

Defining the Barriers to Electoral Participation for Persons with Disabilities in the 2019 General Elections in Oyo State

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Ambali, Abdulrauf

Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria

Salawu, Ibrahim O.

Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria

Aderemi, Asiyanni Kazeem

Federal College of Education (Special) Oyo, Nigeria

Abstract

One of the main goals of the international movement for sustainable development, supported by the UN, is the quest for the political inclusion of people with disabilities in political participation generally and the electoral process specifically. In Nigeria, there seem to be no formal barriers to electoral participation of persons with disabilities. However, the electoral participation of persons with disabilities seems to be minimal. Therefore, this study aimed at investigating the barriers to electoral participation for persons with disabilities in the 2019 general elections in Oyo state, Nigeria. Oyo state is selected for this study because the Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo has the largest conglomeration of disabled students that could be found in any higher institution in Nigeria. This study opted for a mixed method by utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. For the quantitative method, this study utilized the descriptive survey research design. For the qualitative method, focus group discussion was utilized to collect data from the members of the Joint Actions of Persons with Disabilities (JONAPWP) Oyo chapter. 400 questionnaires were distributed to disabled persons who are purposively selected for the survey. In analyzing the data, the quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Data and evidence gathered from the field were analysed through the use of bar chart and percentage. The qualitative data were analysed using narrative analysis technique. The findings revealed that the predominant barriers to electoral participation for persons with disabilities were lack of access to polling stations, stigmatization and financial constraint, while the minor barriers were lack of support from INEC officials, information accessibility and unsupportive legislation. The study concluded that stigmatization and discrimination of persons with disabilities could further lead to low electoral participation of disabled people in election. It is therefore recommended that creating an enabling environment that promotes accessibility and eliminates discriminatory practices against PWDs will do the magic.

Corresponding author:

Abdulrauf Ambali, Department of Politics & Governance, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria

Email: Abdulrauf.ambali@kwasu.edu.ng

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Introduction

Democracies guarantee the voting rights of persons with disabilities through various conventions, declarations, and constitutional provisions to which Nigeria is a signatory (Rufai 2012). Nigeria ratified the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2010 and signed into law Disability Act in 2019 after so many years of unrelenting pressures by Non-Governmental Organisations/Civil Society groups. Persons with disabilities rights to vote are also spelt out in the 2010 and 2022 Electoral Act as amended respectively. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) also made available framework for access and inclusion of persons with disabilities in electoral process at every election (Article 29 of the Electoral Act, 2022). Despite these reforms and policies, persons with disabilities in Nigeria continue to face challenges in participating actively in electoral processes (Hussaini, 2023).

A brief survey of literature shows that scholars such as Lang, (2008), Ugo, (2014) and Afeez (2020) have examined issues on persons with disability with emphasis on logistics, mobility and aspect of political environment as they affect voting behavior of persons with disabilities. In Nigeria, the low level of political and civic participation of persons with disabilities is a source of concern (Afeez, 2020). People with disabilities have always been affected by years of marginalization, acute discrimination, exclusion and inequality during elections (Sikiru, 2023). More also, persons with disabilities often than nondisabled people face practical barriers while entering politics or voting during elections. There is however little or dearth of empirical research on the barriers to electoral participation for persons with disabilities in Nigeria. The need to study the barriers that deter electoral participation of persons with disabilities is fundamental to enhancing the level of electoral participation of persons with disabilities in Nigeria. The major objective of this study is to investigate the barriers to electoral participation for persons with disabilities in the 2019 general elections in Oyo state, Nigeria. As it must be noted, Oyo state is selected for this study because the Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo has the largest conglomeration of disabled students that could be found in any higher institution in Nigeria and the largest concentration of specialized facilities for teaching and training of teachers of the Handicapped in Nigeria (Ekpo, 2021).

This study is structured into five sections. Following the introduction, the next section reviews the extant literature on electoral participation of persons with disabilities and identifies the gaps in the literature. The third section discusses the methodology of the study. The fourth section presents the results and discusses the findings of the study. The last section concludes and makes recommendations on areas for improvement.

Literature Review

Barriers to Electoral Participation for Persons with Disabilities

Across the globe, persons with disabilities seem to share a common feature when it comes to participating in elections. Their participation in electoral processes has continued to be a major concern for policy makers and academicians alike. As indicated by Goldsmith (2019), persons with disabilities are less politically engaged than non-disabled people in several countries of the world including the United Kingdom. This informs why many concerted efforts have been made by various individuals, advocates and activists, disabilities associations, civic society organizations and international agencies to ensure equitable participation of persons with disabilities in politics and governance (Lang & Upah, 2008).

In practice, there are existing barriers to electoral participation for persons with disabilities. Many scholars agreed that it is persons with disabilities find it difficult to participate in electoral processes (Zero Project, 2015; Ohkubo, Miura, Abe, Fujioka & Okamoto, 2019). Barriers hindering the electoral participation of persons with disabilities are well documented in the literature. For example, Goldsmith (2019) identified two broad categories of barriers to political engagement for disabled people. These include legal barriers (such as disenfranchisement) and barriers that can make participating more difficult or less likely (such as serious physical, mental, or emotional conditions). For example, Sobolewska (2013) opined that persons with serious mental health problems could be excluded from the right to vote in an election. This is because such individuals do not possess the intellectual capacity to vote or stand as a candidate in elections.

Prince (2012) tried to explain the impediments to electoral participation of disabled people from three main dimensions. From legal perspective, Prince (2012) believed that persons with disabilities can be hindered from electoral process through government policy, court decisions and legislation that may limit their activities during election. Second, the scholar opined that the practices of electoral management bodies may serve as barriers. For example, if the voting methods deployed (especially those methods specifically designed to assist persons with disabilities with voting) by the electoral management bodies are not encouraging, persons with disabilities may choose not participate in electoral processes. The third category consists of the electorates themselves and those individuals and groups that are directly or indirectly

involved in their immediate support network. The intersection of all these factors influences the electoral participation of persons with disabilities.

In their own study, Clarke et al. (2006) identified a few physical barriers to electoral participation of person with disabilities. These include inaccessible polling stations, ballot papers, and campaign materials. This is an indication that the polling stations must be safe and accessible to disabled people. Unsafe polling stations may discourage persons with disabilities as there are no measures put in place to ensure that disabled voters can cast their vote. In some cases, disabled people may need companions who will help them mark the ballot paper or render other essential assistance. When such companions are not available, electoral participation of persons with disabilities becomes harder.

Also, studies have linked low literacy (Attanayake, 2015), discrimination and stigma (Sackey, 2014), poverty, cumbersome electoral procedures (Baffoe, 2013) and lack of financial resources (International Labour Organization, 2013) to low electoral participation of disabled people. Yeo (2005) supported the above submissions by this statement that persons with special needs, irrespective of where they live in developing countries are statistically more likely to be unemployed, illiterate, to have less formal education and have less access to developed support networks and social capital than their able bodied counterparts. Beside these factors, disability makes it difficult for some persons with disabilities to interact with other members of society, thus limiting interaction with their peers and the opportunities to understand the political process (Meekosha, 1999; Schur et al., 2013). Finally, the dearth of disabled politicians might also discourage disabled citizens from participating (Reher, 2018).

The need to enhance the participation of disabled people across globe is getting a lot of attention from scholars in the other parts of the world. There seems to be little literature on the barriers of electoral participation of persons with disabilities in Nigeria. This insufficient knowledge poses a great challenge in understanding the likely barriers of electoral participation of persons with disabilities in Nigeria. It is with the intention to fill this gap that this study embarked on this research.

Methodology

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection are considered appropriate research design. For the quantitative method, this study utilized the descriptive survey research design. For the qualitative method, focus group discussion was utilized to collect data from the members of the Joint Actions of Persons with Disabilities (JONAPWP) Oyo chapter. The

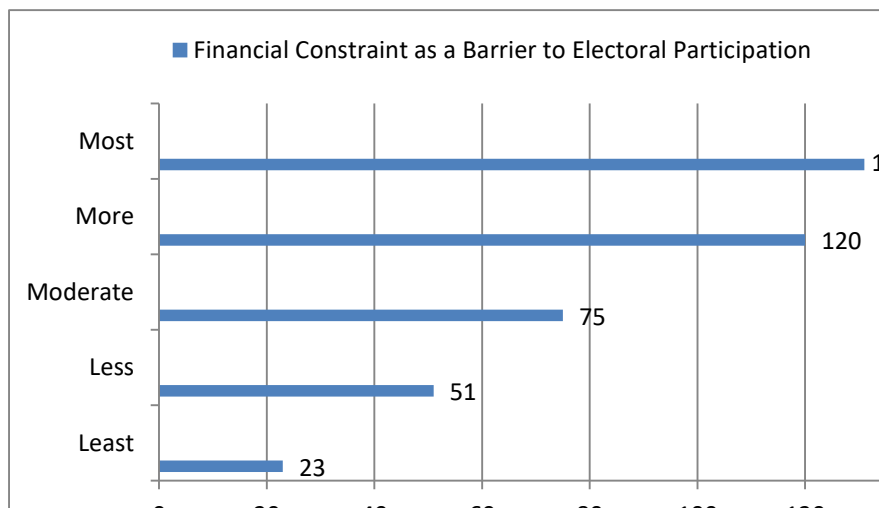
population for this study includes all disabled persons who are 18 years and above and are registered members of the Joint Actions of Persons with Disabilities (JONAPWP) Oyo chapter. According to JONAPWP (2021), there are 2424 members who are 18 years and above and have the right to participate in an election. This means that the population of this study comprises of 2424 members of the Joint Actions of Persons with Disabilities (JONAPWP) Oyo chapter. The Taro Yamen formula was utilized to determine the sample size for the study. From the calculation, the sample size for this study was 400. In this regard, 400 questionnaires were distributed to disabled persons who were selected for the survey using purposive sampling technique. The questionnaire which consisted of 10 closed-ended questions was subjected to face and content validity. One focus group discussion (FGD) with a total of 9 participants was staged. 3 participants were selected from each senatorial district in Oyo state. There are three senatorial districts which include Oyo South, Oyo North and Oyo Central. The session of the focus group discussion was held at the Joint Actions of Persons with Disabilities (JONAPWP) Ibadan South East Centre. The session was staged to discuss the barriers to electoral malpractices for persons with disabilities. The participant exclusion criterion was adopted to select the participants for the focus group discussion. Key individuals who participated in the 2019 general elections were nominated. A set of predetermined questions were structured and this gave the participants the chance to share their opinions freely. For both questionnaire and focus group discussion, the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity was given to the participants. Also, the participants were duly informed that their participation was voluntary (Trochim, 2006). In analyzing the data, the quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Data and evidence gathered from the field were analysed through the use of bar chart and percentage. The qualitative data were analysed using narrative analysis technique.

Results and Discussion

This study seeks to find out the barriers to electoral participation for persons with disabilities in the 2019 general elections in Oyo state. In order to determine the barriers faced by disabled voters during the elections, the researcher raised six major barriers which include financial constraint, stigmatization, lack of support from electoral management body officials, information accessibility barrier, lack of access to polling stations and unsupportive legislation. The responses are illustrated and narrated below.

Barriers to Electoral Participation for Persons with Disabilities in the 2019 General Elections in Oyo State

Figure 1: Perception of Respondents on Financial constraint as a barrier to electoral participation



Source: Authors’ Compilation (2021)

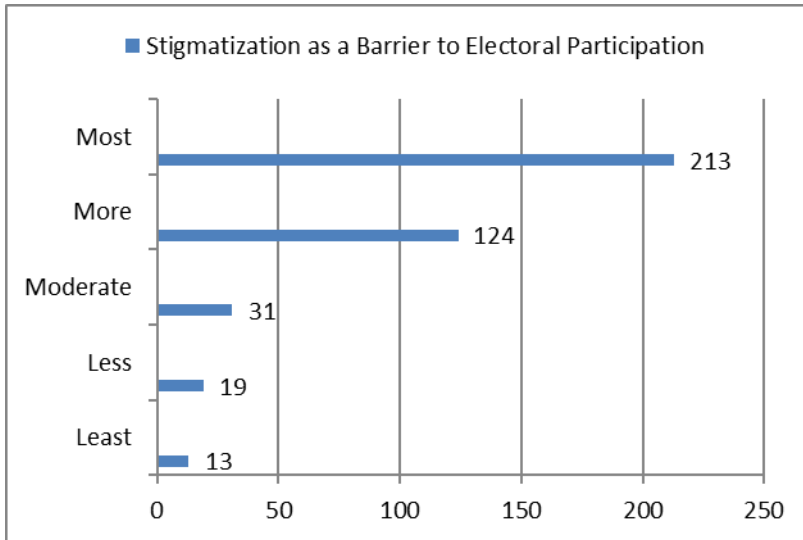
From the above figure, most of the respondents indicated that financial constraint was a major barrier to their participation in the 2019 general elections in Oyo State. In this regard, it can be seen that financial constraint remains a hindrance to electoral participation. It must be noted that financial resources are essential resources needed by the voters to participate in politics. Voters who live very far from their place of voting may find it difficult to locate their polling place for election day. As enunciated by one of the discussants, it is stated that:

“the economic condition of a voter matters a lot and it determines the voting behaviour of many people. As a disabled person, I found difficult to participate in the 2019 general elections in Oyo state because I could not afford to travel back to my home town from Ibadan.

Another discussant complemented the above result by emphasizing on how financially unsecured she was during the election and how she opted out from

the electoral processes. As narrated, the discussant opined that “she skipped going to the polls on election days due to lack of money.”

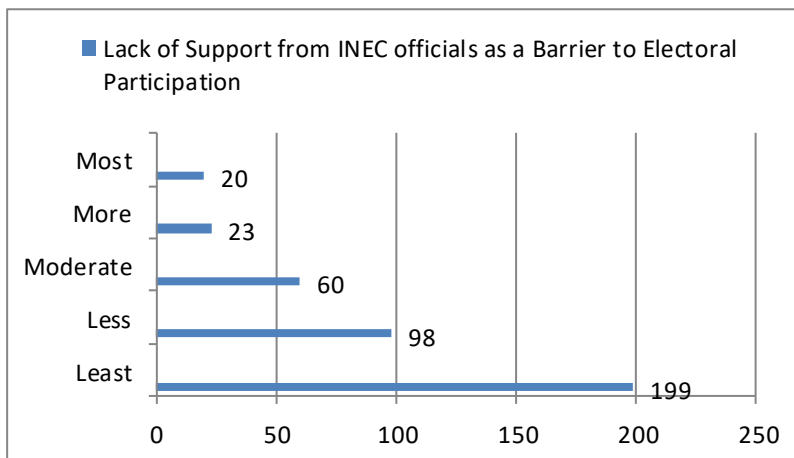
Figure 2: Perception of Respondents on Stigmatization as a barrier to electoral participation



Source: Authors' Compilation (2021)

This section measured the perception of the respondents on whether stigmatization is a barrier to electoral participation for persons with disabilities. The response above showed that persons with disabilities are often stigmatized and this serves as a major barrier to their participation in electoral practices. Stigmatization has much impact on the voting behaviour of persons with disabilities. A discussant narrated that “the society is not friendly with the disabled people. We are often stigmatized, stereotyped and discriminated. This attitude often makes it difficult for me to be able to participate in everyday life including elections.”

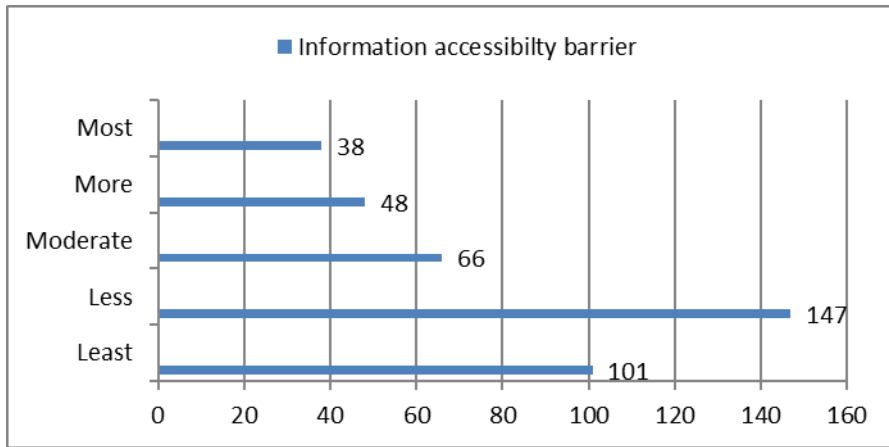
Figure 3: Perception of Respondents on lack of support from electoral management body officials as a barrier to electoral participation



Source: Authors’ Compilation (2021)

From the above results, it can be seen that lack of support from electoral management body officials is not a barrier to electoral participation of persons with disabilities. Many of the respondents indicated that they received adequate support from the INEC officials. Going by the number of respondents who chose that lack of support from electoral management body officials is a least barrier, we can conclude that the Independent National Electoral Body provided adequate tools and personnel to help the person with disabilities during the voting process. The numerical data was supported by a discussant who agreed that “he was able to successfully participate in the 2019 general elections due to assistance rendered by an INEC official who helped him in ticking the ballot papers.” However, a few of the respondents during the focus group discussion indicated that they had bad experiences with the INEC officials. A discussant argued that the INEC officials in his polling unit did not meet up to expectations and this frustrated him during the elections.

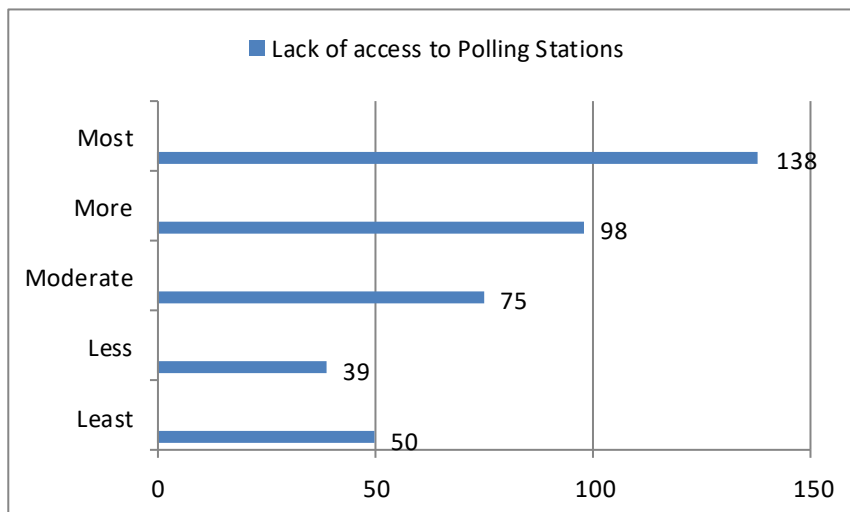
Figure 4: Perception of Respondents on information accessibility barrier



Source: Authors' Compilation (2021)

The figure 4 above showed the opinion on whether lack of access to information is a barrier to their participation. As we can see from the figure above, about 147 respondents considered information accessibility barrier as a lesser barrier. This is an indication that majority of the respondents were well informed about the electoral processes ahead of the 2019 general elections. The qualitative data also complemented the statistical results. Most of the discussants agreed that they had access to necessary information on how to go about voting and voting processes. According to a discussant, it was revealed that “we were provided with information on the context in which the 2019 elections were conducted.” Another discussant opined that “the rules guiding how the elections were conducted were adequately provided to us. This informed why it was easier for us to participate in the 2019 elections in the little way we did”.

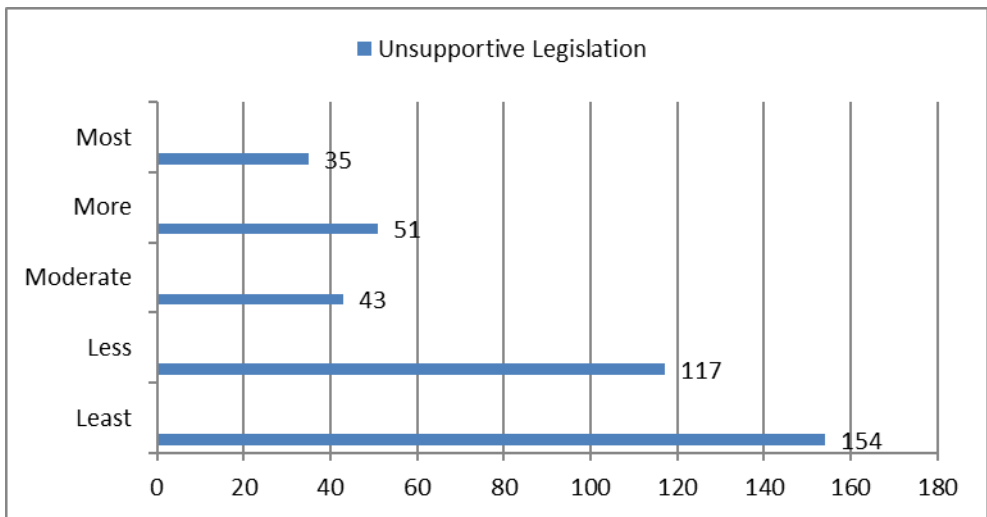
Figure 5: Perception of Respondents on lack of access to polling stations as a barrier to electoral participation



Source: Authors’ Compilation (2021)

Lack of access to polling stations is seen as a barrier to electoral participation of persons with disabilities. Polling must be accessible to everyone including the disabled people but the situation was not the case as indicated by most of the respondents. This means that the electoral management body did not take into account the accessibility needs of persons with disability. As seen from the results, majority of the respondents believed that lack of access to polling stations was one of the most notable barriers encountered during the 2019 general elections. As narrated by a discussant, chairs were not provided in some polling booths for voters who cannot stand for long periods”. Also, political violence, were witnessed, denied most disabled people access to their polling stations.

Figure 6: Perception of Respondents on unsupportive legislation as a barrier to electoral participation



Source: Authors' Compilation (2021)

From the above results, it can be perceived that unsupportive legislation was a minor barrier to electoral participation of persons with disabilities during the 2019 general elections. It is apparent that the Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act of 2018 ensured equal treatment and participation of persons with disabilities in electoral processes. This means there are no legal barriers to electoral participation for persons with disabilities in Nigeria.

Key Findings

The findings of the study are presented around a cluster of variables and themes that collectively target an understanding of the barriers to electoral participation of persons with disabilities in 2019 general elections in Oyo state.

- The predominant barriers to electoral participation for persons with disabilities are lack of access to polling stations, stigmatization and financial constraint.
- The minor barriers are lack of support from INEC officials, information accessibility and unsupportive legislation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study was carried out with the overarching aim of discovering the barriers to electoral participation for persons with disabilities in the 2019 general elections in Oyo state. From the foregoing analysis, it can be seen that lack of

access to polling stations, stigmatization and financial constraint are the major barriers the persons with disabilities faced during the 2019 general elections in Oyo state. It was therefore concluded that there is need for improvement in the financial status of most disabled people. The governments, at all levels, must work against unlawful discrimination against persons with disabilities. Considering this context, it is recommended that a comprehensive approach to addressing the issue is needed to guarantee the full participation of PWDs in elections. This would involve creating an enabling environment that promotes accessibility and eliminates discriminatory practices against PWDs. Such efforts could enhance the legitimacy and credibility of the electoral process and promote social inclusion by empowering persons with disabilities to participate fully in democracy. It is also recommended that the government takes steps to encourage greater participation of persons with disabilities in the electoral process by implementing measures such as providing accessible polling stations, facilitating voter education, and ensuring that disability rights are integrated into electoral laws and policies. Additionally, it would be important to engage with disabled persons organizations and disability rights advocates to better understand the challenges faced by persons with disabilities in regard to electoral participation and to work collaboratively towards improving inclusion and accessibility in the electoral process.

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