



POLITICAL APATHY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of political apathy on democratic consolidation in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023. Despite institutional reforms such as the Electoral Act of 2022 and the deployment of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), voter turnout declined steadily from 43.65% in 2015 to a historic low of 27.4% in 2023 reflecting deepening public disillusionment with the political system. Using a qualitative research design and secondary data from academic sources, INEC reports, election observation records (including YIAGA Africa and EU EOM), and policy documents, the study analyses how citizen disengagement has weakened Nigeria's democratic foundations. The findings show that political apathy is not passive indifference but a rational response to elite capture, electoral malpractice, unfulfilled promises, and systemic unaccountability. This withdrawal has eroded governmental legitimacy, distorted representation particularly for youth, women, and marginalized regions and undermined mechanisms of vertical accountability. Anchored on Pluralist Democracy Theory, the study concludes that democratic consolidation remains elusive not because citizens refuse to participate, but because the system fails to make participation meaningful. The study recommended that reversing apathy, therefore, requires more than voter education; it demands credible institutions, inclusive governance, and a renewed social contract that restores faith in democracy as a vehicle for dignity and justice.

Keywords: Political apathy, INEC, democracy, Pluralist Democracy Theory, democratic consolidation

Introduction

Democratic governance all over the world has increasingly been challenged not by overt authoritarianism, but by the quiet erosion of citizens engagement. In advanced and emerging democracies, political apathy characterised by widespread disengagement from civic and electoral processes has emerged as a defining challenge to democratic sustainability across the globe. This has affected both advanced and emerging democracies alike (Blais, 2000; Gray & Caul, 2000). Characterised by disillusionment, detachment, and a sense of political futility, this phenomenon represents not merely a decline in turnout but a deeper erosion of the citizen-state relationship that underpins democratic legitimacy. While this trend is universal, its consequences are most severe in fragile democracies where institutional trust remains tenuous and accountability mechanisms weak. In Africa, experiences of democratic consolidation have been markedly uneven. Countries such as Ghana and Botswana have managed to sustain relatively high levels of voter participation through credible institutions and consistent public trust. Nigeria, however, presents a starkly contrasting trajectory. Since its return to civilian rule in 1999, the country has maintained formal democratic continuity marking a significant departure from decades of military dictatorship but the substantive quality of its democracy remains deeply contested (Omotola, 2011). Among the many challenges threatening democratic deepening, political apathy stands out as one of the most insidious forces, actively undermining institutional resilience and public accountability (Ibrahim, 2018; Fagunwa, 2015).



The Nigerian case illustrates how formal democratic continuity can coexist with deepening public alienation. Marked by a population exceeding 210 million, profound ethnic and religious diversity, and a political history scarred by coups and authoritarianism, citizen engagement is not just desirable but essential for democratic survival (Omotola, 2011). Yet over the past two decades, a pervasive culture of disengagement has taken root. This apathy is not rooted in ignorance or laziness; rather, it is a rational response to decades of broken promises, systemic corruption, electoral fraud, and elite impunity. As Nkwede (2014) observes, many citizens lack even a basic understanding of how governance functions, which prevents them from recognising the value of civic rights like voting. DeLuca (1995) further describes political apathy as an “indefinite suspension of the consciousness to form political intentions and act accordingly,” while Pasek (2011) defines it as a state of indifference or overt negativity toward political life.

This deep-seated cynicism has fostered what Almond and Verba (1963) term a “parochial political culture,” wherein citizens view the state as an alien and hostile entity rather than a collective project they can shape (Akinola, 2018). The result is visible across Nigeria: on election days, polling units in Lagos, Kano, Port Harcourt, and Maiduguri often remain empty not because citizens are indifferent, but because they no longer believe participation yields tangible improvements in their lives.

Nigeria’s democratic experience embodies a striking paradox: while institutional reforms have advanced, public trust has collapsed. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has implemented significant innovations Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs), Smart Card Readers (2015), the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) in 2023, and the Electoral Act of 2022 granting INEC greater autonomy. On paper, these should have boosted confidence. Yet official data reveal the opposite: voter turnout declined from 43.65% in 2015 to 35.66% in 2019, and a historic low of 27.4% in 2023 (INEC, 2023; Jega, 2023). This downward trend occurring alongside technical progress demonstrates conclusively that the crisis is not logistical but existential.

When the majority of eligible voters abstain, elected governments lack a genuine popular mandate, risking unrepresentative leadership and weakened legitimacy. As Jega (2023) and Griguoli (2018) argue, the health of any democracy depends not on passive citizenship but on an active, informed electorate that treats participation as a civic duty. It is within this context of eroding trust and institutional fragility that the impact of political apathy on democratic consolidation must be critically examined. Overall, reversing this trend requires more than technological fixes or legal amendments. It demands a fundamental recommitment to inclusive, responsive, and trustworthy governance where democracy delivers not just elections, but dignity, security, and justice. Only then can citizen engagement be restored not as an obligation, but as a meaningful act of collective agency.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria’s democracy faces a deepening crisis: the mass withdrawal of citizens from political life. Political apathy manifested in declining voter turnout, civic disengagement, and profound disillusionment has ceased to be a passive reaction to poor governance and has instead become an active force eroding democratic consolidation itself. Between 2015 and 2023, electoral participation fell to a historic low of 27.4% (INEC, 2023), the weakest mandate in Nigeria’s post-1999 democratic history. This is not ignorance or laziness; it is a rational response to decades of electoral malpractice, unfulfilled promises, systemic corruption, and elite impunity (Ibrahim, 2018; Fagunwa, 2015). Persistent irregularities including vote-buying, ballot snatching, intimidation, and result manipulation have entrenched the belief that elections are predetermined by political godfathers rather than shaped by popular will (Obiagu et al., 2021). When citizens see no tangible link between voting and improved governance, abstention becomes a justified act of cynicism (Blais, 2000; Nkwede, 2014). This cycle



is further worsened by socio-economic hardship, widespread insecurity, and inadequate civic education, all of which diminish motivation to participate (Fagunwa, 2015). The consequences are severe: governments elected by a minority lack genuine legitimacy, weakening accountability, responsiveness, and public trust (Omotola, 2011). Over time, democracy risks becoming hollow a system that maintains the form of elections but fails to deliver representation, justice, or inclusion. It is on this note that the paper examined the danger of political apathy on democratic consolidation in the Nigerian political landscape. Without understanding how political apathy actively corrodes the foundations of democratic rule, policy interventions will remain superficial, addressing symptoms while the institutional decay continues unchecked.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Conceptual Review

Political Apathy

Political apathy is far more than mere disinterest in politics; it is a complex, rational, and deeply rooted withdrawal from political life forged through repeated experiences of betrayal, institutional failure, and elite impunity. Scholars have long emphasized its multidimensional nature: Ojo (1954) described it as a “reluctance to be politically involved” or an “outright negative attitude,” while Fagunwa (2015) framed it as a “deficiency of love and devotion to the state,” highlighting the emotional rupture between citizens and national identity. Arowolo and Aluko (2010) further clarified that apathy manifests as measurable decline across all spheres of political engagement from voting to party membership while Mason, Nelson, and Szlarski (1991) conceptualized it as a syndrome where psychological detachment, emotional disengagement, and behavioural withdrawal converge, rendering political rituals meaningless.

In Nigeria, this condition is not born of ignorance but of hard-earned disillusionment. Despite over two decades of civilian rule, elections remain marred by violence, manipulation, and elite capture, while leaders routinely abandon campaign promises with no consequence. This environment transforms participation from a civic duty into a futile gamble. The phenomenon cuts across demographics but manifests uniquely: youth though digitally active and capable of mass mobilization, as seen in #EndSARS remain alienated from formal politics due to closed party structures and fear of co-option (Ibrahim, Liman, & Mato, 2015). Women face cultural restrictions, safety concerns, and financial barriers, resulting in significantly lower turnout, especially in Northern Nigeria (UNDP, 2020). In conflict zones like Zamfara, Kaduna, and parts of the South-East, insecurity and political marginalization have led to outright electoral boycotts.

Empirically, apathy is visible in four key behaviours identified by Yakubu (2012): non-registration, deliberate abstention (26.74% turnout in 2023), silence in the face of rigging, and refusal to cooperate with security agents all reflecting rational calculation, not laziness. Poor civic education exacerbates the crisis, as citizens fail to see the link between local governance and their daily lives (Idike, 2014; Nkwede, 2014). Even landmark reforms like the “Not Too Young To Run” law and BVAS technology have failed to reverse the trend, because citizens judge democracy by outcomes security, jobs, justice not procedural upgrades.

Ultimately, as Omotola (2011) and IDEA (2006) warn, when turnout falls below legitimacy thresholds, democracy becomes unrepresentative and unaccountable. Political apathy thus functions not as passive withdrawal, but as an active indictment of a system perceived as irredeemably closed a reality that defines Nigeria’s democratic paradox between 2015 and 2023.



Democracy

Democracy, at its core, is envisioned as “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” a people-centred social contract that prioritizes collective welfare, dignity, and inclusion over elite interests (Igwe, 2010; Zimako, 2009). Scholars like Ahmed (2002) expand this to encompass a socio-political framework where every individual, regardless of status, has meaningful agency in shaping national destiny. Historically, Carl Cohen (1971) rooted democracy in direct participation, while modern governance relies on representative systems what Nnamdi Azikiwe described as “the rule of the people by its majority inhabitants” through periodic, free, and fair elections (Esikot, 2002). Udokang and Awofeso (2000) further stress that democracy entails both inclusive decision-making and majority rule, always balanced by protections for minority rights and human dignity.

A functional democracy goes beyond elections it requires strong institutions, rule of law, accountability, civil liberties, and power-sharing. Scholars like Sen see democracy as freedom to participate regardless of socio-economic status, while Lane emphasizes that democratic progress comes through struggle, not automatically. However, democracy is fragile: Anyim and Schumpeter caution that it has inherent limits, and when reduced to mere elite competition, it can slide into “illiberal democracy” holding elections without real freedoms or accountability. For Sartori, true democracy must rest on popular sovereignty: the people’s power not just to elect leaders, but to hold and remove them.

In Nigeria, this ideal collides with harsh reality. Despite over two decades of civilian rule, democracy remains hollow marked by “elections by arrangement,” elite capture, and weak accountability (Igwe, 2010). Constitutional freedoms are routinely violated: journalists face intimidation, peaceful protesters encounter state violence, and dissent is criminalized. Meanwhile, unemployment, insecurity, and infrastructural decay persist without consequence for leaders. As Ake (2001) lamented, Africa’s collective economic output remains dwarfed by that of small European nations a critique not of democracy itself, but of its performative practice. Osaghae (1992) argues that real democracy requires power to genuinely reside with the people, yet in Nigeria, governance remains elite-driven, with minimal public consultation (Chafe, 1994; Sadeeq, 2008).

This gap between democratic promise and performance fuels mass disillusionment. When citizens see no link between voting and improved lives, they withdraw not out of ignorance, but rational judgment. Thus, democracy’s survival depends not on holding elections, but on delivering justice, inclusion, and dignity. Without that, even the most procedurally sound system risks collapse from within.

Democratic Consolidation

Despite its centrality to democratization studies, democratic consolidation remains a contested and multifaceted concept. Early scholars like Pridham (1990) warned of its “nebulous” nature, while Gunther et al. (1995) described it as a “conceptual morass” due to inconsistent definitions ranging from regime stability and performance legitimacy to cultural indicators like political trust. Originally framed by Ojo (2006) as building “dams against reverse waves” of authoritarianism, the concept has since expanded to include civilian supremacy, party system stabilization, institutional routinization, and the diffusion of democratic values. Yet in contexts like Nigeria, where basic electoral credibility remains fragile, this breadth risks obscuring urgent priorities.

A foundational definition comes from Linz and Stepan (1996), who argue that democracy is truly consolidated only when it becomes “the only game in town” universally accepted by elites, institutions, and citizens as the sole legitimate political framework. This hinges not on procedural



regularity but on substantive legitimacy: elections must be perceived as credible, leaders must respect constitutional limits, and citizens must believe their voices matter. Odoh and Aro (2016) echo this, describing consolidation as the institutionalization of a democratic culture where both rulers and the ruled internalize democracy as the only viable path. Similarly, Ikpe (2011) emphasizes that consolidation requires collective societal confidence in democracy despite its imperfections a belief nurtured through consistent, credible practice.

This process is inherently multidimensional. Institutionally, it demands independent structures: a judiciary capable of checking executive overreach, an electoral commission that commands public trust, a legislature with real oversight capacity, and firm civilian control over the military. Yet as Diamond (2014) stresses, institutions alone are insufficient without a supportive political culture. True consolidation occurs only when democratic norms permeate everyday behavior when citizens routinely demand accountability, reject violence, and engage beyond election day.

In Nigeria, this ideal remains unrealized. Despite uninterrupted civil rule since 1999 a historic achievement after decades of coups democratic consolidation is elusive (Yagboyaju, 2013). Elections are held regularly, but often reinforce rather than resolve the crisis of trust (Bretton, 1981). The judiciary, though occasionally assertive, is overburdened and vulnerable to executive influence, with election petitions frequently expiring unresolved. The National Assembly functions more as a rubber stamp than a check on power, reflecting what Ujomu and Felix (2014) describe as the broader failure of institutions to translate formal authority into genuine accountability. Political parties, meanwhile, operate as personal vehicles for godfathers, with primaries marred by violence and exclusion failing in their role as mediators between state and society (Diamond, 1992). Civil society and youth movements like #EndSARS (2020) demonstrate civic energy, but this engagement rarely sustains within formal institutions. As Schmitter (2016) notes, consolidation is not a destination but a continuous process of “deepening” requiring vibrant civil society, media freedom, civil liberties, and inclusive participation. Yet in Nigeria, these remain fragmented or suppressed.

At its core, democratic consolidation cannot be measured by the calendar or the number of elections conducted. It must be judged by whether democracy delivers responsive, inclusive governance and whether citizens believe they have a real stake in shaping their future. The period 2015–2023 encapsulates this tension: beginning with the hope of an opposition victory and ending in historic disillusionment with 27.4% turnout. Until the gap between democratic form and substance closes, Nigeria’s democracy will remain a promise unfulfilled.

Political Apathy and Democratic Consolidation: A Nexus

The relationship between political apathy and democratic consolidation is not merely correlational it is deeply causal, reciprocal, and self-reinforcing. At its core, democratic consolidation depends on the active, informed, and sustained participation of citizens. When that participation wanes due to apathy, democracy loses its legitimacy, accountability mechanisms falter, and institutions become hollowed out from within. Conversely, when democratic institutions fail to deliver fairness, transparency, or responsiveness, they breed disillusionment, which fuels further disengagement. This creates a dangerous feedback loop: weak democracy produces apathy, and apathy deepens democratic fragility a cycle that has defined Nigeria’s democratic trajectory.

Political apathy, manifested through low voter turnout, disinterest in public affairs, and withdrawal from civic discourse, directly erodes the foundational pillars of democratic consolidation. As Okafor and Okeke (2022) observe, when citizens disengage, elected governments suffer from a “legitimacy deficit,” as they no longer reflect the collective will of the people but rather the preferences of a mobilised minority. In such a context, leaders face little pressure to be accountable, policy-making



becomes disconnected from public needs, and democratic institutions lose their moral authority. Diamond (1999) emphasises that consolidation requires not just elections, but a “virtuous circle” of participation, responsiveness, and trust precisely the cycle that apathy disrupts.

Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023. Despite historic moments such as the 2015 peaceful transfer of power to an opposition candidate, public confidence in the democratic process has steadily declined. This is not mere indifference; it is a rational response to decades of electoral malpractice including vote-buying, ballot snatching, and result manipulation that, as Obiagu et al. (2021) note, have systematically undermined the integrity of Nigeria’s elections. Compounding this crisis is the brazen impunity of political elites who loot public funds with no consequences. When citizens repeatedly witness elections manipulated, campaign promises abandoned, and public resources diverted, they conclude logically that participation is futile. As Ibrahim (2018) notes, this disillusionment is especially acute among Nigeria’s youth, who constitute over 60% of the voting-age population, yet increasingly view formal politics as a corrupt, exclusionary space reserved for godfathers and careerists.

This withdrawal has profound and cascading consequences for democratic consolidation. Given that legitimacy hinges on inclusive participation, the widespread abstention of citizens inevitably weakens the moral and political authority of elected governments. Governments elected by only a minority of eligible voters’ struggle to claim a true mandate, making it easier for elites to govern without accountability. For instance, the Tinubu administration assumed office following the 2023 general elections, which recorded the lowest voter turnout in Nigeria’s democratic history raising serious questions about representativeness and policy direction.

Moreover, low participation distorts who gets heard and who gets ignored in the political system. Those who are more likely to vote often the wealthy, urban residents, and politically connected individuals end up having disproportionate influence over election outcomes and policy decisions. Meanwhile, the voices of the poor, rural communities, and young people are increasingly left out. In Northern Nigeria, where insecurity and poverty are rampant, voter participation in the 2023 elections was severely constrained by safety concerns and limited access to polling units. In the South-East, deep-seated feelings of political and economic marginalization led to widespread electoral disengagement a trend documented by the International Crisis Group (2023), which notes that many citizens viewed participation as futile in a system they perceive as exclusionary. Women’s underrepresentation due to cultural and safety barriers leads to policies that ignore gender issues. This exclusion fuels inequality, weakens trust in government, and drives protests like #EndSARS, where youth rejected formal politics, revealing a deep gap between public demands and state responsiveness. Critically, the relationship is institutionally mediated. Weak institutions amplify the effects of apathy. Consider INEC: despite adopting BVAS and the Electoral Act of 2022, its failure to upload results in real-time in 2023, coupled with last-minute changes to voting procedures, reinforced public cynicism. The judiciary, though constitutionally empowered to adjudicate electoral disputes, is hamstrung by statutory time limits that expire before judgments are delivered rendering election petitions largely symbolic. The legislature, meant to serve as a check on executive power, is often co-opted through budgetary inducements and party loyalty a reality that reflects Ujomu and Felix’s (2014) observation that Nigeria’s democratic institutions have largely failed to translate formal authority into genuine accountability and oversight. When these institutions fail to protect the integrity of the democratic process, they validate citizens’ worst fears: that the system is rigged. This deepens cynicism, which in turn reduces participation, allowing elites to manipulate the system with even less resistance. The result is a democracy that survives procedurally but stagnates substantively elections are held, but they no longer serve as mechanisms of accountability or popular sovereignty.



The cycle is further reinforced by socio-economic realities. In a context of mass unemployment (45% among youth, NBS 2023), rising inflation, and widespread insecurity, citizens prioritise survival over civic engagement. When a young graduate in Kano cannot find a job, or a farmer in Benue faces daily threats from herdsmen, voting feels irrelevant. Political parties offer no meaningful policy alternatives campaigns are dominated by ethnic appeals and godfatherism rather than ideology. As a result, citizens disengage not out of ignorance, but out of rational calculation: the system does not work for them.

Theoretical framework

Pluralist Democracy Theory

This study is anchored in Pluralist Democracy Theory, as advanced by Robert A. Dahl in *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (1956) and further developed in *Democracy and Its Critics* (1989). Dahl rejected the notion that democracy is merely a façade. Instead, he argued that modern representative systems can approximate genuine popular control what he termed “polyarchy” provided certain institutional and cultural conditions are met. Polyarchy rests on two interlocking pillars: public contestation (the right to form opposition parties, run for office, express dissent, and access independent media) and inclusive participation (broad, equal, and effective opportunities for all adult citizens to influence political decisions).

Some scholars note that Dahl’s model may not fully account for deep structural inequalities such as wealth concentration or ethnic divisions that can limit pluralism in contexts like Nigeria. Nonetheless, his framework remains highly relevant because it understands political apathy not as civic indifference or cultural inertia, but as a rational response to democratic deficit. When elections become empty rituals, promises go unfulfilled, and institutions operate without accountability, citizens disengage because participation no longer yields meaningful outcomes. Crucially, Dahl’s theory affirms that democratic quality can be deepened through reforms that enhance transparency, broaden inclusion, strengthen civil society, and rebuild the social contract between state and citizen. This makes Pluralist Democracy Theory especially suited to analyzing Nigeria’s experience in recent time. It provides a clear lens to examine how declining citizen participation has undermined the legitimacy of democratic institutions, weakened accountability, and distorted representation while also affirming that democratic consolidation remains possible through renewed civic engagement, institutional innovation, and inclusive political practices

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a descriptive and analytical approach, relying exclusively on secondary sources of data including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government publications, policy documents, election observation reports from credible institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), YIAGA Africa, and the European Union Election Observation Mission, as well as reputable newspaper archives covering key political events like the #EndSARS protests and the 2023 general elections. Its mode of analysis is conducted using thematic and content analysis, a systematic qualitative method that identifies, codes, and interprets recurring patterns of meaning across textual sources.

Findings

Political apathy in Nigeria as manifested in the recent elections did not happen by accident. It grew because of deep problems in the country’s democratic system. Citizens stopped believing that their votes matter. Even though INEC introduced new technologies like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and passed the Electoral Act of 2022, elections were still filled with vote-buying, ballot snatching, intimidation, and violence (Obiagu et al., 2021; YIAGA Africa, 2023). When people see that election results can be changed or that powerful people decide who wins before voting even



begins, they lose hope. As Nkwede (2014) and Fagunwa (2015) explained, this makes citizens feel that taking part in politics is useless. Another big cause is the way political parties are run. Parties are not open to ordinary people they are controlled by rich elites, godfathers, and those with money (Jega, 2023). The “Not Too Young To Run” law was meant to bring in young people, but in reality, only those with money or connections could actually run (Nwolise, 2017). This made many Nigerians, especially the youth, feel left out. On top of this, poverty, unemployment, and insecurity made it hard for people to focus on politics. Many chose to stay home because they were struggling to survive (Fagunwa, 2015). Some even accepted small money or food just to vote, which shows how little value they placed on the process (Arugu & Wosu, 2020). Finally, poor civic education means many citizens do not understand how government works or why their participation matters (Nkwede, 2014). All these things together created a culture where people no longer trust the system and so they simply walked away.

The extent of political apathy in Nigeria during this period was very serious. The clearest sign is the drop in voter turnout. INEC (2023) reported that only 26.74% of registered voters came out in 2023 the lowest since 1999. In 2015, turnout was 43.65%, and in 2019, it fell to 35.66%. This steady decline shows that more and more people are choosing not to vote. But apathy is not only about not voting. It is also seen in how people no longer join political parties, attend rallies, or believe that leaders will listen to them. Political parties have become closed groups that do not welcome ordinary members (Omotola, 2011). Young people, who make up over 60% of the population, are especially disconnected. Even though they are active online and protested during #EndSARS in 2020, many still refuse to take part in formal elections because they see politics as corrupt and unfair (Akinola, 2018). In some parts of the country, like the North-East and South-East, people did not vote because of fear due to violence and insecurity (EU EOM, 2023). They stayed away not because they did not care, but because it was too dangerous. Public opinion surveys also show how deep the distrust goes. Afrobarometer (2022) found that only 28% of Nigerians trust INEC, and just 22% have confidence in political parties. These numbers prove that political apathy is not just a small problem it is widespread and affects all areas of civic life.

This growing disengagement has hurt Nigeria’s democratic consolidation. Democracy is not just about holding elections it must also produce governments that are legitimate, accountable, and truly represent the people. But when most citizens do not vote, the government loses its legitimacy. If only one in four voters chooses the president, can that leader really speak for the whole nation? (Ibrahim, 2018). Also, because of apathy, leaders do not fear losing power, so they become unaccountable. They make promises during campaigns but forget them after winning (Ibekwe, 2016). Without pressure from voters, corruption and bad governance continue unchecked. Representation has also suffered. Women and young people remain underrepresented in government, even after laws like “Not Too Young To Run” were passed (YIAGA Africa, 2023). Rural communities, especially in insecure regions, are ignored because their voices are not heard at the polls. Over time, this creates a cycle: people feel excluded, so they stop participating, and because they do not participate, they stay excluded (Omotola, 2011). Finally, political apathy weakens the entire democratic culture. When citizens stop engaging, political parties become tools for elites, civil society loses strength, and public discussion becomes shallow. As Diamond (1999) and Linz and Stepan (1996) warned, without active citizen involvement, democracy becomes weak and can easily slide back into authoritarian habits even if elections are still held.

Despite these challenges, some efforts have been made to reduce political apathy. INEC tried to make elections more credible by using BVAS and the IReV portal to show results in real time (INEC, 2023). These steps helped reduce fraud on election day, but they could not fix problems like violence before



elections or lack of punishment for those who break the rules (Jega, 2023). The “Not Too Young To Run” law was another important step. It lowered the age for running for office and gave hope to many young Nigerians (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2018). However, in practice, money and party gatekeeping still blocked most young people from actually competing (YIAGA Africa, 2023). Civic groups like YIAGA Africa and CDD West Africa also worked hard to educate voters through town halls, radio programs, and social media campaigns like #TurnUp2023 (CDD West Africa, 2023). These efforts helped some citizens understand politics better and feel more confident about taking part. International observers from the EU and UNDP also supported the process by monitoring elections and offering advice (EU EOM, 2023). But as Omotola (2011) pointed out, real change will only come when reforms are fully implemented and owned by Nigerians themselves. In the end, solving political apathy is not about forcing people to vote it is about fixing the system so that citizens can trust it again. When people believe their votes count, when leaders are held accountable, and when everyone especially the youth and women can truly take part, then democracy in Nigeria can begin to consolidate.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that political apathy in Nigeria within the period under study is not a surface-level behavioural anomaly but a deep-seated structural condition rooted in systemic institutional failure, elite exclusion, and eroded civic trust. Far from being a passive withdrawal, it functions as an active and rational response to a political system that has consistently failed to deliver accountability, representation, or tangible improvements in citizens’ daily lives. This interpretation aligns with the core tenets of Pluralist Democracy Theory, which holds that democracy thrives not through elite benevolence but through broad-based citizen engagement that checks power and shapes public outcomes (Dahl, 1971). The evidence confirms that when this engagement collapses as it has in Nigeria democracy becomes hollowed out, reduced to a procedural shell devoid of popular sovereignty. Elections may still be held, but they no longer reflect the will of the people.

The causes of apathy identified in this study such as electoral illegitimacy, socio-economic precarity, elite capture, and weak civic education are not isolated factors but interconnected elements of a self-reinforcing cycle. Electoral reforms like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the Electoral Act of 2022 addressed technical vulnerabilities on election day, but they left untouched the deeper political economy of exclusion: godfatherism, pre-election violence, candidate imposition, and impunity for offenders. As a result, citizens rationally concluded that participation offered little return on investment. This finding supports Omotola’s (2011) argument that institutional reforms, without genuine political will and enforcement, are insufficient to restore democratic legitimacy. Similarly, the limited impact of the “Not Too Young To Run” law underscores that legal inclusion alone cannot overcome informal barriers such as prohibitive nomination fees, lack of security for young candidates, and closed party structures a reality that challenges purely formalistic approaches to democratic reform.

The extent of disengagement, evidenced by the historic low turnout of 27.4% in the 2023 general elections (INEC, 2023), reflects more than voter fatigue; it signals a full-blown crisis of democratic faith. The fact that abstention cuts across regions, age groups, and social classes though manifesting differently in each context demonstrates that apathy is a national phenomenon with local inflections. In the North-East, insecurity kept voters away; in the South-East, feelings of marginalisation led to boycotts; in urban centres, cynicism replaced hope. Yet, as Afrobarometer (2023) data show, this withdrawal coexists with high levels of political interest, particularly among youth engaged in informal activism like the #EndSARS protests of 2020. This paradox suggests that citizens are not apathetic to governance per se, but to the formal political system as currently constituted. They care



deeply about justice, security, and opportunity but no longer believe that elections are the vehicle to achieve them.

Most critically, the impact of apathy on democratic consolidation has been profound. The erosion of legitimacy, distortion of representation, and collapse of accountability mechanisms have collectively weakened Nigeria's democratic resilience. Governments elected by a minority of eligible voters lack the moral and political mandate to pursue bold reforms or demand shared sacrifice. At the same time, political elites operate without fear of electoral consequence, knowing that low turnout insulates them from public backlash. Over time, this dynamic normalises unresponsive governance, entrenches public cynicism, and weakens the very idea that leaders should serve the people. These findings resonate with Linz and Stepan's (1996) warning that democratic consolidation requires not just elections, but a vibrant "political society" in which multiple groups parties, civil society, media, and citizens compete and cooperate within shared democratic rules. In Nigeria, the absence of such a society replaced instead by winner-takes-all, zero-sum politics has made apathy both a symptom and a cause of democratic fragility.

Finally, the measures implemented to address apathy: technological (like BVAS), legal (like "Not Too Young To Run"), and civic (like voter education campaigns) reveal a crucial insight: no single intervention can succeed in isolation. BVAS cannot compensate for widespread insecurity or logistical failures. Youth inclusion laws cannot overcome financial gatekeeping or party gatekeeping. Civic education cannot thrive in an environment where institutions lack credibility, or speaking out carries risk. True democratic renewal requires a synergistic approach that simultaneously strengthens independent institutions, democratizes internal party processes, protects civic space, and addresses the socio-economic drivers of disengagement such as unemployment, poverty, and inequality. This holistic view is consistent with Pluralist Democracy Theory's emphasis on dispersed power, inclusive participation, and institutional responsiveness (Dahl, 1971). It also affirms a central truth: reversing political apathy is not about "motivating voters" through slogans or rallies, but about making democracy work for them so that participation becomes meaningful, safe, and worthwhile.

In sum, this study demonstrates that political apathy in Nigeria is neither inevitable nor irreversible. It is a rational response to a broken system but one that can be repaired through credible, multi-dimensional reforms that restore the reciprocal relationship between state and citizen. Without such efforts, elections may continue to be held, but democratic consolidation will remain elusive.

Conclusion

This study shows that political apathy in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023 was not random disinterest but a rational response to a system that favours elites over ordinary citizens. People withdrew not because they did not care, but because they no longer believed voting could bring accountability or real change. Nigeria's democracy now runs on procedure without legitimacy. Elections are held but with only low turnout the government lacks a true mandate. This fuels public doubt about democracy itself. Without broad participation, elections risk becoming empty rituals in what scholars called "electoral authoritarianism" a system that keeps the form of democracy but loses its substance. Apathy has also reshaped governance. Youth, women, and marginalized groups remain excluded, turning politics into elite bargaining based on ethnicity and patronage. With low turnout, leaders face little pressure to perform, and accountability fades.

This outcome resulted from deliberate choices: elites weaponizing institutions, parties shutting out new voices, and governments failing to deliver security or dignity. Technology like BVAS addressed symptoms, not root causes. Faith cannot be restored by machines alone when citizens face daily



betrayal through corruption and unresponsive rule. Democratic consolidation will remain out of reach unless participation is made meaningful through inclusive, equitable, and responsive governance. Until then, elections may continue, but democracy will stay hollow.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, reversing political apathy and strengthening democratic consolidation in Nigeria requires a multi-institutional strategy that addresses both structural barriers and cultural disillusionment. The following recommendations are directed at key stakeholders whose actions can meaningfully reshape the relationship between citizens and the state.

The National Assembly should go beyond symbolic reforms and enact comprehensive legislation that tackles the root causes of exclusion in Nigerian politics. While the “Not Too Young To Run” law was a welcome step, it must be supported by strict campaign finance regulations to reduce the monetization of elections, mandatory provisions for internal party democracy to end candidate imposition, and legal safeguards for whistleblowers and civic activists who challenge corruption.

Equally, urgent is the need to review constitutional provisions to guarantee the true independence of anti-corruption agencies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and the Code of Conduct Bureau, so they can hold leaders accountable without fear of executive interference.

Political parties must stop functioning as private enterprises for godfathers and elites. They need to become genuine platforms for public participation by adopting transparent membership systems, holding open primaries monitored by independent observers, and developing clear policy manifestos instead of relying on ethnic rhetoric or personality cults.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) must expand its role beyond managing election-day logistics. While technological tools like BVAS and the IReV portal have improved technical credibility, INEC should partner with civil society to run continuous civic education programmes that explain not only how to vote but why participation matters even in imperfect systems. Town halls, school outreach, and digital campaigns can help reconnect citizens to democracy.

Civil society groups have vitals roles to play as bridges between citizens and institutions. Groups like YIAGA Africa and CDD West Africa should strengthen post-election accountability initiatives through tools like budget tracking, constituency scorecards and legislative report cards to keep citizens engaged beyond just voting. The media, in turn, must move from sensationalism to issue-based journalism that informs the public and holds leaders accountable.

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