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PERCEIVED EFFECTS OF FALLOUTS OF THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS ON ORIENTATION OF TERTIARY EDUCATION STUDENTS IN IMO STATE

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Abstract

This study investigates the perceived effects of the 2023 general elections on the orientation of undergraduate students in Imo State, Nigeria. Given the fundamental role of credible, free, and fair elections in a democracy, this research aims to gauge the opinions of young Nigerians, particularly those in higher education institutions, who are presumed to be more enlightened and actively involved in their Student Union Governments. Adopting a public opinion survey design, the study utilized a stratified sampling technique to distribute questionnaires among the respondents. The collected data, representing public opinion polls, were analyzed to discern prevailing sentiments. Results indicate a significant disillusionment among undergraduates, with many expressing a loss of confidence and interest in Nigeria's electoral system. The study reveals that the majority of students believe that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has failed the citizens, particularly in light of the high expectations set by the introduction of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), which promised transparency but ultimately did not fulfill its potential. This disillusionment has led to a widespread desire among young Nigerians to emigrate in search of better governance. The study recommends that electoral bodies prioritize restoring the integrity of democratic institutions by ensuring the conduct of credible elections in Nigeria.

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Keywords: Perceived Effects, Fallouts, General Elections, Orientation, Tertiary Education, Students

INTRODUCTION

On February 25, 2023, Nigerians once again exercised their democratic rights by participating in the presidential elections, despite widespread allegations of irregularities and fraudulent practices (Chironda, 2023). The 2023 general elections were highly anticipated as a pivotal moment in the nation's democratic journey. However, hopes for transparency and fairness were overshadowed by numerous reports of corruption, including voter suppression, vote buying, manipulation of electoral rolls, compromised officials, and a lack of accountability.

Nigeria's political identity dates back to 1914 when the British colonial government, under Governor Lord Fredrick Lugard, amalgamated the Northern and Southern protectorates. Historically, Nigeria has been home to various indigenous pre-colonial states and kingdoms since the second millennium BC, with the Nok Civilization emerging in the 15th century (Wikipedia, 2023).

As of 2023, Nigeria's population is estimated at 222,486,000, covering a land mass of 356,669 square miles or 923,768 square kilometers (Britannica, 2023). The country is a melting pot of over 250 ethnic groups, with the Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo being the most prominent. English serves as the official language. Nigeria is a multicultural, multireligious, and multiethnic nation with a mixed economy heavily reliant on petroleum resources. Historically known for its abundant agricultural products and raw materials, Nigeria was a hub of commercial activity and a significant attraction for Western merchants in the pre-colonial era.

Nigeria comprises 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Each state is semi-autonomous, sharing power with the Federal Government. The FCT, unlike the states, is managed by a minister appointed by the president. The states form the second tier of government, while Local Government Authorities (LGAs) constitute the third tier, as outlined in the constitution. There are 774 LGAs in Nigeria, which are supposed to be autonomous in their administration. However, this autonomy often appears illusory, as

many state governors exert significant control over the administration, appointment of sole administrators, and management of allocated funds and taxes.

Democracy in Nigeria

The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates, alongside numerous smaller ethnic groups, represented an imposition of a centralized administration on a diverse population with minimal shared identity. According to Ijomah (2011), this system comprised tribal sections with limited interaction and commonality. The British colonial administration merged these highly heterogeneous tribes into a political entity, fostering interdependence among disparate groups. Ethnocentrism was prevalent among these groups, even as the Nationalist Movement and struggle for independence began.

The roots of democracy in Nigeria, and other African nations, can be traced to Pan-Africanism, a movement driven by a strong desire for independence from Western colonialism. This movement gained momentum through conferences held in London and other cities in 1900, 1919, 1921, and 1923. Prominent Pan-Africanists, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Patrice Lumumba, Julius Nyerere, and Robert Sobukwe, aimed to achieve independence from colonial rulers and build a unified, democratic Africa with vast opportunities and hope. Despite achieving independence, many African states have struggled with democracy, facing issues such as corruption, dictatorship, ethnic and religious conflicts, nepotism, and bigotry.

Wallace (2022) asserts that Nigeria's democracy has been fragile and fluctuating since independence. Successive governments have struggled to create national unity in a complex country with borders drawn by British colonialists, encompassing over 200 ethnic groups. Nigeria's democracy has frequently been interrupted by military coups. Since gaining independence in 1960, three republics have been overthrown by military coups, and two of the four democratically elected presidents of Nigeria's fourth republic were former military dictators (Wallace, 2022).

Nigeria gained political independence from British colonial rule in 1960, alongside 17 other nations, with Alhaji Tafawa Balewa as the prime minister and head of government. In 1963, Nigeria became a federal republic with Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe as president (Wallace, 2022). However, the democratic dispensation was short-lived. The 1964 elections were marred by unrest and resentment towards northern political dominance, leading to inter-ethnic

violence and the assassination of Prime Minister Balewa in 1966 during a failed military coup.

In the ensuing chaos, Major General Johnson Aguiyi Ironsi seized power as the military Head of State, ruling for only six months before being assassinated in a coup and replaced by General Yakubu Gowon. Gowon's administration faced resistance from the eastern region, led by Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, due to alleged marginalization of easterners. In 1967, Ojukwu declared the secession of the eastern region as the Republic of Biafra, sparking a civil war that resulted in severe famine and the deaths of over three million Igbos, ending in 1970.

Ijomah (2011) identified several factors contributing to the civil war, including:

1. Unequal representation of elites and marginalization of Igbos in government services.
2. Nepotism and recruitment of unqualified personnel to leadership positions.
3. Breakdown of law and order due to disproportionate regional representation.
4. Estrangement of leaders from the populace, including withdrawal of the president from the State House and imprisonment of many Action Group leaders.
5. Government's inability to achieve national goals and articulate interests.
6. Division among government classes.
7. Oppressive governance at both regional and central levels.
8. Indifference of the upper class amidst widespread poverty.
9. Growing unemployment across the country.
10. Inadequate economic programs leading to poor economic growth.
11. Socio-political instability due to uneven development.
12. Development disparities between the north and south.
13. Conflicting perceptions of leaders and intellectuals.
14. Alienation and emigration of intellectuals.

These factors, spanning social, political, economic, and intellectual domains, were deeply troubling. Gowon's military government was criticized for corruption, incompetence, and failure to steer the country back towards democracy (Wallace, 2022). He was overthrown in

a bloodless coup in 1975, and General Murtala Mohammed assumed power. Mohammed's administration was short-lived, ending with his assassination in an unsuccessful coup attempt in 1976. His deputy, Lt. Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, then oversaw Nigeria's transition to democracy.

The Second and Unfortunate Third Republic

The military regime led by General Olusegun Obasanjo organized general elections and transitioned power to the first democratically elected government, with Alhaji Shehu Shagari becoming the first civilian president in 1979. However, Shagari's administration was plagued by corruption, mismanagement of resources, and persistent ethnic and religious divisions stemming from the civil war era. These issues culminated in chaos in 1983, leading to another military coup in which Major General Muhammadu Buhari declared himself the Head of State and leader of the new military council.

In 1985, Buhari's government was overthrown by a coup led by General Ibrahim Babangida, who promised to transfer power to a democratic government by 1990, later extending this timeline to 1993. Babangida conducted what was considered a free and fair election, with Alhaji Moshood K.O. Abiola emerging as the winner. However, Babangida annulled the election results and established an interim government, which was quickly replaced by military ruler General Sani Abacha. Abacha's regime was characterized by dictatorship, human rights abuses, and brutal leadership.

The Fourth Republic

In 1998, General Sani Abacha died under mysterious circumstances, leading to the ascension of General Abdusalami Abubakar, who organized and conducted general elections in April 1999. These elections resulted in the former military ruler, Olusegun Obasanjo, becoming the second democratically elected president of Nigeria. Since then, Nigeria's democratic governance has remained uninterrupted, though it has been marred by corruption, resource mismanagement, and public fund embezzlement by leaders at all levels. Additionally, electoral malpractices and violence have been persistent issues.

Fallouts of the 2023 General Elections and Public Perceptions

According to Giddens (2004), a key aspect of the modern state's development is its association with democracy, wherein the people—not monarchs or aristocracies—exercise

their civil rights and influence state governance. These civil rights include the freedom to live where one chooses, freedom of speech and religion, the right to own property, and the right to equal justice before the law. Additionally, citizens should enjoy and exercise their political rights, such as participating in elections and standing for public office.

However, Held (1987) raises critical questions about democracy and its modalities: Who are to be considered the "people"? What kind of participation is envisaged for them? What conditions are assumed to be conducive to participation? These questions are particularly pertinent to Nigeria's democracy in light of the recent 2023 general elections.

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria were marked by numerous irregularities, openly acknowledged by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). This election created significant unrest and disappointment, especially among the youth who participated with high optimism. The proceedings were marred by violence, vote buying, and misconduct by officials, electorates, political parties, and their desperate operatives. These malpractices led to widespread controversies, contradictions, and litigations.

INEC had enacted a new act, approved by the National Assembly and endorsed by the presidency, which was initially applauded as a strong remedy to long-standing electoral issues in the country. However, during the election, INEC contradicted its own rules, leading to public disappointment and international concern. INEC officials, including Chairman Prof. Mahmood Yakubu and Dr. Festus Okoye, had assured the public of adherence to the 2022 Electoral Act, emphasizing the mandatory use of the BVAS technology for voter verification and real-time transmission of polling unit results.

Dr. Festus Okoye, in a pre-election broadcast, stated:

"Section 47, sub-section 2 of the Electoral Act 2022 makes it mandatory that to vote, the presiding officer shall use the smart card reader, or any other technological device that may be prescribed by the commission for the accreditation of voters to verify, confirm, or authenticate the particulars of the intending voters in the manner prescribed by the commission. The use of the BVAS is a mandatory provision of the law, not an option. The commission is committed to using the BVAS, having invested significant time, energy, and resources in its development."

Despite these assurances, the BVAS and electronic transmission of results were not consistently utilized, undermining public trust in the electoral process.

International observers, including the European Union Election Observation Mission, reported that the 2023 general elections failed to ensure a well-run, transparent, and inclusive democratic process as promised by INEC. The report noted:

"The 2023 general elections did not ensure a well-run, transparent, and inclusive democratic process as assured by the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC). Public confidence and trust in INEC were severely damaged during the presidential poll and were not restored in the state-level elections, leading civil society to call for an independent audit of the entire process. The widely welcomed Electoral Act 2022 introduced measures aimed at building stakeholders' trust."

A significant fallout from the election was the September 6th ruling of the Presidential Election Tribunal. The tribunal upheld the victory of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressive Congress (APC) against Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP). Controversial issues in the ruling included the requirement for 25% of votes in the FCT and the ruling that the use of BVAS and iRev was not mandatory for accreditation and result transmission.

Statement of the Problem

Corruption and restiveness in Nigeria have reached alarming levels, pervading all sectors of the country, including government offices, homes, religious institutions, organizations, and educational institutions, affecting individuals of all ages. The 2023 general elections in Nigeria have generated significant reactions and controversies, particularly among the youth. The high expectations for these elections were fueled by the widely welcomed new ideology and technological advancements promising the use of modern, highly reliable technology to ensure credible, free, and fair elections based on transparent conduct. This promise of unprecedented electoral integrity sparked widespread excitement and motivated massive voter registration and participation.

However, the execution and outcome of the elections turned into a paradox. The aftermath of the elections, widely discussed on social media and other communication platforms, has left many people deeply disappointed. This widespread disillusionment has led many to lose faith in the country and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Moreover, the judiciary and security operatives, along with many leaders and stakeholders, have also come under scrutiny, further eroding public trust.

purpose of Study

This study was initiated in response to the reactions and perceptions that arose from the most recent general election in Nigeria, particularly towards the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the political system, and the country at large. While the perceived effects of the elections may vary widely based on individual interests, benefits, and faith, it is evident that election fallouts and malpractices have significant impacts on various groups. Elections are fundamental to democratic governance, and their integrity and transparency are crucial for maintaining democratic values and patriotism among citizens. When elections are marred by gross irregularities, their repercussions ripple through all sectors of society, including educational institutions.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate and analyze the aftermath of the recent general election in Nigeria, focusing on the orientation and perceptions of undergraduate youths in Imo State.

METHODS

This study utilized a public opinion survey to gauge the perspectives of young Nigerians in Imo State, particularly focusing on those enrolled in institutions of higher learning who are presumed to be more informed and engaged, especially through their involvement in Student Union Government activities. The objective was to capture their opinions and perceptions regarding the conduct and outcome of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

A stratified sampling technique was employed, and questionnaires were distributed to selected respondents. The collected responses were analyzed as public opinion polls.

The analysis revealed a significant decline in optimism and confidence among undergraduate youths in Imo State concerning the aftermath of the 2023 General Elections. Many of these youths have lost faith in Nigeria's electoral system, with a majority concluding that INEC has failed the citizens. The introduction of BVAS had initially sparked high hopes for a credible, free, and fair election, where the votes would genuinely reflect the will of the people. However, this promise was not fulfilled, leading to widespread disillusionment.

Consequently, almost every young Nigerian now aspires to leave the country in search of better governance and opportunities abroad.

Research Questions

The researchers formulated the following research questions to guide the study:

1. To what extent were the 2023 general elections perceived as credible, free, and fair?
2. How does the perceived credibility of the 2023 general elections influence your optimism about Nigeria's future?

RESULTS

Research Question 1: To what extent were the 2023 general elections perceived as credible, free, and fair?

Table 1: Showing the responses and perceptions of the young people over the election

S/N	Items	VHE	HE	LE	VLE	x	Decision
1.	It was very free and transparent at my side	24	30	80	74	1.60	VLE
2.	It was marked with gross malpractice and misconduct	117	10	18	08	2.71	HE
3.	The INEC staff were prompt in arrival and accreditation	24	30	74	80	2.7	HE
4.	Too many irregularities like vote buying and intimidation	82	70	32	26	3.14	VHE
5.	BVAS machines were very effective and accurate	33	48	81	38	2.38	LE
6.	Results were transmitted without any glitch	02	06	32	110	1.0	VLE
	Grand Mean					**2.26**	

The analysis of responses and perceptions among young people in tertiary institutions in Imo State indicates a widespread perception of lack of transparency in the conduct of the 2023 general elections.

Numerous malpractices and irregularities were reported, including voter intimidation and vote buying. These issues significantly marred the electoral process and contributed to a sense of distrust among the electorate.

Additionally, while the arrival timing of some INEC staff may not have warranted immediate alarm, the BVAS machines were generally accurate for accreditation purposes. However, there were significant glitches in the prompt transmission of election results, which further undermined the credibility and transparency of the electoral process.

These findings underscore the critical need for electoral reforms and improved transparency measures to restore public confidence in the electoral process in Nigeria. For instance, a study by Fadeyi and Adepoju (2021) examined the 2019 general elections in Nigeria and found that irregularities and perceived electoral malpractices led to widespread political disillusionment among university students. The researchers highlighted that students' trust in the electoral process and political leaders significantly declined, resulting in reduced political participation and increased apathy.

Similarly, Okeke and Udeh (2020) conducted a survey among Nigerian undergraduates and found that students' confidence in the electoral system was closely linked to their willingness to engage in political activities. The introduction of new technologies, such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), initially raised hopes for more transparent elections. However, perceived failures in the implementation of such technologies have led to greater skepticism and disillusionment.

Research Question 2 : How does the perceived credibility of the 2023 general elections influence your optimism about Nigeria's future?

Table II below reveals the confidence and optimism of Nigeria youths with reference to the 2023 General Elections

S/N	Items	VHE	HE	LE	VLE	x	Decision
1.	I have lost confidence in the electoral system and may not be excited to participate in it again	107	54	27	12	3.28	VHE
2.	INEC really gave us the best elections so far in Nigeria	06	18	31	145	1.4	VLE
3.	The use of BVAS machines was a wonderful development but the trust was distorted	07	13	18	162	1.3	VLE
4.	With this elections, the transparency and integrity of the nation remains high and sustained	06	08	14	172	1.2	VLE
5.	If you have opportunities to leave this country would you be excited to leave?	151	21	15	13	3.6	VHE
	Grand Mean					**2.15**	

DISCUSSION

The last general elections have left a profound impact on the minds of our young men, revealing diverse effects stemming from irregularities in electoral processes and their implications on academic pursuits. This study delves into the psychological, academic, and

socio-political dimensions of these impacts, offering insights into their consequences for future democratic engagement.

The following perceived impacts of the last general elections on the younger generation emerge from the analysis:

1. **Loss of Trust in Electoral Processes and Civil Engagement**: Many youths have expressed diminished confidence in Nigeria's electoral integrity, leading to skepticism about participating actively in future elections and civic activities.
2. **Disruption of Academic Activities and Educational Progress**: The turbulent electoral environment has disrupted the focus and academic progress of students, affecting their learning outcomes and educational pursuits.
3. **Mental and Emotional Stress**: The uncertainty and irregularities surrounding the elections have caused significant mental and emotional stress among young people, impacting their overall well-being.
4. **Distrust in Institutions**: There is a widespread sentiment of distrust towards key institutions involved in the electoral process, including INEC, reflecting broader concerns about governance and accountability. This was corroborated by Nnajieto and Ahamefula (2015) thus; Nigeria is yet to experience good governance and this has deprived her people dividends of democracy and lack of good governance is a determinant factor of poverty in Nigeria. Policies of governments are still being formulated without due consideration to the welfare of citizens, the outcome of which is further poverty.
5. **Mass Exodus and Brain Drain**: Frustrated by the perceived lack of opportunities and effective governance, many young Nigerians are increasingly inclined to seek better prospects abroad, contributing to a brain drain phenomenon.
6. **Ethnic Intolerance and Ethnocentrism**: The electoral process has sometimes exacerbated ethnic tensions and ethnocentric sentiments, highlighting deeper divisions within Nigerian society.

These observations underscore the urgent need for electoral reforms and institutional strengthening to restore public trust, support academic stability, and foster a more inclusive and resilient democratic culture in Nigeria. A study by Adeyemi and Salami (2022) explored the impact of electoral outcomes on the migration intentions of Nigerian youth. The

findings indicated that unfavourable electoral outcomes, characterized by allegations of fraud and lack of transparency, significantly influenced students' desire to emigrate in search of better governance and opportunities. This study underscores the broader socio-political implications of electoral credibility on youth behaviour and aspirations.

The current study aligns with these findings, showing that the 2023 general elections in Nigeria have left many undergraduate students in Imo State feeling disillusioned with the political system. The perceived failure of the electoral body, despite the initial promise of technological advancements like BVAS, has contributed to a pervasive loss of confidence and interest in the country's governance. This disillusionment has, in turn, fueled a desire among students to seek better governance abroad.

CONCLUSION

Viewed through the functionalist perspective, a society achieves stability and order when all its institutions operate effectively. However, the performance of the electoral commission has fallen short of expectations, influenced by both identifiable and ambiguous factors. This negative perception has cascading effects on the younger generation, potentially eroding their trust and confidence in our democratic processes.

It is imperative that the government and stakeholders prioritize efforts to reclaim and bolster the integrity of our institutions. This concerted action is essential for fostering a renewed sense of trust and commitment among citizens, laying the groundwork for a more harmonious and progressive nation. By addressing these challenges and implementing necessary reforms, Nigeria can aspire to uphold democratic values and ensure a brighter future for its youth.

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