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Voting Behavior and Economic Inequality in Emerging Democracies: The Case of Nigeria

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of economic inequality on voting behaviour in Nigeria's emerging democracy. Utilizing a desk research methodology and based on the Political Economy of Clientelism framework, the study investigates how socioeconomic disparities influence electoral engagement and party preferences. The results show that significant economic inequality leads to political disillusionment among lower-income populations, causing lower voter turnout and a greater likelihood of vote-buying. The research also identifies regional variations in voting behaviours, with poorer areas displaying stronger ethnic affiliations, while wealthier regions tend to support parties focused on economic reform. Political elites often exploit these divisions, perpetuating cycles of inequality that undermine democratic representation. The article concludes with suggestions, highlighting the necessity for economic reforms aimed at reducing inequality to cultivate a more active and representative electorate, thereby enhancing Nigeria's democratic stability.

Keywords: *Voting, Inequality, Democracy, Elections*

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1. Introduction

In many emerging democracies, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, economic disparities play a crucial role in shaping political engagement and influencing electoral outcomes (Burchard, 2015). An emerging democracy is defined as a country making the shift from authoritarian governance to a democratic framework, marked by relatively new political institutions and electoral processes that are still finding their footing (Diamond, 2008). These democracies often encounter obstacles such as weak institutions, limited political participation, and socio-economic inequalities that impede their development (Lindberg, 2009). Nigeria exemplifies this situation, having moved from military rule to a democratic system in 1999. Despite holding regular elections, the nation

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grapples with challenges like electoral malpractice, corruption, and significant economic inequality, all of which obstruct the consolidation of democracy (Metumara, 2010). Nigeria's significance in this study arises from its large population, diverse ethnic composition, and pronounced economic disparities, making it a vital case for exploring how inequality influences voting behaviour in emerging democracies. The country's experience with varying levels of political engagement amidst ongoing economic difficulties offers valuable insights into broader trends in similar environments (Cheeseman, 2015).

This study uses a desk research approach, relying on secondary data. Throughout the research, existing academic literature, electoral reports, and published information on economic inequality and voter behaviour in Nigeria were examined. By analysing these documented sources, the study systematically explores trends and patterns in voting behaviour among various income groups, avoiding the logistical difficulties associated with primary data collection (Bryman, 2012). Considering Nigeria's diverse socio-economic landscape, secondary data offers a comprehensive view of how economic factors shape political behaviour over time, providing valuable insights into voter behaviour in an emerging democracy (Silverman, 2016).

1.1. Objective of the Study

1. To analyse the relationship between economic inequality and voting behaviour in Nigeria.
2. To investigate the role of economic inequality in influencing voter turnout and political participation.
3. To assess how political parties in Nigeria utilize economic inequality in their electoral strategies.
4. To compare voting behaviour influenced by economic inequality in Nigeria with other emerging democracies.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How does economic inequality influence voter preferences and electoral choices in Nigeria?
2. What is the impact of economic inequality on voter turnout and political participation in Nigeria's elections?
3. In what ways do political parties exploit economic inequality to shape electoral outcomes in Nigeria?
4. How does the relationship between economic inequality and voting behaviour in Nigeria compare to other emerging democracies?

1.3. Research Outline

Chapter One introduces the research topic, outlining its scope and presenting the key research questions. It discusses the importance of examining the relationship between economic inequality and voting behaviour, particularly in the context of emerging democracies like Nigeria. Additionally, it will outline the objectives and the methodology employed. Chapter Two presents the Theoretical Framework and Literature Review. In this section, significant theories and scholarly works related to voting behaviour, economic inequality and their interaction in democracies are examined. Theories of political participation, models of voter behaviour, and the influence of economic factors on electoral outcomes are explored, while also identifying gaps in the literature that this research seeks to address. Chapter Three offers a detailed analysis of economic inequality in Nigeria, looking at both historical and contemporary data on income distribution, wealth disparities and poverty levels. It investigates the causes and consequences of these economic inequalities and their potential impact on the political landscape.

In Chapter Four, the trends in voting behaviour in Nigeria were explored, with a focus on electoral participation, turnout, party affiliation, and the influence of economic factors on voter choices. Empirical data from the 2023 Presidential elections in Nigeria highlighted the connection between economic inequality and voting patterns. Chapter Five presented a comparative analysis of Nigeria alongside other emerging democracies, such as Brazil, South Africa, and India, to examine how economic inequality impacts voting behaviour in similar political contexts. This comparative approach aimed to place Nigeria's situation within a global framework and extract relevant insights. The final chapter, Chapter Six, summarizes the key findings of the research, discusses their significance for Nigeria's democratic development and suggests potential policy implications. It also addresses the broader implications for emerging democracies.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Rational Choice Theory (RCT)

RCT suggests that people make decisions by weighing the costs and benefits, with the goal of maximizing their personal gain (Downs, 1957). When it comes to voting behaviour, this theory implies that voters act rationally, choosing candidates or policies based on the perceived benefits they might gain. However, in emerging democracies with significant economic inequality, such as Nigeria, these rational calculations can be affected by economic hardships. According to Collier and Vicente (2012), for voters with fewer resources, immediate benefits like vote-buying or patronage may take precedence over long-term policy considerations, leading them to favour candidates who provide short-term financial rewards. Economic inequality complicates rational decision-making, as those in disadvantaged positions may prioritize their immediate survival over democratic values. This helps explain the ongoing presence of undemocratic practices, such as patronage, which take advantage of economic disparities and distort electoral behaviour in emerging democracies (Stokes, 2007).

2.2. Resource Model of Political Participation

The Resource Model of Political Participation, developed by Verba, Scholzman, and Brady in 1995, suggests that a person's political involvement is greatly affected by their resources, particularly economic resources, education, and available free time. In emerging democracies such as Nigeria, where economic inequality is stark, this model helps explain why citizens with lower incomes often face obstacles to participating in politics. Those with limited financial resources and education may not have the means to engage effectively in the political arena, resulting in lower voter turnout and a sense of political inefficacy (Burchard, 2015). Additionally, economic inequality can lead to differences in access to information and social networks, which further complicates political mobilization for marginalized communities.

The Resource Model illustrates that in situations marked by significant inequality, the political environment tends to favour individuals with greater resources, perpetuating cycles of disenfranchisement. This examination highlights the essential connection between economic circumstances and voting behaviour, stressing the importance of policies aimed at improving political inclusion.

2.3. Political Economy of Clientelism

Clientelism offers important insights into the dynamics of voting behaviour and economic inequality in emerging democracies. This system, defined by the exchange of material goods for political support, often flourishes in environments marked by significant economic disparities (Stokes, 2007). In countries like Nigeria, economic inequality creates a situation where political elites take advantage of vulnerable populations, providing incentives such as cash, jobs, or goods to secure votes (Van de Walle, 2007). Such practices can distort democratic processes, as economically disadvantaged voters may focus on immediate material benefits rather than long-term policy implications, resulting in transactional voting behaviour. Clientelism not only affects individual voter decisions but also perpetuates systemic inequalities, allowing elites to maintain power through these patron-client relationships and reinforcing the existing status quo (Kramon and Posner, 2016). Therefore, understanding clientelism is essential for analysing how economic inequality influences political engagement and the quality of democracy in emerging contexts, underscoring the challenges of achieving fair representation.

2.4. Theoretical Justification

Rational Choice Theory, the Resource Model of Political Participation, and the Political Economy of Clientelism each offer important perspectives on voting behavior and economic inequality in emerging democracies like Nigeria, but they approach the topic from different angles, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Rational Choice Theory focuses on individual decision-making based on perceived costs and benefits, suggesting that voters with limited economic means might prioritize short-term gains, such as vote-buying, over long-term democratic involvement (Downs, 1957). This theory illustrates how economic inequality can skew electoral choices, highlighting a significant aspect of Nigeria's political environment.

On the other hand, the Resource Model of Political Participation examines the structural obstacles that hinder political engagement for low-income individuals. It posits that a lack of resources – whether financial,

educational, or social – greatly reduces voter turnout and political effectiveness (Verba *et al.*, 1995). This model enhances the rational choice perspective by explaining why economically disadvantaged citizens may completely withdraw from the political process. The Political Economy of Clientelism, which this study primarily focuses on, illuminates the wider systemic issues of patronage and political exploitation that are common in Nigeria. It illustrates how elites exploit economic inequality to secure votes by offering material incentives (Stokes, 2007).

While it has similarities with rational choice theory in terms of decision-making driven by personal gain, it also underscores the influence of systemic power dynamics that shape these decisions. Together, these theories highlight the intricate relationship between economic inequality and voting behaviour, stressing that a comprehensive understanding of Nigeria's electoral dynamics necessitates an approach that considers individual motivations, structural obstacles, and systemic exploitation.

2.5. Review of Relevant Literature

The connection between economic inequality and voter behaviour has received considerable attention in academic discussions, especially regarding its effects on democratic participation and election results in emerging democracies. Various studies suggest that economic inequality significantly influences political behaviour, often resulting in lower voter turnout and biased electoral preferences. Research by Burchard (2015) points out that in many emerging democracies, economic inequality is linked to reduced political participation among lower-income individuals. This disenfranchisement can stem from both structural obstacles, like limited access to education and resources, and psychological factors, such as feelings of political alienation (Piketty, 2014). In Nigeria, for instance, high levels of poverty and income inequality have been found to diminish voter engagement, with many citizens viewing the electoral process as unresponsive to their needs (Akanbi, 2018).

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In Nigeria, for instance, high levels of poverty and income inequality have been found to diminish voter engagement, with many citizens viewing the electoral process as unresponsive to their needs (Akanbi, 2018). In Brazil, Pacheco (2014) notes similar patterns, where economic inequality shapes electoral decisions and promotes clientelism, particularly in less affluent areas. In contrast, wealthier voters generally exhibit higher rates of political participation, as they are more inclined to engage in advocacy and sway electoral results in their favour (Baker, 2015).

This gap in political involvement not only perpetuates existing inequalities but also presents significant obstacles to the strengthening of democracy. Research on Eastern Europe further underscores the negative impact of economic inequality on voter behaviour. Cernat and Varga (2018) indicate that nations with pronounced income disparities often face heightened political polarization, as economically disadvantaged groups gravitate towards populist movements that offer immediate solutions, while wealthier voters tend to back more established political parties. This rift complicates the political environment, making it challenging to reach consensus on vital national matters.

Research indicates a strong link between economic inequality and voter behaviour in emerging democracies. The combination of structural barriers, vote-buying practices, and political alienation intensifies the difficulties encountered by economically disadvantaged citizens, which in turn weakens the democratic process. Grasping these dynamics is essential for creating strategies that improve political participation and promote fairer electoral results.

3. Economic Inequality in Nigeria

3.1. Historical Overview

Since Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the country has seen considerable changes in economic inequality, influenced by political turmoil, economic reforms, and varying oil prices. In the years immediately following independence, the economy was fairly balanced, with a reasonable distribution of income. However, the discovery of oil in the 1970s turned Nigeria into an oil-rich nation, resulting in a concentration of wealth among the elite and increasing gaps between urban and rural communities (Adeleke, 2013). The economic reforms of the 1980s, particularly the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), aimed to stabilize the economy but often worsened inequality by focusing on deregulation and privatization, which primarily benefited the wealthy (Ogwumike, 2014).

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Gini coefficient—a crucial measure of income inequality—saw a significant increase, highlighting the widening gaps in wealth. In Nigeria, the Gini coefficient was estimated at approximately 0.43 in 2004, rising to 0.49 by 2018 (World Bank, 2021). Even with economic growth fuelled by oil revenues, a large segment of the population continued to live in poverty, with more than 40% falling below the national poverty line in recent years (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

3.2. Current Economic Disparities

The economic disparities in Nigeria are quite pronounced, showcasing serious issues with income distribution and elevated poverty levels, especially among various regions and demographic groups.

In 2021, Nigeria's Gini coefficient was around 0.43, which points to a moderate degree of income inequality (World Bank, 2021). This inequality is further exacerbated by regional variations; for instance, the northern states face higher poverty rates compared to the southern regions. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the poverty rate in Nigeria was about 40.1% in 2021 (Table 1), with more than 83 million Nigerians living below the national poverty line (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

Region	Poverty Rate (%)
North Central	35.5
North East	67.1
North West	64.0
South East	29.0
South South	24.8
South West	23.0

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (2021)

Wealth gaps continue to exist among various demographic groups. A report from 2020 revealed that the wealthiest 10% of the population owned approximately 43% of the nation's wealth, whereas the bottom 50% possessed only about 3% (Oxfam, 2020). This economic inequality is worsened by issues like education, job opportunities, and access to resources. For example, literacy rates in the northern regions are considerably lower than those in the south, which perpetuates cycles of poverty (UNESCO, 2021).

3.3. Causes and Consequences

Economic inequality in Nigeria is a complex issue influenced by various factors, including corruption, ineffective governance, and mismanagement of resources. These elements have led to a persistent wealth gap, uneven resource distribution, and widespread poverty throughout the nation. Corruption plays a significant role in driving inequality in Nigeria. When government officials misuse public funds for their own gain, it diverts resources from crucial social services like healthcare, education, and infrastructure development (Akinola, 2018). This misallocation of funds worsens economic disparities, leaving the less fortunate with few opportunities for upward mobility.

According to Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perception Index, Nigeria ranked 154th out of 180 countries, underscoring the severity of the issue ([Transparency International, 2021](#)).

Poor governance exacerbates the problem. Successive administrations have found it challenging to implement effective policies aimed at reducing inequality, often prioritizing immediate gains over sustainable development strategies ([Obadan, 2021](#)). The lack of robust institutions and accountability mechanisms allows inequality to endure, as those in power frequently place their personal and political interests above the well-being of the general populace. Additionally, mismanagement of resources, especially in the oil sector, has fueled economic disparity. Nigeria's oil wealth, which is largely concentrated in the Niger Delta region, has been poorly handled, resulting in environmental damage and the impoverishment of local communities ([Aigbokhan, 2017](#)). Instead of reaping the benefits of the country's abundant natural resources, many Nigerians continue to live in poverty while a small elite monopolizes the nation's wealth.

The impact of these factors is significant. Economic inequality in Nigeria is evident through high unemployment rates, low wages, and restricted access to essential services. This situation also leads to social unrest, as marginalized groups may resort to violence and criminal behaviour due to their lack of economic opportunities ([Oyeniyi, 2020](#)). Additionally, inequality weakens democracy and national unity, as it reinforces divisions based on ethnicity, region, and religion.

4. Voting Behaviour in Nigeria

4.1. Patterns of Voting Behaviour

Voting behaviour in Nigeria is significantly shaped by ethnic, religious, and regional ties, which play a crucial role in determining electoral results. During the 2015 and 2019 general elections, these identities were central to political campaigns and influenced voter choices. Ethnicity continues to be one of the most powerful factors affecting how people vote in Nigeria.

The political scene in the country is heavily influenced by its key ethnic groups – the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo – who typically back candidates from their own regions or ethnic backgrounds ([Orji, 2014](#)). For instance, during the 2015 elections, Muhammadu Buhari, hailing from the mainly Hausa-Fulani North, gained considerable support in Northern states, whereas his rival, Goodluck Jonathan, was strongly supported in the Southern states ([International Crisis Group, 2015](#)). Religion is a significant factor in Nigeria's electoral landscape. The North is mainly Muslim, while the South is predominantly Christian, and these religious affiliations often sway voter choices.

In both the 2015 and 2019 elections, Buhari garnered substantial support from Muslim voters, whereas Christian voters tended to favour his opponents ([Kew, 2015](#)). Regionalism is also a vital aspect, evident in the 2019 elections, where Buhari received strong backing in the North, while Atiku Abubakar found more support in the Southern and Middle Belt areas ([BBC, 2019](#)). This trend illustrates how regional interests and political alliances influence voting behaviour. These factors highlight the intricate nature of Nigeria's electoral dynamics, which are deeply rooted in its socio-cultural context. However, economic inequality plays an even more significant role, which will be explored further.

4.2. Economic Inequality and Voting Pattern Nexus

Economic inequality in Nigeria significantly affects voting patterns, influencing voter turnout, party preferences, and the emergence of populist candidates. This analysis focuses on the 2015 and 2019 general elections to explore how economic disparities shape electoral behaviours.

4.2.1. Voter Turnout

Low-income groups, who are most affected by unequal access to resources, often experience political alienation, which results in lower voter turnout. This was particularly noticeable in the 2015 and 2019 general elections, where participation rates were alarmingly low. In 2015, only about 43.7% of registered voters cast their ballots, and this number further declined to 34.75% in 2019 ([INEC, 2019](#)). One contributing factor to this drop is the belief among economically disadvantaged citizens that elections fail to bring about significant improvements in their lives. Economic inequality fosters political disillusionment, as poorer voters feel disconnected from the

political elites. Consequently, they may choose not to vote or become vulnerable to vote-buying tactics, which undermine the integrity of democratic engagement (Kukah, 2019).

4.2.2. Party Preferences

Wealthy individuals and elites often back parties that safeguard their financial interests, while low-income voters may gravitate towards candidates who advocate for economic redistribution or populist reforms. During the 2015 elections, the All-Progressives Congress (APC) took advantage of the widespread discontent with the economic policies of the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP). Muhammadu Buhari’s anti-corruption message struck a chord with poorer voters, who perceived corruption as a key factor in economic inequality. However, in the 2019 elections, even with Buhari’s re-election, there was growing disillusionment among poorer Nigerians, as the economic landscape did not show significant improvement during his tenure. Still, the APC retained strong backing from the political elite, who continued to benefit from the existing system (BBC, 2019).

4.2.3. Rise of Populism

In Nigeria, populist messages that emphasize wealth redistribution and anti-corruption efforts strongly resonate with voters who feel economically marginalized. Buhari’s 2015 campaign was centred around these populist themes, targeting those frustrated with the economic neglect they experienced under the PDP. However, the disparity between the promised change and the actual economic improvements following Buhari’s election in 2015 highlighted the shortcomings of populism in tackling deep-rooted economic inequality. By 2019, while populist sentiments remained influential, the emergence of other populist leaders like Atiku Abubakar indicated a growing dissatisfaction with the APC’s administration.

4.2.4. Regional and Class Divides

Economic inequality is evident in both regional and class divides, influencing voting behaviours in different areas. The North, which has some of the highest poverty levels in the country, has traditionally supported Buhari, thanks to his Northern background and populist charm. On the other hand, wealthier regions like Lagos and parts of the South-West display a broader range of party preferences, often backing candidates whose economic policies promote private enterprise and wealth generation (Oyeniyi, 2020).

The Table 2 shows how economic inequality affected voting patterns in Nigeria during the 2015 and 2019 general elections. In 2015, there was a higher voter turnout, with the APC and Buhari gaining support due to his anti-corruption and populist approach. However, by 2019, voter turnout had dropped significantly, indicating a sense of disillusionment among voters, even as populism remained a factor, particularly with regional divides that favoured the APC in the economically disadvantaged North.

Year	Election Turnout (%)	Key Voting Trends	Populism
2015	43.7%	APC’s Buhari secured overwhelming support in economically marginalized Northern regions.	Anti-corruption populism; anti-elite
2019	34.75%	Decline in voter turnout, disillusionment among poorer voters; regional support for APC but rise of Atiku Abubakar in the South-East.	Persistent populism but growing voter fatigue

Source: INEC (2015 and 2019); Author’s Compilation (2024)

5. Comparative Analysis: Nigeria vs Other Emerging Democracies

Economic inequality in emerging democracies such as Brazil, India, and South Africa play a crucial role in shaping voting behaviours. These nations share similarities with Nigeria in the ways that economic disparities affect political engagement, voter turnout, and party preferences.

5.1. Brazil

Historically, poor and marginalized communities in Brazil, especially in the North and Northeast, have

supported left-wing populist candidates like Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and the Workers' Party, as noted by Hunter and Power (2007). This backing was largely due to promises of poverty alleviation and social redistribution programs such as Bolsa Família, which, while effective in reducing inequality, also created some dependency on government assistance. According to Zucco and Power (2024), Lula's victory in 2002 was primarily driven by the strong support from the poor, who viewed his social welfare commitments as a means to achieve economic relief. In contrast, the 2018 Brazilian election, represented a significant shift towards right-wing populism with Jair Bolsonaro's ascent to power.

This change was propelled by middle-class voters disillusioned with widespread corruption, who preferred market-oriented reforms over redistributive policies. Bolsonaro's rise underscored the divisive impact of economic inequality, as wealthier voters leaned towards conservative, market-driven solutions, while economically disadvantaged groups continued to support populist candidates advocating for redistribution. Fasakin argues that Brazil's electoral dynamics closely mirror those in Nigeria, where leaders like Muhammadu Buhari have similarly tapped into the frustrations of economically disadvantaged populations, particularly in the poorer Northern regions. Like Lula in Brazil, Buhari gained substantial support through populist messaging centred on anti-corruption and wealth redistribution, resulting in fragmented voting patterns along class and regional lines.

5.2. *India*

Chhibber and Nooruddin (2004) posited that the rural poor and marginalized castes in states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have traditionally supported populist and left-leaning parties that promote redistributive policies. The emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) highlights how economic inequality and caste divisions influence political decisions in India.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Narendra Modi, has achieved success in recent elections by appealing to economically disadvantaged voters through welfare initiatives, while also drawing in middle-class voters with promises of economic growth and nationalism. Modi's victories in 2014 and 2019 demonstrate how politicians can navigate economic inequality by merging populism with economic nationalism and religious identity. Voter behavior in India, akin to that in Nigeria, is shaped by regional disparities, with poorer states like Bihar being more vulnerable to populist messages, similar to the Northern region in Nigeria. The effects of economic inequality in India reflect those in Nigeria, where both nations face significant rural-urban divides that influence electoral results. In both scenarios, economic inequality frequently results in low voter turnout among the poorest segments, driven by disillusionment and political alienation.

5.3. *South Africa*

As noted by Seekings (2008), the African National Congress (ANC) has been the dominant force in South African politics since the end of apartheid, relying on its historical legitimacy and redistributive policies to garner support from the economically marginalized black population. However, Southall (2014) points out that increasing dissatisfaction with the ANC's inability to significantly alleviate poverty and inequality has resulted in voter apathy and a rise in support for populist movements like the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which advocates for radical wealth redistribution.

Kukah (2019) remarked that the electoral dynamics in South Africa are similar to those in Nigeria, where both nations grapple with high levels of inequality that fuel the emergence of populist movements. The EFF's appeal to impoverished black voters in South Africa is akin to Buhari's support in Nigeria's struggling North, where promises of wealth redistribution and anti-corruption resonate strongly. In both scenarios, the ongoing economic inequality has led to low voter turnout among the poorest citizens, highlighting their growing disillusionment with the political system's ability to effect meaningful change.

While each country has unique political and historical contexts, the common thread in Brazil, India, South Africa, and Nigeria is how economic inequality reinforces populist voting patterns, particularly among the poor. In all four countries, left-leaning or populist candidates tend to garner significant support from economically marginalized regions, as seen with Lula in Brazil, the BSP in India, the EFF in South Africa, and Buhari in Nigeria. These candidates' appeal lies in their focus on redistributive policies, promises of social

welfare, and critiques of corruption (Cornia, 2014). However, economic inequality also creates voter apathy, particularly when promised reforms fail to materialize.

This has been evident in the declining voter turnout in Nigeria's 2019 election and South Africa's 2014 election, where disillusionment with the ruling party's ability to address inequality led to decreased political engagement (Southall, 2014). The same trend has been observed in Brazil, where the rise of Bolsonaro reflected voter dissatisfaction with the Workers' Party's handling of corruption and economic inequality (Zucco, 2019).

6. Summary and Conclusion

This study reveals several important findings. Firstly, it shows a strong link between economic inequality and voter apathy in Nigeria, where economically disadvantaged groups tend to participate less in politics due to their disillusionment with the political system. The research indicates that income differences greatly influence voting behaviour, as those with lower incomes often focus on immediate benefits rather than long-term policy effects, which can lead to practices like vote-buying. Additionally, the study highlights a regional aspect to this issue, noting that economic disparities across Nigeria's geopolitical zones affect party loyalty and voting trends. In wealthier areas, voters are more likely to back parties with comprehensive economic policies, while in less affluent regions, voting decisions are often swayed by ethnic and community ties. The research also points out that political elites take advantage of these economic divides to retain their power, thus perpetuating a cycle of inequality. Ultimately, the study suggests that even with Nigeria's progress in democracy, economic inequality continues to hinder truly representative electoral outcomes, indicating that tackling inequality could enhance political participation and strengthen democratic processes.

These findings have important implications for Nigeria's democratic consolidation, political participation, and economic development. Economic inequality undermines democratic consolidation by fostering voter apathy and widening social divides. A thriving democracy relies on broad and equal participation. However, in Nigeria, economic inequality discourages the poorest segments of society from taking part in elections, as they often feel disconnected from a system that overlooks their needs. This aligns with Lipset's (1959) argument that economic prosperity supports democratic stability, while poverty erodes it. Political participation is also affected, as economic disparities distort voter engagement.

According to Verba *et al.* (1995), political participation serves as a means of expressing civic equality, but in Nigeria, those facing economic hardship tend to focus on immediate benefits, such as vote-buying, rather than long-term democratic accountability. This trend hinders the growth of a politically active and informed electorate.

The findings emphasize that ongoing inequality obstructs inclusive growth in economic development and that inequality breeds political instability, which subsequently hampers economic advancement. In Nigeria, political elites take advantage of economic disparities, maintaining a cycle of inequality that stifles development. As Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) point out, having inclusive political institutions is essential for achieving sustainable economic growth. Therefore, tackling economic inequality could enhance political participation and representation, while also creating a pathway for more equitable and sustainable economic progress.

6.1. Policy Recommendations

6.1.1. Progressive Taxation System

Nigeria should explore the possibility of establishing a more progressive tax framework that increases the tax obligations for the wealthiest citizens and businesses. The additional funds could then be used to support social initiatives that aim to boost education, healthcare, and infrastructure in areas that are lacking.

6.1.2. Enhanced Electoral Education Programs

Launch nationwide campaigns aimed at educating citizens about their voting rights and the significance of political participation. This initiative should be managed by an independent entity, separate from the influences of the Nation's main electoral commission. By leveraging community centres, social media, and local leaders, we can enhance awareness and empower marginalized groups to take part in the electoral process.

6.1.3. Affirmative Action in Political Representation

It is essential for the Nigerian National Assembly to enact legislation that ensures a certain percentage of political roles are filled by individuals from economically disadvantaged communities. This could involve implementing quotas for women and youth, thereby reflecting the diverse makeup of the population in the political arena.

6.1.4. Investment in Community Development Programs

International donors might want to rethink their funding approach. It's essential that financial support goes directly to grassroots organizations that champion the rights of economically marginalized groups. By backing these movements, we can enhance their voices and impact in the political landscape.

The Nigerian government should halt investment in white-elephant projects that do not benefit the people and instead prioritize human capital development. Community-based initiatives aimed at skill acquisition should be developed, and entrepreneurship should be supported through improved access to credit for low-income individuals. By promoting economic empowerment, these programs can boost political engagement as people become more invested in their communities.

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