

Influence of Ethnic Identities on Voting Behaviour in 2019 National Assembly Elections in Gombe State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Gombe state is a multi-ethnic society with diverse backgrounds, where distrust and animosity among the ethnic identities run deep. Contrary to the liberal principles of universal adult suffrage, politicians have been manipulating ethnic identities to influence voting behaviour to feather their political nests since the creation of Gombe state in 1996. This has led to the deprivation of the voters of their full rights to freedom of choice and the undermining of democracy in the state. The literature review shows scanty study has been carried out in the area. Therefore, this paper examined the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour in the 2019 National Assembly elections in Gombe state. A qualitative design and a case study approach are adopted. Purposive sampling and snowballing were used for the selection of informants. Apart from the review of secondary materials, primary data collection was through online Zoom, WhatsApp, and phone calls interviews under various categories of informants. Rational Choice Theory is employed and thematic analysis was used for data interpretation. Findings revealed abject poverty, low level of political education and culture among the voters mainly made it easier for the politicians to manipulate ethnic identities to influence voting behaviour.

Keywords: Deprivation, Ethnic Identities, Voting Behaviour, 2019 Elections, National Assembly.

Introduction

Democracy is a political system that guarantees the full right to freedom of choice and equal participation of the voters in a free and fair periodic election. Hence, from the advanced

democracies of Europe, the U.S. and the emerging democracies of Africa, Asia and Latin America, the concern for the freedom to democratically vote for leaders of choice among the available alternatives has been on the front burner (United Nations (U.N), 1948; Constitution Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN), 1999; Dahl, 2015; Aloko & Abdullahi, 2014). According to Douglas (2013), voting is a form of grassroots decision-making and one of the fundamental democratic rights of the electorates, through which the notion of the sovereign will of the people is affirmed. This means voting is a way through which individual voters aggregate their preferences into a collective decision in the electoral process. In other words, voting is the act of formal or legitimate indication of the voter's choice of a candidate at an election (Kalin & Sambanis, 2018). Therefore, voting behaviour reflects the factors that influence how individuals or identities, such as ethnic identities, vote for or against some candidates in an election (Babalola, 2020; Andersen & Heath, 2000).

Nigeria is a heterogenous and multi-ethnic state, (CFRN 1999), where the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour dates back to the 1923 colonial period (Uwaifo, 2016 & Oboh, 2017). In the opinion of some scholars, ethnic identity is a natural occurrence because we do not choose identities; instead, we are born into specific ethnic identities (Adeforit, 2018). Ethnic identities are subsets of identity categories in which associative attributes with ancestral descent determine membership eligibility (Chandra, 2006). Sadly, the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour is one of the major challenges of democratic elections in Nigeria (Nnabuihe, et al., 2014). In their submission, Tar & Shetima (2010), Egobueze and Ojirika (2017), explain that the political elites selfishly manipulate affiliations such as ethnic identities to influence voting behaviour to their political advantage.

Gombe is one of the states in Nigeria with diverse ethnic backgrounds. It is composed of three Senatorial Districts and six Federal House of Representatives constituencies (CFRN, 1999; Higazi & Lar, 2015; Manpower, 2016). Since the return of democratic rule in 1999, there have been six democratic elections, where different social identities, such as ethnic identities play a significant role in influencing voting behaviour in the various elections conducted (Sule, 2019; Higazi, 2015). The influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour in Gombe state has always generated tension and anxiety leading to the deprivation of the full rational rights of the voters to choose their representatives.

Statement of Problem

Voters are the fulcrums of liberal democracy because democracy guarantees the voters the freedom and rights to fully participate in choosing their representatives in the various elective positions available (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948; Bratton, 2012; Douglas 2013; Toros & Birch, 2019). However, Sule (2019); Douglas (2013), explain that ethnic identities have always been manipulated by some politicians to influence voting behaviour, leading to the deprivation of the full rights of the voters to rational choice. The deprivation of the rights of the voters in the electoral process has a lot of implications, such as questionable election results, the emergence of incompetent representatives, ferocious inter-ethnic acrimony and the polarisation of the voters into hostile ethnic camps (McCauley, 2014 and Toros & Birch, 2019). Furthermore, the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour could lead to voter apathy, low voter turnout or political violence (Human Rights Watch, 2011; Alhaji & Wali, 2018). Thus, the right of the voters to freedom of choice and the democratisation process in Gombe state is hampered.

Aim and Objectives

This paper aims to examine the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour in the 2019 National Assembly elections in Gombe state, and this will be guided by the following specific objectives.

1. To explore the reasons for the manipulation of ethnic identities to influence voting behaviour in the 2019 National Assembly elections in Gombe state.
2. To identify the strategies used by the politicians in manipulating ethnic identities to influence voting behaviour in the 2019 National Assembly elections in Gombe state.
3. To investigate the outcome of the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour in the 2019 National Assembly elections in Gombe state.

Literature Review

This involves the critical review and analysis of relevant themes in the subject of study based on the following sub-headings: The nature of voting behaviour, political culture and voting behaviour in Nigeria, and influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour in Gombe state.

The Nature of Voting Behaviour

Voting behaviour expresses the will of the people, explains why voters vote the way they do, accords legitimacy to the government and ensures sustainable democracy. Voting behaviour is concerned with the factors that influence how individuals or identities vote for a particular political party or candidate that aspires for public office. It includes the examination of individual psychological states or mechanisms, such as perception, emotion, and motivation, and their relationship with the voting decision, as well as social trends, such as the mechanism of communication and their effect on elections (UK Essays, 2016). According to Rule (2014), historical trends in voting behaviour or abstention from voting have shown linkages with the socioeconomic characteristics of a voter and the spatial context within which his political socialization has occurred. Among other factors, are levels of education and awareness, income, race, ethnicity, age group, social status (such as class), religious affiliation or beliefs, urbanization, and regional peculiarities. Rule (2014) further argues that identity similarly plays a role in Australian elections, where elections that took place from 1966 to 2001, showed that poor, young, foreign-born, and male voters tended to vote more for "left-wing" parties, while the voters resident in wealthier neighbourhoods voted for "right-wing" parties.

Macroeconomic factors did not appear to affect entrenched partisanship (Leigh, 2005). In the UK, regionalism is another crucial factor that appears to influence voting behaviour (Pattie & Allsopp, 1988; Johnston et al., 2005). However, the north-south divide between supporters of the Labour and Conservative Parties, respectively, is not as sharp in 2011 as it was in the 1980s. Premdas (2004) argue that in multi-ethnic countries like Trinidad and Tobago, ethnic identities or social cleavages play a significant role in their politics. Power struggles and conflict between the two major racial/ethnic groups of the Indian population (452,709/39.60%) and the African population (444,804/38.91%) (1990 Population Census) have always tilted dangerously towards ethnic identities.

As has been the case with Trinidad, one ethnic group in a primarily ethnically bipolar state had captured power and in the perception of the other major ethnic community instituted an order that was ethnically repressive and discriminatory. An election campaign assumed the form of identity rivalry expressed in a collective communal struggle in which the claims of each community as a whole reignited anew and expressed in strict terms. In survey research by Toğuşlu et al (2014) on European countries such as Turkey, Germany, France, Spain, the

United Kingdom, Poland, Norway, Sweden and Belgium, portrays that ethnicity creates "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991).

Electoral behaviour also depends on age/generation (Marsh, 2007; Goerres, 2007); ethnic/dialect and cultural affiliation are also fundamental determinants of voter choice in the African context (Conroy-Krutz, 2013; Lindberg and Morrison, 2008). Income level is also a major determining factor of electoral behaviour in Africa (Akhter and Sheikh, 2014; Banerjee and Chaudhuri, 2016) because candidates "buy" votes with gifts and money. The fact that Sub-Saharan African countries are poor and therefore the majority of the population have low income or do not have an income favours the phenomenon of corruption. Exogenous factors deal with other variables like socioeconomic factors, political factors, situational factors, and candidate profiles, which influence the voting decision. Socioeconomic factors also play a significant role, as voters seem concerned about a retrospective or prospective vote (Leigh, 2005). Political and institutional factors are also keen determinants (Lewis-Beck, 2005), in which case the turnout also depends on many factors like the nature of the election, party popularity, mobilization of political parties, electoral system, and operating procedures.

Political Culture and Voting Behaviour in Nigeria

Political culture drives the behaviour of people in communities, countries, or societies. In a multi-ethnic-religious society or state, sub-cultures exist side-by-side with the national culture. Therefore, the value orientations of a society or a people are a derivative of its traditions and beliefs which sums up its political culture (Adeniyi, 2010). According to scholars such as Almond and Verba (1963); Lucian & Verba (1965), political culture has to do with how people perceive, interpret, and react to a political phenomenon or phenomena. It is the totality of the general beliefs that shape the attitudes of the citizens of a country towards political institutions, partisan politics, its legitimacy and the overall political activities of the country. In other words, the political culture of a country influences or determines how the various ethnic, religious, regional, or social class cleavages or identities interact and react to political issues, which ultimately influences their voting behaviour (Nebeife, et al., 2021; Okeke, 2017).

Nigeria's political or voting behaviour is wrapped up in its political culture. With its roots in the colonial period, Nigeria's voting behaviour, right from the colonial period to the current Fourth Republic (1999 – date), has largely been woven around ethnicity, religion, regionalism, money politics, political violence, electoral fraud, marginalization of minority groups, and gender inequality (Nebeife, et al., 2021; Sule & Tal, 2018; Agba, et al., 2010). Scholars such as Ejiofor & Udeogu (2017); Alhaji, et al (2018), describe Nigeria's political culture or its attitudinal proclivity towards the country's political system, as that of impunity. Such development, they argue, has been working against the grains of democratic principles and the democratization process in the country.

The Influence of Ethnic Identities on Voting Behaviour in Gombe State

We cannot talk of voting behaviour without an election. Since its creation in 1996, there have been six democratic elections in Gombe state. The first democratic election in Gombe state began with the birth of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999. These elections are, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections This section is a review of the previous literature on the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour in Gombe state. The goal is to identify the existing gap and endeavour to fill it. It has been observed that like in many

other states in Nigeria, ethnic identities play a significant role in influencing voting behaviour in Gombe state (Sule, 2019). Some scholars such as Alhaji, et al (2018) argued that in their overbearing ambition to acquire political power by all means, some weak and unpopular political gladiators resort to the use of thugs or ethnic militias to manipulate voting behaviour. Some of these militias who pose as party agents unleash violent attacks against the voters perceived to have voted against their preferred ethnic identities candidates. Sometimes ethnic militias exert a lot of pressure and even threaten to deal with any voter who fails to vote for their favoured parties or candidates (Human Rights Watch Report, 2007 & 2011; Alhaji, et al., 2018).

In his study of the 2019 general elections, Sule (2019), used a qualitative design and RCT as a theoretical framework. The scholar argues that the voting pattern showed the effect of some factors such as income, religion and media in influencing public opinion to select leaders at different levels. The study suggested, among others, that there is a need for political re-orientation to do away with ethnicity, money politics, and religion in subsequent elections. The study's focus is on the examination of the 2019 general elections in the state of Gombe. The voting pattern has to do with the particular or regularly repeated way that voting is organized, that happens, that is done, or that is taking place. Voting pattern is based on the interplay between different factors in different situations or environments. Generally, both objective factors that cut across a population and subjectively held sentiments determine the pattern of voting and the choices made in an electoral contest. The former may entail, among other things, the socioeconomic status of the voters and ideological persuasion while the latter may consider sectarian issues like race or gender (Bwana, 2009).

This work shares with Sule's (2019) study in the application of qualitative design, research area, theory and year. However, while he focused on the 2019 general elections in Gombe state, this work is limited to the National Assembly (Legislative elections) in the state. While this work focuses on examining the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour in the said elections, Sule (2019) was concerned with voter turnout, religion, money, bribery and corruption, clientele politics, regional factors, and violence (Sule, 2019). Furthermore, while the scholar focused on voting patterns in general; this study is concerned specifically with the influence of ethnic and religious identities on the voting behaviour of the voters.

Although he used rational choice theory, he used only the instrumental approach, neglecting the expressive approach, which is important in analysing altruistic voting behaviour. This study used both the instrumental and the expressive approaches of the rational choice theory in the analysis of the voting behaviour of the electorates or informants. Furthermore, the previous study is weak due to its concentration on the analysis of the electoral results instead of the critical analysis of the voting behaviour. It is not a systematic study borne out of the perspective of the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour in Nigeria's 2019 National Assembly elections in Gombe state.

In his analysis of electoral misconduct in the 2019 general elections, Haruna (2020), aimed at or focused on examining "the nature, causes and implications of electoral Misconducts" in the electoral process in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria, through a case study of Gombe state. The scholar applied a quantitative research design. He administered questionnaires to the target informants and conducted interviews as means of obtaining primary data. He also used previous literature to obtain secondary data. Furthermore, the scholar applied two theoretical frameworks, namely, Social Learning Theory and Culture of Poverty Theory.

The scholar laments that the fortunes of democracy as a reliable form of government are increasingly being eroded due to the prevalence of unchecked multiple forms of electoral misconduct perpetrated by the political class through various means. He argues that electoral misconduct manifests in the areas of ballot box stuffing and snatching, underage voting, vote-selling and vote-buying, and the manipulation of election results by politicians who wants to grab political power at all costs. Regarding the views of scholars such as Ugwuja (2015), the paper highlights three phases of electoral misconduct. These include 1) the Electoral manipulation phase, 2) the voters' manipulation phase, and 3) the election results manipulation phase.

The scholar argues that all these anti-democratic practices are carried out by unscrupulous politicians and their collaborators, who have been instrumental in posing threats to the democratization process in Gombe state and Nigeria in general. Under the phase of electoral rules manipulation, the scholar maintains that politicians selfishly distort electoral laws, such as omitting the names of some voters perceived to be their opponents, in favour of their parties or candidates. The second phase, which is the manipulation of the voters, involves the alteration or distortion of the preferences of the voters since it does not favour the candidates or parties of the perpetrators of such electoral fraud. Furthermore, under this phase, he explains that some politicians exploit the high poverty level among many of the voters to buy their votes, use thugs to intimidate some voters and also engage in over-balloting to increase the vote tally of their preferred candidates.

Under the third phase, voting materials are deliberately under-supplied to opposition party strong-holds to the extent that some voters will end up being disenfranchised due to insufficient electoral materials such as ballot papers. Under this phase, electoral staff or security agents at the various polling centres connive with some politicians to harass supporters of opposition parties.

This study shares part of the scope of the study under review (Haruna, 2020), i.e., both types of research were conducted based on the 2019 elections in Gombe state. However, while this study is based on the examination of the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour in the National Assembly elections in Gombe state, the study under review is based on general forms of electoral misconduct cutting across the presidential, gubernatorial, National and State Assemblies elections or all the elective positions in 2019 general elections. Furthermore, while this study identified the deprivation of the full rights of the voters to rational choice as its main problem, the study under review is preoccupied with the issue of unspecific or all forms of electoral misconduct.

This study feels the scope or focus of the research is too wide for a thirteen-page journal article, hence it could not enable a deeper or in-depth analysis, and this is exactly one of the weak areas of the research because the scholar touched on only a very few issues of electoral misconduct leaving a lot of them unattended to. The scholar would have done better if he had narrowed the focus of the study to some aspects of election misconduct, which could have enabled him to go in-depth thereby bringing out some critical issues or perspectives about the issue of electoral misconduct in Gombe state.

The literature reviewed above shows no systematic previous study that expressly addressed the issue of the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour in the 2019 National Assembly elections in Gombe state. Even from the few attempts made by some scholars, most of them have tilted towards addressing the issues of voter turnout, ethnic and religious violence, political thuggery, electoral misconduct, and a host of other electoral malpractices.

Therefore, the purpose of choosing this topic is to fill the existing gap created by the lack of attention given to the area by previous studies.

Theoretical Framework

Rational Choice Theory: Origin and Proponents

The Rational Choice Theory (RCT) first emerged in the field of microeconomics as a theory in the study of consumer behaviour (Oppenheimer, 2008). As a political theory, the origin of the (RCT) could be traced to the classical work of Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), who argued that political institutions function through the choices of individuals, based on cost and benefit calculation or interest satisfaction analysis (Oppenheimer, 2008). However, in recent times, scholars submitted that RCT emerged as a political science theory between the 1950s and the 1960s in the United States of America during “the behavioural revolution” in the politics U.S. Anthony Downs has been credited as the first scholar who applied RCT in the study of party competition and voting behaviour (Hindess, 2007; Nakaska, 2010). The RCT is a theory of rational self-interest in political behaviour based on cost-benefit evaluation, which assumes individual voters make orderly preferential choices that reflect their interests. It is conceptualized as a means of realizing the voter's interest based on cost-benefit analysis. (Harrop and Miller 1987; Gill & Gainous, 2002).

Assumptions

The RCT assumptions focus on the voter's rational self-interest based on cost-benefit analysis and utility maximization. It assumes that individuals are rational by nature, i.e., they are capable of logical thinking and reasoning. As rational actors, individuals calculate the cost and benefit of their decisions before finally making a choice or preference among the available alternatives that will maximally satisfy their interests (Becker, 1976; Elster, 1989). In political science, particularly in the study of political behaviour, for example, the rational voter votes to maximize the utility of his vote by assessing regime performance or which candidate or political party will best satisfy his short-term, medium-term, or long-term interest, and vote accordingly (Downs, 1957). However, Downs (1957) posits that sometimes voters could vote out of expressive motivation or altruism in support of the overall interest of a community or country. Similarly, the scholar submits that sometimes politicians make decisions that transcend their interests even when they know it can cost them some votes.

Applicability

Kim (1997) argued that the application of the RCT in the field of microeconomics could as well be used in political science or the study of politics. This thinking is buttressed by Buchanan & Tullock (1962), who contended that in political science studies, the average politician or individual acts within the same principles of rational reasoning when he participates as a consumer in market situations. This point of view was later re-affirmed by Tullock (1976) when he stated that: “Voters and customers are essentially the same people. Mr Smith buys and votes; he is the same man in the supermarket and the voting booth.”

The RCT is applicable in the context of this study because the decision to vote for or against a candidate is a function of rational choice. For example, some of the informants revealed that ethnic sentiments have been significantly used to manipulate and influence voting behaviour in Gombe state because the ethnic identities in the state do not trust each other, hence, they use ethnic sentiments to influence voting behaviour in their favour. Some politicians who are not competent or popular, use ethnicity to cover their weaknesses and to easily win elections.

The foregoing analysis reveals that politicians manipulate ethnic identities leaders and other voters collaborated and sowed seeds of ethnic divisions or distrust among the electorates and manipulated the same divisions or sentiments to influence voting behaviour for their political and economic advantages. This study adopted the RCT as its theoretical framework due to its suitability in explaining the context, the literature, the methodology, the research findings and discussions. Therefore, the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour is better explained using the RCT.

Methodology

Research Design

The paper adopted a qualitative research design and a case study approach for data collection because it provides easy access to a large body of data through the use of a suitable strategy as prescribed by (Creswell, 2014; Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). The design involved the collection of data through words, maps, graphs, audio-visuals and other scientific methods to gather extensive data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). The research topic covered a single case (in this case, voting behaviour), which allows for in-depth data collection (in-depth interview in this case). A case study approach involves a geographical location, and boundary, and is time-bound (Creswell, 2014). In this study, therefore, the location is Gombe state, the boundary is the National Assembly, and the time-bound is the 2019 elections.

Study Population

In this paper, key informants were identified through purposive and snowballing techniques based on the informant's selection criteria of knowledgeability of the study area, experience, status/position, and willingness to participate, as recommended by (Creswell, 2014; Merriam 2009). The selection of 18 informants is in line with (Dworkin, 2014) who posits that for an in-depth qualitative interview, 05-50 informants are enough. However, the researcher was guided by the principle of data saturation, which is 'the point at which the data collection process no longer offers any new or relevant data', as opined by (Creswell, 2014; Merriam 2009). Based on the views of these prominent scholars, a total of 18 informants were selected and interviewed across the three geopolitical zones in Gombe state. Below is the Table of a cluster of informants' selection and identification codes.

Table 1.1

Cluster of informants' selection categories and identification codes.

S/No.	Categories	No. of informants	Codes
1	Community Informants Category (Grassroots)		
	i. Partisan voters	3	PGR
	ii. Non-partisan voters	6	NPGR
	iii. Community/Ethnic Identities Leaders (District Heads)	3	CEIL
	iv. Christian Religious Leader	1	RL1
	v. Muslim Religious Leader	1	RL2
	vi. Non-Governmental Organisation (NIREC)	1	NGO
2	Administrative Informant Category		
	i. Government Official (Senior staff of NOA)	1	GO
3	Academicians informants Category (University Lecturers)		
	i. Academician1	2	AMC1
	ii. Academician2		AMC2
	Total number of informants	18	

Data Collection

The data were collected mainly from primary and secondary sources. However, before commencing the interview, approval was granted by the UPM Ethics Committee apart from the approval granted by the main supervisor in the Research Committee. The study used online Zoom meetings, WhatsApp and phone calls to interview data collection. This is in line with the position of Creswell (2014) who maintain that in a qualitative interview, a face-to-face or telephone interview is acceptable. The interview was conducted using some selected relevant informants in the area of political behaviour. A Contact Person was recruited for each of the three geopolitical zones in Gombe state to facilitate the arrangement for the interview between the researcher and the selected informants. All the interviews were recorded by the researcher. The semi-structured interview which supports flexible questions to allow for the extraction of more data from the informants was applied. Interviews were conducted in English and Hausa languages and lasted between 45 to 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

In this study, the researcher used thematic analysis, discussions and interpretation of the data collected from the field, based on the six stages of data analysis propounded by (Braun & Clarke, 2006 & 2013). In terms of validity, this study applied methodological triangulation as the basic or primary approach to verification. This research was conducted in compliance with the ethical principles of conducting qualitative research. Before the beginning of the study, the researcher ensured the validation of the research instruments. Moreover, the researcher ensured the anonymity of the informants' identities and the confidentiality of the information supplied.

Findings and Discussion

Under this section, the raw data were analysed, interpreted and discussed based on the themes and sub-themes highlighted from the informants' interview transcripts as below.

Influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour in the 2019 National Assembly Elections in Gombe State

Ethnic Solidarity (Political Influence)

Gombe state is a multi-ethnic society where an election period is characterized by coordinated campaign trains and strategies by the various political parties in their bids to canvass for votes in support of their parties and candidates during elections. Consequently, the theme of political influence emerged, where relationships are established between the politicians and the voters. Such relationships were the subthemes of ethnic solidarity and the struggle for political power. Given this development, some informants observed that ethnic identity solidarity became the modus operandi among the politicians and the voters as a means of psychologically entrenching ethnic consciousness among the voters to manipulate their emotions and easily win the elections. For instance, an informant stated that some voters were influenced to vote based on *"...ethnic solidarity based on the feeling that it is better to vote for in-group candidates than vote for out-group candidates who are seen as opponents."* (Informant PGR 1).

As noted above by informant PGR 1, ethnic identity members have strong respect and attachments to their leaders, which is why the politicians seek their support during elections. Many of the voters had been indoctrinated to think that candidates who do not belong to their ethnic identity were opponents who should not be trusted. In this regard, an informant stated:

"... most of the voters have been brainwashed by the politicians to think that voting for his/her ethnic identity is the best because of the belief that any candidate outside his/her ethnic identity is an opponent who should not be trusted.....It is a kind of indoctrination of the voters towards ethnic solidarity by the politicians or the political elites..... In this regard, the voter will not think critically. Take suicide bombers, they are good examples of indoctrination." (Informant ACM 2).

In this regard, the informant has clearly shown that the politicians collaborate or conspire with some ethnic identities leaders to indoctrinate the voters to vote only for candidates from their ethnic identities so that the voters could be easily manipulated in carrying out their directives on the choice of which candidate or candidates the voters should vote for even when the voter is alone in the voting or polling booth. By citing the example of suicide bombers, the informant has shown how the ethnic indoctrination of the voters was effective in influencing the voting behaviour of the voters along with ethnic identities solidarity.

The study discovered that in the struggle or campaign to capture political power, political parties, candidates, or politicians tended to entrench ethnic solidarity to easily manipulate ethnic identities divisions or sentiments to influence voting behaviour in their favour. An informant narrated that:

"Gombe state is deeply divided along ethnic lines that was why the politicians manipulated ethnicity and easily influenced the voters to vote on the basis of ethnic sentiment in the 2019 National Assembly elections." (Informant NPGR1).

Another informant agrees with the above submission citing some justifications for the phenomenon as follows:

“Ethnic sentiments have been significantly used to manipulate and influence voting behaviour in Gombe state because of some reasons. The ethnic identities in the state do not trust each other, and because of this, they use ethnic sentiments to influence voting behaviour in their favour. Some politicians who are not competent or good use ethnicity to cover their weaknesses and to easily win an election”. (Informant PGR1).

The above informant submission is a clear demonstration of how the politicians generate distrust among the ethnic identities as a weapon for injecting ethnic solidarity among the voters to easily win elections. Similarly, a grassroots informant further observed and submitted that

“... Ethnic identity politics is propagated by the inordinate ambition of some politicians who want to get power by all means possible. The political elites have created ethnic divisions and distrust among the citizens and the voters alike and they manipulate these divisions to win elections and control state power and resources to their advantage. In short, the politicians have succeeded in politically weaponizing ethnicity..... that is why they have been influencing voting behaviour in every election conducted in Gombe state so far.” (Informant NPGR1).

The foregoing analysis reveals that politicians, ethnic identities leaders and other voters collaborated and sowed seeds of ethnic divisions or distrust among the electorates and manipulated the same divisions or sentiments to influence voting behaviour for their immediate political and economic advantages. This scenario clearly shows that the motivation for the manipulation of ethnic identities in the electoral process is not primarily aimed at improving the lives of the voters as they are made to believe, but rather to mainly advance the political and economic interests of the politicians and their collaborators.

Struggle for political power (Political Influence)

The struggle for political power is one of the subthemes that emerged under the theme of political influence. Election periods in Gombe state are periods of intense struggle for political power among the diverse ethnic identities in Gombe state. In this regard, some weak politicians used ethnic identities and influenced the elections in their favour. For example, an informant stated that

“... most of the politicians are non-performing ones, and you know once a politician is not performing the best way is to resort to the exploitation of these ethnic divisions to fight his way to political power. Because if a politician is a performing one, he may exhibit or display his performance before the electorates to get voted in the next election.” (Informant ACM1)

It is the view of the above informant that there are competent and incompetent or performing and non-performing politicians who aspire to be voted into public office and that it is the incompetent ones who had nothing to show or convince the voters to vote for them that resorted to the manipulation of undue ethnic sentiments to win the election. Such was the situation in the 2019 National Assembly elections in Gombe state. In this case, the politicians

who held public office were quite aware that they did not perform well and had the feeling that the electorates or voters may not vote for them again.

Similarly, another informant stated that some of the politicians were so over-ambitious to grab power by all means. The informant opines that

“... the inordinate ambition of some politicians, they want to get power by all means possible. The political elites have created ethnic divisions and distrust among the citizens and the voters alike and they manipulate these divisions to win elections and control state power and resources to their advantage. In short, the politicians have succeeded in politically weaponizing ethnicity and religion and that is why they have been influencing voting behaviour in every election conducted in Gombe state so far.” (Informant NPGR1).

It is the obvious view of the above informant that some of the politicians were power-drunk and used whatever means, such as sowing the seeds of ethnic division and distrust among the voters and manipulating the same to achieve their political goal of winning the election. It shows how sensitive the issues of ethnic identities have been, and why they have been weaponized into instruments of political power in the political arena in Gombe state. It also shows some of the voters lacked political education because it would be difficult to use ethnicity and religion to manipulate politically educated and conscious voters.

Low literacy and political awareness levels (Social influence), immensely facilitated the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour in Gombe state. For example, one of the gatekeeper informants stated

“Secondly, due to the low literacy level and lack of political awareness of the voters, illiteracy played a great role in influencing ethnic identities voting behaviour also. Our people don’t care about the type of person they vote for, as long as the candidate belongs to his ethnicity, they vote for him.” (Informant CEIL2)

The views of the above informant reveal how politically deadly the issue of low literacy and low political education levels could be, by making voters blindly vote for a candidate solely based on ethnic belonging.

The desire for Infrastructural Development (Economic Influence)

Infrastructural development refers to the provision of infrastructures such as portable drinking water, road, or electricity. Due to the poor state of infrastructural development among the communities in Gombe state, the desire for infrastructural development has been ethnicised by politicians to influence voting behaviour and advance their political interests. This scenario was succinctly captured by a grassroots informant when he stated

“When your opponents control political power, they will dominate you. Your opponents will develop their areas and leave your areas undeveloped. So, you should all vote for our ethnic identities candidates to be free from domination, poverty, and lack of infrastructural development.” (Informant NPGR 2).

Theoretically, the views of the above informants further show that the behaviour of the politicians towards the voters and the ethnic leaders was guided by their instrumental rational self-interests since the goal was to win the elections. Studies conducted by Shehu (2018); Chimee (2021); Okolie et al (2021) explain that politicians fan the embers of ethnicity among the electorates and manipulate them to influence voting behaviour and achieve their political objectives. A study by Marcus (2015) also reveals that the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour has been prompted by the selfish interests of the political class, which have negative implications on democracy and national integration in Gombe state and Nigeria. The above analysis, therefore, shows the data and the literature are in line with one another and are also in consonance with the rational choice theory assumption of cost-benefit calculation and self-interest.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper concludes that the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour is a global political problem that deprives the voters of their full rights to freely vote for leaders of their choice, thereby leading to the stunted growth of the democratic culture. Nigeria is identified by this study as a multi-ethnic and plural society with over 400 ethnic groups. The ethnic composition, instead of being channelled into political cohesion and harmony, is manipulated by the political elites to secure power during electoral contests. The paper also concludes that the outcome of the 2019 National Assembly elections in Gombe State exhibits a high level of the character of elites' manipulation of ethnicity, which was hinged on emotional appeal to ethnic identities leaders, accompanied by some financial inducement and in some instances, by the threat of political violence or coercion. Thugs are deployed during the electoral process to harass and cow the voters to submit to the selfish wishes of the politicians. The paper further concludes that some of the consequences of the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour are misrepresentation, misgovernance, failure to institute democratic culture and values, abuse of the electoral process and manipulation of electoral victory by the elites.

The paper opines that if these manipulative tendencies continue, Gombe State may not have a sound and quality representation in the National Assembly while good governance will continue to elude the people of Gombe state and Nigeria in general. Given the foregoing analysis, this paper finally concludes that the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour has narrowed democratic elections to mere ethnic identities chauvinism, which has led to the emergence of political elites cartels who have been arm-twisting and subjecting the rights of the voters in the electoral process to their whims and caprices in furtherance of their inordinate political ambitions, thereby depriving the voters of their full rights to freedom of choice in the electoral process, sabotaging the democratization process and disabling democracy in Gombe state.

Therefore, to mitigate the problem of the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour, the following are hereby recommended.

1. There should be a sustainable poverty alleviation program in each of the administrative wards in Gombe state. This is quite necessary because poverty has been identified as one of the background factors in the manipulation of ethnic identities to influence voting behaviour in Gombe state.
2. There should be massive grassroots political education and public awareness campaigns against the manipulation of ethnic identities to influence voting behaviour by the state government in collaboration with each of the eleven Local Government

Councils (LGCs) in Gombe state. This is important because the lack of political education and awareness among the voters in Gombe state made it easier for the elites' political cartels to subordinate the electoral rights of the voters to advance their selfish political interests.

- 3 Relevant Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) need to intensify their civil liberty engagement of the masses at the grassroots level to inculcate proper political ethics, values and civic engagement in the electoral process.
- 4 Ethnic identities leaders, in conjunction with the various community gate-keepers within the local administrative setting, religious leaders and other strands of opinion leaders, have a great role to play in disabusing the minds of the voters against the dangers of ethnic politics and the manipulation of voters;
- 5 Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other international donors as well as partner countries that are supporting Nigeria in democratisation should dedicate significant time and resources to enlightening the grassroots voters, especially in Gombe state where the level of political education and democratic culture is low.
- 6 Furthermore, academics should engage in rigorous political education and public awareness campaign through seminars and workshops across the state. Furthermore, field research and policy-oriented programmes that will mitigate the influence of ethnic identities on voting behaviour in the electoral process should be a priority.
- 7 There should be operational and enforceable rules and regulations against the manipulation of ethnic identities to influence voting behaviour by political parties. Stiff penalties, such as the banning of political parties found wanting in this regard.

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