

United We Stand: How the Election Results Dismiss the Narrative of a Divided #Nigeria

LSE's Lola Adeyemo looks at the numbers behind the 2015 Nigeria Presidential elections and analyses what it reveals about the Nigerian state. This post is part of our *African Elections* series.

Nigeria decided. The recent presidential election was the most competitive in the history of the Nigerian state. As was widely reported, General Muhammadu Buhari, the candidate of the two-year-old opposition party, All Progressives' Congress (APC), is now the President-elect. His victory over the incumbent, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan of the de facto ruling party for the past sixteen years, People's Democratic Party (PDP), is being hailed as a step forward for democracy in Nigeria and on the African continent.



Nigeria decided on General Muhammadu Buhari after a fierce presidential contest with the incumbent Goodluck Jonathan Photo Credit: Premium Times Nigeria

However, this is not the first time that General Buhari has taken part in a contest for the privilege of managing Africa's largest economy and most populous country. Before winning in 2015, General Buhari had made three failed presidential bids. The last of those was in 2011 with the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), a party he founded in 2009. This time around, the former military leader ran for the top position in government in Nigeria with the recently-formed APC – a merger of a number of small opposition parties including his own CPC. Although some have argued that the ethnic backgrounds of the names on the APC ticket alone helped secure the win, the election results demonstrated a widespread desire across all Nigerian regions for alternative governance.

Buhari's northwestern ties and the Vice President-elect, Professor Osinbajo's southwestern roots alone did not lead to victory. Even though Buhari had a dominant position in the northern states, the incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan, who is from the South-South, actually lost votes in this region. Granted, Buhari maintained his lead over Jonathan in the north, particularly the North West region, which delivered 46% of Buhari's 15 million votes. It was in this latter region that Jonathan faced the highest decline: from an average of around 490,000 for each of the 7 states in 2011, to about 190,000 on average in 2015. However, data demonstrates that there was a greater increase of votes for Buhari in the South-South relative to the votes from the North West, while Jonathan experienced a decline in the number of votes received in all the South-South states.

With APC, Buhari unlocked what some refer to as “the battleground states” of the South West. In his previous runs, Buhari had not been strong in this region. In fact, in his 2011 presidential bid, he secured a total of about 320,000 votes compared to 2.4 million accrued this time around – leading to an increase of over 650%. Although these significant relative increases in the 2015 election occurred in four of the six states – Osun, Ondo, Ogun and Ekiti; Lagos and Oyo also recorded a positive upward trend in favour of the General.

As opposed to 2011, other numbers that moved significantly in support of the Buhari ticket this year were in the South East states of Ebonyi and Imo as well as in the South-South state of Edo. In fact, the Nigerian electorate voted increasingly for Buhari in most states so much so that the only states in which he showed a slight downward trend were Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Niger, Kaduna and Zamfara. On the other hand, Jonathan experienced a drop in his numbers in all states with the exception of the South West state of Osun.

Ethnic divisions across the nation, though relevant to understanding the complexity of the Nigerian state, are perhaps overstated in analysing the 2015 Presidential elections. The numbers, as they were reported, indicate a general, positive trend across all regions in support of Buhari alongside a decline in those allied to the Jonathan camp. Therefore, although the regional shifts towards backing either candidate have been proportionally different, the general trend across the nation implies change was desired.

Neither candidate can take full credit for the gains or reverses as several other factors including financial sponsorship and political partners came into play. Yet, in light of recent talk of the lack of a cohesive Nigerian unit, it must be noted that the elections – both presidential and gubernatorial further buttress the point that the sentiment regarding change was spread out across the nation.

Over the next few years, Buhari will need to prove himself to the Nigerian people who have placed their trust in him to lead Nigeria forward. This time, all the regions of Nigeria decided that they did not like the direction in which Jonathan was leading the country. In 2019, it is my expectation that Nigerians will, once again, unite to decide who will best steer the country in the right direction.

Note: These numbers are not proportional to the total number of votes cast due to a lack of reliable available data.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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