

Insecurity and Electoral Participation in Southwest and Southeast Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how insecurity affects voter turnout in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, with a particular focus on the southwest and southeast regions. Using the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM), the study highlights how specific types of insecurity, including politically motivated violence in the southwest and ideology-based militia insecurity in the southeast, influenced electoral behavior. Employing a qualitative comparative historical review and using secondary data, the study finds that physical violence and psychological fear largely influenced voter participation. In the southwest, episodic violence by party-affiliated thugs undermined voter turnout, while the southeast experienced persistent intimidation from separatist ideological militias. Both situations deprived participants of resources, motivation, and mobilization, negatively impacting democracy. The study, therefore, recommends region-specific security measures to address security needs and boost voter confidence and turnout.

Keywords: Insecurity, Voter Turnout, Electoral Violence, Civic Voluntarism Model

INTRODUCTION

Democracies can only function properly if the political elite and the entire citizenry do their part to prevent democratic relapse by resisting autocratic shifts and engaging in political and civic activities (Almond & Verba, 1963; van Lit et al., 2024). However, conventional forms of political participation are on the decline in many liberal democracies (Parvin, 2018; Putnam, 2000), thus challenging democratic theory and principles. Some scholars have scrutinized the sustainability of liberal democracies and the concept of widespread participation (Brennan, 2016; Merkel & Petring, 2012). In fact, the global level of democracy is sinking and reached its lowest point in 2021 (Boese et al., 2022). Although this trend can in principle be observed in all regions of the world, Africa in general and Nigeria are particularly affected due to different levels of insecurity (Nwolise, 2007).

The fact that participation rates systematically vary across societal groups or regions further compounds the problem of low political participation (Parvin, 2018). For instance, empirical evidence from one hundred and two elections across thirty advanced democracies suggests a decline in political participation among different groups of people (Polacko, 2022). Insecurity has been identified as one of the major factors for low voter turnout in Africa (Nwolise, 2007; Mahmud & Ozden, 2024).

Insecurity is a global phenomenon that affects virtually every nation in the world. This challenge manifests in different forms, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Al-Qaeda, and civil wars in Syria and South Sudan. Political instability in Venezuela and Myanmar, as well as organized crime such as drug cartels in Latin

America, are other examples. All of these disrupt governance, societal functioning, and the ability of citizens to live safely and perform their civic responsibilities (Mahmud & Ozden, 2024).

Nigeria's multiethnic and multicultural society is often known; however, the country remains beleaguered by systemic challenges that hinder political stability and development. One of the challenges that keep recurring is insecurity, which has grown in magnitude and become more complex. Nwolise (2007) noted that since Nigeria's independence in 1960, the country's electoral process has been marred by violence, the most extreme of which, until 2007, was the violence in the Western Region in 1965–1966, which led to the military coup of 1966. He stressed further that there can be no democratization, democratic consolidation, or internalization of best democratic practice in any country if the electoral process is marred with violence. No peaceful, free, and fair democratic transition of power can be achieved without first salvaging the electoral process and the country from such electoral insecurity. Violence limits voters' participation in the electoral process and encourages imposition of candidates, programs, and policies, which often engender violent reactions from the electorate and losers. This might have been the reason why Kean (2004) observes that violence is the greatest enemy of democracy.

Electoral participation, which is a foundation of democratic governance, is not immune to the influence of insecurity. Electoral violence is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria's political history; as observed by Nwolise (2007), it can be traced back to the pre-independence period and has continued to manifest in subsequent elections, especially those conducted by civilian administrations. The 2023 general elections, which were held in an atmosphere of violence and fear, particularly in some areas in the Southwest and Southeast of Nigeria, led to a big decline in voter turnout in most regions across the country (Yiaga Africa, 2023; INEC, 2023). Insecurity in the form of political thuggery, the mobilization of militia, and voter intimidation has dissuaded civic participation and destroyed the confidence of people in democratic institutions (Anyika & Ani, 2021).

The 2023 General Elections in Nigeria have posed yet another wake-up call about the deep connection between insecurity and electoral participation in Nigeria. Insecurity in Nigeria has been displayed in various forms, like terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, political thuggery, communal clashes, and secessionist movements (Nwolise, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2011; Yiaga Africa, 2023). These incidents have created misperceptions in various aspects of national life, including the electoral process. During the 2023 General Elections, incidents like widespread violence, intimidation of voters, and logistical challenges caused by insecurity mainly affected the turnout of voters and the overall reliability of the elections (Anyika & Ani, 2021; Kahiu, 2023; Okoye, 2023).

Electoral participation, no doubt, is a cornerstone of democracy, allowing citizens to have a say in governance and the direction of national policies. However, in many developing democracies, including Nigeria, electoral processes have been largely impacted by insecurity. In the 2023 general elections, insecurity was a predominant factor affecting voter participation, particularly in regions with high levels of violence (Kahiu, 2023; Okoye, 2023).

While some studies on electoral processes have focused on the overall effects of insecurity in Nigeria, such as Eze (2022), who examined the role of security agencies in mitigating electoral violence, there is a lack of detailed comparative studies focusing on how different forms of insecurity affect electoral participation at the sub-regional level, particularly in the Southwest and Southeast. Furthermore, scholars like Taiwo (2022) have analyzed how insecurity undermines voter turnout in the context of Nigeria's general elections. However, he primarily focused on broader, national perspectives, neglecting the comparative dynamics of how insecurity in particular sub-regions, such as the Southwest and Southeast, influences electoral participation. For instance, Ojukwu (2023) discussed insecurity in Imo State but did not compare it with similar situations in other regions, especially in the Southwest. This gap in the literature underscores the need for a focused analysis on how insecurity, in its various forms, shaped the 2023 elections in specific regions of the southwest and southeast.

Thus, this study filled the identified gap by addressing the insufficient analysis of how insecurity in different sub-regions, specifically in the southwest and southeast, shaped electoral participation in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. This study compares the specific security challenges faced in these two sub-regions and their respective impacts on voter turnout, political engagement, and the electoral process in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

This study adopts a comparative longitudinal historical approach to deepen the understanding of the relationship between insecurity and electoral participation in the Southwest and Southeast regions of Nigeria. It highlights both similarities and differences in how insecurity shapes electoral behavior in these sub-regions. Although peaceful, free, and fair elections are essential for societal stability and sustainable democracy, electoral processes in Nigeria continue to be marked by violence. This persistent violence discourages substantial segments of the population from participating in elections.

To address this issue, this paper is organized into six sections. Section One introduces the topic. Section Two outlines the materials and methods. Section Three examines the theoretical relationship between insecurity and electoral participation. Section Four addresses elections and electoral violence. Section Five provides a synopsis of electoral violence in Nigeria. Section Six offers a comparative analysis of the impact of various forms of electoral violence on voter turnout in the Southwest and Eastern Regions of Nigeria during the 2023 general elections, followed by the conclusion.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Insecurity has been one of the major political challenges faced by Nigeria right from the colonial era. Free and fair elections are the bedrock of democracy and the catalyst of development in every society. In recognition of this importance, this study utilized a historical comparative study design to qualitatively and quantitatively interrogate the nature of insecurity and its influence on electoral participation in the southwest and southeast sub-regions in the 2023 Nigerian general elections. These sub-regions were purposively selected because of the reported cases of electoral violence and insecurity recorded in these areas before and during the general elections.

Therefore, because of the nature of this study, a historical descriptive research design was adopted, and the objectives of the study were qualitatively interrogated. The main objective of the study is to comparatively analyze the effects of different forms of insecurity on voter turnout in the southwest and southeast during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. The data was gathered from secondary sources only. Hence, secondary data, including academic journals, textbooks, newspapers, official publications by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), civil society observation reports (e.g., YIAGA Africa, CLEEN Foundation), media reports by reputable media outlets, and peer-reviewed journal articles, were thoroughly reviewed to interrogate the objectives of the study. These sources contained elaborate reports of security situations, behavior of voters, and institutional reactions in the course of the elections in the selected areas.

The data gathered were comparatively analyzed using the longitudinal historical review method. The repetitive issues found by content analysis, which consisted of voter intimidation, disruption of polling units, and militia presence, were thematically analyzed. Comparative analysis was then used to compare the election results in the two sub-regions with the aim of revealing how insecurity had varying degrees of influence on electoral participation in these sub-regions. This two-pronged approach was useful in establishing a relationship between insecurity and voter turnout in the respective areas.

Theoretical Connection Between Insecurity and Electoral Participation

This study adopts the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) theory, developed by political scientists Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady in their seminal work, "Voice and Equality" (1995), as its theoretical framework for analyzing the relationship between insecurity and electoral participation in the context of Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) was developed to explain why some individuals participate in politics and why others abstain. Unlike models that focus exclusively on rational calculation of costs and benefits, such as Rational Choice Theory, the CVM broadens the scope by emphasizing three central factors: resources, psychological engagement, and mobilization. These elements are particularly useful in understanding electoral behavior within insecure contexts, where physical danger, structural weakness, and institutional distrust are prevalent.

The first component of the CVM is resources, which include time, money, education, and civic skill elements that are essential for political engagement (Alscher, Graf & MacElvany, 2025). Insecure environments often deprive individuals of these necessary resources. In regions such as the southeast, particularly in Imo State, continuous militia threats, displacement, and violent disruptions make it difficult for citizens to allocate time for voting, access voting centers safely, or develop the civic skills needed for meaningful participation (Oni, Faluyi, Asumu, & Olutola, 2025). Similarly, in the southwest, particularly in some areas of Oyo, Lagos, Ekiti, and Osun States, incidents of politically motivated violence and gang disruptions reduced citizens' physical access to polling units, thereby stripping them of the logistical ability to engage in the electoral process.

The second component, psychological engagement, refers to political interest, awareness, and the sense of civic duty. Insecurity largely undermines these psychological motivators. The climate of fear created by violence and intimidation breeds political apathy and detachment. When voters fear for their lives or believe that their votes will not make a difference due to manipulation or coercion, their motivation to engage is diminished. This phenomenon was evident during the 2023 general elections, where a substantial number of voters in both sub-regions expressed reluctance to vote due to fear of harm or perceived futility of their participation (Yiaga Africa, 2023).

The Civic Voluntarism Model offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how insecurity affects electoral participation. Overall, by adopting the Civic Voluntarism Model, this paper aligns its theoretical foundation with the complex realities faced by voters in insecure regions of Nigeria. The model enables a deeper analysis of how different forms of insecurity, whether overt street violence in some parts of the southwest or militia control and ideological coercion in the southeast, interact with civic capacities and institutional trust to influence electoral participation. The next section discusses the concepts of election and electoral violence in relation to their connection with voter participation.

The Concept of Election

An election can be defined as the process of choosing qualified candidates to represent a group of people in an organization or in public offices through voting (Nwolise, 2007; Dibia, 2023). Such an election may be seeking the office of the president of a country, the governor of a state, or the chairman of a corporate organization, etc. Akzin (1960) noted that elections have social and technical importance. Viewing it from the technical aspect, it is the process through which an individual is accorded an office with the support of many people expressed through voting, while its social aspect is reflected in the process by which a person is linked to an office through the due process of participation of the majority of the people in the choosing of the elected official that will rule over them in offices.

The social aspect of an election shows the idea of a society being governed with the people’s consent; this distinguishes an election, which is the bedrock of democracy, from appointment (Akzin, 1960). The main purpose of an election is to have a government that has the support and recognition of the people, technically referred to as legitimacy (Mayo, 1960). Thus, any election that does not reflect the choices of the people automatically suffers from a legitimacy crisis ab initio. To this end, elections are crucial because they confer legitimacy on government when conducted in a peaceful, free, and fair atmosphere devoid of violence, but they may generate a legitimate crisis if the result does not reflect the true choice of the people.

Electoral Violence

The concept of electoral violence refers to the physical violence unleashed by political thugs used in the election rigging process (Nwolise, 2007) or by the people reacting against the outcome of elections believed to have been manipulated in favor of a particular candidate. In this process, the political thugs engage in physical assault on the opponents of their sponsors, destroy their properties, and engage in kidnapping, assassination, and snatching of ballot boxes, among others; while the public, reacting against the outcome of such manipulated elections, engages in burning of tires, riots, and beating up of electoral officials, and burning of public properties, among others (Nwolise, 2007). However, observation from existing literature shows that existing research on violence in Nigeria has focused more on this physical aspect of election violence alone (Albert, 2007).

Albert (2007) opines that violence encompasses physical, psychological, and structural dimensions. Electoral violence involves all forms of organized actions or threats, be they physical, psychological, or structural, targeted at harming, blackmailing, or intimidating a political stakeholder before, during, or after an election to determine, delay, or influence the election outcomes or process (Nwolise, 2007). Ochoche's (1997) view aligns with this definition by emphasizing that electoral violence is not limited to physical acts but also includes structural and psychological forms. Consequently, this scholar observed that each stage of the electoral process is susceptible to abuse, manipulation, or distortion, and electoral violence can occur at any stage. Based on this observation, electoral violence should not be viewed solely as physical aggression. Any attempt to influence, corrupt, or determine the outcome of an election at any stage, beyond what would occur objectively, constitutes electoral violence (Nwolise, 2007). Consequently, this scholar suggests that electoral violence may involve the use of physical force, terror tactics, or official bureaucratic mechanisms to achieve improper electoral ends. Electoral violence has three different components. Table 1 below presents the three forms of electoral violence.

Table 1: Components of electoral violence

PHYSICAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL	STRUCTURAL
Burning down of opponents' or public properties	Broadcast or publication of abusive or intimidating materials or advertorials, threats to life through mass media, sms or WhatsApp or on social media	Use of incumbency factors to accord undue advantage to some candidates; lengthy delay in announcing election results; supply of inadequate voting materials and election forms; delay in voting, absence of electoral officers at polling stations
Assassination of political opponents or perceived political enemies	Threats or harassment by security agents against opponents of the ruling party, which usually engenders apathy	Partisans of security agents who are providing security for the election materials
Forceful disruption of campaigns by political thugs; destruction of opponents' campaign billboards	Shoot at sight order by the government that breeds fear in voters, terror inflicted by political assassinations, which scares people from taking part in the election process	Declaration of false or fraudulent results; coercion of people to register to vote, unequal opportunities for political parties and candidates

Bias harassment by security agents, forceful dispersal of rallies or political campaigns etc.		Deliberate changes of election dates, venues, or time of events to the disadvantage of opponents etc.
Killing of individuals, shootings, kidnappings		Discriminatory policies and acts; exclusionary policies or acts
Armed raids on voting and collation centers, snatching and destruction of ballot papers and ballot boxes by political thugs, free-for-all fights etc		Reliance on force and money instead of competence and moral integrity; an unfree campaign, excessive fees for collecting party nomination forms
Physical assaults on individuals during electioneering campaigns, and when election results are released		Partisan delimitation of electoral constituencies and the location of polling booths, restraints imposed on voters

Source: Author, 2025

Synopsis of Electoral Violence in Nigeria

The history of elections in Nigeria can be dated back to the Clifford Constitution of 1922 (Nwolise, 2007; Dibie, 2023). The constitution introduced the elective principle, which provided for voting in Lagos and Calabar. The implementation of this principle led to the formation of Nigeria's first political party, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), established by Herbert Macaulay in 1923 (Dibie, 2023). Early elections in the country were relatively devoid of violence, probably because they were newly introduced and managed by the colonial masters. According to Nwolise (2007), electoral violence crept into Nigeria's political history as the country approached independence, particularly after the MacPherson Constitution of 1954 had established regionalism as the foundation of Nigeria's federal system. This scholar observed that the alignment of the major ethnic groups' boundaries in the country, Yoruba, Hausa/Fulani, and Igbo, with the Western, Northern, and Eastern regions, respectively, contributed to electoral violence in the country. This structure enabled dominant groups to marginalize minority groups within their regions both economically and politically. Nwolise, 2007).

Electoral violence in Nigeria can therefore be linked to the political manipulation in the Western Regional House of Assembly in 1952, which denied Nnamdi Azikiwe, a man of Igbo extraction, an opportunity to secure representation from the region (Nwolise, 2007). This forced Azikiwe to return to the Eastern Region, his political base and where he originated from, and forcefully displaced Eyo Ita, who came from a minority group, to become the Premier of the Eastern Region. The minority groups in the Eastern Region were dissatisfied with this act; in the same vein, the Igbos were embittered with the way their son was forced out in the Western Region (Nwolise, 2007).

This hostility resulted in psychological, structural, and physical violence during the 1959 general elections in Nigeria, including thuggery and election rigging (Nwolise, 2007). While vote counting was ongoing, the Colonial Governor, Sir James Robertson, instructed Abubakar Tafawa Balewa of the Northern People's Congress (NPC), a long-standing ally, to form a government (Nwolise, 2007; Dibie, 2023). The origins of electoral violence in Nigeria can therefore be traced to the pre-independence era. Nevertheless, the nationalists remained unified, and there was minimal protest from the major political parties Action Group (AG), National Council of Nigerians and Cameroons (NCNC), and Northern Elements of Progressive Union (NEPU)—against Sir James Robertson, as their primary objective was to achieve political independence from colonial rule (Nwolise, 2007; Dibie, 2023).

However, significant electoral violence occurred in Nigeria during the 1964 national elections, intensifying during the 1965 Western Regional elections (Nwolise, 2007; Dibie, 2023). Key party leaders reportedly organized thugs and groups to assault, kidnap, and kill political opponents; disrupt campaign rallies; seize ballot boxes; destroy property; and manipulate voting processes. Many fatalities and widespread property destruction were reported. Electoral officers absconded with sensitive election materials, and women were allegedly used to covertly dump thumb-printed ballots into ballot boxes at polling booths. As a result of extensive electoral malpractice, the Eastern Region boycotted the election, causing a constitutional crisis. For roughly three days, Nigeria did not have a Head of Government, as the President initially hesitated to invite Tafawa Balewa to form a government. Tafawa Balewa was subsequently appointed prime minister following extensive consultations (Nwolise, 2007).

The 1965 electoral violence in the Western Region resulted from extensive electoral manipulation (Nwolise, 2007; Dibie, 2023; Alabi, 2024). Chief S. L. Akintola, leader of the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), declared his intention to retain power regardless of electoral outcomes. Supported by the Northern People's Congress (NPC), which sought to diminish Chief Obafemi Awolowo's influence, the NNDP formed an alliance with the National Council of Nigerians and Cameroons (NCNC), known as the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA). The NPC-led central government enabled electoral rigging to ensure Chief S. L. Akintola's continued leadership in Western Nigeria. The announcement of the manipulated results triggered widespread violence,

resulting in significant loss of life and property (Ojiako, 1979; Ojo and Azeez, 2002; Nwolise, 2007; Alabi, 2024). This period of violence, commonly referred to as 'Operation Wet-e,' involved the extensive burning of individuals and property. The ensuing crisis precipitated the first military intervention in Nigeria on January 15, 1966 (Nwolise, 2007; Dibie, 2023; Alabi, 2024). Ige (1992) characterized the 1964 national election and the 1965 Western Region election as reprehensible and indicative of anti-democratic forces. Initial public response included a boycott of the 1964 general elections, followed by the escalation of violence in 1965.

The 1965/1966 election violence was observed by Ochoche (1997) as the worst period of electoral violence in Nigeria's political history; as at the time the military took over in 1966, the violence had grown into epidemic proportions (Duddley, 1973). The UPGA that lost the election in the Western Region rejected the outcome of the election but refused to go to court, which was controlled by the NNDP and its federal allies. Hence, UPGA and its supporters embarked on massive protests, burning and maiming members of the ruling party, and this threw the Akintola-led government in the Southwest into a legitimacy crisis. The situation was nasty and brutish in many parts of the Western Region, like Ibadan, Ile-Ife, Ikeja, etc. Ochoche (1997) noted that unpopular Customary Court Presidents were killed like rams in the Western Region, which was then referred to as Wide-Wide-West. The people employed physical violence to get rid of anti-democrats who had employed structural violence to impose themselves on them.

Nigeria returned to civil rule in 1979 after thirteen years of military rule under General Olusegun Obasanjo, who voluntarily handed power over to the elected president on October 1, 1979. The election that ushered in President Shehu Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) in 1979 did not witness much violence, probably because it was conducted by the military government. However, the outcome of the election was challenged up to the Supreme Court, as it was disputed by many people. The court delivered a controversial judgment on the winner, using the controversial mathematical theory introduced to determine the winner through an Electoral College as provided for in the 1979 Constitution (1979), *All N.L.R.* 105; Nwolise, 2007; Alabi, 2024).

However, electoral violence resurfaced in the 1983 general elections conducted under the President Shehu Shagari administration. Despite that many Nigerians wanted a change in leadership, President Shagari and his party, NPN, were bent on remaining in power. The major slogan in the north then was "change". Despite this, the election was massively rigged using thugs, security agents, and even the electoral body, the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO), as instruments of electoral manipulation. This attracted violent protests from the people, and the federal government ordered the security agents to shoot on sight. This political violence once again invited military intervention on December 31, 1983, and the second republic was truncated (Nwolise, 2007; Dibie, 2023; Alabi, 2024).

Following the death of General Sani Abacha, Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar took over as the head of state and organized a transition to democracy within six months. Consequently, President Obasanjo was sworn in following his victory in the election that was free from violence on May 9, 1999. Election violence, however, resurfaces in the 2003 general elections conducted under President Obasanjo. Nwolise (2007) noted that the electoral body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), was employed by the state to manipulate the 2003 general elections in favor of preferred candidates. He noted that the outcome of the manipulated elections manifested in the misgovernance and corruption that pervaded the country at that time.

Meanwhile, many Nigerians thought the 2007 general elections would be better since the president would not participate since he had served his second term as allowed by the constitution. However, Nigerians and the world were surprised as President Obasanjo told the world, as the election was drawing near, that the election would be a do-or-die affair (Faboyede, 2007: 271; Obasanjo's electoral legacies, 2007; Nwolise, 2007). Faboyede (2007) noted that although an individual is morally and intellectually free to choose his action and the range of choice is not unlimited, consider the case of electoral violence in Nigeria; it was committed with impunity under Obasanjo's administration, and in this regard, his essence contributed as an individual to the electoral violence recorded during the period.

President Obasanjo's pre-election utterance prepared the stage for the psychological form of electoral violence that accompanied the election, which Nwolise (2007) described as the worst electoral violence in the political history of Nigeria, surpassing the 1965/1966 election violence, as the modus operandi of electoral violence changed from the masses reacting against election rigging to godfathers, governors, etc., arming their thugs with sophisticated weapons to deal with their political opponents, letting a hell of vandalism loose on the society. The ruling party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), INEC, and the presidency were allegedly involved in the massive election rigging to favor their preferred candidates. Egbokare (2007) described the situation that election management had continued to get worse since 1979. He noticed that the major political actors, like governors, ministers, etc., were actively involved in the electoral violence that was once left for the thugs, as they physically participated in ballot box snatching, thumb printing of ballot papers, and other activities under the protection of the security agents. In some instances, the security agents and political thugs used tear gas to disperse voters and carted away ballot boxes and stored them with thumb-printed ballot papers. Faboyede (2007) acknowledged that

since 2007, due to the institutionalized elections in Nigeria, holding free and fair elections had been one of the greatest challenges and threats to democracy in the country.

However, it must be noted that the electoral process in Nigeria has coincided with a surge in violent events involving political parties, with the movement to democratic rule followed by spikes of additional insecurity every four years (Nwolise, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2011; Yiaga Africa, 2023; INEC, 2023). Violent incidents carried out by and against supporters of political parties have spiked each election year since 1999, around national and state elections. During previous election cycles, partisan violence has escalated along ethnic and sectarian lines, resulting in multiple rounds of revenge killings (Nwolise, 2007). Human Rights Watch (2011) argues that the magnitude of electoral unrest reached its highest point in 2011, when clashes between supporters of the ruling PDP and the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) resulted in an estimated 800 deaths following the election of President Jonathan (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Likewise, hundreds of fatalities were reported during the 2015 and 2019 general elections (Adebajo, 2022).

Comparative Case Analysis of the Impact of Electoral Violence on Voter Turnout in the 2023 General Elections in the Southwest and Southeast

Voter suppression had an influential impact on electoral outcomes in Nigeria in general and in the Southwest and Southeast in the 2023 general elections (Orizu, 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2023; Kahi, 2023). The integrity of democratic processes in Nigeria faces serious threats from election-related violence. Political rivalry and security crises intensified public fear during the 2023 general elections (Mahmud & Ozden, 2024). Tactical violence, such as intimidation of opponents, voters, and democratic institutions like INEC, was recorded before and during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, particularly in the southwest and southeast regions (Yiaga Africa, 2023; Ojewale & Onuoha, 2023; Ogundapo, 2023; Udora & Orizu, 2023; Oni et al., 2025). Widespread security issues escalated in the run-up to the election. Incidents like vandalism of political properties, attacks on party supporters, and destruction of campaign billboards were recorded across multiple states in both the Southwest and Southeast regions, particularly Ondo, Osun, Oyo, and Lagos from the Southwest, and Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo from the Southeast. Between 2019 and 2022, the Southeast recorded about 134 cases of violent attacks on INEC offices and staff (Ojewale & Onuoha, 2023). The rise in armed groups, especially secessionist activity in the Southeast, further undermined the democratic process, creating fears of safety in the minds of voters (Yiaga Africa, 2023; Ojewale & Onuoha, 2023; Ogundapo, 2023; Kahi, 2023; Orizu, 2023).

Data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data repository, covering general violence, indicate that between 2019 and 2023, the southeast region experienced 970 violent incidents, resulting in approximately 1,360 deaths (Ojewale & Onuoha, 2023). About 60% of attacks were by unknown gunmen, with IPOB and communal militia responsible for 129 and 101 attacks, respectively (Ojewale & Onuoha, 2023). INEC facilities were also frequent targets, including about 50 attacks between 2019 and 2022, with 33% occurring in 2022 (Ojewale & Onuoha, 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2023: 27-28). High-profile incidents include the attack on the INEC headquarters in Owerri, Imo State, on December 12, 2023, which resulted in one death, and another on INEC facilities in Enugu South LGA on January 15, 2023, where a local government official and a police officer were killed (Orizu, 2023; Ojewale & Onuoha, 2023).

In the twelve months preceding the election, over 200 violent cases involving party members and supporters, resulting in nearly 100 fatalities, were recorded across the country (ACLED, 2023). These numbers are largely in line with the run-ups to the previous two election years, with over 150 cases and more than 100 fatalities recorded between 2018 and 2019, and an estimated 115 cases and over 90 fatalities between 2014 and 2015 (ACLED, 2023). The Southeast and the Southwest regions accounted for the highest number of violent cases and fatalities involving party supporters before the 2023 general elections across the country, with each region accounting for 46 and 45, respectively. Nearly one in 10 cases occurred in Osun State (southwest), where both the PDP and APC accused each other of instigating violence against their rivals (Ogundapo, 2023). Half of the violence involving party supporters in the twelve months before the 2023 general elections involves direct, organized attacks against civilians, followed by mob violence and abductions (ACLED, 2023). These figures highlight the intensity and persistent targeting of both civilians and electoral infrastructure.

Given these patterns of violence and targeted attacks, the rise, scale, and dimensions of violent attacks in the regions during the pre-election period raised concerns about the possibility of high voter turnout and free and fair elections in the sub-regions during the 2023 general elections. The pre-election violence was not limited to the southeast, as there were also sustained and coordinated attacks targeted at Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) facilities, materials, and staff in the southwest during the pre-election period (INEC, 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2023; Ogundapo, 2023; Ojewale & Onuoha, 2023; Udora, 2023). However, pre-election violence differed significantly from that in the southeast in many respects. Election preparations were disrupted by political thugs in many parts of the southwest. They also fostered widespread uncertainty and fear regarding the feasibility

of elections in affected areas. Numerous cases of arson and vandalism were recorded across the regions. INEC facilities were vandalized in Ogun, Osun, and other locations as well (Yiaga Africa, 2023).

Deliberate voter suppression, which involved targeted actions to prevent eligible citizens from voting, was recorded across both the southwest and southeast regions (Ogundapo, 2023; Ojewale & Onuoha, 2023). These actions significantly reduced the voter turnout in affected areas. In several areas of the Southwest and Southeast, authorities and non-state actors prevented citizens from voting during the presidential and gubernatorial elections, particularly in Lagos, Oyo, and some other areas. Armed groups disrupted the electoral process by seizing materials and suppressing voter participation. For example, in the Oshodi/Isolo Local Government Area (LGA) of Lagos State, armed attacks disrupted the voting process (Ogundapo, 2023; Ojewale & Onuoha, 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2023). These actions largely led to reduced voter turnout and directly influenced electoral results in these regions.

The 2023 general elections highlight the critical need to devise legal and administrative frameworks for eliminating all forms of voter suppression in Nigerian elections. Political parties engaged local gangs that interrupted the voting process by disrupting polling units, seizing ballot boxes, and threatening voters in many parts of the southwest. According to the CLEEN Foundation (2023), major parts of the urban neighborhoods were hit by coordinated attacks, forcing some polling stations to be temporarily closed. Voter turnout in these regions declined significantly compared to 2019. Lagos State was the only state in the Southwest region that recorded a slight increase in voter turnout in the 2023 general elections, with the state recording a turnout of 18.92% compared to 18.32% in the 2019 general elections. In contrast, Ekiti State experienced a significant decrease, with a 11.91% decrease in voter turnout in the 2023 general election. Tables 2 and 3 present a graphical analysis of the persistent decrease in voter turnout in the Southwest and Southeast geopolitical zones, which is attributed to various forms of electoral insecurity.

Table 2: PVC collected and voter turnout in the 2023 Presidential Elections

Region	Total registered voters A	Total PVC collected B	Voter turnout C	% of PVC collected D	% of voter turnout E
Southwest					
2023					
Ekiti State	987,647	958,052	305,044	97.0	31.84
Lagos State	7,060,195	6,214,970	1,175,872	88.0	18.92
Ogun State	2,688,305	2,278,063	518,032	84.7	22.74
Ondo State	1,991,344	1,729,641	495,023	86.9	28.62
Osun State	1,954,800	1,594,066	617,063	81.5	38.71
Oyo State	3,276,675	2,761,421	717,969	84.3	26.00
Total	17,958,966	15,536,213	3,829,003	87.07	27.81
Southeast					
Abia State	2,120,808	1,949,197	350,855	91.9	18.00
Anambra State	2,656,437	2,624,764	617,082	98.8	23.51
Ebonyi State	1,597,646	1,551,795	327,584	97.1	21.11
Enugu State	2,112,793	1,995,389	442,976	94.4	22.20
Imo State	2,419,922	2,280,339	442,614	94.2	19.41
Total	10,907,606	10,401,484	2,181,111	95.28	20.85

INEC, 2023; Yiaga, 2023 Reports

Table 2 shows that despite a large number of registered voters collecting their voter cards, only a few of them turned up to vote. For instance, 87.07% of the registered voters in the southwest collected their voter cards, but only 27.81% of them turned out to vote. The situation in the southeast appears to be worse; while 95.28 percent of the registered voters in the region collected their voter cards, only 20.85 percent of them turned out to vote. This low voter turnout in the region may be attributed to the high level of insecurity in the region caused by IPOB and political violence. Table 3 presents voter turnout in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria.

Table 3: PVC collected and voter turnout in the 2019 Presidential Elections

Region	Total registered voters in 2019 A	Total PVC collected B	Voter turnout C	% of PVC collected D	% of voter turnout E
Southwest					
Ekiti State	909,967	899,919	393,715	73.25	43.9
Lagos State	6,570,291	6,313,507	1,156,634	84.19	18.9
Ogun State	2,375,003	2,336,887	605,955	71.36	26.2
Ondo State	1,822,346	1,812,567	586,909	81.13	33

Osun State	1,680,498	1,674,729	731,857	75.37	43.7
Oyo State	2,934,107	2,796,542	890,978	74.17	32.4
Total	16,292,212	15,834,151	4,366,048	76.58	33.02
Southeast					
Abia State	1,932,892	1,793,861	344,421	89.5	19.20
Anambra State	2,447,996	2,389,332	625,049	84.6	26.16
Ebonyi State	1,459,933	1,392,931	379,434	88.9	27.24
Enugu State	1,944,016	1,935,168	429,607	91.9	22.20
Imo State	2,272,293	2,037,569	395,492	74.9	19.41
Total	10,057,130	8,590,420	2,174,003	85.96	22.84

INEC, 2019; Yiaga, 2019 Reports

Table 3 shows that voter turnout remained generally low in both regions. However, voter turnout was higher in 2019 compared to the 2023 general elections. In the southwest region, 76.58% of registered voters collected their voter cards, but only 33.02% participated in the election. In the southeast, 22.84% of registered voters who collected their cards turned out to vote in the 2019 general election.

Table 4: Comparison of voter turnout in the 2019 and 2023 Presidential Elections

Region	% of voter turnout 2019	% of voter turnout 2023	% Difference
Southwest			
Ekiti State	43.75	31.84	-11.91
Lagos State	18.32	18.92	0.60
Ogun State	25.93	22.74	-3.19
Ondo State	32.38	28.62	-3.76
Osun State	43.70	38.71	-4.99
Oyo State	31.86	26.00	-5.86
Average	32.66	27.81	-4.85
Southeast			
Abia State	19.20	18.00	-1.20
Anambra State	26.16	23.51	-2.65
Ebonyi State	27.24	21.11	-6.13
Enugu State	23.4	22.20	-1.2
Imo State	28.7	19.41	-9.41
Average	24.94	20.85	-4.94

INEC, 2023; Yiaga, 2023 Reports

The substantial decline in voter turnout in the Southeast can be attributed to two major forms of electoral insecurity in the region. The two major forms of insecurity in this region are ideological and structural insecurity. Ideological insecurity is driven by the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which enforces a weekly sit-at-home order and engages in acts of kidnapping and violence to advance its separatist agenda. The group's open threats against voter participation further scared voters from coming out to vote for fear of their personal safety (Sahara Reporters, 2023). Table 4 indicates that 95.28% of the registered voters collected their Permanent Voter Cards (PVC) in the southeast region in 2023, but only 20.85% of them turned out for the election, which was 4.94% lower than the number of voters that turned out in the 2019 election. The situation was worse in Imo State, where the activities of IPOB were so rampant. Table 4 indicates a reduction of 9.41% of voter turnout in Imo State in the 2023 election. This situation may be attributed to the prevalence of insecurity in the area.

Structural insecurity arises from weaknesses within the electoral system that permit manipulation of election outcomes, which instigates a perception of psychological insecurity. This perception was reinforced during the 2023 general elections in Imo State, where the announcement of results by the Independent National Electoral Commission contradicted the field-observed results, thus confirming that many voters' prior believe that their votes would not count. For instance, Yiaga Africa (2023) identified inconsistencies and evidence of significant manipulation in the results collation process in some areas. For instance, in Imo, INEC announced 66,406 votes for the All-Progressives Congress, representing 14.2%; 360,495 votes for the Labour Party, representing 77.1%; and 30,234 votes for the PDP, representing 6.5%. These figures substantially differ from the Yiaga Africa Watching the Vote (WTV) estimates for Imo, which are APC 5.1% \pm 2.3%, LP 88.1% \pm 3.8%, and PDP 5.7% \pm 2.3%. The manipulation of the results in this region, particularly in Imo State, coupled with the ideological insecurity driven by the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra in the region, largely undermined public confidence in the electoral process and contributed to decreased voter turnout in the region. Table 2 presents a persistent trend of low voter

turnout in the Southeast geopolitical zone. In Imo State, voter turnout declined by 9.42% in the 2023 general elections, decreasing from 28.74% in 2019 to 19.4% in 2023 (INEC, 2023). This reduction is primarily attributed to security threats posed by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the structural nature of electoral violence in the sub-region.

The southeast had a more systemic type of insecurity compounded by militia groups, some of whom are associates of a separatist group, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). These groups enforced the sit-at-home order, intimidated voters and INEC officials, and directly attacked electoral facilities. The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2023) recorded that several INEC offices and polling units were destroyed or abandoned because of violence and fear of reprisal.

Unlike the episodic violence in the Southwest, insecurity in the Southeast was persistent, ideological, and enforced through sustained territorial control. The militia groups actively patrolled certain neighborhoods to enforce compliance with their orders (Yiaga Africa, 2023). Voters were warned against participation, and some polling officers were reportedly kidnapped or coerced into manipulating results. In such a climate, voter turnout dropped tremendously (Ojewale, & Onuoha, 2023).

Despite differences in form, both regions reflected how insecurity obstructs democratic participation. In the Southwest, insecurity was largely partisan and linked to competition between political actors, while in the Southeast, it was rooted in deep political grievances and executed by non-state actors who sought to delegitimize the election and state institutions altogether.

This comparative study highlights the complex, multidimensional ways insecurity shapes electoral behavior. The findings of the reviews suggest that the three forms of electoral insecurity, physical, structural, and psychological threats, contribute to voter apathy and suppression in Nigeria's 2023 general elections, particularly in the southwest and southeast. The state's inconsistent response to security threats eroded trust in electoral integrity. In the southwest, insecurity primarily disrupted voter mobilization. Campaign rallies were cancelled, community meetings suspended, and political engagement declined. In the southeast, the threat of violence by non-state actors was so pervasive that it produced widespread disengagement. Voters feared for their lives and questioned the legitimacy of elections conducted under duress. This not only suppressed turnout but may also have long-term implications for political engagement and state legitimacy in the region. This study corroborates the existing literature (Adetula and Alabi, 2017; Ojo, 2019; Arowosegbe, 2020; Olarinmoye, 2021; and Omotosho and Ayeni, 2022), which suggests that perceptions of physical threats, concern for personal safety, and a lack of confidence in electoral institutions significantly contribute to reduced voter turnout.

The Civic Voluntarism Model remains useful in illustrating these patterns. In both regions, the resources needed for participation (safe access to polling units, reliable information, and physical security) were compromised. Psychological engagement was weakened by fear and distrust. Mobilization structures were dismantled or co-opted by hostile actors.

Finally, this study aligns with those of Adetula and Alabi (2017) and Olarinmoye (2021), which indicate that perceptions of physical threats (Arowosegbe, 2020), psychological violence (Ojo, 2019; Olarinmoye, 2021), and structural forms of electoral violence (Omotosho and Ayeni, 2022) significantly contribute to reduced voter turnout due to concerns about violence and personal safety. The present study corroborates this conclusion. Specifically, low voter turnout in the southwest and southeast regions during the 2023 general elections was largely attributed to safety concerns and diminished confidence in electoral institutions.

CONCLUSION

This study has identified insecurity as a major factor that contributed to declining voter turnout in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, particularly in the southwest and southeast regions. In the southwest, the main form of insecurity was political thuggery and violence, both before and on the day of the elections. This disrupted voting logistics and created fear among voters. Conversely, insecurity in the southeast was more organized and ideologically driven. It was perpetrated by militia groups that psychologically intimidated voters and undermined the validity of the entire election process. Therefore, this study aligns with the Civic Voluntarism Model, which states that insecurity destroys the conditions necessary for democratic participation. It affects civic resources, demoralizes citizens, and hampers mobilization, thereby sabotaging electoral activity. In both regions, voter participation decreased substantially compared to past elections. The most severe decreases occurred where insecurity was systemic and ideologically driven. This study highlights the need for electoral and security reforms at the local level. Reforms should address the specific threats that exist in each region. A uniform national solution will not ensure voter safety and democratic inclusion in Nigeria's diverse security environment.

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