

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST YOUTHS AND POLITICAL APATHY IN SOUTHWEST NIGERIA: AN EMPIRICAL SURVEY

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Abstract

The effect of certain theological worldviews on political engagement is empirically investigated in this paper. Focus is beamed on young people in tertiary institutions in south-western zone of Nigeria universities who were members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Although, a decline is noted among youths in many countries around the world, this research notes that religion is one factor that affects the attitudes of some youths to issues of politics and how they are governed in south-west zone of Nigeria. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has at the core of its theology the importance of keeping holy the seventh day of the week as Sabbath which it believed is Saturday. It also believes the imminent, pre-millennial Second Advent of Jesus Christ. Its beliefs indicate a low expectation of the ability of secular political structure to cause enduring just, equitable and prosperous human society. Only the Second Advent will achieve that. The denomination is also suspicious of the unity of church and state and campaigns against any semblance of such a unity. This theological position affects the political worldview of its young members who are in tertiary institutions. The apolitical posture of the young members of the denomination is steeper than that of their contemporaries in other faith groups.

Keywords: Political engagement, religion, governance, youth participation, democracy.

1.0 Introduction

This paper is a report of an empirical survey of youths who are members of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in tertiary institutions in south-western zone of Nigeria. The said youths were students in tertiary institutions in Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Oyo, Ekiti, Kwara and Kogi states. Although, there are different classifications of age groupings to define the youth, the United Nations (1981) defined youth as people within the 15-24 years age bracket. The Nigeria Youth Policy of 2009 defined youths as people between 18-34 years of age (Uzoma, Falade and Bello, 2016). This paper particularly focuses on those between 15 and 25 years of age because that is the age group of most undergraduate students (Ademola, Ogundipe and Babatunde, 2014), although Agboola and Ofoegbu (2010) describes it as 18-35 years. Lawal (2018) noted that although there was no explicit legal backing, many government-owned universities placed the lower age limit to gain admission at 16 years. This paper puts particular attention on students in tertiary institutions because of the potential of educated young minds to bring radical change to the Nigeria development conversation especially since young people are the future of the country. This group according to a previous study feels marginalized, manipulated and used for political gain on older players (Ogu and Iyang, 2015). The paper seeks to gain insight into this

group's attitudes to the country's politics and governance. The highpoint of this paper is the investigation of how their religious, Seventh-day Adventist, worldview impacts their political perception, attitudes and behaviour.

1.1 Political engagement decline in Nigeria

Nigeria has gone through various phases in its nationhood; from struggles for independence to a Civil War and coup d'états. By May 29, 1999, the country was able to begin a stable democracy (Omotosho, 2016) which has lasted till date. In order for the country to achieve its developmental aspirations, it has to build a strong and vibrant democracy. The quality of a democracy is determined by the level of political engagement (Agu, Okekeand Idike, 2013). The country therefore needs to have the full participation of its citizens (Falade, 2014).

The phrases political engagement and political participation are used in this paper interchangeably. It is understood as the various ways in which citizens of the country get involved in its political life. Political engagement, according to McClosky, has to do with how deliberate actions of persons in a community, either directly or otherwise, lead up to the emergence of leaders of their societies (McClosky 1968:249). It involves activities such as voting, joining political parties, campaigning, contesting and activism. All these activities contribute to a large extent the success of the country's political development (Fadale, 2014). Decline in voting population reduces the legitimacy of government. Therefore, a country as Nigeria should be aware and work to minimize factors that mitigate citizens' political engagement.

In Nigeria, there has been a decline in political engagement over time in the democratic experience. For example, although the number of registered voters increased in 2007 above those who were duly registered to vote in 2003, the number of actual voters in presidential, gubernatorial and senatorial elections dropped significantly. There are various reasons put forward for the drop in enthusiasm including but not limited to the loss of hope in Nigeria's electioneering system as a path to political change (Agu, Okekeand Idike, 2013). Despite the fact that an unprecedented number (73) of political parties fielded candidates in the 2019 elections, the total number of voters in the said presidential election of 2019 since the 2011 presidential elections. A major reason for this low turnout is political apathy (Sule, 2019).

The youth population of a country have been identified globally as a vital sector of its citizens; they are important in the socio-economic and political life of a country. Unfortunately, young people were marginalized in Nigeria and excluded from the political life of the country. Older people between the ages of 60 and 80 have the greatest access to political power in Nigeria thereby sidelining younger population (Ibezim, 2019).

1.2 Decline in youth political engagement in other parts of the world

There is a global interest in studying how young people engage in politics and their attitudes to how they are governed. Decline in young people's political engagement is not peculiar to Nigeria; it is a major phenomenon in contemporary politics. This paper notes a few examples in different parts of the world. Print (2007) noting the decline of young people's involvement in political process, particularly in Australia urged the government to facilitate young people's involvement (in politics) in order to strengthen the legitimacy

of government in power. In Australia, the efforts to empower young people through schools' curriculum did not yield remarkable results; their government were thus challenged to be more creative and explore other avenues of impacting the minds of young people towards being involved in the political process. In Europe, there is also decline in young people voting, belonging to political organizations and other forms of traditional political activities. It is however noted that there may be a shift into alternative forms of political influence among young people (Kitanova 2019; Sloam andHenn 2019).

There could be a variety of reasons for young people's decline of interest in traditional political activities globally. Factors such as distrust for traditional national institutions (the press as an example of such institutions), limited financial resources, feeling of frustration with the older people and alleged systemic exclusion by the older political class have been identified as turn-offs for young people in African countries like Tunisia, Libya and Egypt (The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2014)

1.3 The religion connection to political engagement

Aghazadeh and Mahmoudoghli(2017) argued that religion is a major factor in how people engage politically. The influence religion wields on a society may not necessarily be rational; its effect on political worldview therefore may not be rational, but the effect is real. In Nigeria, religion was identified as a major factor that would affect voting patterns in the general elections of 2015. Due to the violence ignited by the terror group, Boko Haram, many Nigerians had tried to use the rhetoric of religion to sway political decisions of voters. There were anticipations of violence, but the elections took place without unusual level of violence. Furthermore, "it cannot be argued convincingly that religion finally played a significant role in the actual voting decision of the electorate" although religious sentimentalism was deployed to mobilize voters (Onapajo 2016). On the other hand, some have opined that some religious organizations, such as the Evangelicals in the United States, although have great potentials to mobilise for political purpose, have actually limited member's involvement in politics and civil actions (Campbell 2004). This paper therefore highlights how religious worldview impacted young people in Seventh-day Adventist Church in Nigeria. This study reveals that although there is general decline in traditional political engagement among young people, the situation among young SDAs is even steeper due to the denomination's peculiar eschatological worldview.

1.4 The Seventh-day Adventist Church and politics

In a particular way, the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church has a theological worldview that shapes how its members relate to daily life issues. Although the SDA Church is a Christian denomination, sharing most core Christian doctrines such as acceptance of the Bible as the authority for belief and doctrine, the Trinity, the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ, and other ones, SDA Church has its unique doctrinal viewpoints. Such includes but not limited to the imminent, visible, pre-millennium Second Advent of Jesus Christ, living and eating healthy and the intercessory ministry of Jesus Christ in the heavenly sanctuary. Another central doctrine is the belief in Saturday being the Biblical Sabbath day (Smylie and Melton, 2019).The name of the denomination highlights the importance of these two unique SDA Church doctrines.

The SDA Church has historical connections with William Miller who believed and taught that Jesus Christ would physically return to the earth in the Second Advent mid 1800s. Many people who believed him had quit their everyday socio-economic activities since. Some sold or gave away their real estates, farmlands and other properties in anticipation of the eschaton. When Jesus Christ did not return, the Millerite group broke up in different groups. One of the groups would become the SDA Church. This group still believed in the imminent Second Advent, but would not fix a date such as the Millerite group did (Knight 2004).

Apart from the belief in the imminent Second Advent of Christ, SDAs believe that the church and state should be completely separated in function. SDA Church cautiously approaches the issue of political involvement. For example, Tuima, Marfo and Gwizo (2013) note the dilemma faced by the SDA Church in Fiji Island when a baptized member of the church, George Speight, led a coup d'état in year 2000. The leadership of the SDA Church in the region raised serious concerns about the need for church and state to be separated. The denomination did this in response to open solidarity members of the SDA Church displayed towards Speight when both laity and clergy paid several visits to Speight, praying for him and offering him moral support. The coup was dubbed an "Adventist coup". The church did not want the denomination to get caught up with challenges often associated with siding with a particular political ideology although each member is deemed free to adopt any political worldview that was not in conflict with Christian principles.

The General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (2012) in its official statement on the denomination's relationship political leadership notes that Adventist church historically had joined with both religious and secular organizations to influence governmental authorities to end slavery. The church, however, recognizes the fact that religious influence does not automatically translate into better societies. It admits that the development and growth of its mission has enabled the church exert some political influence in certain parts of the world, which in itself may not pose any problem. It must however be noted that abuses may become inherent when a religion has an overbearing influence of governance; minorities may suffer. The SDA Church also believes that individuals within the church are at liberty to aspire to be elected in political leadership offices. SDA Church warns of the pitfalls of influence of religion on state and vice versa. Such must be carefully avoided.

One of SDA Church founder, an influential woman who is considered a prophet in the denomination is by the name Ellen G. White. Her writings continue to shape the worldview of the church and its members. White (1898) made the following statement:

The government under which Jesus lived was corrupt and oppressive; on every hand were crying abuses—extortion, intolerance, and grinding cruelty. Yet the Saviour attempted no civil reforms. He attacked no national abuses, nor condemned the national enemies. He did not interfere with the authority or administration of those in power. He who was our example kept aloof from earthly governments. Not because He was indifferent to the woes of men, but because the remedy did not lie in merely human and external measures. To be efficient, the cure must reach men individually, and must regenerate the heart.

The above statement by Ellen White and other statements in the official documents cited above, though did not overtly prohibit members' political involvement, yet in subtle ways seemed to limit members' participation in politics.

This paper therefore highlights how these doctrines, injunctions and nuances impact the attitudes to politics by young people in the SDA Church.

1.5 Statement of the problem

The political apathy and low political engagement among young members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in tertiary institution in south-west of Nigeria contributes to lack of political change in Nigeria. This apolitical state of the members of the SDA Church is connected to its doctrine of the Second Advent (as the solution to the world's problem). Members are also disenfranchised by the scheduling of elections on Saturday, a day regarded by SDAs as Sabbath and reserved exclusively for spiritual activities.

1.6 Objectives of the study

This study is aimed at achieving the following objectives:

- (a) To determine the nexus between SDA youths political attitudes and the denomination's religious doctrines
- (b) To find out the attitudes of SDA youths in tertiary institutions in south western geopolitical zone of Nigeria to politics.
- (c) To investigate how their religious worldview shaped by SDA theology has affected their political engagements.
- (d) To investigate SDA youths' political engagement level relative to other Nigerians of similar age group and socio-economic status.
- (e) To propose strategies for SDA young people's participation in Nigerian elections.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

The political culture theory is a framework for this paper. Lucian Pye's defined political culture as a set of behaviours, emotional outlook and stance (of citizens of a particular state) that give structure and significance to the state's political course of action (Morlino, Berg-Schlosser and Badie, 2017). These form the basis for people's choices and attitudes in a political setting. Also, Political culture is defined as the sum total of the mindset of the citizens of a country regarding their roles and the value of their contributions to the political development of their country or state (Winkler, 2018). Winkler further highlights the work of Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (1963) where political culture can be understood in three variants; parochial political culture, subject political culture and participant political culture. Almond and Verba believed that the democracy is best stabilized when citizens mostly and basically manifested the participant political culture but with a mixture of the both parochial and subject political cultures. The parochial political culture meant that citizens were hardly aware of any central government or political leadership. While in subject political culture behaviour, citizens do not see themselves as really significant contributors to the process of governance, rather, they see themselves as mere subject to government. It is in the participant political culture that citizens feel their contributions are significant to the political process and that their contributions ultimately affected them. Almond and Verba believed that the most desirable

scenario is for citizens to be involved enough in the making known their expectation to political leaders but at the same time to be distant enough to be able to reject decisions by leaders that citizens considered unsuitable for them.

Almond and Verba's theory has similarity with that of Pericles, the Athenian political sage who postulated that the involvement of citizens directly affects the quality of the decisions in a democracy. Pericles insisted that Athenians should not focus on private and household issues at the expense of the state. Any Athenian who paid attention only to his personal business was not a harmless citizen but a useless one (Thucydides, 1900).

3.0 Research Methodology and description of sample

This paper adopted the quantitative research approach. A total number of 300 questionnaires were administered of which 278 people returned the questionnaires. The questionnaires were administered to SDA members studying in various tertiary institutions in the western part of the country. This research focused on the western part of the country because trends in Nigerian elections show that the northern part of the country recorded the highest number of voters registration and actual voting, followed by the southern part while the western part of Nigeria is third (Agu, Okeke and Idike, 2013). This showed that political apathy is more manifest in the western part of Nigeria than other regions.

The respondents were members of the Nigeria Association of Adventist Students (NAAS). The questionnaires were distributed to them at the venue of their bi-annual conference that held in Otun, Ekiti State in 2018. Distributing the questionnaires at the convention site is based on the assumption that those who attended had some level of interest in SDA religious activities. It can therefore be safely assumed that a typical respondent had a leaning towards Seventh-day Adventist religion. Copies of the questionnaires were distributed at the hall where the program held. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was used to analyse the data.

4.0 Discussions on outcome of research

This section presents the analysis of the survey carried out. It is presented under sub-headings; a general description of respondents, their spiritual identity and attitudes to politics. Finally, there is the comparative description of SDA young people and their contemporaries in tertiary institutions in the same south-western zone of the country to highlight how SDA unique doctrines produced different attitudes to political issue.

4.1 General description

Out of the 278 respondents, 109 of them (39.2%) were between 15 and 20 years of age. Another 109 of them (39.2%) were between 21 and 25 years old. That means 78.4% were between 15 and 25 years old. 12.2% of them were from 26 to 30 years old. 15 respondents out of the 278 (5.4%) were above 30 years old. The females were 133 in number, that is 47.8% while 139 (50%) were males. Six respondents did not indicate their gender. As expected of this age group, most of them were not married. 254 (91.4%) were single, 12 (4.3%) were married and 1 person (about 4%) was divorced.

4.2 Perceived Spiritual Identity of Respondents

This section is designed to gain insight into how the respondents perceive their level of spirituality or faithfulness to the SDA religious (or spiritual) standard. This will help this research in understanding the mental framework in which the respondents operate especially as relating to their attitudes to politics and governance.

The SDA Church only recognized those who have gone through the rite of baptism, that is, being immersed in water, as members (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2016). People are only baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church if they were old enough to understand the fundamental doctrines of the church and also assent to them. Usually, people who wished to be baptized would have been subjected to bible studies on doctrines. Such people publicly affirm they understood the teaching and desired to be members of the church through baptism (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2016). This research found out that 244, a figure that constitutes 87.8% of the respondents had gone through the rite of baptism; hence they were considered *bonafide* members of the SDA Church. Apart from baptism, they were also committed to other spiritual disciplines such as weekly attendance in church services, prayer and study of the Bible.

4.3 SDA young people's attitudes to politics and governance

This section presents the investigation into the political worldview and behaviour of SDA young people in tertiary institutions in the western states of Nigeria. It revealed that 45.3% of the respondents are registered to vote by INEC. It is those who are legally recognized by the electoral body as eligible to vote in the particular elections. The inquiry about those who have actually voted before revealed that 30.6% of the respondents have cast their votes in previous elections, either state or federal.

It was further investigated if they would be willing to vote in future elections. 60.4% of respondents indicated a possibility of voting in future elections. 37.4% did not have any plans of voting in the future. This research also revealed that most of the SDA young people in tertiary institutions did not belong to any political party. 90.3% were not part or members of any political party. When asked if they would be willing to join and become a member of a political party in the future, 23% answered in the affirmative. 75% out rightly said they would not join any political party in the future.

A deeper probe trying to investigate if there was a link of the apolitical attitudes to religion reveals that 62.2% of respondents believed that being a Seventh-day Adventist is not compatible with being a politician. 31.3% however believed that the two are compatible. Regarding voting, 49.3% of respondents believed voting is compatible with being an SDA while 43.2% thought voting was incompatible with being an SDA. 55.8% believed an SDA member should contest for elections, while 38.8 believed a member of the denomination should not. 64% of respondents however believed that an SDA Church member would be a very good and suitable for political positions such as state governor or country's president.

The SDA Church believes that the Sabbath day, Saturday, is a sacred day which should be kept holy. The research therefore probed if it is acceptable for members to vote on Saturday. 18.3% of the respondents believed members should vote on Saturday. 77% felt otherwise. The denomination’s manual prescribed deep reverence for the 24-hour period; it must not be spent for secular or mundane purposes (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2016:144). Many SDAs thus feel disenfranchised since most elections are held on Saturdays in Nigeria. This concern was echoed by the leader of the SDA Church in western Nigeria when he challenged the government of the country to stop holding elections on Saturdays (The Nation Newspaper, August 17, 2016 online edition).

Table showing opinion on the most critical challenge a good believer and politics is

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Any other thing	11	4.0	4.0	4.0
Politics and faith are incompatible	77	27.7	27.7	31.7
This world cannot be better according to prophecy till Jesus comes or the world comes to an end	56	20.1	20.1	51.8
Corruption and lack of truth in politics	75	27.0	27.0	78.8
Occultism in politics	14	5.0	5.0	83.8
No response or multiple options selected	45	16.2	16.2	100.0
Total	278	100.0	100.0	

Source: Author’s

This paper investigates what respondents felt was the greatest obstacle between being a good SDA member and being a politician. There are various factors such as perceived corrupt nature of politics, occultism among the political class, eschatological concerns and a feeling that religion and politics are just incompatible. The result shows that 27.7% felt that religion and politics were incompatible. The incompatibility of religion and politics was thus the highest point of concern for the respondents. 27% believed that corrupt practices among the political class were the greatest obstacle to SDAs in politics. 20.1% of respondents believed that the world would not become a better place until Jesus Christ would return (an eschatological concern).

4.4 Comparative analysis of SDA young people and other young Nigerians in tertiary institutions

This section of the paper compares the political engagement of SDA young people in Nigeria tertiary institutions with their peers of other faiths. For evidence on the attitudes of Nigerian youths from different religious backgrounds, both Christian and Islamic, to politics, this paper relies on the Efuntade and Aina study of the group in tertiary institutions in the south-west zone of the country. The study reveals similar patterns in these young people's commitment to their various religions as gauged by their religious activities such as prayer, reading of sacred texts, attendance at places of worship and similar parameters used in the SDA youth study.

Specifically regarding political engagement, Efuntade and Aina (2020:75-76) established that only 46.2% of the youth studied from different religious background were registered to vote. Those who actually voted were only 34.9% of the respondents. 71% of them planned to vote in future elections. 16.9% had their membership in a political party. Only 38.2% planned on joining any political party as members in the future. 55.4% thought their religion was compatible with being involved in politics while 40.1% thought their religion was not compatible with being involved in politics. 79.3% of the respondent thought voting was in line with their beliefs. Regarding contesting in elections, they found out that 78.9% believed that a good practitioner of their faith could contest in elections. Among young people in other denominations and religion, very small proportion, 6.5% of the respondents had eschatological considerations in decisions about politics.

Below is a table that compares the beliefs and attitudes of SDA young people in tertiary institutions and their contemporaries of other denominations and other faiths.

Table showing comparative attitudes to politics of SDA youths and youths of other religions

SN	Description of political engagement	% of SDA youths	% of youths in other faiths
1.	Registered to vote in elections	45.3%	46.2%
2.	Those who have actually voted in previous elections	30.6%	34.9%
3.	Those who planned to vote in future elections	60.4%	71.0%
4.	Those who belonged to a political party	8.3%	16.9%
5.	Those who planned to join a political party in future	23.0%	38.2%
6.	Being involved in politics is compatible with religion	31.3%	55.4%
7.	Those who thought voting was compatible with their religion	49.6%	79.3%
8.	Contesting elections was compatible with religion	55.8%	78.9%
9.	Eschatology as limitation for being involved in politics	20.1%	6.5%

Source: Author

5.0 Conclusion

The doctrine of the Second Advent of Jesus Christ is very central to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Although the denomination did not prohibit its members from participating in politics as individuals, its focus on eschatology diminished the engagements of its young members (ages 15-25 years) in political systems in Nigeria. There is connection between religious fervency and political participation. Although there is general decline in participation of young people globally in traditional politics, SDA young people in tertiary institutions in Nigeria are even less involved in politics than their counterparts who belonged to other religions and denominations. Religion is not supposed to remove power from people rather its mobilization potential should be utilized for the transformational leadership of the nation's political arrangement. Therefore, this paper recommends that the clergy of the SDA Church should properly educate members that being politically engaged is not contradictory to their faith. Clergy should also be aware that non-partisan attitude is different from being apolitical. The SDA Church should not be partisan and at the same time not be apolitical. Every hand must be on deck to ensure Nigeria moves in the direction of a truly egalitarian, equitable and just society.

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