

## Exploring The Social Factors Influencing Voting Behavior in 2019 National Assembly Elections in Gombe State, Nigeria

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### Abstract

Gombe state is a diverse society where social factors significantly influence voting behavior. Voting behavior reflects a society's political culture and it is concerned with factors that influence voting choices. Therefore, exploring the social factors influencing voting behavior in the 2019 elections is crucial in understanding how the politicians manipulated social forces to achieve their political interests. The paper applies classical liberal democracy theory and a qualitative case study design. Purposive and snowballing selection of informants was conducted through online Zoom in-depth interviews. A thematic approach was used in data analysis. Findings reveal politicians intimidated voters by manipulating ethno-religious sentiment, abject poverty, and low literacy/political education levels, to significantly influence voting behavior to their advantage. The paper recommends government and NGOs should give utmost priority to improving literacy rate, political education level, and poverty alleviation through skills acquisition. There should be zero tolerance for corruption and strict enforcement of the rule of law, where sacred cow treatment is discouraged. Furthermore, the paper recommends farther research in the study area covering the whole of Nigeria using quantitative design to enable for the enrichment of the literature on electoral matters, political behavior, and the influence of social factors in national elections.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Voting Behaviour, Social Factors, Influence, Ethno-religious.

### Introduction

Voting behavior is one of the major determinants of the type of democratic election in a society (Obani & Odalonu 2019; Akhter & Sheikh 2014). Democracy espouses inclusiveness; equality; universal suffrage or the right and freedom of citizens to vote and be voted for; the right to freedom of expression in the affairs of the country or community which includes the right to vote and be voted for, thereby producing a government by the consent of the people

through competitive free and fair periodic elections (Muller-Rommel & Geibel, 2020; Warren, 2017; Appadorai, 1975 & 1979). Under a democratic dispensation, all votes are accorded the same weight and the principle of one man one vote holds sway (Dahl et al., 2003). It is only through the upholding of the principles of democratic voting behavior that the leaders can lay claim to legitimate authority over the people. It is equally through the exercise of those democratic values that the citizens can unequivocally hold their leaders to account for their stewardship while in power. Therefore, the free verdict of the voters in the electoral process should be the benchmark for any system that lays claim to the practice of liberal democracy. Hence, democracy should be seen as the legitimate government of the people, freely chosen by the people and exists to serve the people because the people are the custodians of democracy (Muller-Rommel & Geibel, 2020; Dalton et al., 2007).

Nigeria as an emerging democracy, and the biggest in Africa, is currently undergoing its most enduring democratic experiment in the political history of the nation. However, the elements of voting behaviour including ethnicity, religious sentiment, regional divide, and other social plurality manifest in the process. Gombe state and Nigeria in general, is a plural society of several descriptions, that include political, ethnic, religious, economic, or social dimensions. This paper examined the social factors influencing voting behaviour in the 2019 national assembly elections in Gombe State. The liberal form of democracy is adopted because it emphasizes the liberties, rights of the citizens, and the freedom of the voters to choose the candidates of their choice in any election held in the state (Steinmetz, 2021).

In democratic elections, social factors contribute to influencing political or voting behavior in many countries across the globe. Social factors are those things that could positively or negatively affect a person's lifestyle or behaviour. Social factors such as religion, level of education or political education, employment, income level or economic status (wealth or poverty), significantly influence human behaviour, especially voting behaviour (Potgieter, 2013; Antunes, 2010; Brady, et al., 1995). Social factors include poverty, unemployment, low literacy, low political education and awareness levels, drug abuse and addiction, conflict among the various competing parties, and ethnic and religious identities. These factors are known to influence many aspects of human endeavours, including voting behaviour (Sule, 2019; Olanrewaju, et. al., 2017; & Ogbu, 2014). In other words, since party politics and voting choice are about who influences who, what, how, and why; social factors are known to trigger the influence of voting behaviour not only in advanced democracies but also in several emerging democracies across the globe such as Nigeria, thereby affecting voting, the rational voting behaviour of the electorates and hindering the consolidation of democracy (Agbor, 2019; Green, et al., 2002; Akhter & Sheikh, 2014).

The act of voting in an election is unquestionably one of the fundamental pillars of liberal democracy and the voting behaviour of the citizens is the embodiment of a society's political culture transmitted through the socialization processes in a particular community or society (Almond & Verba, 1963). Voting is a way of expressing approval or disapproval of public office holders or administrative authority's policies, programs, and decisions. It is a means of aggregating individual preferences to form a collective decision in an election. In other words, voting is the action of a voter in formally indicating his or her preference or choice among the array of candidates or political parties during an election (Kalin & Sambanis, 2018; Oriavwote, 2000). This shows that free and fair election gives confidence and allows the voters to freely

choose their representatives; hence voting is the most distinctive imperative form of political participation in liberal democratic societies. Therefore, the study of voting behaviour is ultimately about the factors that influence voting choices under a democratic electoral system (Babalola, 2020).

Voting behaviour relates to the understanding of what motivates people to vote the way they do during an election. In other words, what factors influence the choice of certain parties or candidates? What motivates or influences a voter to vote for party Y and against party X? Understanding the voting behaviour of a people should reflect the context of the political culture and socialization of the given society (Almond & Verba, 1963). This means that the political socialization process and the political culture that emerges from it determines the voting behaviour of the society under consideration. Hence, the study and analysis of voting behaviour in an election incorporate the voter's psychological state of mind, the type of political socialization of the voters, and the institutional orientations of the voter, society, or polity in general (Antunes, 2010; Akhter & Sheikh, 2014).

Election and the factors that influence voting behaviour are at the heart of liberal democratic system of government. The fate of parties or candidates who engage in competitive election in the struggle for political power is determined by the voting decisions of the electorates. Literature review reveal that politicians use various strategies or means such as the influence of social factors to outwit each other to clinch victory in the electoral process. Therefore, a democratic election is a major driver of the citizens political participation, especially in the choice of leaders and the formation legitimate government (Adetoye & Omilusi, 2015). Literature review further show that politicians do go out of their ways to influence voting behaviour through the manipulation of undemocratic variables such as ethnicity, religion, poverty, and low political education levels to influence voting behaviour to gain political power ascendancy (Obani & Odalonu, 2019).

### **Statement of Problem**

Democracy provides for voter freedom in the electoral process but in Gombe state and Nigeria in general politicians manipulate social factors to influence voting behavior (Sule, 2019). The manipulation of social factors by the politicians to influence voting behavior leads to intimidation of voters and deprives them of their rights to full political participation and freedom of choice (Steinmetz, 2021; Muller-Rummel & Geibel, 2020). This constitutes an aberration that translates into a serious case of disenfranchisement of the voters and disabling of democracy, which is contrary to the principles of universal suffrage, that guarantees the voter the right to a free and fair election and freedom of choice as enshrined in the principles of liberal democracy (Steinmetz, 2021; UN Charter, 1948; 1999 CFRN, Chapter 4; INEC, 2019). In other words, the encroachment on the rights of the voters contravenes democratic norms and gradually whittles down the enthusiasm or interest of the voters in the electoral process and by extension, the democratic institutions or system (Emeaku, 2019; Christiane, 2017; Houle, 2018). Scholars such as Sule (2019); Toros & Birch (2019), further argue that voter intimidation poses serious multiple problems, including the threat to the election of competent leaders and stunting of the growth of the culture of democracy, which, if not properly addressed, could affect the democratization process in Gombe state and Nigeria in general.

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the social factors that influenced voting behaviour which has been threatening democracy, restricting, or violating the rights of the voters to choose the leaders of their choice. The paper also complements the efforts of previous studies through the expansion of the literature on political behaviour. Practically, the result of the study findings will be of immense benefit to government or private sector policymakers who may wish to make policies, for example, on how to fight poverty, illiteracy, and ignorance. The academicians will find the paper useful as a back-up to the literature on electoral studies under the academic discipline of political science or sociology, thus, contributing to the body of knowledge. Similarly, the methods adopted in the data analysis techniques will be used as reference points, particularly by researchers or scholars who may be willing to conduct research within the ambit of qualitative design inquiry. Therefore, this paper aims at analyzing the social factors influencing voting behaviour in the 2019 National Assembly elections in Gombe state; and is guided by the following specific objectives.

1. To highlight and explore why social factors were instrumental in influencing voting behaviour.
2. To investigate the strategies used by politicians to manipulate social factors to influence voting behavior.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Specifically, this paper dwells on the exploration of the influence of social factors on voting behaviour and adopts one of the variants of the theories of democracy. Scholars such as Norge (2012); Shapiro (2011) maintain that the theory of democracy is broadly categorized into Liberal and Marxist theories. The liberal category is composed of the classical, the elite, and the pluralist theories of democracy (Norge, 2012; Shapiro, 2011). However, this paper employed the classical liberal democracy theory as its theoretical framework. A classical liberal democratic system is a form of government where the people elect their representatives who exercise power or make decisions on behalf of their constituencies or the people, based on the Constitution. Classical liberal democratic constitutions provide for the protection of a variety of rights and freedoms of individuals, such as the right to free and fair elections or adult universal suffrage (political right) (Cunningham, 2002). Liberal democracy is characterized by tolerance of differing views such as political opinion, which are expressed in the political or democratic electoral process. In other words, it allows for the existence of different political parties and ideologies as they compete for political power during periodic elections (Yunusa, 2013).

Fox (1960) posit that before the emergence of classical liberal democracy, most of Europe such as England, Spain, Italy, France, were ruled by aristocrats or absolute monarchs who claimed their rule was ordained by God, hence, any person or system that tried to challenge them was considered ungodly and their acts were considered as blasphemous. Classical liberal democracy is traced to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century England/Europe and was popularly known as the Age of Enlightenment (Norge, 2012). It emerged after the struggle against absolute monarchy and its arbitrary rule, and the collapse of feudalism which it represented (Oldfield, 2000). Therefore, the emergence of classical liberalism was revolutionary at the time.

Apart from John Locke who is widely known as the father of the classical liberal theory of democracy, philosophers such as John Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Hobbes, John Stuart Mill,

Montesquieu, and Bentham, constitute the main proponents of classical liberalism (Shapiro, 2011). They advocated for political pluralism, the liberty, freedom, and rights of the people, particularly their rights to freedom of association, expression, and freedom of choice in choosing their leaders (Norge, 2012). Specifically, Montesquieu is famous for his theory of Separation of Powers among the executive, legislative and judicial arms of government.

Cunningham (2002) opine that a classical liberal democratic system is structured on concepts such as equality, liberty, rights, justice, and secularism, which were virtually not observed under feudalism and were characterized by the oppression of the feudal lords and absolute monarchs. Freedom of the citizens to participate in the democratic process and the rights of the voters to elect leaders of their choice, form part of the main contents of a liberal democratic system. It primarily focuses on serving the interest of humanity and the state exists to protect and promote those interests. To effectively realize these ideals, classical liberal democracy advocates for the enthronement of a democratic system of government (Norge, 2012).

The relevance of the theory has to do with the applicability or suitability of the theory to the paper. The classical liberal democratic theory focuses on the protection of liberty and the rights of the voters to participate in electing the candidate of their choice in a free and fair atmosphere (Cunningham, 2002). Classical liberalism is also concerned with serving the interests of the people rather than the interests of the powerful few in society (Yunusa, 2013). Furthermore, classical liberalism assumes that the supremacy of the views of the people in the electoral process is sacrosanct and provides safeguards to ensure that a democratic electoral system is enthroned, promoted, and protected (Norge, 2012).

Therefore, the classical liberal democratic theory is relevant to this paper because the rights of the voters to freedom of choice is only possible within the context of a free and fair electoral process. Furthermore, the supremacy of the will of the people can only be possible when the voters are free from any form of intimidation or undemocratic influences, such as the influence of social factors, which may, for example, lead to the imposition of unpopular candidates. For instance, some informants revealed that politicians significantly appealed to and manipulated ethno-religious identity sentiments to influence voting behaviour for their selfish political interests in the 2019 National Assembly elections in Gombe state (Sule 2019).

### **Methodology**

This paper adopted a qualitative case study approach as a data collection method that consists of three principles, which include the *case*, *geographical location*, and *time-bound* (Creswell, 2014). In this paper, *voting behaviour* is the case, *Gombe state* is the geographical location where the study was conducted, and the *2019 NASS elections* is the time bound. This is because a qualitative design is good and flexible in the manipulation of a large volume of data using a relevant strategy (Creswell, 2014; Sekaran & Bougie, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2013 and 2018).

Purposive and snowballing techniques were used as techniques for informants' selection taking into consideration the informant's knowledgeability and experience in the field of research, and willingness to participate, as prescribed by (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). According to Dworkin (2014), the selection of 5-50 informants is okay for a qualitative in-

depth interview. The data saturation principle was adopted by the paper. Data saturation is 'the point at which the data collection process no longer offers any new or relevant data' (Creswell, 2014; Merriam 2009). In this paper, therefore, 18 informants were interviewed in reflection of the three geo-political zones in Gombe state, in which each of the categories have been assigned codes as shown in the table below.

Table 1.1  
*Informants' categories and codes*

S/N	Categories	No. of informants	Codes
1.	Community/Ethnic Identities Leaders	3	CEIL
2.	Religious Leaders	2	RL
3.	Government Official	1	GO
4.	Non-Governmental Organization	1	NGO
5.	Academicians	2	ACM
6.	Non-Partisan Grassroots Voters	6	NPGR
7.	Partisan Grassroots Voters	3	PGR
TOTAL		18	

An in-depth interview was employed as a method of data collection, where the selected informants were reached out via online Zoom meetings, WhatsApp messages, and regular phone calls, where necessary. Data analysis was done based on the six stages of thematic analysis as prescribed by (Clarke & Braun, 2006). To test the validity and reliability of the data, triangulation and back-to-back informants' transcripts methods were employed. Furthermore, data were checked by members of the supervisory committee and a third party (professionals) cross-checked the data. However, the researcher obtained ethics approval from the University Putra Malaysia Ethics Committee. The data were validated through informant back-to-back transcript checks and professionals were further contacted to check and validate the data.

### Findings and Discussion

This section presents the main findings of the research based on themes and sub-themes. From the data, social factor was identified as the main theme. However, manipulation of ethnic and religious sentiments, low literacy or awareness levels, influence of poverty, and feelings of personal satisfaction were identified as sub-themes. Therefore, the sub-themes are considered as the social factors influencing voting behaviour in the 2019 National Assembly elections in Gombe state. The sub-themes (factors) are hereby discussed accordingly.

The first sub-theme that emerged under the social factor influencing voting behaviour is the manipulation of ethnic and religious sentiments. In the struggle for political power, politicians manipulated ethnic and religious identity sentiments to influence voting behaviour in their unbridled ambition to win elections. In this study, manipulation of ethnic and religious sentiments refers to the acts of opinion moulding, through some forms of indoctrination, brainwashing, or propaganda that the political class uses to appeal to the emotions of the

voters, which eventually leads to the influence of the voting behaviour of the electorates. For example, non-Muslims such as Christian voters may be manipulated to believe that voting for a Muslim candidate will lead to the establishment of Islamic sharia law, which will be used to prevent the Christians from exercising their rights to freedom of religion or worship, which may not be true. Similarly, a Muslim voter could be manipulated into thinking that Christian candidates are enemies of Islam, so voting for them means voting for an infidel who will eventually destroy the Muslims and Islam.

It is on this basis that some informants stated that the politicians, in collaboration with some ethnic and religious identity leaders promoted and manipulated ethnic and religious sentiments to influence voting behaviour for their immediate and long-term economic and political advantages. For instance, an informant stated that:

*“Both the religious leaders and the traditional rulers are part of the extended converted comprador bourgeoisie that used to connive with the political class in the sharing of the national cake... All these religious leaders are the ones even promoting that sentiment; they are the ones promoting ethnic and religious divisions when it comes to elections. They will go to the politicians, or the politicians will go to them, they will collect their money, they will fill their pockets they will find a dubious means of directly or indirectly manipulating religious sects and context to justify that such a particular candidate is a candidate of God, he must be voted.”* (Informant ACM1)

From the view of this informant, in manipulating the voters, the politicians use the money to induce some ethnic and religious identity leaders and connive with them. The informant also revealed that where the candidates belonged to the same religious identities, sectarian differences were used to manipulate the voters to their political advantage. Therefore, apart from the motivation for immediate political and economic gains, the politicians and some of the ethnic and religious elites connive to manipulate voting behaviour as a means of negotiating the sharing of the proverbial ‘national cake’ among themselves when their candidates come to power.

Similarly, while sharing his opinion, a non-partisan grassroots informant stated that:

*“The problem is that there is what is called the religious divide, the polemics are very sharp. The animosity between the two major religions is very sharp, is so dangerous, it has gone dangerous and is getting out of hand such that I see my Muslim brother as an enemy, or a Muslim brother sees me as an enemy.”* (Informant NPGR5).

The views expressed by this informant show politicians sowed seeds of discord, conflicts, or enmity among the ethnic and religious identities voters and manipulated them to their ulterior political interests.

Furthermore, another informant added that:

*“Ethnicity and religion have been significantly used to influence voting behaviour in Gombe state because of some reasons. The ethnic and religious identities in the*

*state do not trust each other, and because of this, they use ethnic or religious sentiments to influence voting behaviour in their favour. Some politicians who are not competent or good use ethnicity and religion to cover their weaknesses and to easily win election". (Informant PGR1)*

The opinion of this informant reveals that the manipulation of ethnic and religious sentiments to easily win elections was perpetrated by some weak and incompetent politicians who had nothing to offer to freely win the votes of the electorates.

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

Studies conducted by Shehu (2018); Chimee (2021); Okolie et al (2021) explain that politicians fan the embers of ethnicity and religion 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 and religious 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 Nigeria. The above analysis therefore shows both the data, and the literature are in line with one another.

Low literacy and low level of political awareness is the second sub-theme that emerged from the social factor theme. Literacy and political awareness are important in political communication because they serve as safeguards against misinformation and are part of the motivating factors in political participation. Literacy is simply the capacity or ability to communicate through writing and reading. It also involves speaking, listening, and effectively making sense of what is being communicated. On the contrary, low literacy level has to do with ignorance or lack of knowledge in a certain field of endeavour, such as politics. It is also the inability to write, read or understand, for example, such things as names of political parties, logos, flags, or names of candidates (where pictures of candidates are not printed on the ballot papers). This means a person could be politically literate or not. Literacy is part and parcel of political awareness because it enhances a person's level of political awareness. On the other hand, a low level of literacy is a handicap to political awareness.

Political awareness is the extent to which a person has overcome his ignorance about a subject matter. In other words, it is the degree to which a person understands and shows interest in the politics of his/her organization, community, national or even the international political arena. Therefore, literacy and political awareness are part of the key assets that are highly instrumental to people's active engagement and participation in politics, especially during periodic elections. It is based on these that some informants explained that politicians exploited the low literacy and political awareness levels of some voters to influence voting behaviour. For example, one of the gatekeeper informants stated that:



*“Apart from the ones I told you earlier, politicians used ethnicity and religion to influence voting behaviour because of the ignorance or low literacy and awareness levels of the majority of the voters and it is easier for them to win elections”.* (Informant CEIL1).

Similarly, another gatekeeper informant added that:

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

In his contribution, an academician informant submitted that:

*“Secondly, there is ignorance or rather we say illiteracy. We still have a low level of literacy and awareness, both in terms of reading and writing and also in terms of understanding the electoral process and electoral conduct, so the elites are also using and manipulating that. Another factor is because of the low level of political awareness”* (Informant ACM1).

Another informant also pointed out that because of the ignorance or low levels of literacy and political awareness among the electorates, politicians were able to use ethnic and religious identities to influence voting behaviour; but blamed lack of education as the major problem. He stated that:

*“I think the simple answer is, the common man or the masses are largely ignorant of even the religion and suffers from low levels of awareness. ... And an ignorant person usually gets easily manipulated by ethnic and religious sentiments. Religion has always been used as a vehicle by politicians to get their way into office every time during an election. So, I think if people continue to remain ignorant, ... then they will continue to be used by politicians to influence their people into voting for a person of their religion or ethnic identity. I think education is the main problem here.”* (Informant NGO).

In the view of an informant from the category of academicians, politicians used ethnic and religious sentiments to influence voting behaviour not just because of the lack of political awareness among the voters but also because the politicians themselves are not enlightened. He explained that:

*“We are not enlightened, the voters have low levels of literacy and awareness, that is the truth because if you look at the advanced countries, the issues of ethnicity or religion don’t count in influencing voting behaviour.”* (Informant ACM2).

The foregoing analysis and discussion reveal that low literacy and political awareness levels among some of the voters provided the grounds upon which some politicians used ethnic and religious identities to influence voting behaviour in the 2019 National Assembly elections in Gombe state. For example, I was an eyewitness when an illiterate voter was misled to vote for a candidate that was not her choice when she requested someone to show her the logo of the party under which the candidate of her choice was contesting. The person deliberately misled her, and she ended up voting for his candidate and party! This example underscores the significance of literacy in the electoral process or political participation in general.

The literature also supports the views that many Nigerians had low literacy and political awareness levels. For example, in a state-by-state literacy level ranking survey among Nigeria's 36 states conducted by Databod (2018), it was revealed that Gombe state scored 29 per cent and fell among the 10 states with low literacy levels. Similarly, Spur (2019) submitted that in a poll survey by NOIPolls, it was revealed that out of the 91 parties that were registered and the 73 political parties that participated in the 2019 general elections, many people were aware of only 26 of them. The above data shows the literacy and political awareness levels of Nigerians were low, and this prompted some of the politicians to use ethnic and religious identities to influence voting behaviour to their electoral advantage. Therefore, the opinions of the informants are in harmony with the literature.

Poverty is another factor identified as a social factor influencing voting behaviour in Gombe state. Poverty is a relative term, but it is generally described as a social malaise or condition under which an individual or family cannot meet the basic needs necessary for sustenance as expected of the society in which he/she lives. This is because the aggregate income level that is used to determine poverty levels varies from society to society. Hence, the poverty line or below the poverty line is arrived at based on an acceptable benchmark of income that has been estimated to address the basic daily, monthly, or yearly needs of a person or family. For example, in 2019 in Nigeria, a person was considered poor if he/she lived on less than NGN137,430.00 per year, which was roughly equivalent to USD334 per year. Therefore, any individual or family that falls below the estimated poverty line index is said to live below the poverty line, which means the person or family is living in abject poverty. According to informants, poverty is one of the social factors influencing voting behaviour. For example, an informant was of the view that:

*"Number one, there is the influence of poverty. Even if you are going to use the psyche of the voters at the same time you must look at their political economy. Most of the voters are poor due to the prevalence of poverty in the state (being the third poorest in the country, according to the National Bureau of Statistics [2019]). So, the elites are not unaware of that, and they know that is a very good privilege that they can exploit. They will be portraying to their supporters that their poverty and poor living condition is a result of their being dominated and manipulated by the other contenders from another ethnic or religious identity". (Informant ACM1)*

An informant from the grassroots category added that:

*"The influence of ethnicity, religion or poverty on voting behaviour sometimes limits our freedom. You will find that a voter is conscious of who he is going to vote for, but he will vote for someone else because he wants to obey the directives of his ethnic or religious identity leaders or his community. Sometimes the voter consciously votes for the wrong candidate because he has been given some money." (Informant NPGR 1)*

It was added by an informant that:

*"I think the simple answer is the common man or the masses are largely ignorant ... They are poor. And because ... of these two factors of poverty and ignorance they get manipulated." (Informant NGO).*

Another grassroots informant argued that some politicians are ready to sacrifice anything if that will make them win the election. He further added that:

*“If he feels these will make him win the election, he will do it because it’s a matter of money, our people are impoverished, and so you manipulate ethnic or religious sentiments, when you give them money and tell them this is what you want, they will do it....Politicians connive with some ethnic and religious identities leaders and even traditional rulers and brainwash the voters by saying if they vote candidates from other ethnic or religious identities, they will eventually enslave you, they will make their people rich by giving them contracts and deny you access to the contracts and by this they will make you poorer.”* (Informant NPGR2)

An informant concluded that:

*“Due to the high level of poverty, the politicians used money to influence voting behaviour. They induced the religious and ethnic leaders to campaign for them. The religious and ethnic leaders have much influence on their people, so the politicians induce them with money to campaign or direct their followers to vote for them.”* (Informant GO).

The above analysis and discussion show that apart from ethnic and religious identities, poverty was one of the influential factors that influenced voting behaviour. It also suggests that when voters are in extreme poverty, they may sacrifice ethnicity or religion as factors in determining their voting behaviour and go for money or financial inducement. This is because one of the first laws of nature that is highly respected and ‘religiously’ obeyed by humankind, is the natural ‘law of survival’ which is strongly driven by the survival instinct in human beings.

Nigeria is categorized as one of the developing countries with a high rate of abject poverty among most of its citizens. For example, UNICEF and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2015) revealed that 74.6 per cent of citizens of Gombe state are poor. Similarly, Susu (2022) maintains that *Statista* in its 2019 report on state-by-state poverty rate ranked or showed that 62.31 per cent of the people of Gombe state live in poverty. Despite the drop in the rate as compared to the 2015 rate, it is still quite significant. The World Bank (2020) report signifies that most of the voters in Gombe state are poor which constitutes one of the reasons why they could be easily manipulated by the politicians. Therefore, the foregoing analysis shows both the primary (informants) and secondary (literature) data are in line with one another.

The feeling of personal satisfaction or altruism is another influential factor which is related to the social as posited by some informants. The feeling of personal satisfaction in this regard refers to a situation whereby the voter votes for a candidate not necessarily because of personal material attachment or benefit but because the candidate belongs to his/her ethnic or religious identity. So, in this case, the voter is psychologically satisfied simply because his/her in-group member or candidate is elected. On this basis, some of the informants highlighted that some voters voted not for any personal material gain but to satisfy their personal feelings of voting for ‘their own’. For instance, an academician posited that:

*“Yes, of course, there are many of them, one of them is the feeling of personal satisfaction. In African politics, we tend to have that feeling of personal satisfaction of having ‘our own’, i.e., the person who belongs to either our religion or ethnic group, just leading, that alone gives us satisfaction in African context....”* (Informant ACM1).

In his view, a gatekeeper informant noted that:

*“We all want to vote for our ethnic and religious identities; we feel satisfied because they are ours and they are going to protect our interests. So, you cannot vote for anybody outside your religion or ethnicity because of lack of trust.”* (Informant CEIL2)

Another informant was of the view that:

*“The reason is ethnic and religious solidarity and distrust. The in-group feeling of “our own” and the out-group feeling of “their own” dichotomy is very strong among our people. The feeling of personal satisfaction among our people is that it is better to vote for “our own” even if “their own” is better than “ours.” For example, an elected Muslim member of the National Assembly can sacrifice or contribute to the promotion of Islam, such as building a mosque. Can an elected Christian or non-Muslim member of the National Assembly do that? No, he will not”.* (Informant CEIL1)

Similarly, an informant added that:

*“But, you see, in life there are two syndromes. The “we” syndrome and the “they” syndrome. These things always come into play not only in voting but in many aspects of life. Anybody outside an ethnic or religious group is seen as “they” while the in-group is seen as the “we”. The “we” syndrome represents in-group affinity or closeness while the “they” syndrome represents out-group. These types of mentality or feelings of personal satisfaction are part of the major reasons behind the influence of ethnic and religious identities on voting behaviour in Gombe state and elsewhere.”* (Informant ACM2).

The above analysis and discussion show that some of the voters voted to satisfy their personal feelings of voting for either their ethnic or religious identity candidates. Although the data has shown such voters voted, it is rare to have such voters because most voting decisions are tied to personal interest. This is true of Gombe state where many of the voters live below the poverty line, and who, because of their conditions of poverty could be more influenced by personal interest. A study conducted by Weitz-Shapiro & Winters (2018) also shows that feelings of personal satisfaction drive voting choices in Latin America and Europe.

The feeling of personal satisfaction by a voter who votes for his ethnic or religious interest squarely falls within the realm of identity voting behaviour. Chi (2016) highlighted that identity drives feelings of personal satisfaction in voting behaviour more than policy options could do because of the satisfaction most voters derive when they vote for their ethnic, religious, gender, or even regional identity. Similarly, Jenke & Huettel (2016), also argue that most voters seem to drive more feelings of personal satisfaction when their choices are driven by identity considerations as compared to policy considerations.

Another study by Marsh (2007), explains that altruistic voters vote based on the feeling of personal satisfaction rather than personal material gain. Jankowski (2018) argues that voting for the benefit of others or identity or society at large creates a feeling of personal satisfaction in the altruist voter. Though personal interests motivate political participation, Jankowski further stated that the aim of politics is the betterment of public values or interests or what is commonly referred to, as the collective good. Therefore, based on these discussions the interview data is supported by the literature and the classical liberal democracy theory assumption that states that the aim of politics or government is primarily to serve the public interest by promoting the common good and the state exists to protect and promote those interests. The above analysis and discussion show that most of the voters voted to satisfy their feeling of voting for their ethnic or religious identity candidates.

From the above analyses of all the themes and sub-themes, it can be understood that the manipulation of the identified social factors was instrumental in influencing voting behaviour in the 2019 National Assembly elections in Gombe state which ultimately led to voter intimidation. For instance, studies conducted by Sule (2019); Lar & Higazi (2015) affirms the informants' views that social factor did play a vital role in influencing voting behaviour resulting in the direct or indirect intimidation of the voters. Therefore, based on the discussions, the interview data is supported by the literature. Similarly, the results of the findings extracted from the views of the informants contradict the assumptions of the liberal democracy theory which is structured on the liberty and freedom of the electorates to choose or elect their leaders without any form of harassment or intimidation of the voters. Therefore, the application of the classical liberal democracy theory in this paper is suitable and relevant in explaining the study.

### **Conclusion**

This paper concludes that the social factors influencing voting behaviour are part of the general political culture of multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, especially in the developing worlds of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Such development has created many problems including voter harassment and intimidation by the politicians in the electoral process. Consequently, the most powerful among the cliques of the political elites has continued to manipulate and weaponize the social factors of ethnicity, religion, poverty, low literacy, and low political education levels to its political advantage in the electoral process. Such was the situation in the 2019 National Assembly elections in Gombe state. It is further concluded that the influence of social factors on voting behaviour constitutes an assault on the fundamental electoral rights of the voters, credible representation, and the institutionalization of democracy in Gombe state and Nigeria in general.

Given the issues of the social factors influencing voting behaviour highlighted earlier, it is hereby recommended that concerted efforts should be geared towards the political education of the active and the non-active politicians, the voters, the community/ethnic identities leaders, the religious leaders, and other relevant groups in the society to enable them to know their political rights, civic duties, and disabuse their minds against the influence of social factors on voting behaviour in the electoral process. Political education should also aim at breaking ethnic and religious barriers and conflicts among the various ethnic and religious identities in society. Unity and harmonious co-existence among the various ethnic and religious identities should also be at the front burner. Apart from the three tiers of

government in Nigeria, the academicians, and relevant local and international Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) should play active roles. These will enable the politicians and voters alike to play the game according to the tenets of liberal democratic elections.

Abject poverty can easily make a voter susceptible to manipulation. Abject poverty has been identified as one of the social factors that made the electorates amenable to the manipulation of social factors by some unpopular and desperate politicians to win elections. Therefore, it is instructive to have an enduring poverty reduction program that can make the voters economically self-sustaining, have independent opinions about voting decisions, and be able to resist the tendency towards vote-selling and vote-buying by the voters and the politicians respectively. Furthermore, there is a need for operational and strictly enforceable codes of conduct for both the politicians and the voters in the electoral process. Such codes of conduct should aim at addressing the issue of the influence of social factors on voting behaviour in Gombe state and Nigeria as a whole. There should be no sacred cows in the application of sanctions against the violators of the prescribed codes of conduct.

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