



# Voting without Choosing?

## Ethnic Voting Behaviour and Voting Patterns in Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election and Implications for Institutionalisation of Social Conflicts

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**Abstract:** Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election was widely seen as competitive, fair and less violent than other elections since the transition to democracy in 1999. This paper does not argue otherwise. Rather, it problematizes ethnic voting behaviour and voting patterns observed in the election and raises questions about their implications for institutionalisation of democracy and social conflicts in Nigeria. It argues that while scholarly examinations portray the presidential election results as 'victory for democracy', not least because an incumbent president was defeated for the first time in Nigeria, analysis of the spatial structure of votes cast reveals a predominant pattern of voting along ethnic, religious and geospatial lines. It further contends that this identity-based voting not only translates into a phenomenon of 'voting without choosing,' but is also problematic for social cohesion, interethnic harmony and peacebuilding in Nigeria. The relaxation of agitations for resource control in the Niger Delta throughout President Jonathan's tenure and its revival in post-Jonathan regime is illustrative of the dilemmas and contradictions of ethnic voting and voting without choosing in Nigeria. This observation draws policy attention to addressing structural underpinnings of the relationship between ethnicity, geography and voting behaviour in Nigerian politics so as to consolidate democratic gains and enhance democratic peace in Nigeria.

Nigeria's 2015 Presidential election has been described as a turning point in the country's political history and democratic evolution. For

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the first time, an incumbent president was defeated in office. The ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) led by the incumbent President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan lost power to the opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC). The election was also remarkable in the sense that Jonathan peacefully handed over power to Buhari, a transition that was devoid of litigations and post-election violence, which are characteristic of electoral competitions in most African countries.

Emerging scholarly interrogation of the 2015 presidential election tends to devote attention to explaining why Jonathan lost and Buhari won (see Animashaun, 2015; Owen and Usman, 2015; Ewi, 2015; Orji 2017). Overall, there seems to be a consensus amongst scholars that the March 15, 2015 polls were keenly contested, substantially fair, and less violent than others in Nigeria's electoral history. Indeed, popular votes counted and it was described as 'a victory for democracy' (Ewi, 2015, p. 207). The election was, therefore, a significant measure of progress towards the domestication of liberal democracy in Nigeria since the third wave of multiparty democratic elections that swept across Africa in the 1990s.

This paper does not argue otherwise. Rather, it contributes to the existing literature on the election by interrogating ethnic voting behaviour and voting patterns observed in the election and raises questions about their implications for institutionalisation of social conflicts in Nigeria. It builds on Olayode (2015), Anejionu et al. (2016), Olasile and Adebayo (2016), and Lawal's (2017) comparative study of the spatial structure of voting patterns and distribution of election results in the 2011 and 2015 presidential elections to develop a better understanding of the intricate connections between ethnicity, geography and class-based form of solidarity in the determinations of voting behaviour in Nigerian politics and what these mean for emergence and reinforcement of identity-based conflicts in Nigeria.

The analysis is based on data obtained from votes cast in different states across Nigeria in the 2015 presidential election as released by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). It adopts simple descriptive quantitative analysis of the votes cast in the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria to determine the voting behaviour and voting patterns in the elections. The central argument is that the votes cast in the presidential election did not reveal a significant change in voting patterns along ethnic, religious and geospatial lines. A majority of voters in the largely Muslim-dominated Hausa/Fulani ethnic group of Northern Nigeria voted for the APC presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, a northerner and Muslim from Katsina state. A majority on the South voted for the incumbent President, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, a Christian from Balyesa in the South-South of Nigeria who led the PDP. Beyond the significance of regionalism, ethno-religious bias weighed heavily in support for the two main candidates across much of Nigeria's 36 states, thus reinforcing the argument that amongst other factors, the politicisation of ethnicity is important in understanding why people merely vote in Africa but do not choose (Ake, 1996, p.24).

The foregoing argument is structured into seven sections, beginning with the introduction. The next section provides the theoretical and conceptual analysis of voting behaviour in the extant literature and relates them to the Nigerian experience in the 2015 presidential election. This is then followed by an analysis of the spatial distribution of votes cast and electoral voting patterns in the election. Section four explains the social determinants of ethnic voting behaviour in the 2015 election. Section five examines the structural limitations and impact of religion on voting behaviour in the election while section six analyses peace and conflict implications of ethnic voting and 'voting without choosing' in Nigeria. The last is the conclusion, and highlights policy implications of findings of the study.

## **Theoretical Foundations and Premise of the Paper**

Broadly conceptualised, “voting behaviour is defined as a set of personal electoral activities, including participation in electoral campaigns, turnout at the polls, and choosing for whom to vote” (Bratton, 2013, p.4). This paper focuses on the latter and addresses a key question: How did the Nigerian electorate vote in the 2015 presidential election and what influenced their voting behaviour? It situates the analysis and arguments within the sociological school of thought while also acknowledging the significance of other paradigms that explain electorate voting choices.

In the existing literature, there are several analytical explanations of voting behaviour that revolve primarily around three dominant theoretical perspectives. These theories are: sociological theory of the Columbia School (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Lipset 1960); the psychosocial or the Michigan School (Campbell et al. 1960) and the rational choice theoretical model (Downs 1957; Fiorina, 1981).

Succinctly, the Columbia School sociological model argues that social factors, such as socio-economic variables, religion and location are crucial determinants of electorate voting decisions (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948, p. 27). For the psychosocial perspective, the main contention is that voters’ political affiliation or party identification, a product of socio-psychological motivations, influences voters’ decision-making. It is noted that there is a sense of personal and emotional attachment to political parties, an attachment that is historically rooted in the ideological orientations of the parties. This partisan disposition guides voters’ evaluation of policy preferences of political parties and hence their judgment and votes (Goren, 2005; Alvarez and Brehm, 2002; Feldman, 1988). The rational choice model explains that a voter’s decision and choice are based on the realities of cost-benefits analysis. The argument is that as rational actors in the electoral process, voters are pragmatic and strategic in their motivations. Their preferences and choices weigh in favour of maximising the utility of their votes in terms of future realisation of

concrete political, economic and material benefits. Accordingly, “the rational choice theory operates on the basis that all decisions, whether made by the voters or political parties, are rational and guided by self-interest” (Saxena, 2017, p.90).

As the foregoing suggests, different theories have their explanatory power, utility and significance. Nevertheless, none can effectively explain voting behaviour independently. There are issues of mixed motivations, complementarities and interconnectedness, raising questions of complexity of causality. Some people vote during elections, not because of perceptions and influences of expected material gains as rationalists would argue, but, as a dutiful obligation of citizenship (Blais, 2000). Some also have theorised about the interplay between institutional rules and the context of voting as a crucial determinant (Guenther, n.d. p. 11). In much of Africa, some people are apathetic to voting, not necessarily because their votes may not count, because elections have turned into wars and armed conflicts. The recurring incidence of pre- and post-election violence in Kenya and its associated deaths is illustrative of these contextual and structural threats to voting as a form of electoral participation in Africa. Beyond attitudinal factors, influences on voters can also be external, drawing attention to social contagion effects. Some merely vote because others have voted. This is an issue, particularly amongst illiterate voters in emerging democracies of the developing world. Furthermore, the revolutions in information technology, especially the use of internet and social media have been identified to influence voting behaviour and electoral participation (Bimber, 1998; Bimber, 2001; Biswas, Ingle and Roy, 2014).

By and large, whether voting behaviour and the pattern it forms are internally and externally driven, the import of the foregoing theories is that the decision to vote or not is an exercise of the inalienable rights and autonomy of the people. Voting is thus an essential element of the democratic system, which facilitates and reinforces individual autonomy and freedoms of choice. Voting raises an im-

portant question of the exercise of rights to choose representatives and leaders during each election cycle, thereby, "helping to achieve the fundamental right of government by consent" (Mazrui, 2002, p. 15). In democracy, the centrality of the people's votes is emphasized as politicians must be seen to represent their constituencies in order to gain re-election as they engage in a, "competitive struggle for the people's vote" (Schumpeter, 1950, p. 269).

The theoretical argument of this paper is hinged on the assumptions of both the sociological and rationalist approaches to understanding and explaining voting behaviour. The psychological perspective is less persuasive in the context of Nigeria where most political parties are bereft of defined political philosophies, ideological leanings and ultimately distinctive political image. Thus, voting in Nigeria is primarily candidates-centred rather than political party-based or policy driven. Accordingly, Nigerian voters, as in much of Africa, often identify with candidates that show promise for social change in which ethno-religious identities of the candidates rather than political parties and their ideologies are key considerations and sources of influence. Furthermore, members of political parties in Nigeria often defect to other parties, mainly to reposition themselves to grab power and opportunities. In 2013, for example, seven serving governors of the PDP defected to the APC. More recently, in 2018, high profile defections, which included, but were not restricted to serving governors and senators, occurred both in the PDP and APC, the two major political parties in Nigeria. Senator Bukola Saraki, the current Senate President and Chairman of Nigeria's National Assembly elected on the platform of the PDP in 2015 was among the senators who defected to the APC. Since the return to democracy in 1999, crisscrossing from one party to another within the context of defection has defined political life and party activities in Nigeria. Party identification, which is said to be relatively stable over time because party ideologies change slowly, is, therefore, fluid in the Nigerian context. In this regard, a combination of the sociological

and rationalist perspectives is more appropriate in explaining how an incumbent president was defeated in power in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria without a fundamental shift in ethnic voting behaviour and voting patterns.

Eifert, Miguel, and Posner (2013) have shown that 'close' elections in Africa are associated with increase in the salience and strength of ethnic voting. This speaks to Mahmood Mamdani's argument in *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* that an enduring obstacle to democratisation in Africa is the legacy of complex political identities occasioned by European colonialism. Mamdani's (1996) basic thesis is that colonial laws and policies, particularly indirect rule created racial identity in citizens and ethnic identity in subjects during the era of European imperialism in Africa. As Mamdani notes, Europeans colonizers who were presumed to be superior and civilised came under civic citizenship and were bound by the same civil law and this promoted unity amongst them. On the other hand, the colonised natives conceptually described as subjects were organised under different native authorities based on customary laws and traditions that were largely perceived as static and immutable enjoyed ethnic citizenship. More critically, Mamdani contends that while civic citizenship was racialised and belonged to the national state with individual rights and privileges, ethnic citizenship was ethnicized and the institutionalisation of different customary laws for the natives further balkanised them into separate ethnic groups with access to customary rights only. In this way, the policy of indirect rule underpinned the institutionalisation of ethnic difference and the reproduction of ethnic identity into particular forms of political identities (Mamdani, 1996).

Put in context, the colonial state formation process in Africa set in motion processes of politicisation and evolution of cultural identities into complex political identities such as the indigene/settler dichotomy, religious and regional identity. More importantly, since these group identities were legally institutionalised and enforced,

even after political independence, they shape relations between people and the state and to one another through the state (Mamdani, 2002). Overall, the point is that, "Once the law makes cultural identity the basis for political identity, it inevitably turns ethnicity into a political identity" (Mamdani 2001, p. 661). These politicized identities, therefore, underlie struggles amongst citizens and ethnic groups for entitlements and rights, raising questions of inclusion or exclusion. Bitter contestations amongst ethnic communities in African states over which ethnic group should assume the presidency in each election cycle, as we see often in Kenya, is one of several examples of the significance and impact of political identities on electorate voting behavior and the character of post-colonial democratic politics. The point of emphasis in Mamdani's theoretical formulation that is relevant to this paper is that it promotes a better explanation and understanding of the dynamics of ethnic voting behaviour in post-independence Africa.

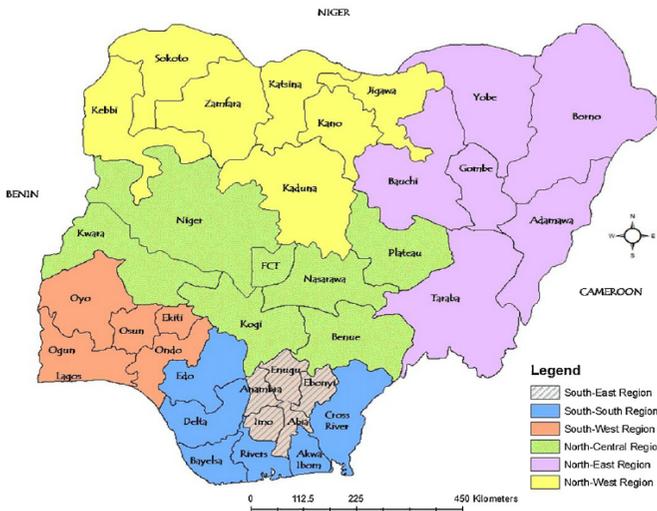
### **Analysis of the Spatial Distribution of Votes Cast and Electorate Voting Patterns in the Election**

For an effective mapping of the results and analysis of spatial distribution of vote cast in the 2015 presidential election, there is need to first examine the structure and ethnic configurations of Nigeria and how they impact the voting patterns in the election.

Nigeria is a multicultural society of about 170 million people, with an estimated 350 ethnic groups, structured into in 36 states. It is geographically divided into North and South. This spatial division corresponds to the ethnic stratification of the country as well as religious differentiation and identification, both of which have implications for identity-based loyalty and polarisations. The North is populated largely by Muslims of Hausa/Fulani ethnicity even though there are minor linguistic categorisations such as some of the middle belt minority groups of Birom that resist their inclusion into the

broad Hausa/Fulani conceptualisation. The South on the other hand, comprises different ethnic groups, which are predominantly Christians, and is made up of 19 states. In 1996, the Sani Abacha military regime restructured the country into six geopolitical zones for administrative convenience. The regions are: South-South, South-East, South-West, North-Central, North-East and North-West (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Map of Nigeria showing the six geopolitical Regions and their States**



Source: Ekong, et al, 2011, p.171

Empirical studies have demonstrated that the foregoing ethnic configurations and structure of the Nigerian state have shaped voting patterns in previous elections in the country including presidential elections since the colonial period and post-independence era (see Olayode, 2015; Nwobashi and Itumo, 2017, p. 439). In this paper, nationally aggregated data of the votes cast for the APC and PDP across the thirty-six states of the Nigerian federation were analyzed based on figures released by the INEC. The aim was to examine the strength of ethnicity in the voting choices of Nigerian electorates in

the 2015 presidential election. In other words, “the spatial analysis of votes cast for each party offers a new opportunity at examining the pattern formed by this activity” (Lawal, 2017, p.2).

I employed simple descriptive statistical analysis of percentages of electoral votes cast for the two main presidential candidates at the regional and state levels to identify the pattern they form in the election. In Table 1, the statistical analysis indicates that the South-South region where the then president, Goodluck Jonathan hails from, recorded 91.8% of the votes cast in the region while Buhari got just 8.2%. The same ethnic and territorial logic played out in the North-West geopolitical zone, the home region of Buhari of the opposition APC party. Buhari garnered 84.2% as against 18.5% received by Jonathan of the PDP. Table 1 is also illustrative of these dominant patterns for both candidates across the six geopolitical zones. In the North-east and North-central regions, Jonathan received 21.9% and 40% and Buhari obtained 3.0% in the South-East, and 53% in the South-West, suggesting a 7% vote, slightly above Jonathan in the South-West zone. It is argued that the fact that Buhari got, “significant votes from the South-West did not mean that he is “loved” by a wide range of people in the zone who voted across ethnic lines to elect him” (Olasile and Adebayo, 2016, p.4).

**Table 1: Distribution of Presidential Votes by Candidates and Regions**

Region	Total votes cast	Buhari (APC)	% share	Jonathan (PDP)	% share
South-East	2,593,154	78,248	3.0	2, 514, 906	97.0
South-South	5,102,705	418,580	8.2	4,684,125	91.8
South-West	3,571,363	1,904,101	53.3	1,667,262	46.7
North-Central	3,986,327	2,392,612	60.0	1,593,715	40.0
North-East	3,645,266	2,848,678	78.1	796,588	21.9
North-West	8,454,918	7,115,209	84.2	1,339,709	15.8

*Source: INEC*

Instead, it shows that in mapping the results, every picture tells a story. This story includes, but is not restricted to, the yearning for socio-economic change. Other factors include the role of Bola Tinubu as an influential Yoruba leader and national leader of the APC as well as the fact that Prof. Yemi Osibanjo, Buhari's running mate is also from the South-West and a Christian. Osibanjo is a Senior Pastor in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, one of the fastest growing Pentecostal churches in Africa with huge membership. In Nigeria, ethno-religious identity of candidates is historically a major consideration for the choice of running mates, whether in local government, state government or presidential elections. Ethnic balancing is considered strategic for promoting ethnic and political stability in Nigeria, and more importantly, for securing ethnically-driven votes. The factors of Tinubu and Osibanjo are, therefore, important explanatory variables in understanding Yoruba votes for Buhari. The widely reported outbursts of the Oba of Lagos who threatened Ibos in Lagos to vote APC or else jump in the Lagos lagoon and perish may also be interpreted as an attempt to secure Lagos and more broadly, Yoruba support for Buhari (Olayode, 2015, p.20). Generally, the emerging picture from Table 1 is that a regional voting pattern dictated by North versus South-based division and, "the politicisation and transformation of ethnic exclusivity into po-

litical cleavages" (Ake 1993, p. 2) can be discerned. To argue differently, both Buhari and Jonathan won and lost respectively with a substantial ethnic political support base.

Table 2 also indicates a strong statistical correlation between ethnicity and voting outcomes. Both Buhari and Jonathan won overwhelmingly in their respective states of origins: Katsina and Bayelsa with 93.1% and 98.6% respectively. Given these patterns of voting, it can be argued that considerations of 'sons of the soil syndrome' were significant factors in the elections. In fact, these voting patterns in both core Northern and Southern states speaks to questions of ethnicity and broader issue of North-South geographical and socio-cultural distinctions (Lawal, 2017, p.10). But, why is this the case?

*Table 2: State by state distribution of Presidential Votes cast for the APC and PDP*

State	Total votes cast	APC	%	PDP	%
Abia	381,697	13,394	3.5	368,303	96.5
Adamawa	626,365	374,701	60.0	251,664	40.0
Akwa-Ibom	1,011,715	58,411	5.8	953,304	94.2
Anambra	678,688	17,926	2.6	660,762	97.4
Bauchi	1,017,683	931,598	91.5	86,085	8.5
Bayelsa	366,403	5,194	1.4	361,209	98.6
Benue	677,698	373,961	55.2	303,737	44.8
Bornu	499,183	473,543	94.9	25,640	5.1
Cross-River	443,221	28,358	6.4	414,863	93.6
Delta	1,211,405	48,910	4.0	1,211,405	96.0
Ebonyi	393,171	19,518	5.0	373,653	95.0
Edo	495,338	208,469	42.0	286,869	58.0
Ekiti	296,797	120,331	41.0	176,466	59.0
Enugu	567,160	14,157	2.5	553,003	97.5
Gombe	458,118	361,245	78.9	96,873	21.1
Imo	692,438	133,253	19.2	559,185	80.8
Jigawa	1,028,902	885,998	86.1	142,904	13.9
Kaduna	1,611,843	1,127,760	70.0	484,085	30.0
Kano	2,119,778	1,903,999	89.8	215,779	10.2
Katsina	1,444,378	1,345,441	93.1	98,937	6.9
Kebbi	668,885	567,883	85.0	100,972	15.0
Kogi	414,438	264,451	63.8	149,987	36.2
Kwara	434,647	302,145	69.5	132,502	30.5
Lagos	1,424,787	792,460	55.6	632,327	44.4
Nasarawa	510,369	236,838	46.0	273,460	54.0
Niger	931,138	657,678	70.6	273,460	29.4
Ogun	457,512	308,290	67.4	149,222	32.6
Ondo	506,839	298,889	59.0	207,950	41.0
Osun	634,971	383,603	60.4	251,368	39.6
Oyo	778,549	528,620	68.0	249,929	32.0
Plateau	732,516	429,140	59.0	303,376	41.0
Rivers	1,556,313	69,238	4.4	1,487,075	95.6
Sokoto	824,125	671,926	81.5	152,199	18.5
Taraba	572,126	261,326	45.6	310,800	54.4
Yobe	471,791	446,265	94.6	25,526	5.4
Zamfara	757,035	612,202	81.0	144,833	19.0
FCT	303,594	146,399	48.2	157,195	51.8

Source: INEC

### **Explaining the Social Determinants of Ethnic Voting Behaviour in the 2015 Election**

Two major reasons can be advanced for the observed ethnic voting pattern in the 2015 presidential election as in other presidential elections in Nigeria, particularly since 1999. First, ethnic voting

behaviour in Nigeria, as in much of Africa, responds to the historicity of communalism in the continent. This is complicated by the fact that ethnicity has also not been creatively adjusted to the emerging liberal democratic order (Ake, 1996, p.24). The second argument is that ethnicity has been effectively mobilised by political elites to gain power at the expense of the people. This relates more to the character of the Nigerian state and the nature of social distribution of power amongst the various ethnic groups that are decidedly political and historically rooted in British colonialism and Nigeria's post-colonial state formation process. The ways both of these factors decisively impacted how individual Nigerian voters voted in the 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria are elaborated below.

First it is pertinent to note that ethnicity remains the primary mode of association, solidarity and expression of collective group identity in Nigeria as in most African societies. Ethnic politics has its social origins in the cultural politics and economics of European colonialism (Eke, 1990; Ake, 1993, Mamdani, 1996; 2001; 2002). It has consolidated since then to the extent that people define themselves first and foremost in terms of their ethnic origins. Thus, citizens' loyalty is first expressed to their ethnic group, and then the Nigerian state. This socio-psychological attachment influences the exercise of franchise, and generally, electoral behaviour in national elections and party politics in Nigeria. There is, therefore, a cultural and historical context that promotes collective group identification, which often translates into what may be aptly described as 'group voting' in contradiction to liberal democratic elections that emphasise one person, one vote. Group voting is defined here as the tendency for members of the same ethnic group to identify with, and vote *en masse* for a candidate based on ethnic descent. The candidate is perceived as a 'brother' or 'sister' based on theoretical considerations of primordiality. Given this context, voting is primarily expressive because identity politics rules. In some sense, it also shows that ethnicity is yet to be effectively adapted to the evolving liberal de-

mocracy in Nigeria, which emphasizes individualism and individual rights rather than group rights (Beissinger, 2008, p.93).

This does not imply that ethnicity and democracy are necessarily incompatible. "There are extremely diverse societies (India, Papua New Guinea) that rate as successful democratizers" (see Beissinger, 2008, p.87). In other words, "A society can function perfectly well if citizens hold multiple identities, but problems arise when those subnational identities arouse loyalties that override loyalty to the nation as a whole" (Collier, 2009, p.51). In the Nigerian context, however, the majority of the electorate continue to vote along ethnic and religious lines as shown in tables 1 and 2. Strong ethnic loyalties are founded on the assumptions that when an 'ethnic brother' is voted into power, he/she would most likely share and support their basic political views and hence respond to the needs of his/her own people as a differentiated other. Ethnic identity may, therefore, be viewed as a politicized collective identity. In this regard, there is a 'group think' in the sense of the causal connections between ethnicity and voting behaviour (Norris and Mattes, 2013). Accordingly, "ethnic identity has often been treated as a group marker in which voters opt for candidates who are members of the same ethnic group." This suggests that, "voters may favour a political party and candidates endorsed by their ethnic members (e.g. the Latino population typically supports the Democratic Party and its candidates in the U.S.), (Graves and Lee, 2000).

Drawing on the foregoing, it can be posited that the South-South region, as indicated in Table 1 voted for Jonathan primarily because he is an indigene of the Niger Delta. In this regard, the electorate of the region expressed preferences for Jonathan rather than Buhari even though the six years of Jonathan's presidency saw no policy intervention in the Niger Delta that addressed the lingering crisis of resource conflict, underdevelopment and marginalisation. To put in another way, the people of the Niger Delta failed to hold Jonathan accountable for his policy indifference to the resolution of

oil conflicts in the Niger Delta between 2010 and 2015 through the ballot box in the election of 2015. Rather, they consciously chose to vote massively for him as a kinsman. But, this seemingly predictable voting behaviour is part of a more complex set of considerations including, for example, the nature of geo-historical division of power in Nigeria and cultural politics of ethnic marginalisation. The ways these variables interacted, were contextualised and interpreted during the 2015 presidential election are particularly important for understanding how the people of the region voted.

Geographically, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is located in the South-South geopolitical zone. It comprises ethnic minorities, which are endowed with oil and gas resources. From the 1970s to date, oil and gas have emerged as the main sources of national revenue in Nigeria and have since then sustained the political economy of the country. Oil accounts for over ninety per cent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and eighty percent of national revenues. Nevertheless, due to the nature and character of socio-political distribution of power in Nigeria, the people of the Niger Delta have benefitted little from the oil wealth generated from their lands. The major ethnic groups in Nigeria have had a strangle-hold on both economic and political power to the detriment of the ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta. It has been empirically demonstrated that it was during the period when the major ethnic groups dominated the political space as Nigeria's presidents that all the draconian legislation such as the Petroleum Act of 1963, the Land Use Decree of 1978 that deprived the Niger Delta oil-producing communities the right to ownership of oil resources found on the lands were enacted.

It is against these dynamics and familiar patterns of land and oil-related legislation that the people of the Niger Delta have made accusations of ethnic discrimination. "The indigenes of the South-South geopolitical zone (part of the old Eastern Region, referred to as the Niger Delta) strongly believed they have been marginalised by almost four decades of civilian and military rule headed by Northern

Nigeria politicians, which failed to develop the region" (Iwuagwu cited in Anejionu et al., 2016, pp 455-456). Some have aptly described this political condition as a case of internal colonialism, not least because poverty, social conflicts and environmental degradation have defined Niger Delta history since oil exploitation started in 1958 (Naanen, 1995; Nbeta, 2012). Yet, Niger Delta residents have remained alienated from the existing power equation and calculus of power in Nigeria, particularly with reference to being able to occupy the office of the president of Nigeria. It was not until in 2010 that Goodluck Jonathan, an indigene of the Niger Delta emerged for the first time as president of Nigeria because of the sudden death of Yar'Adua.

Historically, therefore, the Niger Delta people had over the years developed grievances and resentment, not just against the Nigerian state, but also against the existing structure of ethnic domination that had underpinned their marginalization. Accordingly, the 2015 presidential election was bound up with these local political dynamics. Yet even though Jonathan failed to transform the socio-economic and political conditions of the people in the previous six years, this was not an issue in the 2015 elections. As shown in Table 1 and noted earlier, nine out of ten voters in the Niger Delta voted for Jonathan. In other words, Jonathan's exercise of leadership in the previous six years, which did not connect to the socio-political needs and economic aspirations of the local populations in the Niger Delta, was not the key determinant factor in preferring Jonathan to Buhari in the election. Ethnicity held sway. It can be argued that the people were more or less interested in politics of representation rather than political accountability and performance. Therefore, the votes of the people of the Niger Delta simply point to intrinsic and overt struggles by an in-group against an out-group to retain the presidency in the South-South zone.

Similar considerations may have influenced the Northern 'group vote' for Buhari. To illuminate this point, there is need to re-

visit briefly the power rotation agreement that emerged between political elites of the North and South within the ruling PDP before the 2015 presidential elections. In 2007, Musa Yar'Adua from the North was elected as president of Nigeria to succeed Olusegun Obasanjo with Goodluck Jonathan as the Vice-President. Based on an alleged existing PDP power sharing arrangement, it was expected that Yar'Adua or the North would complete his turn in office and thereafter return power to the South (Owen and Usman, 2015, p. 457). Eventually, when Yar'Adua died in office in 2010, Vice-President Jonathan from the South-South took over power as the president. In 2011, Jonathan presented himself as a candidate for the presidency in further violation of the PDP's internal power rotation principle, thus denying, "the northerners opportunity to complete the unfinished terms of late President Yar'Adua's presidency" (Olayode 2015, p.19). The action of Jonathan generated serious contention, acrimony and significant dissent within the PDP.

The important point that is relevant to this analysis is that Jonathan's disloyalty to the PDP and the fragmentation it created within the party did not remain an internal party affair. Narrow and parochial interests of northern political elites in their struggles to capture power were broadly framed and mobilised as the turn of the North to reclaim its lost opportunity to rule the country again. Consequently, the pattern of the conflict reflected and dovetailed into an entrenched national and wider inter-ethnic struggle for political domination between the North and the South, thereby reasserting and reinforcing historical and structural questions of power that found expressions in the voting patterns in the presidential election. In other words, "...the Northern Region, especially North-West and North-East geopolitical zones, who relinquished power to the South-South zone in 2010 at the unexpected death of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua were very eager to claw back power" (Anejionu et.al, 2016, p.456). The people of the North were mobilised to vote along this line of thinking. It was not surprising, therefore, as already not-

ed, to observe that the people of the North-West, North-Central and North-East regions of the county all voted overwhelmingly for Buhari. In their view, power must return back to the north, irrespective of whether Jonathan's regime was responsive to the North or not. The expression, politicisation and mobilisation of religious sentiments also had similar impact on voting behaviour in the election.

### **The Limitations and Impact of Religion on Voting Behaviour in the 2015 Elections**

Closely related to the influence of nationalism and ethnic identity-based cleavages in the determinations of voting patterns in the 2015 presidential election was religion. Worldwide, religion is viewed as a multidimensional phenomenon centred on belief, behaviour and identity, all of which shape democratic attitudes. It is argued that religion can hurt or enhance democracy, but the exact relationship is complex, and is context specific. In Nigeria, religious affiliation, defined primarily within the context of Muslim-Christian divide is a dominant expression of identity. Nigeria is widely described as a deeply religious nation where religion has emerged, and become consolidated over the years as a strong political force, shaping individual sense of belonging, voting decisions and political dynamics in the country.

By virtue of the geographical and cultural configurations of Nigeria, ethnicity and religion are intimately connected in such a way that they are very difficult to separate in Nigerian electoral process and politics. In Southern Nigeria, you find people who are predominantly Christians. In the South-West and South-Eastern regions, for instance, you find social groups such as the Yoruba and Igbo who speak a common language respectively, and are mainly Christians by their religious faith and beliefs. In Northern Nigeria, the people are primarily Muslims. This geography reinforces the link between religion and nationalism in Nigeria. The people of both Southern and

Northern Nigeria see themselves as different peoples, each group united by religious and cultural ethnicity. Consequently, Hausa Muslims are most likely to vote for a Muslim candidate from the North and vice versa in the South. As illustrated in Tables 1 and 2, “Buhari, a Muslim, garnered massive support from states which had incorporated Sharia law into their legal system. Christian states on the other hand, voted for Jonathan, a Christian from the South” (Anejionu et.al 2016, p.459).

Kaduna state provides an interesting and illuminating illustration of the politics of religion and the saliency of the influence of geography on voting preferences of the people for the two main candidates in question. Kaduna state is a core Northern state, but internally it is more or less a reflection of the broad religious division of Nigeria into a Christian-dominated South and Muslim-dominated North. Northern Kaduna is highly populated by Muslims while the South is largely Christians. While on the whole, the APC won in Kaduna state (see table 2), regional analysis of the results of Kaduna state shows that Buhari won massively in the Northern part and Jonathan won overwhelmingly in the South (Obiora, 2015). In some measure, it can be argued that Nigerian voters are at present, largely inclined to vote for a candidate who shares the same faith with them, and who is also more likely to protect their religious beliefs and religious identities. In Southern Nigeria, Buhari was roundly perceived as, “a strong advocate of Sharia implementation” (Ukiwo and Rustard, 2015, p.3) and a likely candidate to Islamise the country. This attribution was a key consideration for voting preferences in the Christian-dominated regions of the country.

Therefore, given the centrality and place of religion as a force for mobilization, electioneering campaigns by both candidates were not devoid of appeal to, and exploitation of religious sentiments throughout the country. Jonathan, for example, paid several visits to many Christian organisations across Nigeria to mobilise Christian voters to “identify with their Christian brother” (Oloyode, 2015, p.

18). The then governor of Rivers state, and now Minister of Transportation who headed the APC presidential campaign, Mr. Rotimi Amaechi alleged that the Jonathan presidency bribed the leadership of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) with a whopping sum of N7-billion to campaign against General Buhari. According to Animashaun (2015), "Although the national leadership of CAN rejected the allegation, the Executive Director of the Voice of Northern Christian Movement, Pastor Kallamu Musa-Dikwa, insisted that the national office of CAN had received the money and disbursed it to state chapters of the religious body." (p. 194). On the side of the APC, a popular Catholic Priest, Rev. Mbaka, was widely reported in the Nigerian media to have openly preached and campaigned against Jonathan, while also mobilizing a significant section of Catholic Faithful in Enugu city to vote for Buhari. This character of politics has serious implications for effective and productive inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria and the prospects for enhancing internal peace and the building of a viable state and state institutions.

### **Social Conflicts Implications of Ethnic Voting and Voting without Choosing in Nigeria**

The main claim of this section is that the strength of ethnicity in Nigerian electoral politics is not without its complications for the institutionalisation of democracy. On democratic consolidation, the basic argument is that the structural limitation of ethnicity on voting behaviour in Nigeria is that voting is least emancipatory and liberating. Voting along ethno-religious and geospatial lines is a metaphor for powerlessness. In Claude Ake's view, this character of voting does not really amount to choosing because ethno-religious parochialism rooted in elite manipulation tends to hold sway (Bratton, 2013, p.5; Ake, 1996, p. 25, 27). People technically have abstract voting rights, not choosing rights. For example, "if individuals vote in blind support of their ethnic ingroup or in opposition of ethnic outgroups,

their decisions will not involve substantial systematic processing, potentially undermining the principles and effectiveness of the democratic system (Lee et al, 2016, p.12). Indeed, "by responding to ethnic appeal, the voter is frozen in a moment of particularity and obliged to renounce the universality of democratic consensus-building and collective identity" (Ake, 1996, p.11). Ethnic voting, therefore, has mutually reinforcing implications for voting without choosing and the outbreak of ethnic conflicts. This is because there is no space that fosters collective identity, and in state characterised by negative unity such as Nigeria, electoral politics is more or less "a fabrication of an endless war between regional, ethnic, religious and communal groups" (Ake, 1996, p.8).

The resurgence of militancy in the Niger Delta region barely a year Buhari assumed office as President speaks to the nature of identity-based electoral politics in Nigeria. Between April and May 2015, a variety of militant groups emerged in the Niger Delta under the aegis of Niger Delta Avengers (NDA). They organised themselves and revived the agitation for resource control in the region, agitation that was almost totally relaxed throughout Jonathan's presidency. The new enthusiasm among the militants soon found expression in violent attacks on oil pipelines in the region (see Table 3). The various attacks of the NDA contributed significantly to the collapse of oil production, thus complicating the economy that was already reeling under conditions of falling international oil prices. The oil-based Nigerian economy was, therefore, severely threatened by new uprisings presented by Niger Delta militants. In fact, it took direct negotiations of Vice-president Yemi Osibanjo with NDA's militants to restore calm and for oil production to resume again in the region.

It is worth recalling that Niger Delta militants had prior to the election threatened that if Jonathan, their own 'son of the soil' lost his re-election bid in 2015, they would unleash violence in the region to undermine oil production activities and political stability in Nigeria (Animashaun, 2015, p.194, Oloyade, 2015, p.17). The new

wave of militancy that confronted the Buhari regime can, therefore, be interpreted as a rejection of Buhari's victory and the corresponding power shift from the Delta region to the North.

Some, such as John Campbell, former U.S. ambassador to Nigeria have argued that the rationale for the NDA's attacks was driven purely by greed rather than nationalistic grievances. Indeed, greed and criminality cannot be entirely ruled out given the emergent character of the Niger Delta struggles, particularly since the post-Cold War when agitation in the region assumed violent and criminal dimensions. Nevertheless, the timing of the NDA's attacks suggest an instrumentalisation of ethnicity. It is interesting to note that Jonathan's presidency, between 2010 and 2015, was largely characterized by inaction on the part of the Niger Delta militants, and on the other, policy indifference by the Jonathan regime toward addressing the root causes of oil conflicts in the region.

The relaxation of resource control agitation by the people of the Niger Delta may have been influenced by perceptions that Jonathan, the first Niger Delta indigene to assume the Presidency needed ethnic loyalty and strong political support from his constituents. Presumably, passive resistance was considered necessary for Jonathan to succeed in office. He was, therefore, tolerated by his own people, ignoring the fact that the Niger Delta Question is a deeply structural issue. Throughout Jonathan's tenure as president, a combination of cooptation and policy indifference to resource conflict in the Niger Delta, both aimed at securing oil production, rather than sustainable peace, held sway. Political cooptation involved the award of oil pipeline security contracts to ex-militant leaders such as Ateke Toms, Asari Dokubo and Tompolo to ensure that there was temporary peace and security in Niger Delta rather than finding lasting solutions to the festering crisis in the region.

**Table 3: Attacks on Oil Facilities by the NDA, February-June, 2016**

S/N	Date of Attacks	Armed Group Involved	Oil Company Affected	Nature and Place of Attack	Impact
1	10/2/2016	NDA	NLNG	Bombing of Bonny Soku Gas Line, Gbaran	--
2	8/4/2016	NDA	Chevron	Bombing of Chevrons valve platform (an offshore oil facility) Benikuruku, Excravos in Abiteye, Warri South-West LGA	-
3	8/5/2016	NDA	Chevron	Bombing of Chevrons three swamp stations Warri south-West LGA	Estimated loss of 40, 000 bpd of crude oil
4	8/5/2016	NDA	Agip	Bombing of Agip Oil Pipeline Azuzuama, Tebidaba Brass in Bayelsa	-
5	13/5/2016	Unnamed Group	Chevron	Bombing of pipeline Makaraba Community, Gbaramatu Clan Warri South-West LGA, Delta state	-
6	May 2016	NDA	NNPC	Bombing of the truck line supplying crude to both the Kaduna and Warri refineries as well a pipeline supplying Gas to Lagos and Abuja electricity plant, Delta State	-
7	1/6/2016	Chevron	Chevron	Bombing of Chevron's Oil Wells: RMP 23 and RMP 24	About 5 Soldiers died
8	9/6/2016	Unnamed group	NPDC	Bombing of pipeline Chinomi Creeks Warri Southwest Local government	-

*Source: Compiled by Author*

Conceivably, ethnicity and political elitism interacted in such a way that foreclosed efforts to transform state-society relations as the basis for building sustainable peace in the region. Consequently, the Niger Delta did not experience any form of social, institutional and structural change during his tenure or any policy response to the Niger Delta crisis that had direct positive impacts on the material conditions of majority of the local people in the region. Jonathan's

failure to complete the construction of the East-West road, a major road project inherited from the Yar'Adua administration, which would have had direct impact on the lives of the ordinary people, is regarded as the height of insensitivity to the plights of the Niger Delta people. Contradictorily, the Niger Delta, which widely accepted Jonathan as evident in their voting patterns in the election, were also very quick to reject the government of Buhari. For example, the renewed wave of militancy mentioned earlier was complemented by the rise in civil society agitations for resource control in the region in post-Jonathan administration.

Edwin Clark's campaign for resource control in the Niger Delta in post-Jonathan administration is particularly illustrative of the changing dynamics and politicisation of ethnicity in the region. Edwin Clark is a prominent Ijaw leader, who was a key member of Jonathan's kitchen cabinet. He was generally quiet on agitation for resource ownership rights in the Niger Delta when his kinsman was in control of the Nigerian state. Surprisingly, Clark joined forces with other socio-political pressure groups in Nigeria to agitate for political restructuring and resource control immediately after Jonathan was voted out of power. It meant little or nothing to Clark that Buhari implemented the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Report on Ogoni barely a year in office, which Jonathan failed to do in six years. The UNEP Report was released in 2011. It details how negative extractive activities of the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria (SPDC or Shell) devastated the Niger Delta environment and its implementation by the federal government, was widely considered a major step towards reviving the fractured relationships between the Niger Delta people and the Nigerian state. While Jonathan jettisoned the UNEP Report, Buhari a northerner implemented it. Nevertheless, for the militants and people like Edwin Clark, Buhari was perceived as a president from the north, and Buhari's policy actions in the Niger Delta simply did not matter. Generally, the contagion effects of militants' resumption of

armed agitation in the Niger Delta and Edwin Clark's campaigns in post-Jonathan presidency contributed to the intensification of debates on political restructuring of Nigeria and its associated ethnic tensions and perceived threats of disintegration of the Nigerian state.

In the North, similar deployment of ethnicity, reminiscent of what occurred in the Niger Delta under the Jonathan administration was discernible in the spread of armed attacks of Fulani herdsmen when Buhari assumed power in May 2015. Herdsmen armed attacks and herder-farmer conflicts are not entirely new in contemporary Nigerian history. They have been there for over two decades, but were mainly confined to Northern Nigeria between Christian farmers and Muslim herders, especially in the Middle-Belt region. However, recent escalation and diffusion of attacks of the herdsmen across Nigeria, particularly into Southern Nigeria have been predicated on the arguments that when Buhari, a Fulani from Katsina state emerged as president, the herdsmen appeared to have been emboldened and motivated by the politics of ethnicity. This correlation is hinged on the response gap between the rising incidence of herdsmen attacks and the apparent demonstration of impotence by the Nigerian state to contain the rampaging herdsmen. Since 2015, for example, armed attacks of herdsmen on local communities in southern Nigeria have not only consolidated, but had also constituted serious security challenge in social dislocation, internal displacement, economic losses and deaths. In April 2016, herdsmen attacked Ozalla community in Nkanu West Local Government Area of Enugu, Enugu state, killing about forty people and destroying farm lands (Mamah, et al 2016). There have also been attacks in Rivers, Delta and Ondo states. In Ondo, for instance, a former secretary to the federal government and presidential candidate in 1999 was kidnapped from his farm by herdsmen and held hostage for some days. In fact, these increasingly deadly attacks have started taking place more frequently in the southern states, something even Boko Haram has yet to attempt to date (Amaza, 2016).

Given the increasing escalation and persistent security threats posed by herdsmen since 2015 as illustrated by the killing of over 80 people in Benue state on New Year day in 2018, some have described herdsmen as local versions of Boko Haram terrorists (Omitola, 2014, p. 3; Umoru, 2017). Yet, Buhari had failed to take decisive actions against them. Even when president Buhari ordered a military crackdown on herdsmen, such pronouncements were not backed by concrete actions to show a commitment to protecting lives of vulnerable Nigerian citizens. Against the seemingly impotent response of the federal government, many Nigerians, particularly those from the South believe that the president has deliberately turned a blind eye to the herdsmen security crisis because he comes from the Fulani ethnic group (David, 2016).

These ethnic sentiments compelled attention, and were reinforced when president Buhari deployed a military taskforce, code-named Operation Python Dance to subdue the struggle for self-determination by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the South-East in September 2017. The contention was that Buhari who had turned a blind eye to the activities of the herdsmen despite the threats they posed to national security suddenly mustered political will and demonstrated such a hard stance on the IPOB. He declared the IPOB a terrorist organisation and began the process of proscribing it, an action that was viewed as political suppression of legitimate dissent. The application of double standards in the response of Buhari to the IPOB and the herdsmen's security predicaments is said to be underlined by political ethnicity. Not the least, because the declaration of the IPOB as terrorist organisation and discursive constructions of security threats posed by the group raises questions of securitisation within the context of politics of protection and national security (Wæver, 1996; Williams, 2003). Therefore, it was somewhat not surprising for the upper legislative chamber of Nigeria's National Assembly, the Senate, to condemn the deployment of the Operation Python Dance and subsequently set up a committee

to probe the alleged violations of human rights committed by the soldiers. Similarly, the United States government promptly rejected claims that the IPOB was a terrorist group. Beyond the issue of IPOB and herdsmen security crisis, Buhari has also been accused of making political appointments and recruitments into the civil service that smack of ethnicity. It is claimed that these appointments were selectively made to disproportionately favour the North in violation of Nigeria's federal character principle that emphasizes ethnic balancing.

Taken together, Buhari's nepotism with regard to lopsided political appointments, and the failure to address the herdsmen security crisis as well as the resurgence of armed agitations in the South-South and South-East reflect the continuation of the politics of ethnic loyalty expressed in the voting patterns in the election. The logic of all these ethnically-driven social conflicts is that Buhari was popularly voted into power but not chosen. Seeing voting in terms of the substantive freedoms of people to freely choose candidates at elections irrespective of their ethno-religious backgrounds and states of origins will reduce the tendency to resort to nepotism and ethnically-induced violence, thus facilitating the evolution of democratic peacebuilding in Nigeria and development of an inclusive Nigerian society.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has analysed voting behaviour and the pattern it forms in the 2015 presidential election. It argues that historic alignments of ethnicity and religion, which have significantly influenced voting behaviour, voting patterns and electoral outcomes in Nigerian politics since political independence in 1960 were striking in the 2015 presidential election results. The votes cast for Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP and Muhammadu Buhari of the APC reflected perceptions of support for an ethnic kinsman. For example, 90% of vot-

ers in the South-South, the home region of former President Jonathan voted along ethnic lines. Similarly, the North-West voted overwhelmingly for Buhari of the APC. Indeed, across the six geopolitical regions, the results broadly indicate regional voting patterns along North-South-based ethno-regional and religious divisions, and the geopolitical support and votes of the Yoruba people in the Southwest for Buhari were critical in his winning the election. The strategic choice of Osinbanjo as Buhari's running mate contributed significantly in swaying the 53% votes of Yoruba people for the APC. In fact, the Southwest was generally perceived as a stronghold of the APC, not the least, because many of its leaders including Tinubu, the national leader of the party and Buhari's running mate, Osinbanjo were from the region. To this end, the Southwest's vote was more or less as an expression of nationalistic support for ethnic kinsmen, and not necessarily a support for the APC along ideological and policy lines.

The article contends that the causal connections between ethnicity and voting outcomes in Nigeria can be located in African communalism and the nature of the socio-political distribution of power in Nigeria. It further notes that liberal democratic elections that swept across Africa in the 1990s in the so-called third wave of democratisation, which emphasize individualism are yet to be creatively adjusted to the historical, cultural, and practical realities of communalism and ethnicity in Nigeria. There is still a pervasive sense of collective identity built around primordial conceptions of ethnicity, one that is also intensely instrumentalised by political elites who appeal to voters, weeping ethnic and religious sentiments in a bid to capturing and retaining power. Ethnicity, thus, continues to condition people's social, economic and political relations, for example, in the unfair distribution of power and opportunities amongst ethnic groups as well as voting choices expressed during national elections.

The interaction of social constructivist and primordial interpretations of ethnicity is problematic for electoral competitions and democratic outcomes, and peacebuilding in Nigeria. Both are mutually constitutive in the emergence and sustenance of identity-based struggles in the country. This is because the predominance of ethnic voting behaviour translates into a phenomenon of voting without choosing. The relaxation of militant and civil society agitations for resource rights in the Niger Delta during the tenure of Jonathan, for example, and their revival in post-Jonathan regime are illustrative of the challenges and contradictions of voting without choosing for social conflicts in Nigeria. These were also expressive in Buhari's nepotism in appointments that favoured northerners and his divergent strategy in responding to threats of the IPOB and northern Fulani herdsmen. This article, therefore, draws policy attention to voter and citizenship education including addressing structural underpinnings of predictable ethnic voting behaviour and voting patterns in Nigerian electoral politics so as to promote democracy and enhance democratic peace in the country.

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