

Voters Apathy During Students' Union Elections: Implication for Social Studies and Political Science Students

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Abstract

The study assesses the implications of voter apathy during students' union elections on Social Studies and Political Science students. The study assesses the levels of student voter apathy; examines reasons for voter apathy and the influence of Social Studies and Political Science on students' political participation in the students' union election. Three (3) research questions were raised and answered in the study. The study adopted descriptive research design. The target population of the study consists of all the Social Studies and Political Science students of Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ogun State. Six hundred and twenty (620) students were selected for the study, using purposive and stratified random sampling techniques. A self-designed questionnaire tagged "Students and Voting Apathy Questionnaire" (SVAQ) was used to obtain information from the respondents. The data were analysed using descriptive analysis of frequency, percentage mean and standard deviation. The findings show that voter apathy among Social Studies and Political Science students during students' union elections is high; students perceive voting during students' union elections as a voluntary exercise; students have negative perceptions about candidates fulfilling their electoral promises; and Social Studies and Political Science as a course

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have an influence on students' active participation and voting during students' union elections. The study recommended that voting during students' union elections should be made compulsory for the students of Social Studies and Political Science and that the management of higher institutions of learning must adopt e-voting to de-radicalise students' elections and enhance active participation of students during students' union elections.

Keywords: Voter apathy, Student union, Election, Social Studies, Political Science.

Introduction

Globally, the role of students' umbrella bodies in the annals of nation-building has been well documented. Within the political spectrum of states, they have advocated for good governance and have equally engaged in policy dialogue with authorities of higher institutions for better students' welfare. As noted by Oyekanmi and Adebajo (2023), the importance of students in nation-building has earned them the appellation of the conscience of the nation. It is noteworthy to say that these roles are performed under a student-known body, the students' union, acting for the interests of all. Thus, the students' union represents the highest governing body of the students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The students' union serves as the link between the school management and the student populace. The union serves as an avenue for students to seek representation from the student populace in the tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Elections of representatives into the students' union executive or legislative arm are conducted through a democratic process, wherein all the students are eligible to vote during the election. Student's involvement in the political process is essential for student's representative to be viable and meaningful. Oluwagbohunmi (2020) asserts that an election in which many people refuse to participate may not reflect the will of the people. Election is an important aspect of the democratic process. Elections provide the avenue by which a candidate can lay claim to power. Election gives the students the opportunity to select their representatives and choose their leaders directly or indirectly (Nu'man, 2012, Sobowale & Ngarabara, 2023). Election plays an important role in the process of selecting leaders in any democratic setting. Therefore, it's expected that all students must participate in the selection of the students' union leadership.

Recent political happenings at Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ogun State, Nigeria have shown that students have lost interest in participating in the electoral process during the student's union election. This has manifested in a decline in the number of students that turn out to vote during the students' union elections in institutions. Low turnout during students' union elections has become a serious concern that calls for urgent action if the nation is serious about improving the levels of political participation at the general elections. It is worrisome that students of Social Studies and Political Science at Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ogun State, whose courses deal with raising the civic consciousness of people to participate actively in democratic processes, are now part of the students that

refuse to participate actively in campus politics and associated elections, despite being exposed to the integral value of electoral participation as an inalienable civic duty during their course of studies. The unabated growth of voting apathy among the two mentioned social science students has become worrisome and calls for the attention of researchers in the field of Social Studies and Political Science. Students demonstrating what has been learned practically is one of the means of measuring the achievements of the set objectives for the two courses. If political apathy continues as political anathema, it means that the salient objective of Social Studies and Political Science aimed at raising politically conscious students has not yet been achieved and thus, with negative implications on national development. The basic questions that come to mind are: could it mean that union elections are dysfunctional, ineffective, not transparent and fair to all? Going by the prevailing voting apathy during the students' union election in the tertiary institution in Nigeria, it's difficult to classify the leaders that emerge during the students' union election as the choice of the majority of the students, as the high turnout of the electorate in a democratic process is taken as evidence of the legitimacy of election and its outcome (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2022). Practising what is being taught in the classroom should be encouraged among the students. Institutionalizing compulsory voting for students of Social Studies and Political Science will improve their levels of political consciousness and result in high turnout. This is capable of preparing them for more demanding public service after graduation. This study, an assessment of voting apathy during a student's union election, and its implications on Social Studies and Political Science students, is undertaken to provide new policy paradigms to solve the evolving challenges.

Literature Review

Election is a process of choosing a leader that occupies an official position (Alemka & Omotosho, 2018). In a country such as Nigeria, election implies a process which allows adult citizens who are 18 years and above to be part of the leadership selection process in the country. The electoral process could be through the secret ballot system, raising of hands to indicate support for a candidate or standing at the back of the poster or aspirants in the election. The candidate with the highest total vote cast will be declared as the winner and becomes the representative of the people in government (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2022; Nwambuko, et al., 2024). Within the school system, election is the process whereby the students elect their representatives and leaders to serve as a bridge between the students and the university administrators. Election is acceptable as one of the democratic means through which eligible voters in a country participate actively in politics. Election is a political process through which eligible citizens select the leaders of society and their representatives in government (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2022). Election serves as a platform through which citizens made their opinion on the choice of leaders they desired to run the affairs of their society. Through election, therefore, the opinions on who should lead them are made. In addition, the election has become an instrument which the citizens use to effect democratic

changes in their society (Ezirim, et al., 2011). Elections give the citizens the opportunity of participating in government, exercising their political rights and making their opinions count on who will be their leader and representative (Ashindorbe, 2018).

Voter apathy is a global issue. A decrease in voters' participation is a general phenomenon across the globe. Voter apathy connotes the absence of citizens' participation and feeling towards civic obligations and political activities (Moliki and Dauda, 2014). Voter apathy refers to the disinterest, indifference, or reluctance of eligible voters to participate in elections (Dide et al., 2024). Voter apathy occurs when voters become disinterested in the outcome of any election. It is an expressed behaviour lacking the motivation to influence the winner or loser in any contest, which thus translates into very low voter turnout (Balogun & Nwakwo, 2023). Voter apathy means indifference of the electorate towards electoral processes as well as lack of interest in, or concern about, the electoral process (Yakubu, 2012; Balogun & Nwakwo, 2023). Oluwagbohunmi (2020) has observed that during the general elections, many Nigerian citizens, mostly the elite, have lost interest in voting and have left the exercise for artisans who also engage in it due to the incentives they will gain before voting. Most Nigerians prefer staying indoors during the period of election and this has established the fact that political apathy is on the increase during the general elections in Nigeria (Agba, 2011; Falade, 2010). Voter apathy gives wrong people access to power. Unwillingness of the majority of eligible voters to vote during any election gives way for the emergence of wrong candidates. Voter apathy can therefore mean citizen's indifference and a display of a nonchalant attitude by the majority of the eligible citizens towards issues relating to political activities. Voter apathy occurs in the school system when the majority of the students refuse to be involved in political participation in the student's union activities and thus refuse to participate in a student's union election.

Nigerian democracy has also faced persistent cases of voter apathy during elections at all levels. One of the factors that discourage most Nigerian voters from voting is the perceived high level of corruption, mismanagement of public resources, and a lack of transparency in governance among the elected officials in the past (Agbigboa, 2019). This culture of recklessness by public officials has eroded public confidence in participating in national elections. Low turnout of voters in Nigeria can be illustrated using the table below.

Table 1: Statistics on Voter Apathy in Presidential Elections in Nigeria. Statistics for the presidential elections in this piece covers the years 1999 to 2023 elections

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

Source: *African Elections Database and INEC, 2023*

The table above shows the total turn out in presidential elections in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023. The highest voter turnout was recorded in 2003, where 42,018, 735 voters voted out of 60,823,022 registered voters representing 69.08 voters turned out. 2023, however, recorded the lowest voters turn out of voters in Nigeria presidential election history. Out of 93,470,000 citizens that registered to vote, only 25,286, 616 turned out for the election. This represents 26.72 voters turn out.

One of the major civic obligations of citizens is to vote during an election. Political consciousness is a skill that all students that will become major players in political decisions in future must imbibe. Therefore, student's participation in the student's union election is a civic responsibility of the students within the campus. Where most students fail to participate in the political process, such decisions will allow incompetent leaders to emerge. Voter apathy has been experienced in the general election in Nigeria due to declining public interest in the electoral results showing the true opinion of the electorates. However, electoral apathy is not peculiar to the general election in Nigeria. In the tertiary institutions in Nigeria, the eligible voters who participated in the student's union election are mostly within 10 – 20% of the total student population. For instance, taking Tai Solarin University of Education student's union election as a case study in the 2020/2021 session, 2952 students voted out of 27188 students, representing 10.86% of the students' population. In the 2021/2022 session, 2736 students voted out of 26650, representing 10.27% of students' population; in the 2022/2023 session, 3476 voted out of 27729, representing 12.53% of students' population. This showed a clear issue of voter apathy on the part of the students.

Balogun and Nwakwo (2023); Oluwagbohunmi, (2020) and Independence Electoral Commission (INEC) (2011) stressed that lack of interest in the candidates that are running in an election, general feelings that votes cast don't count and distrust in the electoral process, thuggery, intimidation, belief that votes will not count, insecurity at polling units, vote buying, election rigging, result manipulation and destruction of election materials, lack of trust in government, failure to fulfill electioneering promises, eleventh hour postponement, declaring

election inconclusive and delay in release of election results are among the factors that are responsible for political apathy. Other factors such as bad governance, high level of illiteracy and ignorance, pronounced rigging and snatching of ballot boxes, victimization of political opponents, lack of proper accountability, voter fatigue, financial inducement, vote will not count mentality, violation of human rights, lack of transparency, unpopular public policies, programmes and projects, low political participation, timid patriotism towards national issues, non-adherence to due process, non-adherence to the principle of the rule of law and so on have been highlighted as major reasons that scare people away from the polls, and prevent them from exercising their fundamental rights of choosing their leaders through their ballots (Nwambuko, et al., 2024; Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2022).

In a study conducted at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa by Breakfast, et al., (2017), it was found that young people in post-apartheid South Africa had no interest in politics, which suggests that political apathy does exist among students. Oluwagbohunmi (2020) examines causes of political apathy as perceived by secondary school teachers. Findings revealed that teachers perceived all forms of electoral malpractice and bad governance as some of the causes of political apathy. Also, good governance/leadership and an enabling environment for free and fair election among others are perceived as remedies to political apathy in Nigeria and no significant difference in the causes of political apathy as perceived by male and female secondary school teachers were recorded. Chinweuba and Ezeugwu (2022) study assessed critical analysis of voter apathy in Nigeria. Results show that most voters rarely acquire permanent voters' cards (PVC) and eligible ones rarely cast their votes in past Nigerian elections. Nwambuko, et al., (2024) examines voter apathy in Nigerian electoral democracy as an insidious enigma to national development, with an emphasis on the 2023 General Elections. Findings revealed factors such as bad governance, high level illiteracy and ignorance, pronounced rigging as the major causes of voters' apathy in Nigeria. The results also show electoral democracy and violation of human rights, lack of transparency, unpopular public policies and programmes and projects, as consequences on the country's national development.

Theoretical Review

This study adopted the theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) postulated by Ajzen (1975). The proponent speculated that planned behaviours are determined by behavioural intentions which are largely influenced by an individual attitude towards a behaviour. Behaviour is at times planned before execution, and it's based on behavioural intention (Ajzen, 1985). This supports the views of Heider (1958) who is of the opinion that most human behaviour is goal-directed. TPB is a psychological theory that is used to understand and predict behaviour (Caso et al., 2023). The theory of planned behaviour suggests that components of planned behaviour (attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control) shape human behavioural intention and behavioural intention determine human social behaviour (Ajzen, 2019; Bosnjak

et al., 2020). The best predictor of behaviour is an individual's intention to perform or not to perform it. Despite the potential of the planned behaviour to predict human behaviour, the theory failed to identify factors from which the determinants of the behaviour originated (Chatzisarantis, 2007). Caso et al., (2020); Bosjnuik et al., (2020) and Haruna, et al., (2024) have used the theory of planned behaviour to exploit the potential of the TPB to promote the Mediterranean diet, examine factors influencing financial inclusion advanced behaviour and assess the influence of TPB on selected advance applications. The relationship between the TPB and voter apathy is that theory can be used to study and determine factors that influence students' decisions, participation and involvement in students' union elections.

Statement of the Problem

Studies have shown that voter's turnout varies considerably overtime within different sets of elections and places. Despite the importance of electing credible leaders to represent the interests of the students during students' union elections, voter turn-out has continued to decline in most tertiary institutions. Students have in most cases shown a lack of interest in the electoral process and on election day. Social Studies and Political Science students have acquired over time knowledge of the roles of citizens in participating in the electoral process and the need for this set of students that are political conscious to play roles in enlightening citizens to vote during the election has become paramount. Despite the knowledge and political participation skills that Social Studies and Political Science students have acquired in the course of their studies, the students still see voting during the student's union election as a voluntary interest, yet they refuse to vote or raise the consciousness of the students or see voting as a civic duty of the students for responsible leaders to emerge to represent students' interest. Also, most of the available literature on voter apathy is incidental to Nigeria's general election and not much has been done to assess voting apathy during the students' union election. This study therefore assessed the voters' apathy during the students' union election and examined its implications for Social Studies and Political Science students.

Objectives of the Study

1. Assess the levels of voter apathy among Social Studies and Political Science students.
2. Examine reasons for voter apathy among students.
3. Examine the influence of Social Studies and Political Science on students' political participation in the students' union election.

Research Questions

1. What are the levels of voter apathy of Social Studies and Political Science students?
2. What are the reasons for political apathy among Social Studies and Political Science students?
3. Do Social Studies and Political Science have an influence on students on political participation?

Method and Materials

Design

The study employed descriptive research design. This design helps to get the views of the students on voter's apathy during the students' union election.

Population of the Study

The population of this study comprises all the three thousand six hundred and ninety-two (3,692) Social Studies and Political Science students of Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ogun State. The population was selected because the study is interested in assessing the views of Social Studies and Political Science students who have been exposed to lessons on civic rights and responsibilities.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

Six hundred and twenty-seven students (620) constitute the sample for the study. The departments are selected using a purposive sampling procedure, while a stratified sampling technique was used to select the students from 200 level to 400 level for the study. Students in 200 level to 400 level have been taught topics on civics rights and responsibilities in social studies and civic education and all students are eligible to vote during students' union election. The sample is appropriate because the study is interested in assessing voter apathy during the students' union election with implications for social studies and political science students who have been exposed to lessons on civic rights and responsibilities.

Instrumentation

The instrument used for this study was a self-structured questionnaire tagged "Student and Voters Apathy Questionnaire" (SVAQ). This is constructed from the research questions that were raised to be answered in the study. The instrument is made up of a 14 item questionnaire. The instrument is based on two different Likert scales of Yes and No and Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A) Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) based on the trends and parts of the questionnaire. The content and face validity of the questionnaire were established by presenting a copy of the draft questionnaire to two experts in the field of test and measurement for further scrutiny and modification. This was to ascertain the suitability of the instrument in terms of language, presentation, clarity and applicability. Based on their comments, the necessary modifications were made. Also, a field trial of the instruments was carried out on randomly selected students living in non-residential tertiary institutions in another institution outside the study area. Split half was used to determine the reliability coefficient of the instrument, which was found to be 0.85.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data collected was coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics of frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation to describe the basic features of the data in the study.

Results

Research Question 1: What are the levels of voter apathy for Social Studies and Political Science students?

Table 2: Levels of voter apathy on Social Studies and Political Science students.

	Item	N	Yes	%	No	%
1.	I always vote during student union election	672	387	61.7	240	38.3
2.	I never voted in student union election	672	174	27.8	453	72.2

Table 2 above shows the respondents' opinion on the levels of voter apathy in Social Studies and Political Science students. Three hundred and eighty-seven (387) representing 61.7% of the respondents have always voted during the student union election, while one hundred and seventy-four (174) representing 27.8% have never voted during the student union election. The implication of this is that the level of Social Studies and Political Science students' participation during the students' union election is high.

Research Question 2: What are the reasons for political apathy among Social Studies and Political Science students?

Table 3: Reasons for political apathy among Social Studies and Political Science student's

S/N	Items	N	Mean	SD
1.	Participating in students' union election as voluntary exercise	627	4.07	.831
2.	Participating in students' union election as a compulsory civic responsibility.	627	3.32	1.126
3.	Voting during students' union election as a waste of time	627	2.24	.952
4.	Possibility that the election might be manipulated discouraged me from voting during students' union election	627	3.55	1.091
5.	Lack of interest in the candidates running for students' union election	627	3.45	1.060
6.	Distrust in the electoral process	627	3.64	.980
7.	The notion that candidates will not fulfill their electoral promise	627	3.66	1.065
	Total Mean		3.41	.520

The result from table 3 shows the reasons for political apathy among Social Studies and Political Science students. The total mean of 3.41 (SD =.520) recorded is above the 2.5 mean benchmark for making decisions in this study. This shows that reasons such as students seeing participating in elections as voluntary exercise and the electorate having the feeling that the candidate will not fulfill their electoral promises are the major reasons for political apathy among students of social studies and political science. The standard deviation shows a high level of dispersion and closeness with the mean.

Research Question 3: Do Social Studies and Political Science have an influence on students' political participation?

Table 4: Influence of Social Studies and Political Science on students' political participation?

S/N	Items	N	Mean	SD
1.	My course of study encourages me to vote during students' union election	627	3.96	.956
2.	My choice of not participating in the students' union election has nothing to do with my course of study.	627	3.54	1.087
3.	My course has changed my attitude towards mobilising other students to vote during election	627	3.44	1.089
4.	Despite my course of study I do not see mobilising students to participate in election as my civic responsibility.	627	3.09	1.137
5.	As a student of Social Studies and Political Science it is compulsory for me to vote during students' union election.	627	3.62	1.099
Mean Total			3.53	0.495

The result from table 4 shows the influence of Social Studies and Political Science on students' political participation. The total mean of 3.53 (SD =.495) recorded is above the 2.5 mean benchmark for making decisions in this study. This shows that social studies and political science have influenced student's political participation.

Discussion of Findings

The study assesses the implications of voter apathy during students' union election for Social Studies and Political Science students in tertiary institutions in Ogun State. The findings of research question one showed that voter apathy among Social Studies and Political Science students during the students' union election is low. This finding supports the findings of Mogaladi and Mlambo (2022), who also found students' voter apathy to be low in their studies. However,

the finding is in contrast with the findings of Marsuki et al., (2022) whose findings revealed high voter turnout of students during the election. This finding in this study may be connected to the fact that the study is carried out among Social Studies and Political Science students, who are based on their course of studies, are conscious of performing their civic duty of voting during the students' union election. This might be due to their course of study which centered on producing active political citizens.

The finding of research question two shows that various reasons are responsible for political apathy among Social Studies and Political Science students during students' union election. Factors such as students seeing participating in a students' union election as voluntary exercise and the electorate having the feeling that the candidate will not fulfill their electoral promises are the major reasons for political apathy among students of Social Studies and Political Sciences students. This result supports the findings of Oluwagbohunmi (2020), Balogun et al., (2023) and Chinweuba et al., (2022), who also found lack of credible candidates, mistrust in the outcome of the past election and manipulation of election results as reasons for voter apathy during the election. This finding might be due to the experience of the students during the students' union election, which has prevented some students from voting during the students' union election. There is an unexpected result which showed students perceiving voting in a students' union election as a waste of time. This might be connected to their experience of previous union leaders who failed to fulfill their electoral promises, thus discouraging the students from voting in the subsequent union elections.

The finding of research question three shows that Social Studies and Political Science have influenced student's political participation, although there is still a low level of students mobilizing voters during students' union elections despite their course of study. This finding is supported by the findings of Manuwa (2023), Ogundiran (2020) and Uzamere (2024) who find out the importance of Social Studies and Political Science in motivating students to be active citizens by performing their duties during elections. These findings might be due to the fact that students see voting during the students' union election as a civic duty and mobilization should be the duty of the candidates and not part of their own duty as Social Studies and Political Science students. The limitation of this study is that it limits its scope only to Social Studies and Political Science students and to one tertiary institution in Ogun State.

The findings also corroborate the theory of planned behaviour in that students' decision to participate or not to participate in a students' union election is shaped by their innate intention to be part of decisions in their institution or not. The students' experience of the past executive failure to fulfill their electoral promises can be used to predict what the students' action will be in the subsequent union actions.

Conclusion

The study assesses the implications of voter apathy during student's union election for Social Studies and Political Science students in tertiary institutions in Ogun State. The findings from

the study lead to the following conclusion. Most Social Studies and Political Science students vote during the students' union elections. This suggests that voter apathy is low among the Social Studies and Political Science students despite high evidence of voter apathy of all students in the union elections. Also, students perceive participating in students' union elections as voluntary activities, mistrust in the electoral process, the notion that candidates will not fulfill their electoral promise, students viewing participating in a students' union election as a waste of time and manipulation during previous elections discourage them from voting during elections as the major reasons for student voter apathy during students' union elections. This suggests that experience of students forms their views on the reasons for voter apathy among students during the students' union election. Social Studies and Political Science influence student's choice of voting during the students' union election and student courses of study do not influence them to mobilize students to vote during a students' union election. This suggests that students' courses of study can influence their decision to carry out their responsibility in society.

Recommendations

1. To reduce voting apathy during students' union elections, the Department of Social Studies and Political Science should institute voting during students' union elections as a compulsory curricular model. This is capable of integrating them into democratic firmaments, beyond abstract theorization of political sophistication.
2. Higher institutions in Nigeria should adopt an e-voting model in the conduct of students' union elections. This will help to de-escalate the usual electoral crisis, malfeasance and rigid procedures which often turn off prospective participants in students' elections.
3. Social Studies and Political Science students should not only be participating during elections, they should be integrated into the voters' mobilization exercise program of the Independent National Electoral Commission in their bid to drive improved voter registration in Nigeria.

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