

Compulsory Voting in Nigeria

Why Punishment Won't Fix Our Electoral Crisis

The recent move by Nigeria's House of Representatives to make voting compulsory-with the threat of six months in prison or heavy fines for those who don't vote-has sparked a heated debate across the country. Supporters of the bill argue it's a way to tackle the low voter turnout recorded in the 2023 general elections, where only about 25–27% of registered voters cast their ballots, according to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2024). But many Nigerians worry this approach misses the bigger picture and overshadows the important, long-overdue reforms needed to rebuild trust in our electoral system.

When we examine why so many Nigerians abstain from voting, it becomes clear that the issue is not simple apathy but a deep lack of trust in the electoral process. A GeoPoll survey conducted in the week leading up to the 2023 elections found that only about half of Nigerians (52%) believed the election results would be accepted by all citizens, and less than half (49%) trusted the elections to be free of fraud-with trust even lower among young voters aged 18–25 (40%) (GeoPoll, 2023). While 65% agreed that INEC was transparent in informing the public, only 50% believed it was independent and free from political influence, and confidence in a violence-free election was even lower at 43%. Similarly, Afrobarometer's 2023 survey revealed that although 71% of Nigerians support elections as the best method to choose leaders, only 23% expressed trust in INEC, with 78% expressing little or no trust in the electoral commission-a decline from previous years (Afrobarometer, 2023).

But before the government can claim the moral justification to address low voter turnout, it must first address the supply side of electoral participation-namely, the operational barriers that discourage or even prevent eligible Nigerians from voting.

Nigeria's voter register has long been plagued by inaccuracies. Ahead of the 2023 elections, INEC declared over 45% of newly registered voters invalid due to duplicate registrations and

incomplete data (INEC, 2024). This massive cleanup, while necessary, also meant that many eligible Nigerians were disenfranchised due to administrative errors or a lack of awareness about the status of their registration. The process of obtaining or renewing a Permanent Voter Card (PVC) has also been a major obstacle, with logistical delays and lost cards preventing many from participating (Ogbonna, 2024).

Recognising these issues, INEC has recently proposed reforms to legalise voting without a PVC, allowing alternative verification through biometric data and voter identity software. This reform aims to make the process more inclusive, especially for those who have relocated, lost their cards, or faced administrative delays. The use of smart card readers, fingerprint scanning, and facial recognition is intended to improve both the accuracy and security of voter verification, though concerns remain about technological failures and the capacity to implement these systems nationwide, particularly in rural areas lacking reliable power and internet access (Situation Room, 2023).

Operational inefficiencies have also undermined voter confidence. During the 2023 elections, many polling units experienced significant delays in opening, with some voters waiting in line from as early as 5 a.m. and still unable to vote hours after polls were meant to close. INEC cited late deployment of staff and materials, security threats, and even theft of voting machines as causes of these delays (INEC, 2024). Such experiences not only frustrate voters but also discourage future participation, reinforcing the perception that the system is unreliable and unresponsive to citizens' needs.

In discussing reforms to restore trust in Nigeria's electoral system, some have proposed creating new bodies to oversee political party activities and election offences like vote-buying and financial misconduct. However, a more pragmatic and effective approach lies in strengthening the existing collaborative framework involving INEC, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), and the National Planning Commission (EFCC, 2020).

INEC has already been working closely with EFCC and ICPC to combat electoral malpractices, including vote-buying and illicit campaign financing. For instance, INEC's inclusion of EFCC in its Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security (ICCES) has enhanced efforts to

monitor and prosecute offenders during elections. This collaboration has yielded tangible results, such as arrests and prosecutions following the 2022 Osun State governorship election, demonstrating the value of leveraging existing institutions rather than creating new ones (Punch, 2020).

While these agencies have distinct mandates, INEC overseeing electoral administration, EFCC tackling economic and financial crimes, and ICPC focusing on corruption prevention, their joint efforts provide a comprehensive framework to address the political and financial activities of political parties. What is urgently needed is a clear, transparent, and enforceable framework that defines roles, strengthens inter-agency coordination, and ensures accountability in party financing and candidate selection processes (ICPC, 2023).

Such a framework should also be supported by legislative clarity and adequate resources to empower these institutions to act decisively. This approach avoids duplication, reduces bureaucratic delays, and builds on the institutional knowledge and capacity already developed.

The idea of jailing people for not voting is deeply concerning. Countries with compulsory voting, such as Australia and Belgium, typically impose only small fines and allow many exemptions. Jail time for skipping the polls is almost unheard of, however, experience from countries that have tried compulsory voting with penalties like fines or even jail time shows mixed results when it comes to actually encouraging people to vote out of genuine interest.

While it's true that compulsory voting can boost turnout numbers-sometimes by as much as 14 to 18 percent this often depends on how strictly the rules are enforced and what kind of punishments are involved. But higher turnout doesn't always mean people are more engaged or trusting of the system. In fact, in some places, forcing people to vote has led to more invalid ballots and even discouraged people from wanting to participate voluntarily. What's more, these boosts in turnout often don't last; once the penalties are relaxed or removed, turnout tends to drop back to previous levels. This suggests that relying on punishment to get people to vote doesn't build lasting trust or strengthen democracy in a meaningful way (IDEA, 2019).

Also, the positive effects on turnout tend to be temporary, with turnout levels often returning to pre-compulsory voting rates once enforcement ceases or the law is repealed. This suggests that compulsory voting policies relying on punishment do not create lasting improvements in democratic participation or trust.

Countries like Venezuela and the Netherlands, which experimented with compulsory voting, eventually abandoned it because it caused more division and frustration than real improvements in governance.

There is also a fundamental ethical question: voting is both a right and a choice. Nigeria's Constitution and international human rights laws recognise not only the right to vote but also the right to abstain. Forcing citizens to vote under threat of imprisonment infringes on personal freedoms and risks punishing individuals for systemic failures-such as inaccurate voter registers or perceived bias within INEC.

Practically, enforcing such a law would be a nightmare. How do you effectively verify exemptions for millions of displaced Nigerians or those living abroad? With Nigeria's prisons already overcrowded, incarcerating non-violent "offenders" would escalate existing problems.

In the end, while increasing voter turnout is a worthy cause, threatening jail time for non-voters is neither the answer nor the right way to build democracy. What Nigeria needs is real, systemic change that earns the trust of its people and empowers them to participate freely and confidently. Only then can our democracy truly grow stronger.

At its core, this bill distracts from the real issue: Nigerians do not trust the system, and the system itself needs fixing. Instead of punishing people for not voting, lawmakers should prioritize meaningful reforms-like updating the Electoral Act to mandate real-time electronic transmission of results from polling units, ensuring INEC's leadership is independent from political influence, strengthening inter-agency collaboration to oversee political party activities, and investing in civic education, especially targeting young Nigerians who constitute the majority of the population. True change comes from reforming institutions and political leaders, elected officials and electoral administrators forcing citizens to participate in a flawed process.

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