials to ensure democratic representation, a distinct legal personality separate from state and federal governments, and specified powers to perform a range of functions autonomously. Local government is intended to operate independently and no longer serve as an appendage or field office of state governments. These characteristics are vital in ensuring that local governance meets the expectations of the communities it serves, promoting development and democratic values at the grassroots level (Eme & Okeke, 2019).

The United Nations Division of Public Administration, as cited in Yohana, Joel & Ahmad (2023), describes local government as a political entity that governs a specific area with powers to administer local issues and raise revenue. Furthermore, the importance of local government in fostering public participation in decision-making while recognizing the supremacy of the central government has been emphasized. The 1976 Guidelines for Local Government Reforms in Nigeria further define local government as a structure through which representatives, elected by local communities, exercise significant control over local affairs. This includes the ability to plan, initiate, and implement developmental projects while collaborating with state and federal governments to address the needs of the local population (Yohana, Joel & Ahmad, 2023).

Its primary role is to maintain law and order, provide a limited range of social amenities, and encourage cooperation and participation among inhabitants to improve their living conditions. This formal organizational framework enables communities to conduct their affairs effectively

for the general good. Ojofeitimi (2020) further clarifies that the term "local" signifies councils meant for small communities, while "government" refers to their possession of certain attributes of governance. In this context, local government can be seen as a segment of a constituent state or region, established by law to regulate public affairs and provide services within its jurisdiction. Its legitimacy in representing local interests and administering to their needs, requiring democratic ideals and autonomy for effective control of local affairs has been emphasized (Uloko, Yahaya, Fatai, Ochedi, Mutari & Muhammed, 2023).

Local Government Autonomy

The concept of local government autonomy in Nigeria revolves around the ability of local governments to operate independently within their jurisdictions without undue interference from state or federal authorities. Local government autonomy is seen as essential for effective grassroots governance, promoting development, and addressing local needs. Autonomy entails discretionary powers to make decisions, manage resources, and implement policies, as defined by constitutional and statutory frameworks. However, despite its significance, local government autonomy in Nigeria faces numerous challenges (Anayochukwu, Ani, & Nsah, 2022). Politically, Section 7 of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution guarantees local government autonomy by stipulating that they must operate through democratically elected councils (Okorie, Obasi, Nwosu, Chukwu, Akanu, & Ngwuta, 2023).

Challenges of Local Government Autonomy

One of the primary challenges is the pervasive interference of state governments. This interference manifests in the control over recruitment, promotions, and financial resources, which undermines the operational independence of local governments. Additionally, financial constraints pose a significant barrier. Local governments are heavily reliant on statutory allocations from the federal account, often mediated by state governments, which limits their financial independence and ability to execute developmental projects. Furthermore, constitutional provisions exacerbate these issues. The Nigerian Constitution grants state governments substantial powers over local governance matters, creating intergovernmental conflicts and significantly diluting the autonomy of local governments (Anayochukwu, Ani, & Nsah, 2022).

One of the most significant obstacles is the joint state-local government account system. This arrangement, mandated by the Nigerian Constitution, allows state governments to control funds allocated to local governments, leading to mismanagement and delays in disbursement. As a result, local governments often struggle to execute development projects effectively due to insufficient resources (Nwoko & Offor, 2024). Additionally, state interference is a pervasive issue. State governments frequently encroach on the administrative functions of local councils, particularly in areas such as recruitment, promotions, and policymaking. This interference undermines the autonomy of local governments and renders them unable to function independently (Okorie, Obasi, Nwosu, Chukwu, Akanu, & Ngwuta, 2023). The imposition of caretaker committees by state governments instead of allowing democratic elections is another major challenge. These committees lack the democratic legitimacy to represent the people, further eroding the autonomy of local councils (Awotokun, 2005; Wilson, 2013).

Usurpation of revenue sources by state governments, which limits the fiscal capacity of local governments is also a significant concern. Constitutionally, local governments have restricted avenues for generating revenue, and state governments often take over these areas, further weakening their financial base. This financial dependence on state governments compromises the ability of local governments to plan and execute grassroots development projects (Awofeso, 2004; Saulawa et al., 2017). Corruption and mismanagement exacerbate these challenges. Both state officials and local government functionaries often engage in corrupt practices, diverting funds meant for grassroots development. This has led to a significant number of uncompleted or poorly executed projects, undermining public trust in local governance (Bagudu, 2018).

Enhancement of Grassroots Democracy

Democracy thrives when rooted in strong and inclusive grassroots governance, ensuring it moves from concept to reality for citizens. The grassroots level, comprising local government areas, area councils, wards, and administrative units, connects the government with the people. It delivers essential services, empowers communities, and amplifies public voices. However, in Nigeria, this critical tier often suffers from neglect, systemic challenges, and inadequate resources. With local elections on the horizon, it is crucial to reposition grassroots governance as the cornerstone of democracy, enabling it to fulfill its role in building a government truly by and for the people. Strengthening this foundational level is essential to achieving democratic

aspirations and improving citizens' lives (Ironkwe, 2025). Active citizen participation is vital in any democratic system to align governance with the aspirations of the people. This engagement is best achieved through grassroots politics, which empowers citizens to take ownership of their governance. Co-Creation Hub's GoVote program exemplifies this approach by encouraging individuals and communities to actively participate in the political process (Co-Creation Hub, 2024). Grassroots politics, operating at the local community level, ensures that individuals—not just elected officials—can influence decisions that directly impact their lives (Co-Creation Hub, 2024). The importance of grassroots politics lies in its ability to promote transparency, accountability, and inclusivity, ensuring that policies are shaped by the people they affect most. Former U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt aptly emphasized this, stating that governance ultimately belongs to the voters. This active citizen involvement strengthens the foundation of democratic governance, making it more resilient and participatory (Co-Creation Hub, 2024).

Grassroots governance plays a vital role in bringing democracy closer to the people by delivering visible improvements such as better infrastructure, healthcare, education, and security. These tangible benefits strengthen public trust in the democratic process. By fostering inclusivity and fair resource allocation, grassroots governance reduces political tensions and enhances social harmony. It provides a platform for nurturing democratic principles like tolerance, compromise, and shared responsibility within communities. Engaging citizens at this foundational level instill democratic values early, shaping their participation in governance at higher levels. This foundation is essential for building resilience and addressing the challenges of national development (Ironkwe, 2025).

Through grassroots engagement, citizens participate directly in local elections, interact with their representatives, and influence decisions that shape their communities. This involvement transforms democracy from a periodic voting exercise into an ongoing participatory process. When citizens actively monitor and engage with local officials, accountability is enhanced, as leaders are more likely to respond to constituents' needs. Nelson Mandela's assertion that a nation's success is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable resonates with this principle, as grassroots politics ensures every citizen has a voice, fostering inclusivity and transparency (Co-Creation Hub, 2024). Local governments serve as critical platforms for grassroots engagement, addressing immediate community needs and fostering sustainable development. By involving

citizens in local decision-making, policies become more relevant and actionable. Mahatma Gandhi's words, "The future depends on what we do in the present," highlight the importance of grassroots politics in shaping a sustainable future. Local governments, being the closest tier of governance to the people, play a pivotal role in addressing key issues such as infrastructure, healthcare, education, and public services, ensuring responsiveness to community needs and empowering citizens to take charge of their future (Co-Creation Hub, 2024).

Political /Voters Apathy

Voter apathy is a widespread phenomenon that denotes a lack of interest or motivation among citizens to participate in elections, even though voting is a cornerstone of democratic governance. In Nigeria, this issue has become particularly concerning, as voter turnout has steadily declined since the return to democracy in 1999. For instance, voter participation dropped from 52.3% in 1999 to a record low of 37.4% during the 2019 general elections (Adeniyi & Salawudeen, 2020); further declining to a record low of 25% in the 2023 general elections (Nwambuko et al., 2024). This trend highlights a growing disconnection between citizens and the political system, raising concerns about the health and sustainability of democracy in the country. Fapetu, Saka-Olokungboye & Olateru-Olagbegi & Ilugbami (2024) identified poor service delivery by local governments, candidate imposition, a lack of credible candidates, and inadequate organization by the State Electoral Commission as key contributors to voter apathy in local government elections in Ondo State. To address these issues, the study recommended granting local governments more autonomy, improving their service delivery capabilities, and establishing a National Independent Electoral Body to manage local government elections, among other suggestions. Sheriff, Farouk & Aliyu (2021) also revealed that democracy in Nigeria especially at the local government level has not done up to its expectations due largely to corruption, partisan politics, upper governmental interference, and lack of local government autonomy, among others. It therefore recommends that among other things, the local governments should be granted constitutional autonomy in powers and functions, the fight against corruption should be stretched to the local government areas while Local government officials are made accountable to the residents, and that the leaders should be more ethical in their political pursue

Causes of Voter Apathy

The study identifies a myriad of factors contributing to voter apathy in Nigeria. Chief among these are political violence and intimidation, which create a climate of fear and discourage citizens from participating in elections. The prevalence of corruption and vote rigging further erodes trust in the electoral process, making citizens feel that their votes do not count. Additionally, unfulfilled political promises and persistent bad governance leave many disillusioned with the political system. Socioeconomic challenges such as poverty and the inequitable distribution of resources also play a role, as these issues prevent many from engaging in civic duties. Finally, the insincerity of electoral commissions, perceived as lacking independence and accountability, has significantly undermined public confidence in elections (Adeniyi & Salawudeen, 2020). According to Nwambuko et al. (2024), electoral violence, including incidents of ballot snatching, intimidation, and thuggery, further discourages citizens from participating in elections. Such actions often occur under the watch of law enforcement, eroding trust in the system (Adeyemi & Salawudeen, 2020). Also, ethnic and religious biases were found to contribute to voter apathy, as the politicization of these identities alienates sections of the population who feel their interests are inadequately represented (Nwambuko et al., 2024). Additionally, poverty and illiteracy play a role, with economically disadvantaged and less-educated citizens perceiving elections as irrelevant to their immediate survival needs (Ogunbiyi, 2022).

Impact of Voter Apathy

The consequences of voter apathy are profound and multifaceted. Low voter turnout undermines the legitimacy and accountability of elected officials, weakening the democratic fabric of governance. Elections, a critical mechanism for holding leaders accountable, lose their effectiveness when citizens abstain from voting. This lack of legitimacy contributes to poor accountability, as such leaders feel less compelled to deliver on their promises or address the needs of the populace (Ogunniran, 2023). Lack of participation also diminishes the

representativeness of government policies, as leaders cater primarily to the interests of the few who vote. Scholars such as Agaiibe (2019) emphasize that voter apathy threatens the core principles of democracy by limiting citizens' ability to influence governance and ensuring their voices are heard. Furthermore, it perpetuates governance issues, such as the implementation of unpopular policies and programs that do not align with public interests. Violations of human rights, particularly voter suppression based on ethnicity or political affiliations, also remain a consequence of this disengagement, deepening societal divisions and mistrust in the political system (Amata, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Decentralization Theory

Decentralization Theory: Proponents, Assumptions, and Critics

Decentralization theory focuses on the transfer of authority and decision-making from central governments to lower levels, such as regional or local governments, to enhance governance and foster public engagement. Among its notable proponents, Jean-Jacques Rousseau emphasized the importance of participatory governance, suggesting that decentralization enables citizens to exercise greater influence over policies affecting their lives. Similarly, Alexis de Tocqueville highlighted the role of local governance in sustaining democracy, arguing that active civic participation strengthens democratic structures. Modern scholars like James Manor advocate decentralization as a tool to enhance accountability, responsiveness, and efficiency, particularly in governance within developing nations (Manor, 1999; Rousseau, 1762; Tocqueville, 1835).

Key assumptions underpinning decentralization theory include the belief that devolving power to local governments encourages citizen participation by creating proximity between governance structures and the people. This proximity is expected to reduce political apathy and strengthen democratic engagement. Another assumption is that local governments possess better knowledge of their communities' needs, enabling more effective and efficient delivery of public services (Rondinelli, 1981). Additionally, decentralization is assumed to increase accountability and transparency, as local officials are more accessible to their constituents. Lastly, the theory posits that decentralization can promote social inclusion by providing marginalized groups with platforms for active participation in governance (Smith, 1985).

In Nigeria, decentralization is constitutionally enshrined, with the 1999 Constitution recognizing the federal, state, and local government tiers. However, local government autonomy—a critical element of decentralization—has been largely undermined by state government control. State authorities frequently interfere in the allocation of resources and local administrative decisions, limiting the ability of local governments to function effectively (Adeyemi & Salawudeen, 2020). This lack of autonomy not only stifles local governance but also fuels political apathy, as citizens lose trust in governance systems perceived as distant and ineffective. Empowering local governments through genuine autonomy aligns with the principles of decentralization theory and serves as a pathway to reducing political apathy. Furthermore, when local governments are empowered to deliver services effectively, citizens are more likely to perceive governance as beneficial and meaningful, motivating them to participate actively in electoral and civic processes. Accountability is another critical factor. Local government autonomy ensures that officials are directly answerable to their constituents rather than higher state authorities. This direct relationship promotes transparency and provides citizens with the opportunity to hold leaders accountable, fostering trust and reducing apathy (Ogunbiyi, 2022).

Methodology

The research employs a qualitative approach to deeply explore the interplay between local government autonomy and voter apathy in Nigeria, providing a nuanced understanding of the underlying issues. By focusing on qualitative insights, the study captures the complexities of governance at the grassroots level and the factors contributing to the persistent disengagement of voters. To support this qualitative analysis, the study utilizes secondary data, including voter turnout statistics and electoral records obtained from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). These datasets, spanning the period from 1999 to 2023, offer a historical perspective on voter behavior across multiple election cycles. By examining these records, the research identifies patterns in voter registration, accreditation, and turnout, shedding light on how changes in local government structures and autonomy correlate with fluctuations in electoral participation. The qualitative approach allows for thematic analysis, which involves identifying and categorizing recurring patterns and insights within the data. Themes such as distrust in electoral systems, the perceived inefficacy of local governance, and the impact of state interference on local government operations emerge as central to the discourse on voter apathy.

This thematic exploration contextualizes statistical trends, linking them to broader socio-political realities. For example, declining voter turnout is not merely a numerical trend but reflects deeper issues such as systemic corruption, voter suppression, and disenchantment with unfulfilled political promises.

FINDINGS

Table 1: Statistics on Voter Apathy in Presidential Elections in Nigeria

Statistics for the presidential elections in this piece cover the years 1999 to 2023

Election Year	Registered Voters	Total No of Accredited Voters	Difference between registered voters and accredited voters (%)
1999	57,938,945	30,280,052	52
2003	60,823,022	42,018,735	69.08
2007	61,567,036	35,397,517	57.4
2011	73,528,040	39,469,484	53.68
2015	67,422,005	29,432,083	43.65
2019	82,344,107	28,614,190	34.75
2023	93,470,000	25,286,616	26.72

Source: African Elections Database and INEC, 2023

Percentage of Voter Turnout in Nigeria's General Elections

Voter turnout has been on a steady decline since 2007

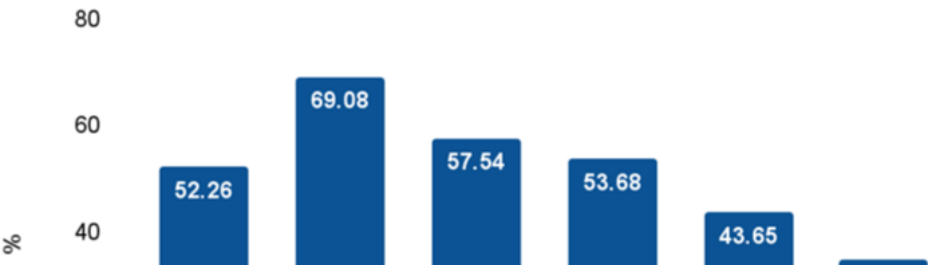


Figure 1: Percentage of Voter Turnout in Nigeria's General Elections Since 1999 (Amata, 2023)

The data on voter apathy in Nigeria's presidential elections from 1999 to 2023 highlights significant trends that underline challenges in electoral participation. Over these 24 years, the number of registered voters steadily increased, reflecting both population growth and enhanced voter registration initiatives. Starting at 57.9 million in 1999, registered voters reached 93.47 million by 2023, marking a 61.3% increase. This growth in voter registration indicates a proactive effort to broaden democratic engagement. However, this upward trend in registration starkly contrasts with the decline in accredited voter turnout, revealing a persistent issue of voter apathy. Accredited voter turnout reached its peak in 2003, with 42 million voters representing 69.08% of registered voters. However, subsequent elections have witnessed a gradual decline in participation. By 2023, only 25.3 million voters were accredited, accounting for just 26.72% of the registered electorate. This consistent drop in voter engagement, particularly from 2019 to 2023, demonstrates an alarming disconnect between registration efforts and actual participation in the electoral process.

The percentage difference between registered and accredited voters paints a troubling picture of growing voter apathy. In 1999, the difference stood at 52%, a figure that has worsened over the years, reaching 73.28% in 2023. The most significant decline in participation occurred between 2019 and 2023, when the number of accredited voters fell by 3.33 million, even as registered voters increased by over 11 million. This widening gap suggests deep-seated challenges that hinder effective voter mobilization. Several factors could explain this trend. Distrust in the electoral process remains a significant concern, as issues of transparency and fairness have discouraged many Nigerians from participating. Security concerns, particularly in politically

unstable regions, further deter potential voters from heading to the polls. Additionally, logistical challenges, such as delays in distributing Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and limited access to polling units, disenfranchise voters. Voter fatigue, driven by unmet political promises and frustration with governance, also contributes to the declining turnout.

The implications of this persistent voter apathy are profound. Low participation erodes the legitimacy of elected officials, as their mandates may not reflect the will of the majority. Furthermore, the growing disconnection between the electorate and the electoral process poses challenges to democratic governance and political engagement in the country. Addressing these issues is critical to sustaining Nigeria's democracy. To counteract this trend, efforts must be made to enhance voter education campaigns that emphasize the importance of participation in shaping governance. Electoral reforms should prioritize addressing systemic barriers, such as ensuring timely distribution of voting materials and improving polling logistics. Strengthening security at polling units is essential to reassure voters of their safety during elections. Additionally, leveraging technology to enhance transparency and reliability in the electoral process can help rebuild public trust. The increasing gap between voter registration and turnout is a call to action for systemic changes in Nigeria's electoral framework. Bridging this gap will require coordinated efforts to address both logistical challenges and the underlying distrust in the electoral process. By restoring confidence and removing barriers, Nigeria can work toward reversing the trend of voter apathy and ensuring more inclusive participation in its democratic processes.

The decline in voters' turnout in Nigeria has been viewed in the dimension of materialism ideology which was used to espouse the view that political officeholders prioritized their personal interests, wealth accumulation, and corrupt practices over the welfare of the general population. The vast amount of wealth amassed by political officeholders through corrupt practices is always employed to secure political empires and associates creating trust issues and concern and raising the bar of voters' apathy (Mary, Chilaka, Degi and Yonomo, 2024). In addition, institutionalized corruption has further dampened public perception of the various government agencies in charge of the electoral process where the masses see election outcomes as a fixed process clouded by the garment of kingmakers and political heavyweights with interest. Also, clandestine affirmation, either religious background, ethnic grouping, or sectional

interest, has contributed deeply to the rot where the gateway to rigging is laced with red carpet. In addition, the general beliefs that each election outcome has not been fair also dampen the interest of the public to have faith in the institution. ‘Go to court’ has been a peculiar lexicon in the Nigerian political space with each election marred by election results rejections by most of the political parties and its candidates who participated in the election except the declared winner. Each election in Nigeria.

Voters’ suppression also counts as a factor in voters’ apathy. This suppression is being carried out through voters’ disfranchisement at the polling unit via late turn-up of electoral officers, missing electoral materials, and malfunctioned machines as the case may be. Even when voters put in more effort to vote through resilience, cases have been reported where these votes have not been counted; claims present at each electoral tribunal (Cable, 2023). For instance, the last presidential election of 2023 witnessed four presidential candidates who filed petitions to challenge the emergence of Bola Ahmed Tinubu as the winner of the election. The National Legal Adviser of the Labour Party, Akingnade Oyelekan, believed the party won the election. According to him, “the basis of approaching the court ranges from [the Independent National Electoral Commission’s] non-compliance with the electoral act to other irregularities.” Oyelekan stated that the electoral act states that results must be uploaded from the polling units. That was not done. According to Ose Anenih, “in the first instance, the process laid down by the Electoral Act was not followed,” he says. “The second is that by not complying with the Electoral Act, INEC has taken us back to the days of manual collation thereby exposing us to the days of bad faith actors manipulating physical result sheets.” “I think votes were artificially brought down through voter suppression and a manipulation of the result declared by INEC chairman just to make it competitive enough to make it possible for Tinubu to be president,” concludes Anenih (Abdulrahman, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The findings from the voter apathy study reveal a deep-seated distrust in Nigeria’s electoral system, fueled by corruption, voter suppression, and perceived inefficiency. Local government autonomy can serve as a countermeasure by creating a governance structure that emphasizes accountability and transparency. Autonomous local governments, free from undue interference by state or federal authorities, are better positioned to operate transparently and prioritize

community needs. When local leaders are directly answerable to their constituents, they can foster a culture of trust and engagement that counters the disillusionment many Nigerians feel toward national politics. When local governments operate independently and respond effectively to community needs, citizens are more likely to see tangible benefits from their participation in governance. For example, improved infrastructure, healthcare, and education at the grassroots level can renew trust in democratic processes and motivate electoral participation. Furthermore, local government autonomy can help address voter fatigue and disenfranchisement. Many citizens grow apathetic when they perceive governance as distant and ineffective. By empowering local governments to implement programs tailored to the unique needs of their communities, citizens can witness firsthand the impact of governance, rekindling their interest in political participation. Additionally, local governments can engage marginalized groups, such as women and youth, in civic processes, ensuring their voices are heard and their concerns addressed. This inclusivity can help to reduce apathy and create a sense of belonging within the democratic system. In conclusion, local government autonomy offers a viable pathway to reducing political apathy in Nigeria by creating a governance system that is inclusive, responsive, and accountable. When citizens see their local leaders as effective and their participation as impactful, it fosters trust and engagement that extends to national elections. Strengthening local governance, therefore, is not just a solution to voter apathy but also a cornerstone for sustaining and deepening Nigeria's democracy.

Recommendations

Despite its potential, local government autonomy in Nigeria faces significant challenges, including state government interference, inadequate funding, and political patronage. Constitutional reforms are necessary to guarantee financial and administrative independence for local governments, reducing the overreach of state governments. Capacity-building initiatives for local government officials can also enhance their ability to deliver services and manage resources effectively. Civic education programs, organized in partnership with local governments, can further encourage citizens to engage in the political process by highlighting the importance of their participation.

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