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ETHNO-RELIGIOUS VOTING IN NIGERIA: INTERROGATING VOTING PATTERN IN THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Abstract

This article analyses voting pattern in Nigeria's 2019 presidential election. The main objective is to establish a continuity or change in ethnic, regional and religious voting in Nigeria's elections. The paper undertakes a historical approach to examine voting patterns in the past elections as a background to the examination of the 2019 presidential election. It was discovered that ethnic, regional and religious sentiments were still major factors that shaped voting choice in the election.

Keywords: Presidential election; voting pattern; ethno-regional identity; religious identity

Introduction

In Nigeria, politics is characterised by a fierce struggle among ethnic, religious and sometimes, regional groups. Ethnic and religious identities are particularly important to the political elite's calculations in who gets what elective position and this is why politicians are always quick to use these primordial sentiments for mobilisation during elections. This phenomenon explains why the influence of ethno-religious sentiments on voting patterns cannot be ignored in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. Many analysts had expected that the issue of ethnicity and religion would not be salient in the presidential election in 2019 given that the candidates of the two major political parties, Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressive Congress (APC) and Abubakar Atiku of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) have identical ethno-religious background. Surprisingly, this was not the case.

Given the above discussion, the aim of this article is to interrogate the salience of ethno-religious identity in the voting pattern of the 2019 presidential election with a view to establishing the continuity or otherwise of ethno-religious voting in Nigeria. In order to achieve this, we undertake a historical review of voting pattern in the country since independence in 1960.

Nigeria as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country

It would be difficult to achieve our aim without some understanding of the ethnic, regional and religious character of the Nigerian society. Nigeria is one of the most diverse countries in the world with about 350 ethno-linguistic groups. However, the three largest groups—the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba—which are concentrated in the northern, western and eastern parts of the country remain dominant and see themselves as constituting the tripod upon which the country stands. They see the minority ethnic groups as resources in their quest to capture power at the centre. Nigeria is not only multi-ethnic; it is also multi-religious, although Christianity and Islam are the main religions. Contrary to the perception of some analysts, Nigeria’s population is not evenly divided between Christians and Muslims as there exists a tiny minority who practise ‘indigenous/traditional’ religions and those who practise none (Babalola, 2019: 50). In Nigeria, religious identity overlaps not only with ethnic identity but also with regional identity.

Although, Nigeria is a 36-state federation but political issues are usually analysed within the context of the six geopolitical zones/regions – north-central; north-east; north-west; south-east; south-west; and the south-south (also referred to as the Niger Delta region). The north-east and north-west are populated mainly by the Hausa-Fulani, although with some minority ethnic groups such as the Kanuri in the north-east in particular. Islam is the predominant religion in these regions. The north-central is culturally and religiously mixed with the Tiv, Igala, Igbira and the Yoruba as the main ethnic groups. People in this region are either Christians, Muslims or worshipers of traditional religion. The south-east is populated mainly by the Igbo, who are predominantly Christians. In the south-south are the minority ethnic groups such as the Edo, Efik, Ibibio and Ijaw, who are also largely Christians. In the south-west are the culturally homogenous Yoruba ethnic group who are either Christians, Muslims or traditional religion worshippers (Babalola, 2019: 51).

Ethnic and religious voting in historical perspective

Let us begin with the 1959 general elections, which Dudley (1973) described as critical because they were to decide which parties were to control the first post-independence government. It should be mentioned here that Nigeria started its political life with a parliamentary system whereby the success of a political party in elections was determined by the number of seats secured in the central legislative house. The three dominant political parties that contested the elections were essentially regional parties. The Action Group (AG) was based in Western Nigeria; the Northern People's Congress (NPC) in Northern Nigeria; and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) had Eastern Nigeria as its stronghold. These parties were also built around ethnic leaders – AG (Chief Obafemi Awolowo), NPC (Sir Ahmadu Bello), and NCNC (Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe) (Abba and Babalola, 2017).

As table 1 shows, electoral support for the parties demonstrated their attachment with the major ethnic groups in their respective regions of pre-eminence. Voting pattern was short of being national in outlook as the NPC's victory was a Northern one while the AG's success was derived mainly from the Western Region. The NCNC's success was slightly different because it made some impacts in the West. Clearly, the ethno-regional character of the parties largely contributed to the regional voting pattern.

Table 1: Results of the 1959 general elections showing number of seats won by parties

Party	East	North	West	Lagos	Total
AG	14	25	33	1	73
NCNC/NEPU	58	8	21	2	89
NPC	--	134	--	--	134
Others	1	7	8	0	16
Total	73	174	62	3	312

Sources: Kurfi, 1983: 177; Osaghae, 1998: 33

The first attempt at democratic rule came to an end in 1966 but the country was returned to civilian rule in 1979. Before quitting the stage, the military carried out a series of political reforms, one of which was the adoption of the American-style presidential system. With the new system, a presidential candidate must win a quarter of the votes in thirteen states, which is two-thirds of nineteen states (Nigeria was then a federation of nineteen states).

Like the parties that operated in the immediate post-independence era, nearly all the parties that contested the 1979 presidential election were ethno-regional parties and had links with the parties of the First Republic (1960 – 66). For instance, the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) which was a reincarnate of the AG was led by Awolowo while the Nigerian People's Party (NPP), which grew out of the defunct NCNC was also led by Azikiwe. The NPP and the Great Nigerian People's Party (GNPP) were initially within a single political formation, the NPP. When the party split, Azikiwe became the leader of the faction that retained the original name while the faction loyal to Waziri Ibrahim, a Kanuri from Borno state formed a new party, the GNPP, which had the north-east as its base. The People's Redemption Party (PRP), led by Aminu Kano was an offspring of the defunct Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) and was based in Kano, north-west Nigeria (Graf 1988: 80). Not only were these parties regional in outlook, they were also built around individual politicians. The National Party of Nigeria (NPN), though an upspring of the defunct NPC and anchored in the core North, was an exception as it 'emerged as the most nationally accepted party' (Osaghae, 1998: 126). The party attracted a large number of political notables from other ethno-regional groups.

Ethnicity and religion dominated the 1979 campaign such that it became fairly easy to associate parties with certain ethnic groups. During the campaign, some politicians openly urged the electorate not to vote for 'unbelievers' in the Northern emirates while in the middle-belt, the campaign was that the people should vote to liberate themselves from Hausa-Fulani tyranny (Ige, 1995: 405). The voting pattern was strikingly similar to what was experienced in the First Republic as the ethnic character of these parties reflected in their electoral fortunes. For instance, the NPN candidate, Alhaji Shehu Shagari garnered 47.21 per cent of votes in the North with UPN's Chief Awolowo polling 5.09 per cent while Dr Azikiwe of the NPP polled 3.20 per cent. In the Yoruba-dominated south-west, Awolowo polled 85.03 per cent of the votes while Shagari scored 11.32 per cent and Azikiwe got 2.19 per cent. In Igboland, Azikiwe polled 84.73 per cent of votes cast as against Shagari and Awolowo, who obtained 11.20 per cent and 0.69 per cent respectively (Osaghae, 1998: 125; Kurfi, 1983: 179; Graf: 1988; 87; Nnoli, 1995: 192; Oyediran, 1981: 103).

As Oyediran (1981: 103) observed, about four in every five of the voters in the Igbo-speaking states of Anambra and Imo voted for Azikiwe while the support for Awolowo in the four

Yoruba-speaking states of Lagos, Ogun, Ondo and Oyo was overwhelming, with Lagos having the lowest of 82.30 per cent and the highest 94.50 per cent in Ondo. It must be pointed out that only Shagari had the lowest support from his ethnic group in two states, Sokoto (Shagari's state) and Bauchi where he had 66.58 per cent and 62.48 per cent of the total votes cast respectively (Oyediran, 1981). Apparently, the NPN's success in the north was not as strong as those of the other two major parties (UPN and NPP) in their own respective regions. The reason for this is that the presidential candidates of the GNPP, NPN and PRP (Waziri Ibrahim, Shehu Shagari and Aminu Kano) shared the northern votes.

Another major election in the country was the presidential election of 1993, which was meant to culminate in the Third Republic. Before then, Nigeria operated a multi-party system. But to avoid the problems attributed to ethnic politics, the military regime of Ibrahim Babangida (1985 – 93) imposed a two-party system and also decreed the two political parties that contested the elections – the National Republican Convention (NRC) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) (Abba and Babalola, 2017). Bashir Tofa, a Fulani Muslim, and Moshood Abiola, a Yoruba Muslim became the NRC and SDP flag bearers respectively. Abiola chose a northern Muslim, Babagana Kingibe while Tofa chose Sylvester Ugoh, an Igbo Christian from the south-east, as their vice-presidential candidates.

In spite of the rules outlawing the invocation of religious and ethnic sentiments in the election, the parties still engaged in a campaign of calumny of the past. For instance, the NRC accused the SDP of not respecting the religious sensitivity of the country with its Muslim/Muslim ticket. The party campaigned that an Abiola presidency will impose Islam on Nigeria and also marginalise the Christians (Ihonvbere, 1999: 115). Moreover, the party portrayed itself as the only party that could address the problem of Igbo marginalisation in national politics. Leading politicians appealed to primordial sentiments but for the first time in Nigeria's history, ethnic and religious identities appeared to be inconsequential in electoral politics. Although, the election was annulled, unofficial results published by the print media showed that Abiola won a majority (9 of 16) of the then northern states (including Kano, Tofa's home state), and some predominantly Christian middle-belt states, along with all the Yoruba-speaking states (Osaghae, 1998: 240). The SDP Muslim/Muslim ticket also polled well in the predominantly Christian states like Akwa-Ibom, Anambra and Cross-River. As Lewis (1994: 327) posited, the voting pattern 'suggested an historic merger of northern and southern populist interests,

superseding the ethnic fault-lines which traditionally structured Nigerian electoral politics.’ Indeed, the old ethnic and religious voting appeared to have been replaced with voting premised on issues. Abiola’s victory may be connected with his ‘Farewell to Poverty’ message which appealed to Nigerians who were facing serious economic challenges. Another reason for his victory was his popularity, which cut across religious and ethnic barriers.

With the abortion of the Third Republic and the demise of the main beneficiary, Sani Abacha, the country, once again, under General Abdulsalami Abubakar, embarked on a new transition that led to the establishment of another democratic government in 1999 after long years of military rule. This explains why the 1999 general elections were also critical in the political history of Nigeria. The return to a multi-party democracy provided the politicians the opportunity to freely organise themselves into different parties. Not fewer than twenty political parties were registered by the country’s electoral body but only three were dominant - Alliance for Democracy (AD), All People’s Party (APP) which later became All Nigerian People’s Party (ANPP), and the People’s Democratic Party (PDP). With the exception of the PDP whose membership cuts across the country, the other two could be associated with specific geographical-ethnic domains. The AD was the most regional as it was strongly anchored in the Yoruba-speaking states (south-west).

The two main contenders in the presidential election were the former military head of state, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo of the PDP and Chief Olu Falae who contested on the platform of the AD/APP alliance. The fact that both were Yoruba Christians did not stop ethnic associations from taking sides. For example, the Yoruba socio-cultural group, *Afenifere* not only mobilised for Falae, it campaigned vigorously against Obasanjo who was portrayed as a northern candidate. Obasanjo had the support of the northern elite, particularly, the military wing. In the end, Obasanjo polled 18,738,154 votes (62.78 per cent) to beat Falae, who polled 11,110,287 votes (37.22 per cent) (Omotola, 2010: 543). The election was trailed by claims of electoral corruption involving the departing military junta whose members preferred Obasanjo and the Independence National Electoral Commission (INEC) in favour of Obasanjo (Omotola, 2010: 544). Notwithstanding, the influence of forces of religious and ethnic identities cannot be wished away (see Onapajo, 2016).

The 2015 presidential election was another important election in the history of Nigeria because this was the first time an opposition candidate defeated an incumbent president. Although, fourteen candidates contested the election, the sitting president, Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP and Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressive Congress (APC) were the main contenders. They were popular in their respective geo-political regions. Again, campaigns took ethnic and religious dimension. The invocation of ethnic and religious sentiments heightened the tension in the country to the extent that analysts were predicting post-election violence along ethno-religious lines. Katy Lee (2015), for example, predicted that regardless of who wins, ‘the result could trigger violence by exacerbating pre-existing tensions along religious and ethnic lines, which overlap with political grievances.’ The keenly contested election showed Buhari garnering 15,424,921 votes (53.96 per cent) while Jonathan polled 12,853,162 (44.96 per cent). Buhari won overwhelmingly in the Muslim-dominated northwest and the north-east, while voters in the south-south and south-east voted massively for Jonathan. The north-central and south-west votes were shared almost fairly between the two candidates. Babalola (2018a; 2018b) showed the significance of ethnicity and religion in the election.

The 2019 presidential election: continuity or change in ethno-regional and religious voting?

By 2019, Nigeria’s political space had become so expanded that the number of political parties in the country had risen to ninety-one. However, the ruling APC and the main opposition PDP remained the main contenders. The incumbent president, Muhammadu Buhari who hails from the north-west was the APC flagbearer while Abubakar Atiku, a former vice-president to Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007) and a business tycoon from the north-east represented the PDP. Both candidates were septuagenarian Fulani Muslims from the north. While Buhari went into the race with his vice-president, a Yoruba Christian, Yemi Osinbajo, Atiku picked an Igbo running mate, a former Anambra state governor, Peter Obi who is also Christian. With the two presidential candidates having identical ethnic and religious background and both running mates being southern Christians, it was not out of order to expect an issue-based contest but this was not the case.

It was apparent that the PDP’s calculation in the choice of Obi was to shore up support for Atiku in the south-east and south-south where Buhari suffered massive defeat in 2015. This strategy yielded some dividend as Atiku became visibly popular among the Igbos and the ethnic

minorities of the Niger Delta region. The reasons for Buhari's lack of popularity in these geopolitical regions are many but the perception that the APC was a Muslim party and the PDP a Christian party cannot be ignored. Buhari was also seen as the Hausa-Fulani and Muslim candidate while Atiku was seen as the South-South and the South-East, as well as Christian candidate. Also, the perception of lopsidedness in federal appointments and neglect of the Igbo ethnic group was a major encumbrance against Buhari's re-election bid.

As in previous elections, the campaign took ethnic dimension as ethnic associations, in an attempt to rekindle their relevance found themselves competing for candidate endorsement. The main faction of *Afenifere*, for instance, supported Atiku while the break-away faction, together with leading Yoruba traditional rulers endorsed the Buhari/Osinbajo ticket, ostensibly in support of the 'son of the soil', Osinbajo. Similarly, the national executive of the Igbo ethnic group, *Ohaneze Ndigbo* also endorsed the Atiku/Obi ticket, apparently to support their son, Obi. The predominantly Hausa-Fulani association, the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) threw their weight behind Buhari while a similar association, also based in the north, the Northern Elders Forum (NEF) endorsed Atiku. Clearly, the election took place against the backdrop of a deepened ethnic division.

As in 2015, the main issues in the 2019 election included how to end the insurgency in the north-east and how to put the country on a sound economic footing. In addition to these was the farmers-herders crises in the middle-belt region. The issue of restructuring the country was also on the front burner. However, these issues were largely ignored. Instead, top politicians from both sides of the political divide painted a picture of a contest between the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba on one side, and the Hausa-Fulani and Igbo on the other. The media space, particularly, the social media was also awash with hate speeches and fake news.

Buhari was re-elected after winning in 19 of the 36 states and Atiku won in 17 states and the FCT, Abuja.

Table 2: The 2019 Presidential Election Results

	APC Votes	%	PDP Votes	%	Other Parties	%
North-Central	2331375	56.65	1763772	42.86	20166	0.49
North-East	3219783	71.78	1255357	27.99	10306	0.23
North-West	5995651	72.31	2280465	27.5	15988	0.19
South-East	403968	19.14	1693085	80.21	13784	0.65
South-South	751405	25.11	2223232	74.3	17640	0.59
South-West	2036450	51.72	1776370	45.12	124439	3.16
FCT (Abuja)	152,224	35.91	259,997	61.33	2974	2.76
TOTAL	15,191,847	56.00	11,262,978	41.00	205297	3.00

Source: INEC

As table 2 indicates, Buhari polled impressively in the north-west and north-east, while Atiku showed overwhelming dominance in the south-east and south-south. Although Buhari also defeated his rival in the religiously mixed north-central and south-west but the victory cannot be described as decisive. As mentioned earlier, the north-west is the President's base and has nearly three times the population of the south-east and south-south combined. It should be mentioned that by the time the election took place, Buhari's administration had been labelled as under-achieving. The economy had deteriorated, the farmer-herdsmen crises showed no sign of abating, and allegations of nepotism by the president was on the increase but these were not enough to deter voters in the region from voting for him. Likewise, one would expect the administration's lack of outright success in the war against the Boko Haram insurgency ravaging the north-east to do damage to his aspiration in the region but this was not the case. It would be recalled that former President Jonathan's poor handling of Boko Haram's issue

contributed to his re-election albatross. It is also a plausible argument that northern voters rejected Atiku because of the whiff of corruption around him. Buhari was seen as an honest man who has not enriched himself with public money. Nonetheless, the perception of the APC as a party more likely to protect northern interest cannot be ignored.

In the south-east and south-south, Buhari and his party campaigned on the administration's achievements, especially in the provision of infrastructure such as roads and bridges but this was not enough to convince the voters to re-elect him. In the same vein, the labelling of Atiku as a corrupt politician was not enough to dissuade the Igbo and the Niger-Delta voters. Moreover, Atiku's open support for restructuring the federation was important to garner more support in those areas but the voters were going to vote for him anyway. Another point worth noting is that voters in these regions have largely been voting for PDP candidates since when the party was formed in 1999. Voters here appear to have psychological attachment to the party as they have always seen the PDP as the only party that can protect their interest in the mainstream Nigerian politics. The reason for this may be, as mentioned earlier, when parties were formed as part of the transition process in 1999, APP was seen as the Hausa-Fulani party, the AD as the Yoruba party while the PDP was the only party with national appeal.

The PDP had hoped that the herdsmen crisis in the north-central would translate into an abysmal performance for Buhari but this hope was dashed as Buhari performed above PDP's expectation in the region. Buhari's poor handling of the farmers-herder crises in the middle-belt region saw his popularity dwindled particularly in Benue and Plateau states but the results show that the voters in the region preferred him to Atiku.

The votes in the south-west, where analysts had predicted an overwhelming victory for Buhari, were shared almost evenly. It is important to find out why, despite Osinbajo's name on the APC ticket, Buhari still performed below his party's expectation in the region. While analysing the 2015 presidential election results, Babalola (2018a: 40) argued that Yoruba voters paid less attention to religious identity. This assertion did not apply to the 2019 elections, which showed that religious sentiment cannot be wished away in who got what share of the votes in the region. The perception of Buhari as a fanatical Muslim pursuing an 'Islamisation agenda' contributed to his diminished popularity in this part of the country. In the run up to the election, some notable pastors openly preached against Buhari in the south-west alleging that if re-elected, he would Islamise the country. The atmosphere was filled with hate speeches spewing from the

pulpits. The vice-president, Osinbajo, also a pastor, was accused of betraying Christianity for not speaking out against the President's quest to turn Nigeria into an Islamic country. Buhari's perceived nonchalance to the herdsmen crisis as well as his often-cited lopsided appointments in favour of Northern Muslims helped to fuel the perception of Islamisation. Another plausible explanation for the below-expectation performance is that the Igbo voters in Lagos (in the south-west), for instance, constituting about 40 per cent of the state's population might have preferred the Atiku/Obi ticket.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that in Nigeria, ethnicity and religion provide strong instruments of mobilisation in the elites' quest for political power. It particularly shows that except in the 1993 presidential election, voting patterns have always been shaped by ethnic and religious considerations. The 2019 presidential election results reflected strong ethnic and religious bias as voters show preference for candidates of their ethno-regional or religious identity. In Nigeria, the rational-choice or issue-based voters are in the minority. It is, therefore, fair to conclude that there is a relationship between ethno-regional and religious identities and voting pattern in Nigeria. Moreover, in line with the objective of this paper, it may be concluded that in Nigeria, there is continuity in voting pattern along primordial lines.

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