

GENDER

Historically, gender and women's issues have not gained national saliency and visibility in general elections across the country. The 2019 election is no different as the economy, corruption and security have been the key themes driving the elections. Nevertheless, women are becoming more politically engaged and savvy, making gender-based policy demands on candidates in exchange for their votes. INEC revealed that more women than men registered in the extension of voters registration. Of the 13,634,414 million newly registered voters, 7,386,583 million were females, and 6,247,831 million were males. This is an interesting development and confirms the idea of women's increasing political engagement, as men have usually participated more than women in electoral process. Of the 84,004,084 million people registered to vote in the first instance, 52.86% (44,405,439) were males and 47.14% (39,598,645) were females.

More women also engaged as aspirants and candidates in this 2019 election than previous elections. One factor that informed women's increased participation as aspirants and candidates is the proliferation of political parties that allowed for emergence of parties. These new and smaller parties have provided a platform that has allowed women the space to contest political power without the high entry and participation costs that exist in the big established parties. Women's increased participation has however led to the conspiracy theory that most of the women merely posturing to attract appointive positions without the intention of running a credible and sustained campaign. The recent withdrawal of all but one of the women presidential candidates have done little to disprove this notion.

The withdrawal of Dr. Oby Ezekwesili's candidacy has been notable because she was considered one of the better qualified of the 73 presidential candidates and the most qualified of the five women presidential candidates. While she offered what seemed to be conflicting explanations for her decision, the implications of her candidacy withdrawal for women's political participation in the country is yet to be determined in full. An immediate impact, however, is the possibility of depressing women's vote as her fans, especially women

and youth may decide not participate in the presidential election especially as she is yet to endorse any other candidate after she withdrew from the contest.

Historically, women have not voted as a specific bloc/constituency. This determination has been challenging to make as previous voting data were not gender-disaggregated. Additionally, parties have not typically catered to the women's vote except PDP during Goodluck Jonathan's campaign in 2011. However, the leadership of the National Council of Women's Society has continued to sensitize women with messages that ask them to vote candidates that are women-friendly and/or vote women candidates too but with no emphasis on either. As such, it is difficult to predict who women will vote for in this election. But if the voter registration data is anything to go by and women decide to vote other women after all, then we should expect to see more women win elective positions but not limited to presidential contests, and we should also expect likely increase in women's overall share of elective positions across the country for all elective positions to a figure above the 2015 general elections outcomes.



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