

# WHO VOTE ‘EPP’? POLITICAL AND VOTER APATHY AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN A NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*There is no doubt that youths or millennial are becoming apathetic towards political and voting process. It is on this basis that the paper examines the political and electoral- ‘voting’ behaviour of undergraduates in a specialized tertiary institution in Western Nigeria. A survey design using a questionnaire was administered on 50 randomly chosen students in a class of 450 who were eligible to vote. Result revealed that most of the respondents are politically empathetic but electorally apathetic as a result of their experiences such as corruption, abandoned projects, failed promises, selfishness, bad governance, and non-impact on their welfare, religion is the least of the reason. Another one-on-one interviews were randomly conducted on 28 students in other to establish the reliability of the claims, a number of students outside the earlier respondents were randomly interviewed in which the results show that undergraduate electorates will vote if the political class are receptive and people oriented. This phenomenon generated the parlance among the undergraduates, “Who Vote Help [Epp].” It then concludes that until government and stakeholders at all levels exhibit all forms of good governance, then election results may not reflect the voice of the people which inadvertently is the voice of god. It is hoped that the result of this work act not only as a panacea to the problems of voter and political apathy at all levels but steer debates and theories on the subject matter.*

**KEYWORDS:** Apathy, Tertiary institution, Undergraduates, election, Nigeria

## INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria’s total population of 140, 431, 790, (15-39) years make up 57, 345, 217; (19-39) years make up 42, 445, 798 of the 2006 Census Population (NPC, 2006) though now hovers at about 170 million or more, the country has been bedeviled with military incursion for a long period of its history before the advent of the recent relatively precarious democracy in 1999. More so, the country has witnessed several forms of government, republican, military, diarchy, and totalitarianism among others. Though across the globe, the wave of democracy is becoming the most popular form of government and Nigeria and Nigerians are also not exempted from this global revolutionary savor. However, for democratic sustainability, periodic voter registration, independence of electoral umpires and judiciary, enabling environment and steady elections are only few of the ingredients. Election as one of the ingredients of democracy is widely accepted yet participation seem declining by the day especially among the youths or millennials who make up the highest population of most states. Elections are not enough for the survival of any democratic sustainability except it is credible, free and fair. Amongst all, it guarantees trust in the electoral process which removes all forms of political apathy and vices

especially in developing democracies. There is an aphorism that when good men keep quiet, then bad people take over. This explains the repercussion of political and voter apathy and its attendant problems for Nigeria’s nascent democracy as electoral results have not reflected the total will or perception of the electorates. This was corroborated by Jega (2011, 2015) that in its Action Plan Implementation Committee objectives, voter education especially in the area of voter apathy will be given priority so as to avoid the mistakes of the past. Mill (1861:340) in Nuka, et al (2015) opined that: ...there is no difficulty in showing that the ideal best form of government is that in which the sovereignty or supreme controlling power in the last resort is vested in the entire aggregate of the community; every citizen not only having a voice in the exercise of that ultimate sovereignty but called on to take an actual part in the government

Political apathy can be defined as the disinterest in the authoritative allocation of state resources and values. Borrowing from Lasswell’s definition of politics, Political apathy can be defined as the disinterest in who gets what, when and how?” On the other hand, Voter apathy can be defined as the disinterest in the expression of preference or choice for a candidate in an

election or electoral process. Voter apathy negatively impacts upon the electoral process and its outcome. Any serious effort at electoral reforms to bring about free, fair and credible elections must take into account the challenges of voter apathy. It is a subset of political apathy that has emerged as a major problem in advanced and emerging democracies, settled and volatile societies, large and thriving economies, as well as small and troubled ones, among youth, women and other marginalized groups as much as among mainstream dominant interests (INEC, 2011). Some reasons for voter apathy include broad psychological factors and collective memory of historical and contemporary events. Others are patterns of trust, feelings of efficacy, political engagement and disengagement at individual, group and regional levels. Though, there are empirical evidence that the global trend have been toward a decline in voter turnout, there is lack of grounded and sustained scholarly attention to voter apathy in the context of voter turnout in Nigeria despite the challenges plaguing that country's electoral system (INEC, 2011: 7). In the 2011 general election, a total of 73, 528,040 registered to vote, total votes/voter turnout was 39,469,484 (53.7%) and total valid votes was 38,209,978 while the 2015 general elections recorded 67, 422,005 total registered voters, only 31, 746,490 were accredited and 29,432,083 were valid votes cast (INEC). Record show that youths seem indisposed to voting as seen in voting configurations despite making up the bulk of any nation's population. In the Universities or citadels of learning, the case is indifferent. In the 2013 election which was manual, 13, 276 were eligible to vote, 3649 (27.49% voted), in 2014, 14, 200 students were eligible, 3828 (26.96% voted) while the 2015 had 15, 333 eligible students, but 4742 (30.93%) voted (ICTREC and 2013 University Digest) Though there was an increase in 2015 in voter turnout, study show that this was as a result of the level of awareness, free and fair election since the inception of the e--voting process in 2014 and the increasing number of admitted students (Anonymous interviews with ICTREC staff) Scholars have written widely on political and voter apathy among youths at general or national electoral level but very little has been done among them epicentrely, especially a population who aside women make up the total population in most electoral participations in most developing countries. This paper intends to investigate issues of voters and political apathy among youths (undergraduates) in a specialized Federal University in Nigeria, add to existing literatures on voter apathy at undergraduate levels and help identify key areas where such problems can be resolved. It is hoped that the outcome of this study could open up more debates and theories, used in the future and other climes in correcting this growing trend not only at undergraduate level but at other levels of the society.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Ugwu (2007) argued that in most developing countries of which Nigeria is one, participation in political activities by the

citizens, is more or less an ordeal which of course leads to political apathy. Yakubu (2012) describes political apathy as the deficiency of love and devotion to a state. Indeed, every destructive political tendency is a manifestation of political apathy, to the extent that in this "we" versus "them" dichotomy, when one is directing his point-finger to others, as the culprits of political apathy, the rest of the fingers point in the accuser's direction. He went on to give four manifestations or consequences of political apathy to include: decline in the number of registered voters, refusal to vote, failure to protest against rigging and failure to assist security with useful information and concludes that bad governance which is misrepresentation of the people causes political apathy. But is it possible to satisfy a peoples' insatiable wants? Cloud (2010) in Agaigbe (2015:4) maintains that, voter apathy occurs when eligible voters do not vote in public elections, thus, brings about low voter turnout. Epstein (nd) using the Chilean experience averred that despite the obligatory mandate of voting by all registered voters, it leaves initial registration voluntary and voting preferences regularly fail to translate into desired political changes. This is as a result of the perception of voters that the election may have been automatically or presumably rigged for a preferred candidate hence voters' choice do not matter. Tan (2012) argues from the humanistic impact of political apathy as he puts it thus:

The most immediate impact of political apathy on a country is a decline in political involvement, which at first may appear harmless. As involvement and interest in government and politics declines, the element of humanity is taken away from government, and politics is no longer of, by, or for the people. Without the expression of real individuals and their concerns, government stops being a living entity of the people and becomes a mindless machine. What is left is a nation at a standstill and a society abandoned.

Idike (2014) clarified that political apathy has continued to be mistaken for the related concept of voter apathy and also berated political parties in their roles in voters' education. The Independent National Electoral Commission [INEC] Report (2011) revealed that respondents identified politicians as being most responsible for voter apathy, with the politicians, Government and the INEC ranking highest on their list of those considered responsible for voter apathy. It then recommend voter mobilization, ensuring credible, inclusive, transparent, free and fair election to reducing voter apathy. The National Democratic Institute [NDI] Report (2012) exposed that the 2011 general election as one of the most peaceful and participated was so as a result of the role of voter education and civic outreach done by INEC, National Orientation Agency (NOA), Civil Societies and to an extent, political parties. Claassen and Highton (2009) reveals that political unawareness contributes to voter apathy despite increased party polarization

as party polarization is not sufficient to combat voter apathy. Fowler and Kam (2006) in their study revealed that patience play a huge role in voter apathy as electorates will have to queue or delayed while exercising their voting right yet no gratification or dividend, hence patience as a virtue has a significant role to play in voting. Agaigbe (2015) in her aim to examine views and perception of voter turnout in three local governments in Benue North-east Senatorial zones and factors responsible for the rather low level voter turnout and participation during the Nigeria's 2015 general elections show there were pre-conceived notions among many voters of result outcomes, votes might not count, fear of violence, culture of imposition of candidates among others as the causes. Fagunwa (2015) in an attempt to examine reasons behind the level of voter apathy in same election revealed that management and administration of electoral processes, modus operandi during elections individual and social factors were responsible for this but suggested that until political parties, politicians, INEC, the Media and the government provide the necessary environment, then apathy will continue. Gokenbach (n.y.) offers variables that will either increase or decrease voter-turnout to include: unemployment, violent crimes, property crimes, poverty, government expenditure on the child health insurance programmes, recipients of social security, government stance on the legalization of medical marijuana, and same sex marriage. He concludes that political satisfaction could still be a factor in voter apathy, but threats to that satisfaction could be a mobilizing force for voting. The question is must the public then be exploited so as to make them politically empathetic?

Nye (1997) emphasized that young electors were the most likely of the electorates to have a deep mistrust of government and government structures. Eliasoph (1998) identified a phenomenon she termed the 'shrinking circle of concern', as Americans increasingly attempt to 'avoid politics' in everyday life as well as in electoral contests. The Electoral Commission Research Report (2002) revealed that the 2001 United Kingdom election voter turnout dropped to its lowest with 59.4% of eligible voters exercising their right, 39% of 18-24 years voted as compared to 70% of those aged 65. It further gave some of the reasons why young people or youths hardly vote to include: disillusion, apathy (lack of interest in politics), impact (view that vote will not make a difference), alienation (the belief that politics is not for young people), lack of knowledge about politics, inconvenience as a result of time consumption as all these seem to affect no other group that the disproportionately young section of the electorates. Corroborating this situation is Letsas (2015) that the participation of youths in politics has reduced from 60% to 40%, a situation which should worry all. He furthered that political apathy-low voter turnout, disengagement from civic activities or inability to make informed decisions, UK youth are highly disconnected from the political system, process and parties and

that young non-voters are largely more distrustful of politicians and generally consider their promises to be deceitful of politicians and generally consider their promises to be deceitful, intentions manipulative and actions to be corrupt, perception that all candidates are similar and their votes make no difference. He charged the universities to provide the platform for political socialization since it is an avenue to see all vagaries of youths across party affiliations.

Kohnle (2013) argued that majority of 18-to-29 years old Americans would replace every Congress if given the opportunity and they feel that their future are threatened by the Shenanigans in Washington DC but of those who seek for this change, only half intended to vote in 2014 midterm Elections. Of the 2089 questions, 75% did not self-identify as politically active. A sobriquet in The Economist by D.K (2014) observed that the turnout of people aged 18-24 was just 21%. He then compared the state to that of the UK same year that only 44% of people aged 18-24 voted in Britain's general elections, compared with 65% of people at all ages even as the older voters explained that young people are simply lazy despite the latter being much educated, less likely to drink excessively or use drugs than previous generations of youths and even volunteered than older people. It furthered that young people do not feel that there is anyone worth voting for and concluded that young people who are more cosmopolitan, liberal, and hopeful than their elders tend to be switched off by the negativity and cynicism of election campaigns targeting the unhappy old but sadly cynicism then breeds cynicism. Meanwhile, Niemi and Hanner (2010) in a study through the telephone of college students in the 2004 US presidential elections revealed that there is need for development of new theories since demography as suggested by traditional theories is not a factor hindering turnout or not, rather new factors such as college-specific, mobilization by parties and battleground states were relevant to the study. Though the CIRP (2010) research show that college students participated more in the 2008 US election than ever but warned that this may not always be the case for future elections. Park (2000) observed the shrinking participatory politics of youths from the 1980s and warns of its graving dangers for democracy when he puts it thus:

It is by no means certain that the size of the democratic deficit from which this cohort (those born in the late 1970s and early 1980s) currently suffers will remain this large as they age. Instead they may revert to type as they move into their 30s and become comparable to today's 30 year olds. But, for this to be the case, they have a great deal of catching up to do (Ibid, 11).

The reviews have shown a common consensus that there is political and voter apathy among youths of voting age across the globe, though the case was a bit unique in the US presidential elections of 2008 however, none of the scholars have looked at these youths or young voters in their enclave. This is the lacuna this paper intend to fill.

## METHODOLOGY

The sampling frame of 450 undergraduates who offer courses in Elements of Politics and Government is spread across six departments and two colleges (Human Ecology and Environmental Management). 50 students were chosen at random *via* a convenient sampling using a simple percentage of 1/9<sup>th</sup> of the class size. 29 (58%) were males and 21 (42%) females and their age show they are youths or millennials. The University Electoral Law states that only matriculated students can vote with evidence of a valid School Identity as the school commenced E-Voting in the 2014/15 academic session. Majority of the respondents are sophomores and only a very few third, fourth and sixth years who are retaking the course.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

**Table 1**

| SN | Questions   | Yes         | No          | Indifferent |
|----|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1  | Are you aware of the presence of a Students Union Government (SUG) on campus?           | 48<br>(96%) | 1<br>(2%)   | 1<br>(2%)   |
| 2  | Do you think the SUG have been or are effective representing 'your' (students) welfare? | 9<br>(18%)  | 37<br>(74%) | 4<br>(8%)   |
| 3  | Have you felt their impact on campus or on your welfare?                                | 12<br>(24%) | 33<br>(66%) | 5<br>(10%)  |
| 4  | Do you think the union is corrupt?  | 34<br>(68%) | 14<br>(28%) | 2<br>(4%)   |
| 5  | Despite the answer above, will you continue to be involved in campus politics?          | 36<br>(72%) | 11<br>(22%) | 3<br>(6%)   |
| 6  | Did you partake in the last election?   | 29<br>(58%) | 21<br>(42%) | 0<br>(0%)   |
| 7  | Would you vote in next SUG Election?  | 11<br>(22%) | 35<br>(70%) | 4<br>(8%)   |
| 8  | Would you vote if the SUG becomes more responsive in terms of governance?               | 31<br>(62%) | 14<br>(28%) | 5<br>(10%)  |
| 9  | Would you vote if the SUG satisfies your needs or you see the dividends?                | 36<br>(72%) | 8<br>(16%)  | 6<br>(12%)  |

Field Study, 2016

The result show from the first question that majority of the students' electorates are aware of the presence of the Student Union Body or Government (SUG) on campus. On the second question, 37 students (74%) do not think the body has been able to represent them well enough, 9 (18%) believe the body has been effective representing their interests while 4 (8%) were indifferent. On whether the impact of the body is being felt on the polity or students' welfare, 33 (66%) think otherwise, while

12 (24%) attested but 5 (10%) were indifferent. No wonder their response on whether the union is corrupt showed that 34 (68%) were affirmative while 14 (28%) were negative and 2 (4%) were indifferent. Though, one cannot establish if there is a linkage or relationship between their thoughts of the Union's corrupt nature and the response given as to if they (electorates) will be involved in politics (political socialization) as 36(72%) affirmed, 11(22%) gave negative response while 3 (6%) were indifferent. On whether they partook in the last election, 29 (58%) was positive and 21 (42%) was negative. On whether they will vote in the next Students' Election, 11 (22%) responded positively while 35 (70%) were negative and 4 (8%) were indifferent. It shows that level of education does not affect voting behaviour of undergraduates and despite perceiving the Union or Executives as corrupt, they still continue to contribute their quota politically but when it comes to voting, they just snap off. However, there was a twist when asked if they will vote if the Union became responsive in terms of governance as 31 (62%) attested, 14 (28%) were negative while 5 (10%) were indifferent. Finally, when asked if they will vote if the Union satisfies their needs, 36 (72%) ticked yes, 8 (16%) ticked No and 6 (12%) were indifferent in response.

In order to establish a reliability test, one-on-one interviews were randomly conducted on 28 students on "school politics and Voting Behaviour" of which responses were recorded and analysed with 13 Males (46.4%), 15 females (53.6%) with ages under 30years. Since politics was interchangeably understood as voting or being voted, the word was defined to them as sum total of government and governance activities by students including campaigning, protests, pasting posters, information on candidates, awareness weeks among other activities. However, questions asked this time were:

1. Do you partake in campus politics and how?
2. Did you vote in the last election and why?
3. Will you vote in the next election and reason(s)?
4. Will you vote if the SUG becomes more responsive in terms of governance?
5. Will you vote if the SUG satisfies your needs?

The results show that the 28 students are involved in politics and the most popular way among them is campaigning through opening chat groups on social media, protests but voting is least. On whether they voted in previous elections, 12 (42.9%) said Yes while 16 (57.1%) said No. Among the 12 who voted, 10 (83.3%) said it was their right while 2 (16.7%) said they did because they either had a candidate or in order to achieve better things. On whether they will vote in the next election, 10 (35.7%) attested based on their rights, 2 (7.1%) were unsure citing the capability and honesty of the candidates as determinants in future voting, 16 (57.1%) said they will not vote;

of the 16(57.1%) not voting, 2 (12.5%) based their response on their religion, 14(87.5%) said they are not interested in electioneering process. On whether they will vote if the Union becomes responsive, 19(67.9%) said Yes, while 7(28%) said No and 2 (7.1%) were not sure. On the last question, 21(75%) were positive, 7(25%) negative. Of those who were negative, 2 (7.1%) based their response on religion. Some of the responses of the students are: "Who their vote help? They only fight for us when issues affect them and they don't offer us lift with the Union bus if they see us stranded. I will spend my time on other productive ventures than voting again." A member of the Campus Journalists collaborates the above. One of the members said, "this administration is worse than previous. The Vice President is complaining that she is not being carried along by the President while she just bought a brand new car, though she said she did not use the Union's money but they usually use the Union's Letter-headed letters to seek donations without delivering to the coffers. I even saw Air condition in her room and she uses a generator set." Another puts it bluntly:

Have you seen the SUG President recently the way he has added weight? The Union has been for their pockets only. They are there for money because of what they spend during campaigns. Presently, the number of groups opened on campus blogs and social media is mind boggling and show that they are all after money. They do not help us. Recently, the souvenir they gave us is far less than what we are given annually. I will never vote in this school again!

A traced thread on the internet titled "Campus Politics: Hit or Miss?" was also analysed (<http://www.nairaland.com/3123009/campus-politics-hit-miss>). From more than 31 posts and 40 authors, though with a little number of females based on their usernames (sex), it showed that majority of the students were involved in School Politics either as contestants or sponsors, campaign managers amongst other aspects of political participation. Majority of the students who said it was a big hit were either executives of the Students Body (Student Union, Departmental or faculty level), benefitted via friends and sponsored candidate or held one position or the other. Also issues raised from the authors (hit or miss) were: fear of cultism, corruption, network and dining with top guns, fetish (*juju*), help to building leadership skills, politics as battle ground, platform to gain experience , eye opener, among others. The comments of some of the authors that strikes this study are presented below:

op all these you listed are useless and doesn't in anyway tally with the topic at hand....Campus Politics is a no no in some school...do schools abroad contest with dangerous weapons to win, if you are saying it is normal then it is bad. What is the essence of going to school when in the end you act like a rogue to win an SUG election? If it is now presidential election *nkan?* You will bomb the country?

The results above show that the reasons for voter apathy vary across boards. However, there is a common ground around developing nations and its sub-sets (universities, institutions, state, local etc.). The common ground from the findings reveal further that undergraduates (youths/millennial) usually develop enthusiasm to be involved electorally especially first time voters but they turn out to be apathetic when they lose hope in the candidates or government when their expectations are not met or needs satisfied. This may have informed their perception to national voting behaviour as well.

**Fig 1: An abandoned multi million naira project**



**An abandoned Relaxation Spot by the 2014/15 SUG**

**Fig II: Abandoned Timer and light pole project**



**The Timer does not function but the light pole still works.**

## CONCLUSION

Elections and electoral processes in Nigeria have mostly been marred with violence, uncertainties, tensions, apprehensions among other physiognomies leading to a cold feet among electorates leading to misrepresentation, bad governance, unchecked elected officials, gross incompetence, mediocrity in governance, prebendal politics among others but also affecting the political culture, perception and behaviour of the electorates or voters. The situation among undergraduates is not different. Scholars have written widely on Political and Voter Apathy among youths but less work has been done on this theme within their immediate environment or enclave. It also challenges scholars on the role education plays in voter or political apathy since voter apathy is witnessed in an academic enclave such as these undergraduates (youths or millennials). Electorates want

more so they expect more from their leaders or political class. This does not appeal to Gokenbach (n.d) that electorates mostly lose interest in electoral process when they are politically satisfied. This may not hold water in some parts of the climes, not among the undergraduates. It concludes that until good governance, credible candidates, free and fair elections and dividends of democracy are being delivered to the electorates or voters at any level, then voter apathy will continue, be it in small, big communities or even at national level.

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