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## Political Apathy and Collection of Voter Cards: Implications for Voter Turnout and Leadership Selection in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** This article examines the nexus between political apathy and the collection of Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) in Nigeria, and how that relationship shapes voter turnout. The paper was motivated by the paradox of rising registration and PVC collection alongside historically low participation, the study asks why citizens register but often fail to convert registration into votes and what institutional responses might reverse this trend. Using a qualitative, descriptive approach based on systematic review of secondary sources INEC reports, survey data, observer statements, and scholarly literature the paper identifies the principal drivers of apathy, assesses the link between PVC uptake and turnout, and proposes policy responses. Findings show that apathy is multi-causal (distrust, perceived corruption, insecurity, bureaucratic friction) and that a pronounced “PVC paradox” exists: higher collection rates have not translated into greater turnout. Analysis through the lenses of Rational Choice and Political Efficacy indicates that weakened state capacity and a perceived breach of reciprocal obligations underpin withdrawal from electoral participation. The study concludes that technical fixes to registration and distribution must be paired with measures that rebuild credibility transparent result management, targeted civic education, and security guarantees to lower participation costs and restore citizens’ sense of political efficacy. These combined reforms are essential to transform symbolic registration into substantive democratic engagement.

**Keywords:** INEC, Permanent Voter Cards, Political Apathy, Voter Turnout, Nigeria

## Introduction

Elections remain the bedrock of democratic governance, functioning as the principal mechanism through which citizens articulate their preferences, confer legitimacy on leaders, and shape the trajectory of public policy. Beyond their procedural character, elections embody the normative ideals of accountability and representation, serving as the most visible avenue for citizen participation in governance (Powell, 1982; Dalton, 1988). Voting in particular has long been regarded as the simplest yet most consequential expression of civic duty, one that requires limited effort from individuals but carries immense implications for the vitality of democracy (Iyayi, 2006).

Globally, however, concerns over declining voter participation have intensified, and Nigeria reflects this troubling pattern (Blais, 2000; Gray & Caul, 2000). Since the country's return to multiparty democracy in 1999, political apathy has emerged as

a persistent challenge. Manifesting in forms such as low voter turnout, indifference to electoral processes, and weak civic engagement, apathy has become one of the defining features of Nigeria's democratic experience. Data from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) highlights this downward trajectory: while voter turnout stood at 52.3% in 1999 and peaked at 69% in 2003, it has since witnessed a steady decline, reaching 43.7% in 2015, 34% in 2019, and dropping to an unprecedented low of 26.7% in 2023 (Akpobome, 2024; Nwambuko et al., 2024). Such figures are symptomatic of a growing disconnection between citizens and the political system.

Several structural and attitudinal factors underpin this disengagement. Widespread disillusionment with political institutions, driven by unfulfilled campaign promises, corruption, and governance failures, has steadily eroded public trust (Norris, 2011). The prevalence of

electoral violence, vote buying, and allegations of rigging has further entrenched skepticism about whether votes truly count (Ewepu & Ukanwa, 2023). Compounding these challenges are the persistent logistical obstacles associated with the collection of Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs). Despite significant investments in voter registration campaigns, millions of PVCs remain uncollected, reflecting both institutional inefficiencies and the deepening apathy of the electorate (Vanguard, 2022; Daily Trust, 2023). The 2023 general elections starkly revealed the extent of the problem. Despite a record 93 million registered voters, only about 25 million participated in the polls, raising profound concerns about democratic legitimacy and inclusive governance (John, 2023). When electoral outcomes are determined by a fraction of the eligible population, elected leaders risk governing without a substantive mandate, thereby undermining the very

principle of majority rule and leaving democratic institutions vulnerable to delegitimization (Norris, 2011).

Nigeria's youth population, constituting more than 60% of the citizenry, embodies this paradox of awareness without action. While young people dominate online political discourse and have been at the forefront of social movements such as #EndSARS, their engagement often fails to translate into physical participation at polling units. This "digital activism gap" highlights how structural impediments, bureaucratic frustrations, and disillusionment continue to obstruct meaningful participation despite rising political consciousness (Ifesinachi & Omodia, 2022).

Efforts to reverse this trend, including the adoption of technological innovations such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), have aimed to strengthen transparency and rebuild trust. Yet these reforms have been undermined

by technical glitches, public skepticism, and entrenched governance deficits (Rajvanshi, 2023; Mordi, 2023). Consequently, the widening gap between voter registration, PVC collection, and actual turnout illustrates not merely a logistical problem but a profound democratic deficit that demands urgent scholarly attention.

Against this backdrop, this paper interrogates the relationship between political apathy and the collection of PVCs, with a particular focus on how these dynamics shape voter turnout in Nigeria. While the country consistently records high voter registration figures, the sharp disparity between registration and actual participation underscores a deeper attitudinal crisis that cannot be explained solely by institutional weaknesses.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite sustained efforts to broaden electoral participation through mass registration exercises and

institutional reforms, Nigeria's democracy faces a stubborn participation gap: large numbers of citizens register to vote but do not translate that registration into effective participation on election day. This shortfall is visible both in the divergence between registrants and actual voters and in the persistent problem of uncollected Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs), which renders many registrations functionally inert and raises urgent questions about the inclusiveness of the electoral process (Yiaga Africa, 2023; Ganiyu, 2025). The empirical trend is stark. After peaking in the early 2000s, national turnout has declined substantially: historic highs around the 2003 cycle gave way to progressively lower participation in subsequent elections, culminating in an unprecedentedly low turnout in 2023 (roughly 26–27% of registered voters). This decline has occurred even as the voter register expanded dramatically, producing the paradox of a larger electorate but a smaller proportion

turning out to vote a pattern that signals more than episodic failure and suggests deeper structural and attitudinal malaise (Ganiyu, 2025; Amata, 2023).

Multiple interacting drivers appear to underlie this disengagement. Popular distrust in political institutions and elected officials, recurrent reports of electoral malpractice (including vote-buying and rigging), and episodic electoral violence have all been implicated in discouraging voters from participating (Carboni & Serwat, 2023; Ewepu & Ukanwa, 2023). At the same time, logistical obstacles ranging from late or incomplete delivery of electoral materials to the bureaucratic frictions around PVC distribution exacerbate the problem by creating practical barriers to voting even for otherwise willing citizens (Carboni & Serwat, 2023; Vanguard, 2023).

Complicating the picture is an apparent “PVC paradox.” In 2023 INEC reported very high aggregate PVC-collection figures (a reported

collection rate above 90%), yet actual ballot turnout remained unusually low, and several million PVCs were still uncollected in absolute terms a combination that points to uneven distribution, localized access problems, or other behavioral factors that simple collection statistics mask (Nathaniel, 2023, 2023; Bailey, 2023). This mismatch indicates that measuring democratic engagement solely by registration or aggregate card-collection rates risks obscuring the finer dynamics that produce nonparticipation.

The growing prominence of digitally mediated youth activism energized by movements such as #EndSARS and amplified through online networks has not consistently translated into proportionate gains in physical turnout at the polls. While online mobilization increased political visibility and candidate support among young cohorts in 2023, structural deterrents (security fears, mistrust, logistical constraints) and the limits of online-to-offline

conversion mean that digital activism alone has not resolved the turnout deficit (Wired, 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2023). Understanding why heightened online engagement often fails to produce sustained, in-person electoral participation is crucial for policy design and civic outreach (Yiaga Africa, 2023).

Taken together, these patterns reveal a layered problem: declining turnout is not explained only by a single factor (such as PVC availability) but by a complex interplay of institutional shortcomings, security and integrity concerns, logistical bottlenecks, and changing modes of civic expression. The central research problem this article addresses is therefore to unpack how political apathy particularly as it is expressed in behaviors around PVC collection interacts with institutional and socio-political constraints to shape voter turnout in Nigeria. Clarifying these linkages is essential for designing interventions that move beyond simple registration drives and toward

sustainable, inclusive electoral participation. (Research aims and specific questions follow in the next sections.) (Yiaga Africa, 2023; Ganiyu, 2025; Carboni & Serwat, 2023)

## Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. What underlying factors explain the persistence of political apathy in Nigeria, particularly as it relates to citizens' willingness or reluctance to collect Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs)?
- ii. In what ways does the pattern of PVC collection influence voter turnout across successive electoral cycles in Nigeria?
- iii. What institutional and policy interventions could effectively mitigate political apathy, improve PVC collection rates,

and ultimately strengthen in Nigeria's democratic voter participation in system. Nigeria's democratic process?

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The overarching aim of this paper is to investigate how political apathy shapes the collection of Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and to examine the extent to which this relationship affects voter turnout in Nigeria's electoral process. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- i. Identify and analyze the key drivers of political apathy among Nigerian voters, with particular emphasis on attitudes toward PVC collection.
- ii. Evaluate the link between PVC collection rates and patterns of voter turnout in national elections.
- iii. Recommend practical strategies and reforms that can reduce political apathy, enhance PVC collection, and strengthen voter participation

## Theoretical Framework

This article adopts a concise, dual-lens framework Rational Choice and Political Efficacy to explain why many Nigerians register but do not collect Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and, ultimately abstain from voting. From a Rational Choice perspective, citizens weigh the expected benefits of participation against its costs. When the perceived probability that one vote will alter outcomes is small, the expected utility of voting is often eclipsed by tangible and psychological costs: time spent locating collection centres, transport and opportunity costs, fear of violence or disorder, and frustration with administrative bottlenecks. Classic formulations of the “calculus of voting” capture this logic and also recognize that non-material rewards such as civic duty (“D”) can offset low instrumental benefits yet when distrust in institutions depresses perceived benefits and heightens perceived costs, abstention becomes a rational

response (Downs, 1957; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968). In Nigeria’s context, where allegations of malpractice or weak policy responsiveness persist, the rational calculus can favour non-collection of PVCs and non-turnout unless institutions reduce costs and raise credible benefits of participation. Political Efficacy complements this account by focusing on beliefs about one’s competence and the system’s responsiveness. Internal efficacy the sense that one understands politics and can act effectively and external efficacy the belief that authorities will heed citizen input jointly shape whether individuals convert registration into concrete actions like PVC collection and voting (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954; Almond & Verba, 1963). Low internal efficacy (e.g., confusion about procedures) and low external efficacy (e.g., skepticism that votes matter or that results are fairly counted) depress participation even when costs are moderate. Empirical



work shows that efficacy is malleable: civic education, credible administration, and prior positive experiences can raise efficacy over time, while negative experiences lower it, creating feedback loops that either entrench apathy or build participation (Finkel, 1985; Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990; Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991).

Synthesizing both lenses, the framework posits that PVC collection and turnout are jointly determined by a cost–benefit calculus filtered through efficacy beliefs. High perceived costs and low expected benefits amplified by weak external efficacy discourage card collection and voting; conversely, reforms that reduce logistical frictions and visibly improve integrity and responsiveness can shift the calculus and elevate efficacy, increasing participation. This integrated approach generates testable implications for Nigeria: interventions that simultaneously lower costs (simplified, proximate, and digitalized PVC processes) and

raise efficacy (transparent result transmission, credible dispute resolution, and sustained voter education) should have multiplicative effects on both PVC uptake and turnout.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative and descriptive research design anchored in secondary data, drawing on scholarly literature, official reports, electoral statistics, and publications from credible institutions such as INEC, Afrobarometer, and civil society organizations. The choice of this design stems from its suitability for analyzing complex socio-political phenomena like voter apathy and PVC collection without manipulating variables, while also allowing for contextual interpretation of patterns and trends. Data collection relied on systematic document review and content analysis, ensuring that materials were selected based on credibility, thematic relevance, and recency. Using structured review

protocols, key themes such as institutional inefficiency, voter motivation, and democratic disengagement were identified and critically examined. The data were analyzed through thematic content analysis, complemented by descriptive electoral statistics to highlight correlations between PVC collection and voter turnout. This approach provides a coherent framework for exploring the interplay between political apathy and democratic participation in Nigeria, ensuring that findings are grounded in established evidence and scholarly rigor.

## The Discourse

### Political Apathy and the Nigerian Democratic Experience

Political apathy refers to a patterned withdrawal from public life that shows up not only as low voter turnout but also as limited interest in public debates, avoidance of civic associations, and indifference to collective decision-making. Classic scholarship on political culture distinguished between citizens who feel oriented to public affairs and those embedded in more “parochial” orientations with weak knowledge, weak attachment, and weak efficacy conditions that often depress participation. More recent work expands this picture, separating latent disinterest from active disengagement and mapping participation along cognitive (awareness), affective (trust/attachment), and behavioral (action) dimensions. In short, apathy is not just “not voting”; it is a broader syndrome in which citizens feel unable, unwilling, or unconvinced to

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act politically (Almond & Verba, 1963; Ekman & Amnå, 2012).

In Nigeria’s contemporary democracy, apathy is fueled by a dense mix of institutional and experiential factors. Survey evidence shows declining public trust in political institutions across Africa, with Nigeria among countries where confidence in elected leaders, parties, and electoral management bodies is fragile. When citizens doubt that officeholders are responsive or that rules will be applied fairly, they rationally downshift their engagement (Afrobarometer & NOIPolls, 2022).

Perceptions of corruption compound this trust problem. Nigeria’s recent performance on Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index scoring 26/100 and ranking 140th of 180 countries signals entrenched concerns about integrity in public life. Such perceptions erode the belief that participation will yield fair outcomes and feed the sense that politics is a

closed marketplace for elites rather than a channel for ordinary interests (Transparency International, 2024). Security risks also dampen participation. Election seasons have featured threats, intimidation, and episodic violence that make the costs of engagement queuing to collect voter cards, attending rallies, or voting feel unacceptably high to many citizens. Analyses of the 2023 cycle documented significant election-related violence and disruptions, with authorities even taking extraordinary steps (such as closing universities) to mitigate risk, underscoring how insecurity can chill turnout and broader civic engagement (Carboni, 2023; Asadu, 2023).

Administrative frictions further widen the gap between registration and participation. Reports on the 2023 general election describe logistical shortfalls and uneven operations that undermined confidence, while the electoral commission's own post-election

report chronicles the system's strengths and bottlenecks. Where citizens expect long queues, technology failures, or uncertainty about whether their effort "counts," many disengage earlier in the chain by not collecting Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) at all (International Republican Institute [IRI] & National Democratic Institute [NDI], 2023; Independent National Electoral Commission [INEC], 2024).

These patterns resonate with Social Contract Theory and related accounts of political support. In contractarian terms (Locke, Rousseau), citizens owe compliance and participation when institutions protect rights, provide security, and operate under rules that reflect the common good; when institutions fail on these obligations, citizens' duty to invest effort weakens, and withdrawal becomes understandable if not normatively ideal. Easton's classic distinction between "specific" and "diffuse" support adds that repeated disappointments corrode the

reservoir of goodwill on which democratic systems rely producing exactly the mix of cynicism and abstention observed in apathy (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025; Easton, 1975).

Youth dynamics sharpen the challenge. Despite high online activism and bursts of mobilization, independent observers found that the 2023 elections recorded historically low turnout and unmet expectations, especially among first-time and young voters. This “digital-participation gap” reflects a collision between aspiration and experience: young people are civically expressive on social media yet encounter barriers security anxieties, skepticism about results transmission, and bureaucratic hassles that blunt the translation of interest into action (Yiaga Africa, 2023; International Republican Institute [IRI] & National Democratic Institute [NDI], 2023).

Taken together, Nigeria’s apathy problem is best read as a rational and affective response to perceived costs,

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limited efficacy, and wavering legitimacy. Where corruption and insecurity raise the price of engagement, where administrative bottlenecks sap convenience, and where trust is thin, citizens economize their political effort by not collecting PVCs, by staying home on election day, or by tuning out altogether. Reversing this trajectory therefore requires visible progress on integrity and security, credible and user-friendly electoral administration, and sustained civic learning that rebuilds both the belief that participation matters and the expectation that the state will keep its side of the bargain (Carboni, 2023; Independent National Electoral Commission [INEC], 2024; Afrobarometer & NOIPolls, 2022; (Transparency International, 2024).

### **Collection of Voter Cards and Its Challenges**

The Permanent Voter Card (PVC) is the gateway to formal political participation in Nigeria, required for

accreditation at polling units under the current electoral framework. Yet the path from registration to actual card-in-hand remains fraught, and this bottleneck has become a defining symptom of the country's participation crisis. Although continuous voter registration drives have swelled the roll to record levels, millions of cards have routinely sat uncollected before major polls, reflecting a mix of institutional weakness, everyday frictions, and deep-seated mistrust that depresses eventual turnout. At law and in practice, INEC's PVC-centric accreditation architecture aims to curb fraud through biometrics and device-based checks; in reality, uneven execution of these rules, patchy logistics, and security disruptions often frustrate citizens long before election day. (See Electoral Act 2022 and INEC regulations; EU EOM 2023 review of operations.) (Yiaga Africa, 2023; Udemezue, 2023; International Republican Institute [IRI] & National

Democratic Institute [NDI], 2023). A first layer of deterrence is administrative: miscommunication about collection windows, understaffed centres, missing or mis-sorted cards, and long queues that require multiple repeat visits. In major cities, reports ahead of the 2023 general elections described citizens turned back and told to "come next week," or to search multiple locations with little guidance—costly in transport fares and lost work time. Civil society situation rooms documented these frictions across states, noting inconsistent opening hours, insufficient personnel, and device breakdowns during the push to distribute backlogs. These are not isolated anecdotes; they map onto a recognizable pattern of last-mile delivery failure that saps motivation to follow through (Majeed, 2025; Rivers State Government, 2023). Security conditions compound these practical hurdles. Where banditry, insurgency, or politically-linked

violence threatens movement, PVC distribution inevitably stalls. INEC has publicly recorded dozens of attacks on its facilities since 2019, with offices torched or vandalized in multiple states disrupting storage, sorting, and handover of cards and forcing periodic suspension of operations. For residents of rural or conflict-affected LGAs, the risk calculus is stark: the cost (and danger) of repeated trips to a collection centre can easily outweigh perceived benefits, especially when trust in the eventual vote count is already thin.

That trust deficit is pivotal.

International observer missions concluded that operational breakdowns—especially around result upload and transparency dented public confidence in 2023.

When citizens believe that the system will not credibly translate votes into outcomes, the incentive to complete “one more step” (PVC collection) collapses into what political economists call rational

disengagement. In other words, people behave logically within the information environment they face: if the expected payoff of participation trends toward zero, additional costs (time, money, safety) feel wasteful (Independent National Electoral Commission [INEC], 2024; West Africa Civil Society Institute [WACSI], 2023).

The scale of the attrition is visible in the stock of unclaimed cards. In the run-up to the 2023 polls, press briefings and state-level releases pointed to millions of PVCs still on shelves, even after special weekend drives figures that were echoed across reputable outlets and fact-checked for context. The problem is not new; rather, it has become a structural “leak” between registration enthusiasm and election-day accreditation, undermining representativeness (Afrobarometer & NOIPolls, 2022; Centre for Democracy and Development [CDD], 2023; West Africa Civil Society Institute [WACSI], 2023).

Generational and spatial divides shape who bears these burdens most acutely. Youths who made up an outsized share of new registrants during the last CVR express high political interest online but are disproportionately frustrated by analog bottlenecks such as hours-long queues, unclear pick-up points, or repeated device failures. Many are students or informal workers with limited flexibility to queue during business hours; the opportunity cost of “chasing” a card across multiple visits is therefore higher. Conversely, rural voters can be blocked by distance and transport scarcity, especially when collection points are concentrated at LGA headquarters and road security is uncertain. Analyses after 2023 captured this paradox: record registration, especially among young people, yet historically low turnout suggesting that the journey from digital mobilization to physical enfranchisement stalls at the PVC stage for large cohorts (West Africa

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Civil Society Institute [WACSI], 2023).

Media dynamics add an additional headwind. In the months before the polls, credible monitors flagged waves of misinformation about collection deadlines, centre relocations, and supposed “invalid” cards circulating on WhatsApp and Facebook. While INEC and fact-checkers pushed clarifications, the churn of misleading posts created confusion, crowded out official timelines, and, in some cases, convinced people their efforts would be futile. INEC’s own post-election technical review listed misinformation/disinformation as a material operational challenge that affected public perception and compliance with procedures, including around accreditation technologies (Independent National Electoral Commission [INEC], 2024).

These patterns resonate with State Failure (or weak-state) theory, which holds that when governments



struggle to deliver core “political goods” such as security, administrative capacity, and predictable services, legitimacy erodes and citizens recalibrate their engagement accordingly. In Nigeria’s electoral context, every unresolved service failure—unsafe roads to a collection centre, a card lost in transit, a fruitless fifth visit, or a platform for result viewing that does not work as advertised signals institutional fragility. Over time, the cumulative effect is learned helplessness: people internalize the message that the state cannot or will not meet its side of the social contract, so they withdraw from low-salience but costly acts like PVC retrieval (Rotberg, 2003).

To be sure, reform ideas are on the table. INEC and stakeholders have debated ways to reduce the PVC choke-point expanding pick-up locations, leveraging temporary or digital identifiers under controlled conditions, and refining accreditation technologies. Legal experts,

professional bodies, and civic groups have also urged amendments to clarify and modernize accreditation provisions, alongside investments in logistics and communication. But without parallel improvements in transparency and result management the ultimate currency of trust technical tweaks to card collection may not durably shift behavior. Citizens respond not only to the friction of processes but to the credibility of outcomes (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2022; Onyekwere, 2025).

Non-collection of PVCs is less a matter of indifference than a rational response to layered obstacles: costly and confusing procedures, real personal risk in insecure areas, and persistent skepticism that votes will be honored. These are unevenly distributed hitting youths, the urban working poor, and far-flung rural communities hardest but they are linked by a common thread of institutional weakness. Closing the gap between registration and

accreditation therefore requires a dual strategy: fix the last-mile service problem (more accessible, better-staffed, clearly communicated, and secure collection) and fix the confidence problem (credible, timely, and transparent election administration). Without both, cards will continue to gather dust and turnout will continue to slide (Rivers State Government, 2023; Independent National Electoral Commission [INEC], 2024).

Implications on Voter Turnout

The trends in voter registration, PVC collection, and actual turnout present a paradox that carries serious implications for Nigeria’s democratic process. While the data suggests that Nigerians are increasingly willing to register and collect their Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs), this enthusiasm is not translating into higher electoral participation. As illustrated earlier (see Table 4.1), PVC collection has consistently improved, climbing from 77.5% in 2015 to 93.3% in 2023. By

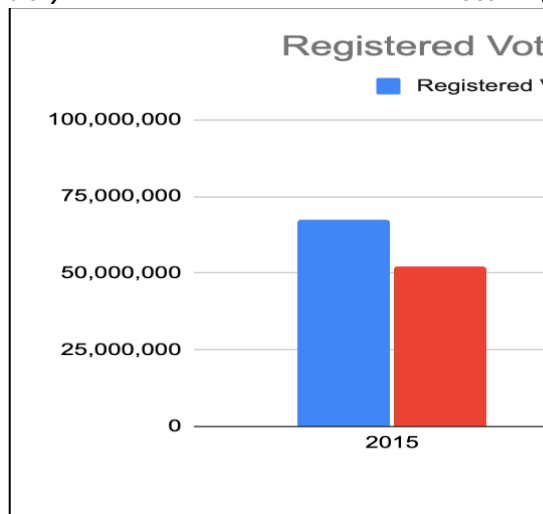
contrast, voter turnout over the same period has experienced a sharp decline, plummeting from 43.6% in 2015 to a historic low of 26.7% in 2023.

Table 4.1 Voters Registration vs. Card Collection Rate

Election Year	Registered Voters	PV
2015	67,422,005	52,3
2019	84,004,084	72,3
2023	93,469,008	87,3

Source: Independent National Electoral Commission

Fig 1: Voters Registration vs. Card Collection Rates



This divergence between readiness to vote and actual participation underscores several critical issues.

First, it demonstrates that PVC collection has become more of a symbolic gesture of citizenship rather than a reliable predictor of electoral engagement. Many citizens appear motivated to collect their PVCs because of its utility as an identity document, necessary for banking, employment, and official verification processes. However, this does not guarantee they will cast their votes on election day, leading to a growing gap between electoral preparation and electoral action.

Second, the persistent decline in

turnout undermines the legitimacy of Nigeria's electoral outcomes.

Democratic theory places high value on voter participation as a measure of political consent. When fewer than 30% of eligible voters decide the leadership of a nation with over 200 million people, questions of representativeness and legitimacy inevitably arise. As turnout declines, elected governments increasingly face a legitimacy deficit, whereby their authority rests on the endorsement of a shrinking minority of citizens. This in turn fuels a vicious cycle of apathy: citizens who believe elections are unrepresentative become less likely to vote in subsequent cycles, further weakening democratic culture.

Third, low turnout widens the disconnect between citizens and the state. A robust voter turnout signals trust in institutions and confidence in the electoral system. Conversely, persistent abstention reflects widespread disillusionment, alienation, and dissatisfaction with

governance outcomes. As Afrobarometer (2022) and NOI Polls (2023) show, a majority of Nigerians doubt the efficacy of their votes, with many expressing the view that elections are manipulated or predetermined. This erosion of trust discourages meaningful participation and reinforces political passivity, particularly among the youth who form the largest demographic bloc yet remain the most disenchanting. Fourth, regional and demographic disparities in PVC collection and turnout exacerbate Nigeria's political imbalance. As earlier noted, collection rates tend to be higher in northern states where grassroots mobilization is entrenched, but turnout remains inconsistent due to insecurity and electoral violence. In contrast, urban centers like Lagos and Rivers, despite high registration and collection, record chronically low participation due to voter fatigue, long queues, and weak mobilization structures. This unevenness raises concerns about the inclusiveness of

Nigeria's democracy, as some groups are systematically more engaged than others.

The paradox of high PVC collection but declining turnout sustains a weak democratic culture. When elections become procedural rather than participatory, democracy risks being reduced to a hollow ritual. Citizens who see little value in voting may still engage in symbolic compliance collecting their PVCs, following election news, or attending rallies without translating this into actual participation. This weakens electoral accountability, emboldens political elites to manipulate the system, and diminishes the prospects for substantive democratic consolidation.

### **Broader Democratic Consequences**

The paradox of rising voter registration and PVC collection alongside declining turnout has implications that extend far beyond electoral participation. At its core, persistent political apathy erodes the very foundation of democratic governance by shifting power away

from citizens and entrenching elite dominance. When only a small fraction of the electorate actively participates in elections, political authority becomes concentrated in the hands of a narrow ruling class whose decisions are rarely subject to broad-based scrutiny. This weakens the accountability loop that sustains democratic legitimacy, as leaders face diminished pressure to respond to citizens' demands.

Apathy also contributes to the gradual contraction of Nigeria's civic space. Where citizens disengage from formal democratic processes, the influence of civil society organizations, grassroots movements, and opposition voices is weakened, allowing incumbents to consolidate authority. Over time, this normalization of disengagement risks breeding a culture of authoritarian tolerance, where low participation is interpreted as acquiescence, and the absence of mass mobilization emboldens political elites to govern without genuine consent. In such a

context, electoral malpractice, corruption, and poor governance become entrenched because fewer citizens are actively holding leaders accountable.

From a theoretical standpoint, sustained disengagement undermines the social contract upon which democratic rule is anchored. As scholars of democratic theory argue, the legitimacy of the state rests on the active consent and participation of its citizens. When citizens perceive that the state fails to protect their interests or ensure credible elections, they experience exclusion from this social contract, which deepens their withdrawal from political life. This cycle of alienation reinforces political apathy, creating a self-perpetuating dynamic in which the state governs without meaningful input from its people, and citizens lose both the capacity and the will to demand accountability.

The weakening of electoral accountability creates fertile ground for authoritarian practices to take

root. Declining turnout means that electoral mandates are secured with progressively smaller constituencies, reducing the cost of electoral manipulation and vote buying. In practice, this makes it easier for ruling elites to capture institutions, sideline dissent, and govern with minimal legitimacy. Left unchecked, such dynamics threaten to hollow out Nigeria's democratic experiment, reducing elections to ritual exercises rather than substantive vehicles of citizen choice.

The broader democratic consequence of voter apathy is the erosion of participatory governance. A democracy in which citizens disengage from the ballot box cannot fulfill its promise of inclusivity, equality, and responsiveness. Instead, it risks drifting into a hybrid regime where elections occur but substantive accountability is absent, and where citizens increasingly turn to informal, sometimes extra-legal means of expressing discontent. To avert this trajectory, it is essential to

complement institutional and technological reforms with deep structural investments in civic education, youth engagement, and inclusive participation.

## Findings and Conclusion

The analysis of secondary evidence and the thematic synthesis carried out in this study produce a set of interlinked findings. First, political apathy in Nigeria is a multi-causal phenomenon: institutional distrust, perceptions of endemic corruption, insecurity around electoral cycles, and chronic governance failures jointly depress citizens' motivation to participate (Transparency International, 2023; Carboni & Serwat, 2023). Framed through Rational Choice and Political Efficacy lenses, these conditions reduce the expected instrumental and expressive returns to participation while lowering both internal and external efficacy, so that abstention becomes a reasoned if normatively undesirable response (Downs, 1957; Campbell et al., 1954; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968). Second, the relationship between PVC possession and voting is not one-to-one: while INEC data and corroborating reports

show improved registration and card-collection metrics in recent cycles, this has not translated into proportionate increases in ballot turnout. The 2015–2023 pattern (rising collection rates alongside falling turnout) reveals a structural disconnect the “PVC paradox” where card ownership signals potential capacity to vote but does not overcome affective and practical barriers to actual turnout (International Republican Institute [IRI] & National Democratic Institute [NDI], 2023; Afrobarometer & NOIPolls, 2022). Third, the drivers and costs of non-participation are unevenly distributed: young, mobile urban residents often cite opportunity costs, bureaucratic hassles, and disillusionment with outcomes; rural and conflict-affected populations face distance, insecurity, and infrastructural exclusion; women, the elderly, and persons with disabilities encounter additional accessibility constraints. These demographic and spatial differentials shape both

collection behaviour and turnout in important ways. Fourth, institutional and technological reforms (BVAS, CVR, online pre-registration) have improved some administrative dimensions of elections but have fallen short of repairing the trust deficit technical fixes without corresponding gains in transparency, credible result management, and frontline service delivery do not reliably convert readiness into participation (EU-EOM, 2023; Centre for Democracy and Development [CDD], 2023). Finally, media misinformation, vote-buying, and the perception of predetermination further depress the normative incentives to vote, producing learned helplessness among many citizens and sustaining a low-participation equilibrium.

Conclusion. Taken together, these findings point to a central conclusion: the problem is not simply one of mechanics (cards, machines, queues) but of democratic quality. The PVC collection

exercise is important as it addresses only the supply side of enfranchisement; it does not, by itself, restore the credibility, security, and responsiveness that generate sustained turnout. Theoretically, this confirms the value of an integrated explanatory frame: Rational Choice explains the cost-benefit calculations that lead citizens to economize their political effort, while Political Efficacy explains why many fail to convert registration into action when they lack belief in their competence or in the system's responsiveness. Practically, the implications are stark. Low turnout despite high registration and PVC collection weakens electoral legitimacy, narrows the accountability channel between citizens and officeholders, and increases the vulnerability of the polity to elite capture and authoritarian slide. Reversing this trajectory therefore requires a two-pronged strategy: (a) reduce the material and procedural costs of participation (more accessible,



secure, and user-friendly card distribution and polling arrangements) and (b) rebuild efficacy and trust through demonstrable integrity in result collation, transparent dispute resolution, sustained civic education, targeted outreach to marginalized cohorts, and security guarantees at critical moments. These combined measures technical, institutional, and civic are necessary to move Nigeria from symbolic registration toward substantive, inclusive participation. The next section offers concrete recommendations derived from these findings.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made;

- i. **Decentralize and operationalize PVC distribution:** INEC should reduce last-mile friction by expanding pick-up points (ward-level and mobile units), instituting weekend/evening

collection windows, and piloting community collection drives with local authorities and civil society. Accompany this with an SMS/USSD notification system that tells registrants where and when their cards are available. These measures target the procedural barriers identified in the findings (long queues, transport costs, limited hours) and will directly lower the transactional cost of converting registration into possession of a PVC.

- ii. **Adopt a sustained, multi-modal civic education strategy targeting youth and marginalized groups:** Move civic education beyond episodic campaigns by embedding age-appropriate civic curricula in secondary and tertiary education; scale peer-to-peer youth hubs, vernacular radio programming, and community

town halls in rural areas. Design materials that explain the practical steps to collect PVCs and vote, emphasize how votes influence local governance, and counter fatalistic narratives.

- iii. **Increase electoral transparency through open data and real-time reporting:** INEC should publish timely, machine-readable dashboards showing PVC distribution and collection rates, and turnout by LGA/ward. Independent audits of card distribution and public, easily queried datasets will allow civil society and researchers to identify underserved areas and target interventions. Greater transparency rebuilds external efficacy and makes institutional performance observable and accountable.

- iv. **Strengthen security planning around**

**registration and election**

**logistics:** Design joint INEC–security-agency contingency plans for vulnerable LGAs that include safe corridors to collection points, escorted mobile distribution where needed, and rapid response mechanisms to attacks on electoral infrastructure. Prioritize continuity of service in conflict-affected areas via secure temporary collection points or localized mobile enrolment.

- v. **Legal and procedural reform to expand inclusive accreditation options:** Amend electoral regulations to permit verified alternative accreditation mechanisms for specific cases (e.g., temporary digital slips, employer-verified absentee procedures, diaspora pilot voting). Clarify statutory timelines for PVC production/distribution and introduce legal penalties for

deliberate disruption of distribution. Such reforms should be carefully piloted, with accompanying safeguards for integrity and privacy.

vi. **Tackle vote-buying and corruption through targeted enforcement and civic monitoring:**

Strengthen coordination between anti-corruption agencies (ICPC/EFCC), INEC, and civil society to monitor, investigate, and prosecute vote-buying and procurement abuses that erode trust. Create confidential hotlines and community reporting mechanisms during registration and elections; publish enforcement outcomes to demonstrate consequences and rebuild external efficacy.

vii. **Scale technology thoughtfully with integrity and accessibility safeguards:**

Continue to refine biometric accreditation (e.g., BVAS) while investing in redundancy, device reliability, and cybersecurity. Pilot e-voting or remote accreditation at small scale with independent evaluation before wider adoption. Ensure technology rollouts are accompanied by offline alternatives so that vulnerable or low-literacy populations are not further marginalized.

viii. **Create an Electoral Participation Observatory and evidence-based monitoring framework:**

Institutionalize a publicly accessible observatory jointly managed by INEC, research institutions, and civil society that tracks PVC distribution vs. collection and turnout disaggregated by age, gender, and locality. Use this dashboard to implement targeted interventions,

evaluate pilots (e.g., mobile collection units), and publish annual analytic reports that inform policy.

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