

# Election and Voters' Turnout in Nigeria: An Investigation of Reasons for Voter Apathy in 2019 General Elections in Oyo State

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**Abstract:-** In the world today, democratic system of government is widely believed to be the ultimate ideals that modern civilization strives to create and sustain because it gives room for popular will, legitimacy, extensive representation, as well as substantive citizens' participation and views that fit into the functioning of a fair and just society. Therefore, while citizens are expected to participate in all the political spheres of the state, government should make provision for a viable democracy. Unfortunately, what is obtained in Africa and Nigeria in particular is different as voter apathy continues to be a major concern after every poll. This paper examined the voter turnout in 2019 general elections in Oyo state and investigated the reason(s) responsible for voter apathy in the elections. Rational choice theory was adopted as the mental map for the work. While data was gathered using secondary and primary sources, it was analysed using descriptive method. The study observed that although INEC has started gaining the trust of electorates and they were pleased with the voting procedure. However, shift in the date of election, pre-voting campaign of calumny, prioritization of election and other factors were responsible for voter apathy in the election. Thus, recommendations were made.

**Keywords:-** Election, Voter Turnout and Voter Apathy.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the world all over, democratic system of government is widely believed to be one of the ultimate ideals that modern civilization strives to create and sustain. This is not unconnected with argument that it gives room for popular will, extensive representation, as well as substantive citizens' participation and views that fit into the functioning of a fair and just society. However, this is achievable when citizens are ready to participate in the administration of the polity and the state creates an enabling environment for them to do so. Hence, in order to have a viable democracy, Dalton sited in Faeren (2015) opined that the involvement of citizens in the political process is essential and if otherwise, such democracy is weak. More often than not, voting is one

among the major ways through which citizens participate in the decision making process in a democracy. The most crucial form of political participation is voting (Lee De Cola, 1980). According to Ambali, Isiaq and Isiaqa (2018:2), although election is an important element of a representative democracy however, robust voter turnout goes a long way in determining how fair, credible and legitimate a democratic government is.

Prior to representative democracy, citizens participated directly in governance without electing representatives. However, the impracticability of direct democracy in the modern democracy paves way for indirect democracy which makes political apathy a concern for world democracies. Kuenzi and Lambright (2007), Arowolo and Aluko(2012), Agu, Okeke and Idike(2013), Fagunwa (2015)among other scholars argued that most developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America had highest decline of political participation especially during electioneering process.

In his study, Cletus (2017:1) avers that while voter turnout in major African democracies had remained high, Nigeria democracy has remained underperformed. For instance, results from South Africa parliamentary elections indicate that in 2018, the country recorded 65.99% of voter turnout, in 2014 (73.48%), 2009 (77.30%), 2004 (76.73%), and 1999 (89.28%). He argued further that voter turnout in Ghana since 2001 have increased considerably. For instance, in 2012, 80.15% of the total registered voters participated, in 2008 (72.91%), 2004 (85.12%). Coming to Nigeria, although the numbers of registered voters have been increasing in every election year but rather than voter turnout to be increasing, it has been declining since the return of democracy in 1999. According to IJSRT (2019), the number of registered voters was 57.9million in 1999; 60 million in 2003; 61 million in 2007; 73 million in 2011; 67 million in 2015 and 83 million in 2019. Comparatively in terms of voter turnout, in 2015, Nigeria recorded 43.65% compared to the 54% in 2011 or the 57% in 2007 and lastly the 69% and 52% in the 2003 and 1999 elections respectively. This is why Kuenzi and Lambright (2007) opined that voter turnout declines the more election held in some African states.

By and large, in its effort to ensure high level of voter turnout and credible election in 2019, Nigeria electoral body, INEC, came out with full force with the usage of Smart Card Reader and Permanent Voters Card. Surprisingly, the result of 2019 election showed that the country recorded its most alarming voter apathy since 1999 with just 34.75% of voter turnout. Oyo state is one the 36 states of Nigeria where presidential election, senatorial election and federal house of representative election held. Also, the southwestern state is among the 29 states where gubernatorial and state house of assembly elections took place. However, reports from national and international observers such as International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (I-IDEA) and news media like Tell Magazine, Premium Times (March 9, 2019) among others showed that the voting behaviour of the people Oyo state differed in the two elections days. In fact, while commenting on the March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019 gubernatorial election in the state, former governor of the state, Senator Abiola Ajimobi, lamented that the turnout was low compared to what was obtained during the presidential and national assembly elections (Premium Times, 2019). Therefore, the objective of this paper is to assess 2019 general elections in Oyo state vis-à-vis reason(s) for voter apathy.

This study is significant because while some researchers examined other variables (religion, god fatherism, political violence, ethnicity etc) that may be responsible for the voter apathy in other states of the federation, not much work, if any, has been done on voter apathy in Oyo states 2019 elections. For instance, Faeren(2015) studied Voter Apathy and voter turnout in the 2015 general elections: the Benue state experience and Anthony and Callistus (2017) focused on the ethnicity, religion and voter's behaviour: the experience of 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. Omotola and Adekunle (2021) work centred on adoption and use of electronic voting system as an option towards credible elections in Nigeria: Oyo state as case study. Thus, this paper contributes to extant knowledge on the relationship between election, and voter participation in Nigeria.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper was anchored on the theoretical construct that “individual always make prudent and logical decisions that offers him greatest satisfaction – given the choices available – and are in his highest self-interest” (Downs, 1957). The rational choice theory according to Haywood (2002:430) based on the assumption that individuals are rationally self-interested actors and make their choices in accordance with the fact of reality. Downs (1957) opined that although rational choice theory emanated from economics however, it is has significant impact on the study of voter behaviour and motivation. According to the rational choice theory, if potential voters think their vote is highly likely to make a difference, electoral turnout would be high, and if they believed that their votes are unlikely to make a difference, there would be voter apathy. In other words, advocates of this theory believe that before an electorate chooses any of the aforementioned options, he would have

his reason or reasons. Thus, like most democracies in the world, Nigeria since 1999 has been experiencing voter apathy which seems to be a signal of voter dissatisfaction with the elections and its conducts in the country. Although, voter register book continuously increasing in every election year of 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 but the question begging for answer is why voter turnout continuously declining? The rational choice theory is best explained this political problem in the African largest democracy. By and large, the theory has been criticized on the ground that not all voters vote rationally especially in democracies where vote buying is practised.

### Conceptualization Clarification

In a research endeavour, clarification of basic terms in order to dispel any myth and doubt about the basic terms involved remains essential. Therefore, in line with this study's intent, the basic concepts that will be clarified are election, voter apathy and voter turnout. I thereby clarify them one after the other.

### Concept of Election

Election is a concept in political science that lacks a generally acceptable definition (Ambali, Isiaq and Isiaka, 2018). In other words, it is a nebulous and fluid concept which has attracted different meanings and definitions from researcher. Nwolise (2007:155) posited that it is a process of selecting the officers or representatives of an organization or group by the qualified members of such social setting. From this definition, one can argue that election can also take place in any organization of people where members who satisfy the electoral requirements would be elected by other members of that organization.

Obakhedo (2011) defines election as a major instrument for recruitment of political leadership in democratic societies; the key to participation in a democracy; and the way of giving consent to government. Election is the heart of representative democracy and it constitutes a mirror of the people's understanding and appreciation of democratic norms (Sam Egwu, 2013). According to Ambali et al(2018), citizens play critical role by coming out to vote during election because the extent at which an election is regarded free and fair is an explanatory factor for the level of voter turnout. According to Osumah cited in Araba and Odunayo (2015), the major objective of election is to select the official decision makers who are supposed to represent the interest of the citizens; extend and enhance the amount of popular participation in the political system. This political system in operation – presidential and parliamentary system – determines the kind of election to be conducted in a democratic state.

The importance of election in liberal/representative democracy cannot be overemphasized. Elections are means to an end, and that end is democratic governance and a democratic society (Sagay, 2008:1). He opines that elections are part and parcel of the democratic process, and as the right to democratic governance has become established as a human right, so too has the right to regular, free and fair elections. Put simply, there can be no representative

democracy without free, fair, credible and valid elections. In his work, Ojo (n.d) posited that if elections were to be truly meaningful, free, and fair, there must be some degree of civil and political freedom beyond the electoral arena so that citizens can articulate and organize on the basis of their political beliefs and interests.

Indeed, elections constitute the threshold or doorway into a democratic, stable and progressive society because of the functions they perform in liberal democracy. These functions of election according to Waldemar (2013) include: delegation of political representation; selection of the political elite; legitimisation of those in power; control over authorities; ensuring political accountability; creation of political programmes; and recreation of the image of public opinion.

As important as election is to liberal democracy, free, fair and credible election is crucial to democratic consolidation and voter participation. The election would be credible, when rules, regulations and laws governing the electoral process will be followed by and ultimately, the credible candidate would be freely and fairly elected to represent the electorate (Mollah, 2016). He posited that indicators of free and fair elections include an effective legal framework, equal voting rights of universal adult franchise, direct and secret voting system, election commission would be independent, security of voters must be ensured before and after election, the fair play of election administration, access to media and election observer in election process, free speech and association, counting votes accurately and impartiality of acting government. If all these indicators are observed, Mollah argues that electorates would be willing to participate in electoral process and in extension leads to high level of voter turnout. Invariably, the absent of all or some of these indicators lead to political apathy which is dangerous to democracy.

### **Voter apathy**

Broadly speaking, there are two major perspectives among scholars on what voter apathy means. The first perspective sees it as the passivity of eligible voters to the state electioneering process. In other words, a citizen is apathetic to voting when he is unconcerned, uninvolved or has uninterested feelings towards exercising his franchise in any election holding within his constituency. In his study, Dan (2002) opined that voter apathy is a term for passivity, submissiveness and even numbness reaching epidemic proportions when it comes to political issues especially voting. In the same vein, Cloud (2010) espoused that voter apathy occurs when eligible voters refuse to vote in public elections. In other words, it is passivity of voters in a liberal democracy towards voting. According to Yakubu (2012) it is a political concept to describe the indifference on the part of electorates as regards their attitude towards electoral processes such as voting.

On contrary, the second perspective believes that voter apathy is the insensitivity of voters to the state electioneering process and as such, goes beyond his abstention to vote as argued before. This, according to

Faeran (2015) is caused by disenchantment arising from dissatisfaction with the political system and sometimes voter ignorance as well as the absence of proper political education. However, what is common between the two schools is that voter apathy not only results to low voter turnouts but also creates room for unpopular government and oligarchy. It is not unconnected with this that Ambali, Isiaq and Isiaka (2018) opined that high level of voter turnout is desirable in any democracy and if it is low, the legitimacy of the government remains questionable. Faeran (2015) added that fewer voters at the polls lessens the impact of the popular vote and strengthens the impact of special interest groups.

### **Conceptualizing voter turnout**

The concept of voter turnout is a victim of definitional pluralism and there have been significant misconceptions of voter turnout with political participation.

According to McLean and McMillan (2009), voter turnout is the proportion of the registered electorate who vote in a given election. Voter turnout is the extent at which eligible voters use their vote on election day (Abdurashid, 2016:17). According to Sakah (2015:3), voter turnout means the percentage of voting age population (or the percentage of registered voters) who actually came out to vote in an election. Voter turnout refers to the participation in the voting by the people of a democratic state, or in any political, social organization (Cletus, 2015). In a nutshell, voter turnout according to aforementioned scholars shows that it is an integral part of election in any democratic setting as it refers to the ratio of eligible citizens that vote on the election day. High voter turnout is very crucial in any democracy and whenever it is low, the legitimacy of the government remains questionable.

It should be emphasized however that the measurement of voter turnout varies from one scholar or country to another. As posited by Abdurashid (2016:17) it is measured as the percentage of votes cast at an election, including invalid votes. This is otherwise known as total vote method (Reynolds, 2012). According to Reynolds (2012), another means to determine voter turnout is the method used by the United States Census Bureau. This technique relies on what is known as the voting age population or VAP. As the name implies the Voting Age Population is the total number of people in a given area older than the area's voting age. To arrive at a voter turnout figure the number of votes cast is divided by the voter population, which will obviously yield a percentage. However, the official turnout figures published by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) are calculated using the total number of vote cast in an election to divide the total number of registered eligible voters for the election.

### **2019 General Elections in Nigeria: Oyo State Experience.**

The 2019 general elections in Nigeria were initially scheduled for February 16<sup>th</sup> and March 2<sup>nd</sup> but were later rescheduled just few hours to the eve of election to Feb 23<sup>rd</sup>

and March 9th. The INEC chairman, Prof. Mahmood Yakubu attributed the issue of logistics challenge and sabotage on the commission efforts, as some of the reasons responsible for the one week shifted in the elections (Pulse.ng, 2019). While 73 political parties and candidates contested for the presidential election, 42 political parties contested for governorship election in Oyo state. At the national level, the ruling party, All Progressive Congress, defeated the main opposition party, Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) and also won majority seats in the two chambers of the National Assembly. The situation in Oyo state was quite different from what obtained at the centre although, PDP narrowly edged APC with 366,690 to 365,229 votes in the state's presidential election result. The election marked a milestone in the history of elections in the state as political permutation of opposition parties (PDP, ADC, ZLP, AD, SDP etc) worked out against the ruling party APC. The opposition party, PDP won 28 out of the 33 local government areas in the state. The PDP therefore won the governorship race and 26 majority seats against 5 won by APC and 1 won by ADP. In spite the outcome of the election, an alarming rate of apathy and low turnout characterized the polls in Oyo state. The tables below is suggestive and illustrative

**Table 1 - Summary of Voter turnout for presidential elections in Oyo state**

a	Total Registered Voters	2, 943,107
b	Total Accredited Voters	905,007
c	Total Vote Cast	891,080
d	Total Valid Votes	836,531
e	Percentage	31%

*Source: INEC, 2019 General Elections. Percentages computed by the researcher*

**Table 2 - Summary of Voter turnout for gubernatorial election in Oyo state**

a	Total Registered Voters	2, 943,107
b	Total Accredited Voters	940,221
c	Total Vote Cast	937,545
d	Total Valid Votes	916,860
e	Percentage	32%

*Source: INEC, 2019 General Elections. Percentages computed by the researcher*

If one comparatively studies the two tables (table 1 and table2) above, one would observe that the figures indicate a higher turnout in the gubernatorial election than that of the presidential elections in the state. Therefore, former governor Ajimobi was wrong with his assertion that the turnout was low in the gubernatorial elections. In spite of this, one can also confirm the existence of voter apathy among the electorates in the elections.

### III. METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, descriptive research design was adopted. This research design was chosen in order to have a clear picture of the phenomena under our study. The data for this study include secondary and primary data. The secondary data comprise journals, newspapers, library materials, INEC reports and the internet. The primary sources are the direct participant observation by the researcher being an active part of the 2019 general election process as an APO in Iseyin local government. By and large, since the researcher wanted to get the voters' opinion (primary data), quantitative method through questionnaires was appropriate. The quantitative method therefore helped the researcher to obtain responses from a large sample from the population of this study. The population for the study consisted of the entire group of eligible Oyo voters (above 18) across the state – 2,943,107. However, using Taro Yamane sample size formula, our sample size was 399.95 (400 in approximation). Multi-stage sampling technique was used in order to reach our sample size. Oyo state was stratified into three senatorial districts and using purposive sampling technique, we picked the local government with the highest registered voters in each of the three senatorial districts of the state as the sample environments. They are Iseyin for Oyo North, Ibadan South West for Oyo South and Oyo West for Oyo Central federal constituency.

Closed questionnaires which contained two sections (section A focuses on bio-data of the respondents while section B covers questions on the 2019 elections in Oyo state and reasons voter apathy) were randomly administered to respondents the 400 respondents in the three local government area. Charts and tables were used in presenting respondents' views on the work under study and simple percentage was used in analysing them.

#### Presentation and Quantitative Analysis of Field Work Results

Four hundred (400) respondents were selected for this study and they answered and returned all 400 copies of the questionnaires. These respondents were drawn from Ibadan, Oyo and Iseyin representing the three senatorial districts in the state. The composition of the respondents selected from these areas is as presented.

**Table 4: Gender Distribution of Respondents**

Sex	Frequencies	Percentages
Male	280	70%
Female	120	30%
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Source: Field work, March, 2020*

Table 4 above shows that 70% (280) of the respondents were males while 30% (120) were female. This indicates although male respondents are more than female respondents however, both gender were represented in the sample.

**Table 5: Age Distribution of Respondents**

Age Brackets	Frequency	Percentage
18 -25	140	35%
26-35	112	28%
36-45	96	24%
45 and above	52	13%
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field work, March, 2020

Table 5 shows the age distribution of the respondents, where 35%(140) were between the ages of 18-25, 28% (112) were between ages 26 – 35, 24% (96) were between ages 36 – 45, and 13% (52) were 45 and above.

**Table 6: Educational Qualification of Respondents**

Education	Frequencies	Percentages
Not literate	Nil	0%
Primary school	32	8%
Secondary school	136	34%
NCE and above	232	58%
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field work, March, 2020

The table 6 above reveals the education attainment of the respondents. 8% (32) of respondents had primary education, 34% (136) had secondary education, and 58% (232) had attained some form of tertiary education, while none of the respondent was illiterate.

**Table 7: Occupational Affiliation of Respondents**

Occupation	Frequencies	Percentages
Students	152	38%
Farming	12	3%
Civil Servant	60	15%
Others	192	48%
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field work, March, 2020

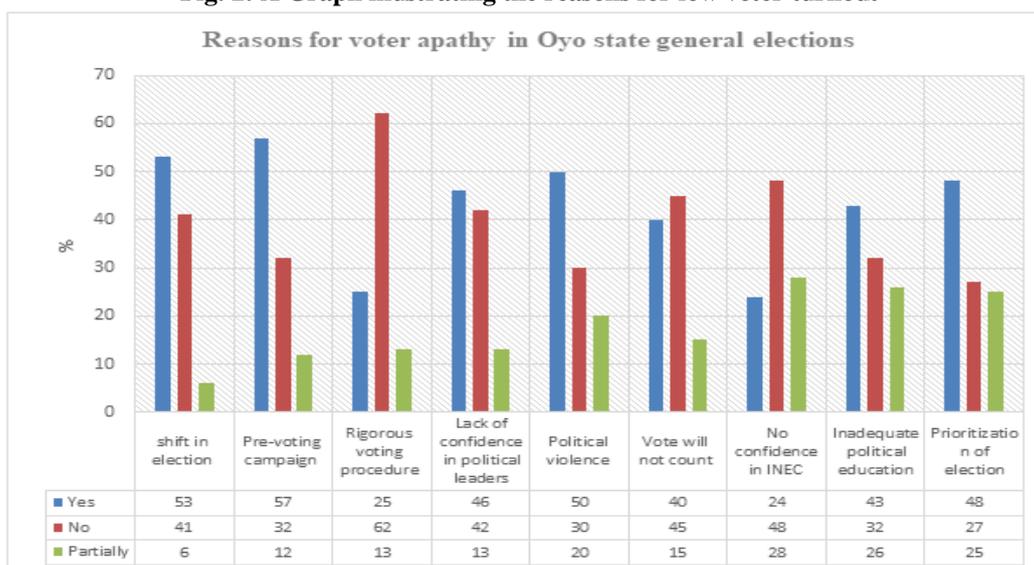
The above indicates the 38%(152) respondents are students, 3%(12) were farmers, 15%(60) were civil servants while 43%(192) were of other occupations like weaving.

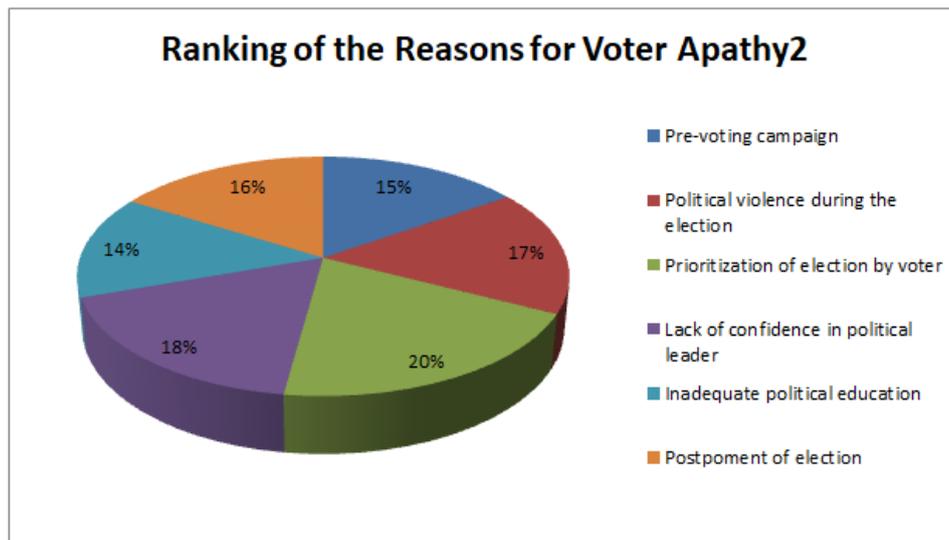
**Table 8: Reasons for Low Voter Turnout in Oyo State 2019 General Elections**

s/n	Reasons for voter apathy	Yes	%	No	%	Partial	%	Respo	%
1	Shift in elections date	212	53%	164	41%	24	6%	400	100%
2	Pre-election day campaign	228	57%	128	32%	48	12%	400	100%
3	Rigorous voting procedure	100	25%	248	62%	52	13%	400	100%
4	Lack of confidence in political leaders	184	46%	168	42%	52	13%	400	100%
5	Political violence and security	200	50%	120	30%	80	20%	400	100%
6	Votes will not count	160	40%	180	45%	60	15%	400	100%
7	No confidence in INEC	96	24%	192	48%	112	28%	400	100%
8	Inadequate political education	172	43%	128	32%	104	26%	400	100%
9	Prioritization of election	192	48%	108	27%	100	25%	400	100%

Source: Field work, March, 2020

**Fig. 2: A Graph illustrating the reasons for low voter turnout**





*Source: Field work, March, 2020*

As Table 8 and Fig. 2 above indicate that, there was voter apathy in the general elections which was as a result of the postponement of general election from February 16<sup>th</sup> and March 2<sup>nd</sup> to February 23<sup>rd</sup> and March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019. This shift in date discouraged some people from coming out to voter after the elections were rescheduled. While 53% (212) respondents agreed that the rescheduling of elections was the reason for their abstention, 41%(164) respondents however, did not see this as a reason for low voter turnout whereas, 6%(24) respondents accepted partially. 57%(228) of the respondents were of the opinion that pre-election day campaign by political parties and their candidates created tension among voters and led to low voter turnout. While 32%(128) respondents held a contrary opinion and 12%(48) respondents partially agreed.

Another factor which my respondents identified as a major reason for voter turnout in the general election was that of the rigorous voting procedure which required the voters to be on the queue for both accreditation and voting at the same time. This was further compounded by technical hitches encountered with the card reader machines in some polling units. 25%(100) respondents affirmed this as a key factor for the low voter turnout while 62%(248) respondents objected this view with 13%(52) respondents partially accepting. Also, lack of confidence in political leaders was responsible for low voter turnout. 46%(184) respondents confirmed this while 42%(168) and 13%(52) respondents objected and partially agreed respectively. This was compounded by the fear of political violence which some respondents agreed on as a reason for low voter turnout in the elections. 50%(200) of respondents argued that they didn't vote because of political violence arising from political thugs and security personnel which led to the death of Honourable Temitope Olatoye (Sugar) in Ibadan. 30%(120) respondents did not see this a factor while 20%(80) respondents partially agreed.

More often than not, people are beginning to have confidence in INEC and that their vote would count. This can be seen in the way the respondents made their opinions

known in the above table. However, some people still have no confidence in INEC and opinion that the outcome of the election was predetermined. Therefore, such respondents didn't vote in the election.

In addition to this, lack of adequate political education from the electoral body, political parties, candidates and civil society groups were seen to be responsible for low voter turnout in the elections. 43%(172) of respondents argued in favour of this assertion while 32%(128) and 26%(104) respondents disagreed and partially agreed respectively. Finally, while explaining why there was low voter turnout during the presidential and national assembly elections compared to turnout in the gubernatorial and house of assembly elections, many respondents opined that they attached more priority to the later than the former. 48%(192) respondents were of this opinion while 27%(108) respondents held a contrary view and 25%(100) partially agreed.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The finding of this study reveals that there was voter apathy which led to low voter turnout in Oyo state during the 2019 general elections. This was in line with the assertion made by Yakubu (2011) when he avers that, political apathy has been a major factor for low voter turnout at elections in Nigeria. The statistics from INEC presented indicated in Table 1 above. The percentage of voter turnout for presidential and national assembly election was only 31%, indicating a decline of about 13.5% from 2015 elections which has a turnout of 44.5%.

In addition to this, this study shows that voters' lack of confidence in their political leaders has led to voter apathy and consequently, low voter turnout. This findings agrees with the previous findings of Mattes et al in Falade(2014) that, popular trust in political institutions remains at relatively low levels. Electoral violence and political campaigns of parties and candidates are other factors that affect political participation according to this study. High

level of violence is a major characteristic of elections in Nigeria. This is why Agu, et al cited in Amdi (2014) asserted that low voter turnout and voter apathy in Nigeria election is because of the intra and inter party violence associated with the electoral process that has created an atmosphere of fear in the electorate.

More often than not, it was also discovered that although, electorates are now having confidence in INEC but the voting procedure lay down by the electoral body and lack of adequate political education are discouraging voters from participating in elections in Oyo state. Finally, the study also reveals that electorates use to prioritize election which makes discrepancy in voter turnout in elections possible. More voters turned out during the gubernatorial election in 2019 than presidential election because of the priority attached to the former.

## V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study reveals the existence of voter apathy in Oyo state which led to a steady decline in the voter turnout at elections in every election year. This work shows that the voter apathy and low turnout are due to lack of confidence in political leaders, campaign of calumny from political stakeholders, technical hitches in card reader usage, political violence, and inadequate political education. Therefore, we make following recommendations;

- (i) The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should sustain its neutrality, cleanse itself from saboteurs in future election in order to earn absolute trust of Nigerian voters.
- (ii) The electoral body should sustain the voting plan (accreditation and voting simultaneously) and ensure all card readers are in good condition on the eve of election in order to encourage voters to shun apathy
- (iii) The national assembly should make law (to be enforced by security agencies) which will attract greater punishment for violence mongers before, during and after election.
- (iv) Adequate political education by political parties, candidates, INEC, government, religious group, mass media and civil society organizations should be given to the electorates on the importance of their participation in political activities in the state.
- (v) Government must ensure good governance in order to build confidence in the minds of their subjects about their government.
- (vi) The national assembly should amend 2011 Electoral Act to create room for the adoption of electoral voting. By so doing, all elections (both state and federal elections) would be organized by INEC at once and this will discourage prioritization of one election over the other.
- (vii) Finally, parties and candidates should shun campaign of hatred in order not to create tension among electorates who ordinarily wishes to vote on the election day.

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