

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND VOTING BEHAVIOUR IN 2011, 2015 AND 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: A CROSS SECTIONAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have written extensively on the imperatives of identity consciousness on voting behaviour of Nigerians in presidential politics and elections. However, there are gaps in depth analysis of ethno-religious identity to explain what inform voter turnout and voting choice of Nigerians across six regions of the federation in three presidential election cycles. In other words, this discourse examines the reality or illusion of ethno-religious identity in voting behaviour of Nigerians in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections from a cross sectional analysis. The methodology of this discourse is exploratory research design with emphasis on documentary and Key Informant interview as sources of data collection. Thus, the sample size of 36 Key Informants were selected from the six regions of the federation through purposive-random sampling procedure and interviewed in face-to-face interaction, telephone communication, Focus Group Discussion etc where responses and empirical data gathered were documented, presented and content- analyzed. The study therefore revealed that many Nigeria voters are most often enthused to participate and vote for frontline candidates and running mates who shared their ethno-religious background amid other intervened influencing factors. Again, there were peculiarities of identity consciousness in voting behaviour across regions of ethno-religious backgrounds in Nigeria presidential elections. The discourse therefore suggest for sense of nationhood, advocacy for national rebirth among other fundamentals to mitigate intense euphoria of ethno-religious consciousness and tensions in power transition.

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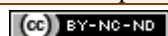
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1. INTRODUCTION

Modern democracy expresses the expedience of elections and popular choice in determining who occupy and direct administrative and legislative output structures of the political system. Thus, the affinity between elections and democracy accentuate the importance of liberty, popular sovereignty and competition (Nnoli, 2003, Adele, 2012, Awopeju, 2011 and Abaass 2008). Hence, voting is at the center of democratic process evincing imperatives of liberty in power transition. In this vein, voting behavior is viewed from the perspective of voter turnout and voting choice (Brathon, 2013, Mahmud, 2015 and Hills, 2010, Serna, 2018). Basically, the three successive presidential elections in 2011, 2015 and 2019 showed considerable variations in the trends of voter turnout and voting choice. As observed in the 2011 presidential election, the voter turnout was 39,469,484 which represent 53.7 percent of 73.5 million registered voters (Report of Election Monitor, 2015 and Mahmud, 2015). The analysis of the regional voter turnout further revealed that South-South (76.3 percent) and South-East (66.9 percent) recorded the highest number of regional voter turnout followed by North-West (54.5 percent), North-East (54.2 percent), and the North-Central (48.2 percent) while the voter turnout was very low in the South-West (32.3 percent) of the country (Report of the Center for Public Policy Alternatives, 2015). In further reference to the analysis of voting choice as embellished in votes won across states in the six geo political zones, it is observed that the relative distribution of these votes showed that Jonathan, the PDP candidate won in 23 states and FCT (16 in the South and 7 in the North). He obtained 25 percent or more of the votes cast in the 32 states and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Buhari, the candidate of CPC won in 12 states (all in the North). The former Army General scored 25 percent or more in 16 states (all in the North) and FCT. Ribadu won in one state, Osun (in the South West) and scored 25 percent or more in

4 states (all in the South) and Shakarau did not win any state and did not score up to 25 percent in any state (Madunagu, 2011). Interestingly, 'the problem' is embellished in the variations of regional voter turnout (where certain regions leads with impressive percentages while others trailed behind) and the inability of CPC presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari to win any state beyond the North? While the incumbent president won overwhelmingly in the Southern states and marginally in the North in the 2011 presidential election. This puzzling development therefore elicits curiosity in the importance of ethno-religious identity in what drives enthusiasm and choices made by the Nigeria voters in 2011 presidential poll.

In contrast as observed in the 2015 presidential election, voter turnout was 29,432,083 (43.65 percent) of the registered 68.8 million voters (Report of Election Monitor, 2015 and Adewale, *et al* 2015). It implied that the 2015 presidential election recorded poor voter turnout with a marginal decline from what was seen in the 2011 presidential election. In the analysis of the regional voter turnout, the South-South (57.81 percent) and North-West (55.09 percent) geo-political zones interestingly leads other regions. This development was followed by North-East (45.22 percent), North-Central (43.47 percent), South-East (40.52 percent) while South-West (40.26 percent) again recorded lowest voter turnout as seen in the 2011 presidential election (Report of Center for Public Policy Alternatives, 2015). In further reference to the analysis of voting choice seen in votes won across states in the six geo-political zones, Ayorinde (2015), noted that Buhari had defeated his challenger, Goodluck in all the Northern states except in Taraba, Nasarawa, Plateau and in the South West states, except in Ekiti. Even in the three states where he lost the election in the two regions, the APC presidential candidate put up a respectable showing, garnering about 40 percent of the votes. On the other hand, the PDP presidential candidate won overwhelmingly in all the South-South and South-East states. In addition, President Jonathan won in Plateau, Nasarawa and Taraba states in the Northern part of the country. Buhari also met the constitutional requirement to be declared president-elect by getting more than one quarter of the votes in the 27 states. The APC candidate won in Adamawa, Bauchi, Benue, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Kogi, Kwara, Lagos, Niger, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Oyo, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara. The President, Jonathan was victorious in Rivers, Plateau, Taraba, Nasarawa, Imo, Enugu, Ekiti, Edo, Delta, Ebonyi, Cross River, Bayelsa, Anambra, Akwa – Ibom, Abia and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. In an explicit manner, it further implied that Jonathan won 15 states and FCT (12 states in the South, 3 states in the North and FCT) and Buhari won 21 states (16 states in the North and 5 states in the South). The 'problem' is obvious in the variations of regional voter turnout quite different from what was observed in 2011 and, what account for dramatic electoral victory of Buhari in the South for the first time since he began to compete fervently for the office of the president in 2003, 2007 and 2011 presidential elections? While Jonathan surprisingly lost five states in the South particularly in the Western region and failed woefully in the North. What really happened? How important was ethno-religious identity in what informed voter enthusiasm and choices made by Nigerians in a presidential election replete with puzzling scenarios?

In the 2019 presidential election, the voter turnout was 28,614,190 (35.66%) from 84,000,084 registered voters, a significant drop from the 43.65 percent recorded during 2015 elections (Report of Election Monitor, 2019 and Online Daily Trust 2019). It therefore implied that February 2019 presidential election recorded the worst national voter turnout compared to voter turnout of 2011 and 2015 successive presidential elections in Nigeria. The analysis of the 2019 regional voter turnout further revealed that North-West (44.86 percent) and North-East (42.48 percent) recorded the highest number of regional voter turnout followed by North-Central (36.95 percent), South-West (32.65 percent), and the South-South (29.23 percent) while the voter turnout was very low in the South-East (24.5 percent) of the country (Report of Election Monitor, 2019:21). Furthermore, Eze (2019) noted that Buhari, who was the candidate of the All Progressive Congress, APC won 19 states of the federation (15 states in the North and 4 states in the South) which were Ekiti, Osun, Kwara, Nasarawa, Kogi, Gombe, Yobe, Niger, Jigawa, Kaduna, Bauchi, Ogun, Kano, Katsina, Lagos, Sokoto, Kebbi, Zamfara and Borno states. His main challenger, Atiku Abubakar, the PDP Presidential candidate won 17 states and FCT, Abuja (13 states in the South and 4 states in the North and the FCT) which were Ondo, Abia, Enugu, Ebonyi, Anambra, Oyo, Adamawa, Edo, Benue, Imo, Taraba, Plateau, Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Akwa Ibom and Rivers, and the FCT. The 'problem' ostensibly resonate from another indication of varied voter turnout where two northern regions remarkably leads in poor context of voter non-enthusiasm different from what was observed in the two successive presidential elections and, where percentage of voter enthusiasm in two southern regions plummeted in a dramatic twist not seen in the previous elections which inextricably underscored 'regularity' which is quite remarkable and instructive in regional voter turnout in the recent time. Again, the recurrence of North-West and North East and South- South and South-East voting pattern is quite puzzling considering the fact that the two frontline presidential candidates were from the region, 'North' and share the same ethnic-religious inclination, *Fulani-Islam*. These developments are quite remarkable and raised more curiosity in the reality or illusion of ethno-religious sentiment to establish what propelled voter enthusiasm, although lower turnout and choices made by Nigerians across states and regions in an election which had no frontline southern candidate from the two dominant political parties, (APC and PDP). These curiosities and puzzling scenarios embellished underscores the thrust of this discourse. In this vein, this discourse is divided into this introduction, conceptual discourse, ethno-religious identity and voting behaviour of Nigerians in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections; conclusion and recommendations.

2. CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

Identity is a multidisciplinary concept replete with varied definitions and perspectives among social science scholars. In this vein, Tsuwa and Otsapa (2015) argued that identity refers to the progress of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute or a related set of cultural attributes, which is given priority over other sources of meaning. For an individual, or for a group there may be plurality of identities. Yet such a plurality is a source of stress and contradiction in both self-representation and social action. Its attributes comprise “commitment to a cause”, “love and trust for a group” “emotional tie to a group with which a person identifies”. Tsuwa and Otsapa’s views conceived identity from the perspective of emotional disposition within the context of group differentiations, alienation and inclusion which is often considered critical in voting behaviour of a presidential election of a cleavage polity. For the purpose of contextual analysis for what identity signifies and represents in Nigeria heterogeneous character, the following definitions are useful:

- Identity is “people’s concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others” (Hogg and Abrams, 1988).
- “Identity is used to describe the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture” (Deng1995).
- “Identity” refers to the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities” (Jenkins1996).
- Identities are relatively stable, role specific understandings and expectations about self” (Wendt1992 cited in Fearon, 1999).

From the application of these scholarly definitions, Nigeria’s ethno-religious identities therefore reflect in the cleavage background of its regions and people. In this sense, the concept of ethnic identity illuminates as Osaghae (1984) described ethnic identification “as not only do the members of an ethnic group see themselves as one but are seen as being so by others outside the group” (cited in Onwuanabile, 2015). The Igbo ethnic group are presently found across the globe. Yet they have continued to maintain their Igbo identity and have carried with them some obvious Igbo traditional vestiges to their host communities to an overwhelming extent that we now hear of *Eze ndi Igbo na China*, *Eze ndi Igbo na Lagos*. In other words, they have maintained their identity as *Ndi Igbo* even in Diaspora. Ethnic identity also involves in addition to subjective self-consciousness, a claim to status and recognition either superior group or as a group at least equal to other groups. Ethnic identification therefore connotes a conscious identification with a people, who have shared cultural heritage, tradition, values and norms, in seeking, protecting and advancing the interest of a identified people (group) within a larger society (Onwuanabile, 2015). Similarly, Omilusi, (2015), and Seul (1999), conceived religious identity as a term, that form a key influence on an individual’s perspectives of themselves and the world. It is therefore argued that religion provides the strongest kind of identity for individuals and groups. Religious identity begins with the inculcation and communication of religious norms and values to individuals through texts and practices; and because of their appeal to the transcendent they have a greater influence on people than other kinds of influence. Religious identity is a specific type of identity formation. Particularly, it is the sense of group membership to a religion and importance of this group membership as it pertains to one’s self-concept.

Emphatically, ethnic and religious identities find symbolic expression in ethno-religious identity. The organic unity of ethnicity and religion is embellished in the term, “ethno-religious”. In this regard, ethno-religious refers to ethnic group which are aside from ethnicity but unified by a common religion. Usually in these cases, religion is closely tied to a particular ethnic group and those who belong to an ethno-religious group usually define their identity through both their ethnic background and through religion (not always the case, but it often is). Examples of ethno-religious groups are Jews. Jews have a common religion (Judaism) and being a Jew is either through the mother or through conversion of Judaism (Novakov, 2017). Subsequently, the term, ethno-religious is used to explain how societies are divided. People belong to one ethnic group are often different from those who belong to another. People who follow one religion are often different from those who follow another. Therefore, political scientists, social scientists and historians look at divisions and they don’t want to limit themselves to only ethnic or only religious differences, they use the term, ethno-religious to show that they are applying both classification at same time (Wittenberg, 2017). Similarly, ethno-religious is a mixture of ethnicity and religion in the lives and expression of a people (Terry, 2015).

Significantly, the affinity between ethnicity and religion reflect enormously in Nigeria’s polity underscoring the buzz/hyper word of “ethno-religious”. It further illuminates the heterogeneous cleavages and centrifugal conditions in Nigeria-nation state. Thus, ethnic nationalities in Nigeria are known by certain religious identities. For instance, Igbos in the Eastern part of the country are predominantly Christians, Hausa-Fulani of the North are dominantly Muslims and Yoruba of the West were mixture of Muslims and Christians (Nonli, 2008, Okpanachi, 2010; and Ade, 2014). As Paden (2011) remarked that the ethno-religious realities of Nigeria are at the heart of its contemporary search for unity. Robert, *et al* (2011) also establish the adverse effects of the religion on the ethnicity with reference to Nigeria state:

There is, then an overlap of religion on ethnicity that intensifies the north-south cultural split, and the case can be made that the most sensitive issues now involve religion rather than ethnicity. These overlapping cleavage are more dangerous because they accentuate regional differences. Nigeria leads a special problem in this regard in that the Christian – Muslim split is near fifty-fifty.

Although, the general presumption is that ethnic identity is a more prominent and stable source of identity in Nigeria. Some researchers have illustrated that religion was more significant than ethnicity as a source of identity and conflict in Nigeria (Ruby and Shah, 2007, Pew Research Center, 2010, Green, 2011). In the North, religious identity is more pronounced than ethnic identity and only serves to stimulate ethnicity (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005). In contrary, among the three dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Yoruba are more likely to identify themselves with their ethnic group than the Northern Hausa-Fulani (Lewis and Bratton, 2000:20). The submissions by these scholars undoubtedly provide an incisive insight on the character of ethno-religious identity. However, the influence ethno-religious identity in the voting behaviour of Nigeria voters in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections form the thrust of this research. However, reference to ethno-religious identities in Nigeria invariably illuminates the concepts of *region* and *regionalism*.

Region as a multidisciplinary term is immersed with varied perspectives in social science scholarship. In this study, region is operationalized as *geo-political zone*. Nigeria as a federation is made up of six geo-political zones or regions which are north-central, north-east, north-west, south-south, south-east and south-west. The 36 states and 774 local councils are clustered unequally in these regions or geo-political zones. The imbalance in the distribution of states and local councils across these regions lent credence to the vehemence of identity consciousness embellishing in *regionalism*. The concept of regionalism is depleted with polemical interpretations. Hence, there are conceptualizations of regionalism in the contexts of international political relations, international political economic relations, geo-politics in continental affairs and federation discourse. In this study, regionalism is operationalized as *consciousness of regional identity, interest and expectations*. It is also contextualized as sense of regional consciousness (of identity, interest and expectation) reflective in attitude and action in relations and competitions. Furthermore, there is a significant affinity between regional identification and ethno-religious inclinations with reference to what is described in the context of this study as *homogeneous ethnic-religious regions* (south-east region of predominant *Igbo-Christians*, north-west of predominant *Hausa and Fulani Muslims*); *heterogeneous ethnic-religious region* (like north-central of predominant ethnic minorities of mixed religious identities); *homogeneous ethnic region in mixed religious inclinations* (south-west of predominant *Yoruba Christian and Muslim population*); *heterogeneous ethnic region in homogeneous religious inclination* (south-south of predominant ethnic minorities of *Christian faith*) and *semi-heterogeneous ethnic region in homogeneous religious inclination* (north-east of predominant *Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri of Islamic faith*). The pertinent question is, *whether regional interest correlate with ethno-religious expectations?* This assertion has remained a polemical discourse among scholars of social sciences. However, the fundamentals are obvious under the following:

- Analysis of ethno-religious identities in Nigeria is inadequate without reference to the regions.
- Sense of regionalism can be demonstrated along ethno-religious sentiment. However, both can independently occur or felt in isolation of each other.

In this study, attempt is made to examine the functionality of ethno-religious identity in voting behaviour across the six geo-political zones or regions in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. In addition, to establish significance or insignificance of regionalism as intervening or correlating variable amid the influence of ethno-religious sentiment in voting behaviour of these successive presidential elections. As clearly illustrated, voting is imperative in every election and democracies. Also, voting behaviour is a concept of conceptual importance in establishing the rationale, content and outcome of voter preference or voting choice in an election process. As earlier noted, (Ranney, 1971 cited in Oluwatula and Arogundade, 2010) remarked that voting behaviour is perceived as having two dominant categories, the voter's preference and voter turnout. The preference includes the degree of approval and disapproval a voter has for a political party and the candidate vying for political offices while voter turnout is actually the percentage of people at the poll.

In similar sense as earlier noted, Mahmud (2015), remarked that voting behaviour refers to how the electorate vote and what determines the way they vote. Furthermore, the analysis of voting choice as a subset of voting behaviour invariably focused on the factors or conditions determining why people vote in a particular manner (pattern) and how they arrive at decision they make. In this vein, Sociologists tends to look to the socio-economic determinants of support for political parties, observing the correlation between class, occupation, ethnicity, sex, age and votes. Political scientists have concentrated on the influence of political factors such as electoral campaign issues, political programmes and the popularity of party leaders on political behavior (Jawah, 2013 and Olaniyi, 2004). Arguably, this behavioural trait according to Olayode (2015) is likely to be influenced by not merely the impact of one cleavage on vote or choices e.g. the strength of class or religious or ethnic voting or whichever is the strongest of them but rather the combined impact of all persistent divisions in the electorate that can be expected to influence the pattern of voting. In a specific sense, voting behaviour is operationally measured in voter turnout and candidate choice. Voting behaviour is the study of voter preference, how many citizens will turn out to vote etc (Gotfridus, 2018; Biereenu-Nnabugwu and Obiora, 2014).

In a more explicit sense, Gotfridus (2018) noted that the study of voting behaviour identifies that voters choose candidates on the basis of one or more of the following considerations which are geopolitical characteristics, candidate figureship, and emotional relationship that are the primary determinants of candidate choice. And two another factors, namely political platform and party identification, appear to be the characteristics that closely relate to the voting behavior. Again, the study of voting behaviour focuses on three questions: (1) how many people participate to vote? (2) which candidate does a voter vote for? (3) why does a voter vote for that candidate? To answer these questions, then the study of voting behaviour, therefore, aims to describe the voter turnout and candidate choice and to identify the determinants of voting behaviour. However, these scholars failed to explicate more extensively the most influential condition or conditions to explain voting behaviour and the context of such pattern of occurrences and recurrence. To this end, voting behaviour is a function of myriad of intervening and interfacing variables that influence preference between competing candidates and political parties. And, these factors have over the years and decades stimulated scientific research on the rationale, development and analysis of voting behaviour among scholars of political science.

Voting behaviour is defined as the orientation, attitude and preference of the electorate for candidates and political parties. Hence, voting behaviour is the extent of awareness, participation and choice of a voter in an election. In a more technical sense, voting behaviour is measured by voter turnout and voting choice influenced by factors. Thus, voter turnout is described as voting participation while voting choice or candidate choice is also described as voter preference between candidates or political parties. Hence, voter turnout and voting choice are indicators of voting behaviour for purpose of measurability. And, voter turnout is also contextualized as *voter enthusiasm* and voting choice is further contextualized as *candidate choice*. Basically, the study of voting behaviour focus three pertinent issues:

a. The number of voters who turned out to vote or participate in an election. In a specific sense, a question that is often asked is, “*how many people participate to vote*”? In other words, voter turnout is measured in the total number of votes cast (valid and invalid) from the number of registered voters in a polling unit. Hence, the *concept of low or high voter turnout* is determined from the percentage of voters who turned out to vote from the number of registered voters in a polling unit. Also, scholars have over the decades to the recent time continue to research and identify factors influencing low or high voter turnout in elections. In other words, this study attempt to find out the significance or insignificance of ethno-religious identity in voter turnout as illustrated in percentages across regions of ethno-religious inclinations in the 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections.

b. Voting choice, voter preference or candidate choice. In a specific sense, a question that is often asked is, “*which candidate or political party does a voter vote for*”? In other words, the number of votes polled by a candidate or political party in an election represents the voting choices or voter preference. Hence, the statistics of votes is further enunciated in parliamentary seats, states, regions won or lost by candidates or political parties which evince and define voting choice or candidate choice. Significantly, spatial distribution of votes (secured by candidate or political party) as illustrated in parliamentary seats and across regions (geography of electoral preferences) is obviously described as *voting pattern*. Thus, voting pattern is a reflection of voting choices or candidate choice of the electorate. In other words, this study attempt to illustrate in Tables votes secured by presidential candidates of Peoples Democratic Party, PDP, Congress for Progressive Change, CPC, Action Congress of Nigeria ACN and All Nigeria Peoples Party, ANPP in April 2011 election; and, presidential candidates of Peoples Democratic Party, PDP and All Progressive Congress, APC in March and February 2015 and 2019 elections respectively across states and regions of the federation to provide insight on voting choices of Nigerians.

c. Reasons for voting choice or candidate choice. In a specific sense, a question that is often asked is, “*why does a voter vote for that candidate*”? In other words, voting choice, voter preference, vote or candidate choice is a function of many factors. These factors are often psychological, sociological, political and economical in nature and occurrences amid other variables. Hence, there are many factors determining voter preference or voting choice for a candidate in an election. Scholars of voting behaviour over the decades observed that voting choice or candidate choice of the electorate is often a mixture of many variables (candidate personality, party-identification, religion, race and ethnicity, issues advocated, etc) where one or two interfacing variable exert predominant influence in a voter decision or preference. In other words, this study examines the significance or insignificance of interfacing variable of ethno-religious identity in voting behaviour of Nigeria voters in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections.

In a nutshell, the researcher examines the significance of ethno-religion identity amid other factors such as personality of the candidate, sense of regionalism or regional inclination, party identification in voting behaviour of Nigerians in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research design presents the framework of the study in a coherent and logical sequence. The design of this study is exploratory research design. The exploratory research design explains why things or phenomenon occur, and is conducted to build theories and predict future similar behaviour or events as they occur (Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2022). The adoption of the exploratory research design is premised on the fact that the study of ethno-religious identity and voting behaviour

of Nigerians in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria is exploratory in attempt to identify and establish significant variables expedient to analyze and predict voter turnout and voting choices of Nigerians in a presidential election. The study area is Nigeria. An area of 923, 769 square Kilometers made up of 909, (890 square kilometers of land and 13,879 square kilometers of water area) located in West Africa on the Gulf of Guinea (Report of National Bureau of Statistics, 2012). A Federation of 36 states, FCT and 774 local government areas clustered in six Geo-Political Zones. Nigeria is African largest democracy with a projected population of 216, 783, 381 in 2022 (Report of Nigeria Population Commission, 2020). The country's presidential election holds every four years in 119, 973 polling unit of 8, 809 electoral wards in 36 states and FCT. Thus, the sample size of the Key Informants respondents was proportionally selected from the six Geo-Political Zones or regions (north-central, north-west, north-east, south-south, south-east and south-west) of the study area. The target population of the study is voters who participated and voted in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. This statistically illustrated in 39,469,484 which representing 53.7 percent from 73.5 million registered voters in 2011 presidential election (Report of Election Monitor, 2015 and Mahmud, 2015); 29,432,083 representing 43.65 percent from 68.8 million registered voters in 2015 presidential election (Report of Election Monitor, 2015 and Adewale, *et al*/2015) and 28,614,190 representing 35.66 percent from 84 million registered voters in 2019 presidential election (Report of Election Monitor, 2019). However, the importance of the sample size illuminate below.

The sample size of Key Informant participants were 36 purposively selected on the premise of knowledgeability and representativeness to provide vital information and views on the significance or insignificance of ethno-religious identity in the voter environments of 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. Suffice to state that Key Informants are not selected through random sampling rather on purposive sampling technique because their number are small and indicative of valid views of general population (Krishna, 2009; Rob and Cherry, 2018 and Effiong, 2019). The 36 respondent Key Informants were reached on the ratio of 6 participants per state of the six states purposively selected from the six regions or geo-political zones. The following is a detail of the sample size of the Key Informants as stated below:

Table 1

The distribution of states and social differentiations of the key informants

| No | States Selected for KI Interview | Social Differentiations of the Key Informants |
|----|----------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Bauchi | Representatives of Ethnic Associations/organizations |
| 2 | Bayelsa | Representatives of Religious Associations |
| 3 | Enugu | Representatives of the frontline political parties |
| 4 | Kaduna | Media practitioners (PU reporters or correspondents) |
| 5 | Nasarrawa | Representatives of Election Observer Group |
| 6 | Ogun | Public Affairs Analysts |

Source: Field Study, 2023.

NB: It is therefore important to note that 36 Key Informants were distributed across the six states of the six Geo-Political Zones as representatives of identity platforms, partisan groups, media reporters who covered events of voter environments of these presidential elections across North/South divide, election observer groups and public affairs analysts.

In this study, the researchers adopted the following methods of data collection:

(a) Documentary source of data collection with reference to textbooks, journal articles, documentary field reports, government publications, editorials that discusses identity events of voter environments of 2011, 2015 and 2019. The importance of this secondary source of data collection undoubtedly generate a broad and insightful data for textual and cross sectional analysis of the effects of the ethno-religious identity in voter environments of these past successive presidential elections.

(b) Interview source with emphasis on Key Informant Interview (KII) which involves conducting personal interviews with knowledgeable persons.

A total of 34 personal Key Informant Interview was conducted and 2 Focus Group Discussion, FGD (of three persons each) interview was held. A pretested and validated interview guide/questionnaire was used to elicit valid data from these knowledgeable participants within and outside the study area. Furthermore, the interview guide/questionnaire was semi-structured and open-ended with emphasis on valid data not adequately covered by documentary source of data collection. The interview guide/questionnaire was administered through the following medium of interview and documentation:

- Face-to-Face interaction while responses were recorded and noted.
- Telephone communication with Key Informants where responses were recorded and noted.
- Social Media -WhatsApp chats/emails where responses were noted.
- Focus Group Discussion (of three participants) where responses were recorded and noted.

3.1 Ethno-Religious Identity and Voting Behaviour of Nigerians in 2011, 2015 and 2019 Presidential Elections

To underscore the significance or insignificance of ethno-religious identity in voting behaviour of Nigerians in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections, it is therefore pertinent to examine data presented for interpretation and analysis. First, Key Informant responses and statistical data are presented on voter turnout (as measurable component of voting behaviour).

1. Data Presentation on Voter Turnout of Nigerians in 2011, 2015 and 2019 Presidential Elections in Nigeria

i. KI Questions and Responses on Voter Turnout

KI Question:

To what extent was ethno-religious identity a decisive factor in turnout of voters in the 2011 presidential election?

A Summary of KI Responses:

To a significant extent amid other factors like party-identification, regional sentiment or regional inclination, personality charisma and traits of frontline candidates (*Buhari's honesty* and *Goodluck's meekness*), etc.

KI Question:

What were the factors of ethno-religious identity which motivated voter enthusiasm in the 2011 presidential election?

A Summary of KI Responses:

- a. The emergence of Goodluck Jonathan, an *Ijaw* and *Christian-brother* across the Niger as the candidate of a ruling political party.
- b. Presence of two popular *Fulani-Muslim* candidates, charismatic Muhammadu Buhari of CPC and Nuhu Ribadu, former EFCC boss of ACN where one or the other was anticipated as possible replacement of late Umaru Musa Yar Adua, *Fulani-Muslim* and former Nigeria leader.
- c. The candidature of Ibrahim Shekaru, *Hausa-Muslim* and former Executive Governor of Kano state, (one of the largest commercial cities in Nigeria). He was very popular and admired for his transformative governance in the ancient city, Kano.
- d. The personality of Tunde Bakare, a popular *Christian pastor* whose ethnic-religious identity was instructive to *Yoruba* voters and *Christian* population across ethnic nationalities of North-South divides.
- e. Sense of regional sentiment (north or south) and religious inclination to participate in an election either in support for a *Muslim-Northerner* candidate or *Christian-Southerner* candidate.
- d. Ethno-religious narratives of expectation like *Muslim-Fulani* president of Nigeria and *Christian* president of Nigeria.

KI Question :

To what extent was ethno-religious identity a decisive factor in turnout of voters in the 2015 presidential election?

A Summary of KI Responses:

To a very significant extent amid other factors like party-identification, sense of regionalism or regional inclination, issues of corruption, national security challenges, Buhari's incorruptible character, etc.

KI Question :

What were the factors of ethno-religious identity which motivated voter enthusiasm in the 2015 presidential election?

A Summary of KI Responses :

- a. The emergence of Goodluck Jonathan, an *Ijaw* and *Christian* brother across the Niger as consensus presidential candidate of Peoples Democratic Party amid fervent opposition from the *Muslim-North*.
- b. The candidature of Muhamadu Buhari, *Fulani-Muslim* on the platform of All Progressive Congress seen as alliance between the elite of the *Muslim-North* and elite of the religiously mixed *Yoruba* ethnic-nationality.
- c. The religious value of Professor Yemi Osinbajo, a district *pastor* of a popular Pentecostal church in Nigeria, *Redeemed Christian Church of God* and running mate of APC candidate, Buhari.
- d. Sense of regionalism (north or south) and religious inclination to participate in an election either in support for a *Muslim-Northerner* candidate or *Christian-Southerner* candidate.
- e. Widespread and frightening regional and ethno-religious campaign of hate and propaganda across the North-South divides not seen in the 2011 presidential election.
- f. Ethno-religious narratives of expectation like *Muslim-Fulani* president of Nigeria and continuation of a *Christian* president of Nigeria.

KI Question :

To what extent was ethno-religious identity a decisive factor in turnout of voters in the 2019 presidential election?

A Summary of KI Responses :

To a significant extent amid other factors like crisis of national economy, challenges of national security, Buhari's cult-followership, Atiku's message of restructuring, Kingsley Moghalu's oratory, charisma of Peter Obi, party-identification, sense of regionalism or regional inclination, etc.

KI Question :

What were the factors of ethno-religious identity which motivated voter enthusiasm in the 2019 presidential election?

A Summary of KI Responses :

- Buhari's charisma and admiration among millions of *Muslim-Fulani* and *Hausa* voters.
- Peter Obi's regional and ethnic value among millions of Nigeria voters of South-South and *Igbo* extraction.
- The ethnic- religious value of Professor Yemi Osinbajo among millions of Nigeria voters of *Yoruba* extraction and *Christian* population across North-South divides.
- Sense of regionalism to participate in support of either *Muslim-Fulani* north-west presidential candidate, Buhari or *Muslim-Fulani* north-east presidential candidate, Atiku.
- Ethno-religious narrative of expectation like *Muslim-Fulani* president of Nigeria.

As earlier noted, the 2011 presidential election held on 16th April witnessed a national voter turnout of 53.7 percent (39, 469, 484) from 73.5 million registered voters while the 2015 presidential election held on 28th March, had a national voter turnout of 43.65 percent (29, 432, 083) from 68.8 million registered voters and the 2019 presidential election held on 23rd February witnessed national voter turnout of 35.66 percent (28,614,190) from 84 million registered voters. These statistics of national voter turnouts were further broken down in regional percentages as explicated in the Table:

Table 2

Percentage of regional voter turnout in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria

| Geo-Political Zone | Percentage (%) of Voter Turnout in 2011 Presidential Election | Percentage (%) of Voter Turnout in 2015 Presidential Election | Percentage (%) of Voter Turnout in 2019 Presidential Election |
|--------------------|---|---|---|
| North-Central | 48.2% | 43.47 % | 36.95% |
| North-East | 54.2% | 45.22% | 42.48% |
| North-West | 54.5% | 55.1 % | 44.86 % |
| South-South | 76.3% | 58% | 29.23% |
| South-East | 66.9% | 41% | 24.5% |
| South West | 32.3% | 40.26 % | 32.65 % |

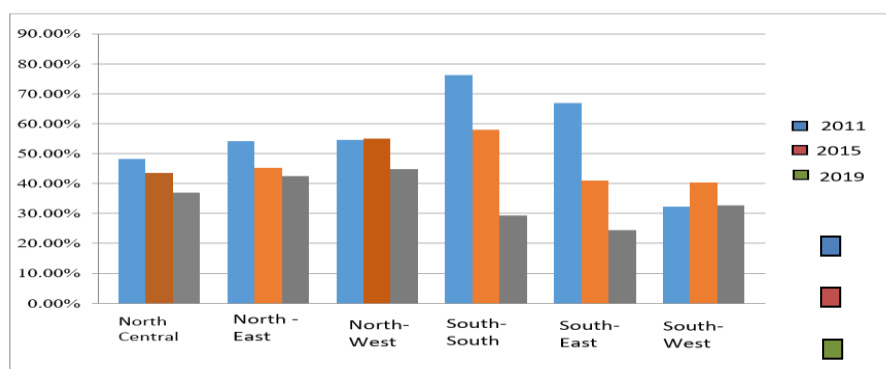
Source: Researcher's compilation from Report of Center for Public Policy Alternative (2015:2 &4) and Report of Election Monitor, (2019:21).

Table 4.2 in explicit manner presented percentages of regional voter turnout for interpretation and analysis to underscore significance or insignificance of ethno-religious identity in voter turnout (as measurable indicator of voting behaviour) in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections.

Data Interpretation and Analysis on Voter Turnout of Nigerians in 2011, 2015 and 2019 Presidential Elections

A summary of responses of Key Informant interview as presented obviously showed a significant extent of ethno-religious sentiment which resonate from the identities of frontline candidates and running mates (although in varied trend) influencing many Nigeria voters to participate in these presidential elections. Nevertheless, there were other issues or prevailing realities amid the influence of ethno-religious identities of frontline candidates which enthused many Nigeria voters to turnout and participate as revealed by Key Informant participants. Most importantly, there were symbolic realities and narratives that stimulate voter's avidness to participate in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections.

The data of Table 1.2 is further illustrated in the Figure 4.1 below for interpretation and analysis.

**Figure 1**

Regional voter turnout in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria

Source: Researcher's design from data of Table 4.3.

Figure 1 also illuminate percentages of voter turnout in regions of ethno-religious identities in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. The index of Figure 1.1 ostensibly showed downward trend in voter enthusiasm of Nigerians in recent presidential elections which is adverse to the country's electoral democracy and political development.

In a cross sectional analysis of the influence of ethno-religious identities of frontline candidates and running mates in voter turnout of the six regions made explicit in the responses of Key Informants, Table data and Figure illustrations, it is observed that in South-South region of ethnic minorities and predominantly *Christian* inclined, sense of regionalism (ie *South*), party identification and religion of frontline candidates are more influential while ethnicity is less significant in the avidness to participate in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. In the South-East region of *Igbo* nationality and predominantly *Christian* inclined, ethnic-religious identities of frontline candidates and running mates and party identification are viable variables of consideration to participate in these presidential elections. In the South-West of mixed religious inclinations, ethnicity or ethnic inclination of a frontline candidate or candidates elicit more consciousness among the *Yoruba* voters while party identification and religion played less significant roles in voter enthusiasm of these presidential elections. In the *Islamic* inclined North-West region of *Fulani* and *Hausa* nationalities, regional inclination (ie *North*) and religious identity of a frontline candidate or candidates are strong factors of influence among millions of *Arewa* voters to come out and participate in presidential elections while ethnicity and party identification played less roles as observed in 2011, 2015 and 2019. In the North-East of predominant *Islamic* inclination and region of *Fulani*, *Hausa*, *Kanuri*, *Chamba* and other tribes, regionalism or regional inclination (ie *North*) and religion of a frontline candidate or candidates are also conditions of influence beyond ethnicity and party identification in the drive to participate in presidential elections. Lastly in the North-Central region of ethnic minorities and mixed religious inclinations, regionalism regional inclination (ie *North*) and religion of a frontline candidate or candidates are very strong identity factors while ethnic consideration and party identification were less influential in the enthusiasm of Middle Belt voters to participate in presidential elections. Most importantly, there were underlying ethno-religious narratives earlier established which occasioned enthusiasm of many Nigeria voters across the divide to participate in these presidential elections.

In conclusive analysis, there is persistent decline in regional voter turnout which emanate from national voter apathy of 2011 and 2015 presidential elections as earlier noted. Remarkably, the national voter turnout in 2019 presidential election was the lowest in the recent history of national elections since 1999. It is also observed that none of the regions in the 2019 presidential election reached 50 percent in voter enthusiasm which may be attributed to certain identity factors already embellished and other conditions such as election thuggery and violence, inadequacy of polling logistics and falsification of election results, widespread discontent on governance failures, climate of terrorism and banditry, recessive economy, murky party politicking etc as highlighted by Key Informant Interviewees which had over the years entrenched sense of voter distrust and disillusionment among millions of Nigeria electors. Remarkably, regionalism viewed in this context as regional inclination to either *North* or *South* emerged as an intervening variable in the imperatives of ethno-religious identity in voter turnout as measurable component of voting behaviour. Beyond these identity considerations, it is pertinent to note that charisma of candidates, regional narrative, issues of national governance inclusion, security and economy are also factors influencing voter turnout in Nigeria presidential elections. To a great extent, ethno-religious identities of frontline candidates amid other factors played significant role in the regional voter turnout in these three successive presidential elections. In other words, many Nigeria voters are most often enthused to come out and participate in a presidential election that had frontline candidates and running mates who shared their ethno-religious background. Secondly, Key Informant responses and statistical data are presented on voting choice (as measurable component of voting behaviour) in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. First, it is therefore pertinent to examine trends of identity consciousness in 2011 presidential election as presented in Key Informant responses, Table data and Figure illustrations.

3.2 Data Presentation on Voting Choices of Nigerians in 2011 Presidential Election

ii. KI Questions and Responses on Voting Choices

K I Question:

To what extent was ethno-religious identity a crucial factor in the choice of the four frontline candidates in 2011 presidential election?

A Summary of KI Responses:

To a significant extent amid other factors like regional sentiments, candidate charisma/credibility, party-identification, government performance, etc. Many Nigeria voters voted for the frontline candidates because of their ethno-religious identities while other Nigeria voters also voted for these frontline candidates and running mates on basis of regional inclination, candidate personality, party identification, government performance, etc.

KI Question:

How did ethno-religious identity reflect on the voting choices of the six Geo-Political Zones?

A Summary of KI Responses:

a. The frontline candidates received varied number of votes across the regions of the federation. And, many Nigeria voters voted for these candidates on the premise of identity considerations and other factors.

b. In the South-West region, ethnic sentiments did not reflect on the landslide electoral victory of Goodluck Jonathan or in the votes polled by the other frontline candidates. Rather, regional sentiments, religion and candidate personality were observed as reasons many *Yoruba-Muslims and Christians* voted for Goodluck Jonathan.

c. In the South-East zone, regional inclination, religious factor and party identification were observed as reasons many *Igbo-Christian* voted for Goodluck Jonathan.

d. In the South-South zone, regional and ethnic-religious sentiments, and party identification were observed as reasons many *Ijaw, Abayon, Akoko-Edo, Eket, Efik, Ejagham, Itsekiri, Urhobo* voters of *Christian* inclination voted for Goodluck Jonathan.

e. In the North-West zone, regional and ethnic-religious sentiments were seen as reasons many *Fulani and Hausa* voters of Islamic inclination voted for Muhammadu Buhari.

f. In the North-East zone, regional and ethno-religious sentiments were observed as reasons many *Fulani, Hausa, Kanuri* of *Islamic and Christian* inclinations voted for Muhammadu Buhari. In addition, candidate personality, religion and party identification were also instructive in the electoral performance of Goodluck Jonathan.

g. In the North-Central region, candidate personality, religion, party identification and regional sentiments were seen as reasons many *Afo, Agatu Akweya-Yachi, Bariba, Bille, Ebira, Eggon, Fyame, Fulani, Hausa, Kanuri, Nupe* of Islamic and Christian inclinations voted for Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari. However, Goodluck Jonathan won the region.

Basically, the statistics of regional votes secured by frontline candidates and political parties are presented for interpretation and analysis to accentuate significance or insignificance of ethno-religious identity in voting choices of Nigerians in 2011 presidential election. This is presented in the Table below:

Table 3

Regional results of frontline candidates and political parties in 2011 presidential election in Nigeria

| Nigeria's 2011 Presidential Election Result in Geo-Political Zones and FCT by Frontline Candidates and Political Parties | | | | |
|--|----------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|
| Geo-Political Zone | Jonathan (PDP) | Buhari (CPC) | Ribadu (ACN) | Shekaru (ANPP) |
| South-West | 2, 786, 417 | 321, 609 | 1,369, 943 | 30, 906 |
| South-East | 4, 985, 246 | 20, 335 | 25, 517 | 20, 357 |
| South-South | 6, 118, 608 | 49, 978 | 144, 141 | 11, 026 |
| North-West | 3, 395, 724 | 6, 453,437 | 146,216 | 612,541 |
| North-East | 1, 832, 622 | 3,624,919 | 84, 273 | 198, 837 |
| North-Central | 3, 376, 570 | 1,744,575 | 309, 011 | 8, 35, 20 |

Source: Report of Nigeria's 2011 Presidential Elections (April 16) Results by States and Geo-Political Zones

Data Interpretations and Analysis on Voting Choices of Nigerians in 2011 Presidential Election

The electoral performance of the frontline candidates and political parties in April 2011 presidential election across the six regions of the federation is further illustrated below:

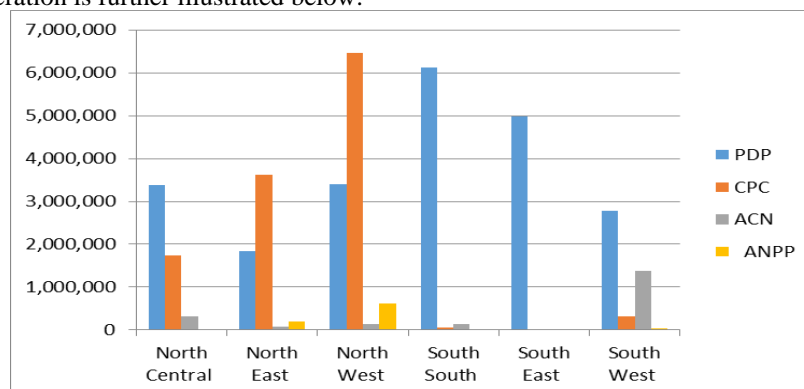


Figure 2

The regional voting pattern of 2011 presidential election in Nigeria

Source: Researcher's design from data of Table 3.

Figure 2 showed how votes were shared or secured by the four frontline political parties across the regions which inextricably illuminate the popularity of the four frontline candidates in regions of ethno-religious identities won or lost in 2011 presidential election. A close observation of voting choices of Nigerians in the three geo-political zones in the North indicated that regional and ethno-religious sentiments enormously influenced voter preference seen in the electoral victory of CPC Candidate, Muhammadu Buhari in North-West which is predominantly *Muslim* inclined *Hausa-Fulani*

ethnic nationality and *Muslim* inclined North-East of *Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri* and other ethnic nationalities while Goodluck Jonathan of PDP won North-Central in mixed religious ethnic minorities and FCT on the influence of religion, party identification and personality traits (with reference to humble background, humane nature and education status). In other words, the candidate of PDP won 7 states in the North and FCT while the candidate of CPC, Buhari won 12 states in the North and other two frontline candidates, Nuhu Ribadu and Mallam Ibrahim Shekaru failed to win any state in the North of the Federation. Emphatically, the failure of Muhammadu Buhari to win any state beyond the North ostensibly showed the imperatives of regional and ethno-religious sentiments in the voting choices of many Nigeria voters of mixed religious inclined *Yoruba*, and *Christian* inclined *Ndigbo* and South-South ethnic minorities like *Ibibio, Isoko, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo* etc. Furthermore, it is established that sense of regional inclination, ethno-religious sentiment and party identification played prominent roles in the regional voting choices of the electorate in Southern Nigeria for the overwhelming electoral victory of Goodluck Jonathan of PDP and failure of other candidates. In other words, the candidate of PDP won 16 states while Nuhu Ribadu of ACN won one state in the Southern regions of Nigeria federation as presented.

In reference to the overview of regional electoral performance, Goodluck Jonathan, PDP candidate won four geo-political zones (mixed religious inclined ethnic minorities of north-central, *Christian* inclined ethnic minorities of south-south, *Christian* inclined *Ndigbo* ethnic nationality of south-east and mixed religious inclined *Yoruba* ethnic nationality of south-west) while Buhari, CPC candidate won two geo-political zones (*Hausa-Fulani* north-west of *Islamic* inclination and north-east region of *Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri* and other tribes of *Islamic* inclination) as illustrated in Figure 1.2. In all, the PDP candidate, Goodluck Jonathan won 23 states (16 in the south and 7 in the north) and FCT while CPC candidate, Gen Muhammadu Buhari (Rtd) won only 12 states (all in the North) and the ACN candidate, Nuhu Ribadu won only one state (Osun) in the South-West. Conclusively, there is a significant correlation between ethno-religious identities of frontline candidates and voting choices of the Nigeria electorate as explicitly embellished in Key Informant interview, illustrations in Table 1.3 and Figure 1.2 and index interpretation and analysis. For instance, the impressive electoral performance of Goodluck Jonathan in *Christian* inclined south-south region of ethnic minorities and *Christian* inclined south-east region of *Ndigbo* and Buhari's electoral victory in *Islamic* inclined of north-west region of *Hausa-Fulani* ethnic nationality and *Islamic* inclined of north-east region of *Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri*, and other tribes, and failure to win any state in the south are indications to underscore imperatives of ethno-religious identities of the frontline candidates in voting choices of the Nigeria electorate in 2011 presidential elections. Furthermore, the voting choices of the *Muslim-Christian* inclined south-west region of *Yoruba* ethnic nationality and *Muslim-Christian* inclined Middle Belt region of ethnic minorities to a reasonable extent diminished the relevance of ethnic-identification but accentuate the importance of religious factor (perhaps on strengthen of *Christian* inclination) and personality traits of a frontline candidate with reference to the impressive electoral victory of Goodluck Jonathan in these zones. In other words, beside ethno-religious identity, there were intervened variables of regional sentiments, party identification, candidate personality traits and candidate charisma in the electoral performance of the frontline candidates in 2011 presidential election.

It is therefore pertinent to examine trends of identity consciousness of 2015 presidential election as presented in Key Informant responses, Table data and Figure illustrations.

3.3 Data Presentation on Voting Choices of Nigerians in 2015 Presidential Election

ii. KI Questions and Responses on Voting Choices

KI Question:

To what extent was ethno-religious identity a crucial factor in the choice of the two frontline candidates in 2015 presidential election?

A Summary of KI Responses :

To a very significant extent amid other factors like candidate charisma/credibility, regional sentiments, party identification, government performance, etc. Many Nigeria voters voted for the two frontline candidates and running mates on the basis of their ethno-religious identities and regional inclinations while other Nigeria voters also voted for these frontline candidates on basis of candidate personality, party identification, etc.

KI Question:

How did ethno-religious identity reflect on the voting choices of the six Geo-Political Zones?

A Summary of KI Responses :

- The two frontline candidates received varied number of votes across the regions of the federation. And, millions of Nigeria voters voted for these candidates on the premise of identity considerations and other factors.
- In the South-West zone, party identification, ethnic sentiment, religious inclination, candidate personality, narrative of federal government marginalization and PDP intra-party dissensions reflect on the landslide electoral victory of Muhammadu Buhari in *Yoruba* region of *Islamic* and *Christian* inclination.
- In the South-East zone, sense of regionalism, religious factor, party identification and governance inclusion are observed in the choices of many *Igbo-Christian* voters for Goodluck Jonathan.

d. In the South-South zone, regional inclination, ethnic-religious sentiments, party identification and governance inclusion were also observed as reasons many *Ijaw* and other ethnic minority voters of *Christian* inclination voted for Goodluck Jonathan.

e. In the North-West zone, regional and ethnic-religious sentiments, candidate charisma reflected on the landslide electoral victory of Muhammadu Buhari in *Hausa-Fulani region of Islamic inclination*.

f. In the North-East zone, regional and ethno-religious sentiments were observed in the choices of many *Fulani, Hausa, Kanuri Muslim* voters for Muhammadu Buhari. In addition, candidate personality, religion and party identification were instructive in the electoral performance of Goodluck Jonathan.

g. In the North-Central zone, candidate charisma, regional sentiments and religion played crucial role in Buhari's victory in the Middle-Belt region. In addition, candidate personality and religion were instructive in Goodluck Jonathan's electoral performance.

Furthermore, the statistics of the regional results are presented below:

Table 4

Regional results of frontline candidates and political parties in 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria

| Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election Result in Geo-Political Zones by Frontline Candidates and Political Parties | | |
|--|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Geo-Political Zone | Muhammadu Buhari (APC) | Goodluck Jonathan (PDP) |
| South-West | 2, 433, 201 | 1, 821, 416 |
| South-East | 198, 248 | 2, 464, 906 |
| South-South | 418, 590 | 4, 714, 725 |
| North-West | 7, 115, 199 | 1, 339, 709 |
| North-East | 2, 848, 678 | 796, 588 |
| North-Central | 2, 411, 031 | 1, 715, 818 |

Source: Report of Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election (March 28) Results by States and Geo-Political Zones.

Data Interpretations and Analysis on Voting Choices of Nigerians in 2015 Presidential Election

The electoral performance of the frontline candidates and political parties in March 2015 presidential election across the six regions of the federation is further illustrated below:

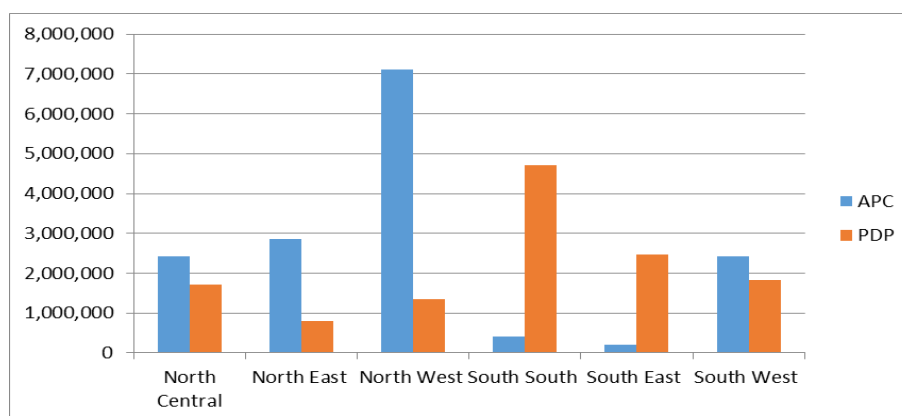


Figure: 3

The regional voting pattern of 2015 presidential election in Nigeria

Source: Researcher's design from data of Table 3.

Figure 1.3 showed how votes were shared or secured by the two frontline political parties across the regions which inextricably illuminate the popularity of the two frontline candidates in regions of ethno-religious identities won or lost in 2015 presidential election. A cursory view of the voting choices of Nigerians in the three geo-political zones in the North indicated that regional and ethno-religious sentiments and party identification enormously influenced voter preference in the electoral victory of Muhammadu Buhari, the presidential candidate of APC and failure of Goodluck Jonathan, the candidate of PDP. The APC candidate won 16 states while PDP candidate won 3 states in the North and FCT. Furthermore, the *Yoruba, Ndigbo* and South-South ethnic nationalities in the three geo-political zones in the South in different scale and dimensions presented interesting scenarios. The decisive electoral victory of APC candidate, Buhari in the mixed religious inclined South-West of *Yoruba* ethnic nationality was unprecedented and remarkably historic from 2003 when he began to contest for the office of the president. To this extent, APC party identification, and, sense of regionalism and ethnic consciousness which resonate from the identity background of APC presidential running mate were decisive in Buhari's electoral performance in *Egbe Omo Odudawa* region. Again, the superlative electoral performance of Muhammadu Buhari

in the South-West region is an indication of two critical factors. First, the alliance between political elite of *Yoruba* ethnic nationality and political elite of *Hausa-Fulani* nationality to wrestle power from the Christian inclined Southern minorities and Igbo ethnic group. Secondly, the partisan inter-regional alliance between the mixed religious inclined *Yoruba* and *Muslim* inclined *Hausa-Fulani* was further reinforced and facilitated through the platform of All Progressive Congress, APC in ensuring the historic electoral victory of an opponent candidate first ever in Nigeria history of presidential elections. Interestingly, regional and ethno-religious sentiments, and party identification sustained voting pattern of South-South and South-East in the electoral victory of Goodluck Jonathan of PDP. In other words, the candidate of PDP won 12 states and lost 5 states to the candidate of APC in the South.

In reference to the regional electoral performance, Muhammadu Buhari, won four geo-political zones (*Muslim-Christian* inclined ethnic minorities of north-central, *Islamic* inclined *Hausa-Fulani* of north-west, *Islamic* inclined *Fulani*, *Hausa*, *Kanuri* of north-east and mixed religious inclined *Yoruba* of south-west) while Goodluck Jonathan won two geo-political zones (*Christian* inclined ethnic minorities of south-south and *Christian* inclined *Ndigbo* of south-east). In all, the APC candidate, Buhari won 21 states (16 states in the North and 5 states in the South while PDP candidate, Goodluck Jonathan won 15 states and FCT (12 states in the South and 3 states in the North). Conclusively, there is a high significant correlation between ethno-religious identities of frontline candidates and voting choices of the Nigeria electorate as explicitly embellished in Key Informant interview, illustrated in Table 1.4 and Figure 1.3 and index interpretation and analysis. For instance, the impressive electoral performance of Goodluck Jonathan in *Christian* inclined south-south region of ethnic minorities and *Christian* inclined south-east region of *Ndigbo* and Buhari's electoral victory in *Islamic* inclined north-west region of *Hausa-Fulani* ethnic nationality, *Islamic* inclined north-east region of *Hausa*, *Fulani*, *Kanuri*, and other tribes, *Muslim-Christian* inclined south-west region of *Yoruba* ethnic nationality and *Muslim-Christian* inclined Middle Belt region of ethnic minorities are viable indicators of ethno-religious voting where identities of the frontline candidate and running mate were reflectively relevant occasioned with vehemence of regional inclination and narrative sentiments. Furthermore, intervened variables of party identification, candidate personality traits and candidate charisma were also instructive in the electoral performance of the two frontline candidates in 2015 presidential election. To this end, the 2015 presidential election displayed a very significant ethno-religious voting far from what was observed and seen in the 2011 presidential election.

It is therefore pertinent to examine trends of identity consciousness in 2019 presidential election as presented in Key Informant responses, Table data and Figure illustrations.

3.4 Data Presentation on Voting Choices of Nigerians in 2019 Presidential Election

iii. KI Questions and Responses on Voting Choices

KI Question:

To what extent was ethno-religious identity a crucial factor in the choice of the two frontline candidates in 2019 presidential election?

A Summary of KI Responses:

To a significant extent amid other factors like regional sentiments, candidate charisma/credibility, party identification, etc. Many Nigeria voters voted for the two frontline candidates because of the ethno-religious identities of the running mates while other Nigeria voters also voted for these frontline candidates on the basis of regional sentiments, candidate charisma, party identification, government performance, etc.

KI Question:

How did ethno-religious identity reflect on the voting choices of the six Geo-Political Zones?

A Summary of KI Responses:

- The two frontline candidates received varied number of votes across the regions of North-South divides. And, millions of Nigeria voters voted for these candidates on the premise of identity considerations and other factors.
- In the South-West region, ethnic sentiment and religious factor reflect on the electoral victory of Muhammadu Buhari. Subsequently, narrative of non-inclusion in federal government and public disillusionment on the abysmal failures of *Fulani*-led federal government were also instructive in the electoral performance of PDP candidate, Atiku Abubakar.
- In the South-East zone, ethno-religious sentiments, party identification, deliberate exclusion of the zone from the dividends of national governance and *Fulani* herdsman menace are observed in the voting choices of many *Igbo-Christian* voters for PDP candidate, Atiku.
- In the South-South region, narrative of the non-inclusion in the dividends of Federal government, party identification, regional inclination and ethno-religious sentiment were visible in the voting choices of *Christian*-ethnic minorities for PDP candidate.
- In the North-West zone, candidate charisma and candidate personality traits reflected in the landslide electoral victory of Muhammadu Buhari in the *Hausa-Fulani* region of *Islamic* inclination.
- In the North-East zone, candidate charisma and candidate personality traits were observed in the popular choices of many *Fulani*, *Hausa*, *Kanuri Muslim* voters for Muhammadu Buhari. In addition, party identification was instructive in the electoral performance of Atiku Abubakar.

g. In the North-Central zone, candidate personality, candidate charisma, party identification and religion were instructive in the voting choices of ethnic minorities of *Islamic* and *Christian* inclinations for the APC candidate, Buhari.

Furthermore, the statistics of the regional results are presented below:

Table 5

Regional results of frontline candidates and political parties in 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria

| Nigeria's 2019 Presidential Election Result in Geo-Political Zones by Frontline Candidates and Political Parties | | |
|--|------------------------|----------------------|
| Geo-Political Zone | Muhammadu Buhari (APC) | Atiku Abubakar (PDP) |
| South-West | 2, 036, 450 | 1, 776, 670 |
| South-East | 501, 769 | 1, 693, 485 |
| South-South | 1, 051, 395 | 2, 233, 132 |
| North-West | 5, 995, 651 | 2, 580, 465 |
| North-East | 3, 238, 783 | 1, 255, 357 |
| North-Central | 2, 465, 599 | 2, 023, 769 |

Source: Report of Nigeria's 2019 Presidential Election (February 23) Results by States and Geo-Political Zone.

Data Interpretations and Analysis on Voting Choices of Nigerians in 2019 Presidential Election

The electoral performance of the two frontline candidates and political parties in February 2019 presidential election across the six regions of the federation is illustrated below:

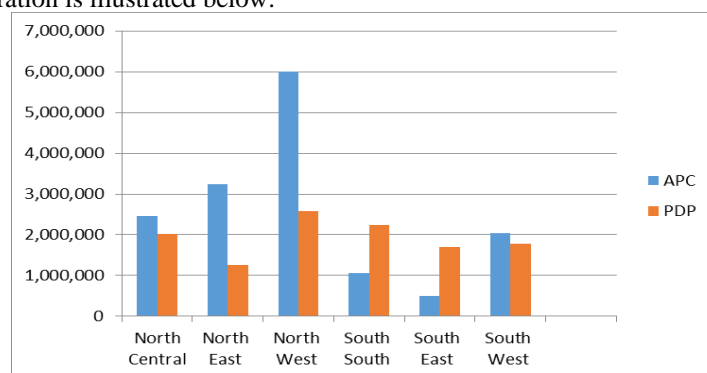


Figure 4

The regional voting pattern of 2019 presidential election in Nigeria

Source: Researcher's design from data of Table 4.

Figure 4 showed how votes were shared or secured by the two frontline political parties across the regions which inextricably illuminate the popularity of the two frontline candidates in regions of ethno-religious identities won or lost in 2019 presidential election.

A close observation of the voting choices of Nigerians in the three geo-political zones in the North revealed that candidate personality traits, candidate charisma and party identification played enormous roles in the electoral performance of APC and PDP frontline candidates to the insignificance of identity considerations (regionalism and ethno-religious inclination). In reference to personality trait and political charisma, Buhari has two popular names in the North, *Mai Mutuchi* (integrity) and *Mai Gaskiya* (as it is...) symbolic to his personality. He is seen as honest and incorruptible, and still enjoyed impressive cult followership among millions of Nigerians of Arewa extraction, and failures of his administration were often blamed on persons around him. Again, the marginal dominance status (North-Central and North-East) and dominance status (North-West) of APC party identification were among the edge to the incumbent president and APC candidate against Atiku, the candidate of PDP. In the North, Buhari won 15 states while Atiku won 4 states and FCT.

Furthermore, the voting choices of the mixed religious *Yoruba*, *Christian* inclined *Ndigbo* and *Christian* inclined ethnic minorities of three geo-political zones in the South undoubtedly underscored the ethno-religious identity value of running mates in Nigeria presidential elections. Hence, the regional and ethno-religious identity value of Peter Obi amid other factors, running mate of PDP presidential candidate was visibly significant to sustain regional voting pattern of the two regions, *Christian* ethnic minorities of South-South and *Christian* inclined *Ndigbo* of South-East as illustrated in Figure 1.4. This is quite remarkable. However, the regional and ethno-religious identity value of APC running mate, Prof. Yemi Osinbajo failed to spring the same trend and pattern (as seen in South-South and South-East) in mixed religious inclined South-West region of *Yoruba* ethnic nationality. In the South, Atiku won 13 states and Buhari won 4 states.

In reference to the regional electoral performance, Muhammadu Buhari won four geo-political zones (mixed religious inclined ethnic minorities of north-central, *Muslim* inclined *Hausa*, *Fulani*, *Kanuri* of north-east, *Muslim* inclined *Hausa*-

Fulani of north-west and mixed religious *Yoruba* of south-west) while Atiku Abubakar won two geo-political zones (*Christian* inclined ethnic minorities of south-south and *Christian*-inclined *Ndigbo* of south-east) as presented in Figure 1.4. In all, the APC candidate, Buhari won 19 states (15 states in the North and 4 states in the South) while PDP candidate, Atiku Abubakar won 17 states and FCT (4 states in the North and 13 states in the South).

Conclusively, there is a significant correlation between ethno-religious identities of frontline presidential running mates and voting choices of the Nigeria electorate particularly in the South as explicitly embellished in Key Informant interview, illustrated in Table 1.4 and Figure 1.4 and index interpretation and analysis. For instance, the impressive electoral performance of PDP candidate, Atiku Abubakar, a *Fulani-Muslim* in *Christian* inclined south-south region of ethnic minorities and *Christian* inclined south-east region of *Ndigbo* underscored imperatives of ethno-religious identity of Peter Obi as a running mate amid party-identification and other influencing variables. Again, intervened variables of candidate personality traits and candidate charisma were instructive in the electoral performance of these two frontline candidates particularly in the North. It is therefore instructive to note that the 2019 presidential election displayed low euphoria for ethno-religious identity consciousness in voter preferences of Nigerians far from what was observed and seen in 2015 presidential election.

In final analysis, the orientation of voting choices across regions of the federation expressed peculiarities and dynamics in Nigeria recent presidential elections. This indication therefore underlined different scale and intensity of variable of ethno-religious sentiments in voting choices of the Nigeria voters in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections respectively. In the South, as earlier noted, ethno-religious sentiment and party identification remained consistent, influential and significant in the voting choices of Nigeria voters of *Christian* inclined South-South and South-East regions. Hence, ethno-religious background of frontline presidential candidate or frontline presidential running mate elicits enormous votes from many Nigeria voters of *Christian* inclined *Igbo* ethnic nationality and predominantly *Christian* inclined ethnic minorities of *Anang*, *Andoni*, *Adim*, *Adun*, *Bahumono*, *Bekwarra*, *Bette*, *Boki*, *Ibibio*, *Isoko*, *Ijaw*, *Isekiri* (*Itsekiri*) *Urhobo*, *Ukwani*, etc in these two regions while regional sentiment is less significant. In the South-West region, ethnic sentiment as earlier noted is significantly high in propensity of voting choices of *Yoruba* electors to the value of regional inclination, religion and party-identification. Thus, the ethnic identity of a frontline presidential candidate or running mate elicits reasonable scale of voting choices to the less significance of regional background, religious inclinations and party-identification of the contesting frontline candidate or running mate. However, this region conventionally spring puzzling scenarios as earlier indicated which calls for more intensive research and study in the dynamics of voting behaviour of *Yoruba* voters in Nigeria presidential elections.

In the North, regional background, *north* and religious inclination, *Islam* elicits enormous voting choices among millions of the Nigeria electorate of predominantly *Muslim* inclined North-West region of *Hausa-Fulani* ethnic nationalities where ethnic considerations and party identification play less significant roles. It is important to note that Buhari despite change in party affiliations (from CPC to APC) had consistently won the region in three successive presidential elections in 2011, 2015 and 2019 respectively. Also, beyond the identity variables, Buhari's personality traits and charisma remarkably sustained the voting pattern of the spring region, *North-West* in three presidential election cycles in Nigeria. This is quite remarkable. In the predominantly *Muslim* inclined North-East of *Hausa*, *Fulani*, *Kanuri*, *Batta*, *Baya*, *Bilei*, *Bille*, *Botlere*, *Bura*, *Bwatiye*, *Bwazza*, *Chamba*, *Chama* (*Chamawa Fitilai*), *Chamo*, *Dadiya*, *Daza Gengle*, *Gornun* and other tribes, sense of regionalism or regional inclination and religion remained influential and instructive beyond ethnic factor and party identification in voting choices of regional voters. It is also important to reveal that Buhari, Goodluck and Atiku have not won the region in landslide manner like North-West, South-South and South-East. It is also important to note that Taraba (ethnic heterogeneous and mixed religious inclined state under PDP government) has consistently voted for candidates of Peoples Democratic Party, PDP in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. This is quite remarkable. In the religious mixed inclined North-Central region of ethnic minorities such as *Agatu*, *Akye*, *Alago*, *Baruba*, *Bassa*, *Baushi*, *Boko*, *Buduma*, *Chokobo*, *Doemak* (*Dumuk*), *Eggon*, *Fyam* (*Fyem*), *Fyer* (*Fer*), *Geruma* (*Gerumawa*), *Ganaganda*, *Gwandara*, *Idoma*, *Igede*, *Jukun*, *Nyifon*, *Tiv*, etc, sense of regional inclination and religion have significantly remained potent in the regional voting choices while ethnic considerations and party identification are less significant. In other words, millions of voters of the Northern minority region are more passionate for the regional background and religious inclination of frontline presidential candidate and running mate. Hence, it is pertinent to note that *Christian* churches in states and FCT of Middle-Belt region represents the 'Center Spread' of *Christianity* in the entire north. And, the vehemence of this reality is conventionally demonstrated in politics of presidential elections in Nigeria. It is also revealing to note that Plateau and FCT inspite of party affiliations (from PDP to APC) have consistently voted for candidates of Peoples Democratic Party, PDP in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. This is quite remarkable.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusive sense, the findings of this discourse concludes that millions of Nigeria voters across North-South divide were enthused to come out and vote for frontline candidates and running mates who shared their ethno-religious identities amid other influencing factors as observed in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. Hence, voter enthusiasm (voter turnout) and voting choice as revealed in these successive presidential polls varies across regions as illustrated in Tables

and Figures. Most importantly, sentiment of ethno-religious identity occurred in significant correlation with intervened identity variable (regional inclination) and party identification to inform voter turnout and voting choices across the regions in these presidential elections.

Ethno-religious voting is not strange....*it is not an absurdity when Jibril from Sokoto state voted for Fulani-Muslim candidate in a presidential election or Emeka from Enugu state voted for Igbo-Christian candidate in a presidential election.* This is because voter enthusiasm and voting choice is conventionally replete with emotions which often stem from identity background of candidate and identity narratives revolving around candidacies. Undoubtedly, ethno-religious identities of candidates often elicit emotions and sensationalism among Nigeria voters in a presidential election....This is not strange.

However, there is sense of nationhood, *when Mohammed, an Hausa-Muslim presidential candidate from Kano won overwhelmingly in South-South region of predominant Christian inclination in a presidential election or Bassey Asuquo, a Southern-Christian candidate displayed impressive electoral performance in states of Islamic region of North-East in a presidential election.* When regional voters vote for candidate (from another region and ethno-religious background) on the conviction that he or she has values to offer for national development then there is sense of nationhood which reduces tension surrounding identity consciousness for regional assertiveness in a presidential election.

Nigerians beyond primordial sentiments should therefore search for credible pan-Nigerian candidate in a presidential election. Pan-Nigerian candidate with knowledge of national plights, expectations and plausible solutions for nation-building and development to be voted for in a presidential election. No legislation or law enforcement can entrench this measure or value except through *national rebirth advocacy* championed by a reformed National Orientation Agency and inter-ethnic and inter-faith councils of Nigeria.

5. REFERENCES

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