Policyweekly

Census, Integrity of Voters' Data and Nigeria's 2023 Presidential Elections

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Policy Recommendations

1 Investigate the allegations by CUPP and publish verifiable findings for the citizens to see and if the claims are valid.

2 INEC must, in the light of allegations of over-registration, clean up its voters' register and urgently publish the final register for public scrutiny.

3 NPC should introduce technologies requiring biometric information in the next census to minimise any group's inflation of census figures.

4 National Identity management department should be housed under the National Population Commission.

5 The National Assembly should make birth and death registrations compulsory.

Introduction

Reliable census data is inevitably required to ensure a voter register's integrity. Census details provide the needed control data for validating information provided by persons registering as new potential voters, updating records on existing registered voters and providing information on those who have attained the age of franchise or even died. In addition, well-managed census data can circumvent some abuses of the electoral processes, such as underage registration and voting, the introduction of fictitious or foreign names into the register and over-registration of any constituency. These forms of abuses of an electoral process are sources of political tension that could snowball into agitations. For instance, the Coalition of United Political Parties (CUPP) recently alleged a plot by the ruling party to compromise the 2023 elections by manipulating the voters' register by including fictitious names and inflating the population of selected constituencies to forge electoral results in the forthcoming presidential election.

However, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has responded by noting that it has not added any new registrants to the voters' register since the end of the continuous voter registration on 31st July 2022. Besides, INEC noted that it is conducting a comprehensive automated clean-up of the voters' register to delete all registrations that do not meet the inclusion criteria in the register based on the Electoral Act of 2022. These concerns by CUPP and the response by INEC relate to electoral data integrity, largely determined by the existence of up-to-date demographic data based on dependable census figures. Incidentally, the census is usually not only highly politicised, but its figures are also equally contested. Hence, Nigeria's existing census data cannot support the process of building dependable voters' information. Based on the preceding, this edition of Nextier SPD Policy Weekly presents reflections on the nexus between voters' registers and broad citizen data from national census records for maintaining and managing transparent and dependable electoral records.

The Electoral Uses and Abuses of Demographic Data

Open Election Data Initiative suggests that for election data to be considered transparent, they have to be: a) published as quickly as necessary (timely); b) available in fine-grained details – granular; c) available for free on the internet; d) released complete and in bulk; e) can be quickly and easily analysed; f) must be in a format over which no entity has exclusive control [non-proprietary]; g) must be non-discriminatory h); maximally reusable without barriers [license free]; i) permanently available and with stable web addresses for easy access. Regarding voter register, the data source usually is from citizens who have attained the age of exercising franchise and have opted to be registered. A properly functioning population information management would usually relate records from election registration with information from the census database. This validation is the primary basis for ensuring the integrity of the information that goes into the electoral register. But Nigerian census statistics are unhelpful because all previous attempts at conducting a population census have been beset with challenges, especially political interference and manipulation. Nigerians feel some incentive to inflate census figures because it is the basis of distributing resources and political seats in government, especially the parliament. Due to the hot contests around Nigerian census results, its figures are used with reservations. Organisations that seek to research Nigeria's demographics usually conduct their surveys and hardly seek to validate citizens from census figures.

Like other organisations that work with citizen data, INEC conducts voter registration and hardly bothers to compare its information with National Population Commission (NPC) which is responsible for national population data. Although INEC and NPC have recently expressed commitments to collaborate in their work, INEC, which ought to draw statistics from NPC, noted that it has the largest biometric register of citizens in Nigeria, obviously more than NPC. The main questions that arise here include whether INEC's data contains only Nigerian citizens in the voter's register and whether the information it has about the registrants' age, place of origin and residence is valid, considering that it has no mechanism for verifying the claims of registrants. As a matter of fact, foreigners take advantage of the country's porous national borders to enter the country and even take part in her political processes in a manner that poses a threat to the integrity of electoral results. For example, the Southern and Middle Belt Forum (SMBF), prior to the 2019 presidential elections accused INEC of registering foreigners from the Niger Republic to pave the way for electoral malpractice during the election.

The spokesman of CUPP also alleged recently, in the light of the forthcoming 2023 presidential election, that while updating the country's electronic voters' register, fictitious names were sourced from several countries such as Ghana, Cameroon, Brazil, Gambia, New Zealand to raise at least 10 million fake registrations. The purpose of the fake registrations, according to CUPP, is to rig the election in favour of the ruling party. The claimed discovery by CUPP includes 3000 male registrants with female gender and duplication of the same pictures among different names, which are believed to be fictitious. The election management body has only denied the allegation but is yet to make good the denial by publishing the voters' register in line with electoral integrity and transparency standards.

The paucity or near total irrelevance of national census data is also the reason why under-aged registrants are allowed to enrol for voting. A senior INEC official had accepted that they register under-aged voters under pressure, primarily when they work under the risk of assault where they usually lack protection. But, of course, successful under-aged registration leads to under-aged voting. Under-aged voting was reported in parts of Northern Nigeria during the 2015 presidential elections, 2018 local government elections in Kano State and 2019 Presidential elections in Ebonyi State. These are possible due to the lack of easily verifiable demographic data stored as important national population information that INEC could easily link up with to verify the age and other demographic data claims for elections. Census and demographic information are expected to keep information not only for birth and death records but also comprehensive information about every citizen so that doubts about the place of origin, date of birth and parentage for easy reference. The national population census is at the very core of gathering, storing and managing this information. Yet, the coordination between the election management body and the national population management institution has not become a priority in enhancing the integrity of election data in Nigeria.

It is based on census figures that constituency demarcation could be realistically done. The last constituency demarcation that took place in Nigeria was twenty-five years ago. At the moment,

INEC cannot fall back on any reliable census data for making such demarcation or meaningfully cleaning up the voters' register because it cannot delete registered voters as under-aged or as non-nationals when no other source is available for reference and validation. Future data coordination and comparison between NPC and INEC is possible only after the 2023 presidential elections. Indeed, the Federal Government has earmarked the sum of 187 billion Naira for 2023 for a national census in 2023. On that note, some steps are necessary for making the census useful for election data management and other policy planning.

Recommendations

The challenges of poor census data for elections in Nigeria requires that the authorities should consider how to address the questions related to the integrity of voters' register and proactively plan how to use census data for electoral and other national planning purposes by doing the following:

1. Investigate the allegations by CUPP and publish verifiable findings for the citizens to see. If the claims are valid, culprits who penetrated the security of the INEC information system and flooded it with false data should be punished. Also, reports of underage voting in the 2015 presidential elections, 2018 Kano local government elections and 2019 presidential elections should be made public, in addition to sanctions for those who enabled it.

2. INEC must, in light of allegations of over-registration, clean up its voters' register and urgently publish the final register for public scrutiny.

3. NPC should introduce technologies that require biometric information in the next census to minimise any group's inflation of census figures. The database emerging from this serves as a reference point for validating people's claims about their biodata during voters' registration.

4. The National Identity management department should be housed under the National Population Commission so that the national population census could build on their national identity information gathering method.

5. The National Assembly should make birth and death registrations compulsory. Furthermore, NPC must constantly upload information about deaths and births to have a realistic approximation of the national population figures.

Conclusion

The challenges to Nigeria's electoral data represent one of the spinoffs of planning without data. It affects every sphere of national life. For elections which are usually a space of massive contestations in Nigeria, its preparations are usually fraught with tensions because it is commonly felt that voters' data are suspect. These are all grounded on poor population data gathering and management through a census. Only by conducting a census free from manipulation and building a dependable database that feeds national planning, including elections, could the electoral system gain further trust.

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Wednesday 12th
October 2022

10:00 - 12:00
West African Time

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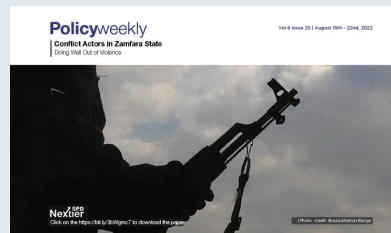
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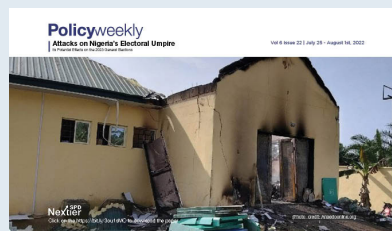
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