



## Well-Being of First-Time Voters in Nigeria: Predictive Influence of Decentering and Mindfulness

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### **Abstract**

*The mind in response to the outcome of election process is a factor on how such outcome can influence well-being of first-time voters. Holding different perspectives to the election and outcome in decentering, and being consciously aware of internal state and surrounding, not judging or reacting to it in mindfulness could add value to the well-being of first-time voters. This study explored the predictive influence of decentering and mindfulness on the well-being of first-time voters in Nigeria. The participants of the study were 594 (males = 226; females = 366) undergraduate students of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus. Ages of the participants ranged between 18 and 32 ( $M_{age} = 20.75$ ;  $SD = 3.24$ ) years. Test of hypotheses using multiple linear regression analysis (Enter Method) revealed an omnibus effect of mindfulness and decentering on well-being of first-time voters,  $F(6,593) = 2.80$ ,  $P < .05$ . Further, decentering positively predicted well-being  $P < .05$  while mindfulness had negative prediction on well-being of first-time voters. This study suggests the need not to use mindfulness in isolation of decentering while building positive intervention to enhance well-being of first-time voters after an election. The implication is that positive psychotherapy interventions should consider to combine mindfulness practice with decentering for effectiveness in promoting well-being of first-time voters.*

**KeyWords:** *Decentering, Election Process, First-Time Voter, Mindfulness, Well-Being,*

## Introduction

First-time voters in Nigeria may experience difficulties adjusting to the electoral process; from registration, accreditation to voting. The joy of going to the polls for the first time comes with deep expectations in line with how the activities are done, and the outcome of the election. These expectations through the election and the outcome induce stress to voters (Hagan et al., 2018). The extent to which the electoral process and the outcome influence first-time voters (those young people who have reached the voting age and are facing their first opportunity to vote) may be dependent on the link between the electoral outcome and fate of the citizens. In the event when the negative outcome defeats the earlier positive expectation, there is bound to be problem with electorates' mental health being jeopardized due to their experiences and learning associated with electoral process and outcome (Nayak et al., 2021). Aside mental health, the election and its outcome may negatively impact on the well-being of voters.

Generally, well-being has been an issue in terms of definition, and this has been influenced by evidence of different theories on well-being (Diener et al., 2003). Well-being describes a state where one feels good and functions well, and brought forth when one is able to explore and develop his or her potentials; be happy and contented, have some level of autonomy and control on life and events accompanying it, purposeful, and able to have a web of meaningful relationships (Huppert, 2009). In another definition, well-being refers to “a state of successful performance across life course, integrating physical, cognitive and socio-emotional function” (Pollard & Davidson, 2001, p. 10).

These definitions highlight some characteristics of well-being as opposed to the definition that captures only psychological well-being in their measures. In essence, well-being should cut across physical well-being, psychological well-being, economic well-being and social well-being as well as emotional well-being. Capturing these accommodates different aspects of well-being, which helps in bringing about objectivity in research outcome. Generally, well-being is beneficial to individuals, as it brings about higher levels of productivity in home and work, ability to learn well, increase in creativity level, ability to form and maintain meaningful relationships, as well as engaging in helping behaviours (Diener, 2012; Huppert & So, 2013; Oishi et al., 2007). However, with the incidence of election and its outcome, the well-being of voters, especially first time voters' voting during election may be negatively affected.

Revealing this, Roche and Jacobson (2019) reported elevated levels of anxiety, stress and poor sleep immediately after election. Similarly, Pierce et al. (2016) reported lower levels of happiness among voters whose favourite candidate lost an election after the election period. However, on the flip, Gray et al. (2021) reported that there is an increase in subjective well-being among voters that supported a winning candidate. Also, Gray et al. (2018) reported an increase in overall life satisfaction for voters that supported a winning candidate.

In addition, there is an increase in psychological well-being for voters that supported a winning candidate. In essence, subjective well-being is jeopardized among voters on the losing side of the election. Confidence is being lost on the electoral process and the vote counting system when electoral outcomes do not align with voters' expectations (Mongrain et al., 2023). This may become more pronounced among first-time voters, who are experiencing the process of voting, counting and declaration of results. However, Roche and Jacobson (2019) showed that the effect of election outcome on voters' well-being was short lived, as they diminish with time. Factors influencing such reduction may cut across holding different perspective to the election and outcome in decentering, and being consciously aware of internal state and surrounding and not judging or reacting to it in mindfulness.

## Decentering and Well-being

Naragon-Gainey and Demarree (2016) defined decentering as “a present-moment awareness of one's mental experience marked by a detached observed perspective” (p.935). It highlights the ability to form different perspectives on an event, through conscious awareness and shifting the mind away from the sole interpretation,

which it gives to an event (Fresco et al., 2007). This is built on the premise that a perspective held on an event is dynamic, and can be altered through detaching the mind from the current perspective (Kessel et al., 2016). When these new perspectives are formed, negative beliefs about the event is removed; thus, appropriate emotional reaction to the event surfaces, leaving no room for negative attitude about the self (Ong et al., 2012). In order to do this, one has to become aware of what he or she is currently feeling or experiencing, misidentify the mind from such present experience, and have control in terms of reacting to the contents from the thoughts due to such present internal experiences (Bernstein et al., 2015).

Furthermore, engaging in decentering can have positive effect on the health of people. Bernstein et al. (2015) stated that decentering is important in improving well-being, as well as understanding and managing mental health problems. Also, Fresco et al. (2007) reported that decentering helps in good psychological and social functioning, through its impact in good mental health and general health development. Further, decentering helps to reduce negative emotional reactions to painful experiences as well as reduction in anxiety and depression symptoms (Shoham et al., 2017). In addition, when decentering is high, psychological distress is lessened, and well-being is generally improved among people with chronic pain (McCracken et al., 2014). Also, decentering positively reduced dysphoria symptoms by improving positive affect and reducing negative affect (Naragon-Grainey et al., 2023). However, notwithstanding these related studies to well-being, there are dearth in research exploring the relationship between decentering and well-being. In line with this, the present study tested the following hypothesis:

*H1: Decentering will positively and significantly relate with well-being*

### **Mindfulness and Well-being**

The position of the mind in response to the outcome of election is a determinant factor on how such outcome influence well-being, with mindfulness posing benefits in mental health situations (McClintock et al., 2019). Mindfulness is being able to pay attention to what one is feeling presently, through established consciousness, and judging not or reacting to the feeling faced at the moment. In mindfulness, the focus is on the present state through conscious awareness; however, the individual paying attention makes no attempt to control or change what he or she is feeling (Jazaieri & Shapiro, 2017). An individual through constant practice (Garland et al., 2009) can hold such positive behaviour. However, the essence is placed more on trait mindfulness, as it becomes part of the individual, without having to nurture it through mindfulness practice. Trait mindfulness refers to personality characteristics inherent in an individual to be able to have conscious awareness of the present moment, in such a way that he or she does not judge or react to what is being felt (Carpenter et al., 2019). In essence, such mindfulness characteristics are inherent in individual and it is not a product of brief or prolonged mindfulness practice. Nevertheless, mindfulness practice has been found to increase the levels of trait mindfulness in an individual (Goldberg et al., 2015), and helps to reduce levels of psychological distress (Alsubaie et al., 2017). Effects of mindfulness on the well-being of individuals are aided through the components of intention, attention and attitude as they help interrupt automated responses, as well as respond to environmental events without judging the situation (Troy et al., 2013).

Mindfulness have been found to reduce negative affect, reduce symptoms of psychopathology, increase in life satisfaction, vitality, and the ability to regulate emotions to suit prevailing circumstances (Keng et al., 2011). Similarly, the practice of meditation, which is a mindfulness practice brought about greater optimism, increased positive emotions, and increase in positive social relationships (Gootjets & Rassin, 2014). In addition, mindfulness has an effect on physical well-being, as it brought about increase in telemerone, which is an immune responsible for the improvement of functioning and health (Schutte & Malouff, 2014). Also, mindfulness practice brought about increase in antibody titres for vaccine to manage influenza (Davidson et al., 2003). In addition, mindfulness practice positively impacted learning and memory, ability to regulate emotions, and ability to hold perspectives to events, as it increased the concentration of grey matter in the hippocampus (Hozel et al., 2011). Consequently, mindfulness practice brought about lowered level of blood pressure among individuals with hypertension, diabetes and cancer (Interakamhang et al., 2020). More so, sleep quality was improved through mindfulness practice (Ding et al., 2020), as well as reduction in anxiety, pain and depression symptoms (Behan, 2020). In addition, mindfulness practice brought about increase in quality of life (Fortney et

al., 2013). However, most of these studies are rooted in mindfulness based reduction programme, which may extinct with time in non-clinical setting; hence, the importance of determining the effect of trait mindfulness on well-being. Also, none of the studies captured all aspects of well-being measures, which are physical, social, emotional, mental, and economic well-being; hence the following hypothesis was tested:

*H2: Mindfulness will positively and significantly relate with well-being.*

## Method

### Participants

Five hundred and ninety-four (male = 228; female = 366) young persons were chosen through purposive sampling method to participate in this study. The participants were Nigerians undergraduate students from Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University who were first time voters that reported their experiences following the conduct and offshoots of 2023 federal and state elections conducted by Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria. The participants that participated in voting, witnessed the election processes and outcomes; and were enthusiastic about the positive outcome of 2023 general elections. Participants' ages ranged between 18 and 32 years ( $M = 20.77$ ,  $SD = 3.26$ ).

### Instruments

Participants responded to three items: Well-being Assessment (Adult-24 items: Stiefel et al., 2020), 11-item Experience Questionnaire Decentering Subscale (EQDS: Soler et al., 2014), Toronto Mindfulness scale (TMS: Lau et al., 2006).

EQDS: This is an 11-item self-report measure designed to measure decentering or disidentification with contents of negative thinking, hypothesised to be a process of change under two dimensions, e.g., rumination and wider perspective. Each participant responded on a 5-point option format ranging from 1 – never to 5 – all the time. Some of the items in the scale include “I am more capable of accepting myself as I am”, “I can slow down my thinking in times of stress”, “I realize that I don't take difficulties so personal”.

This questionnaire on decentering was subjected to validity measures using 80 individuals who experience 2023 general election in Nigeria. ( $M_{age} = 20.80$ ,  $SD; 3.26$ ). The reliability (Internal consistency) of this scale is at Cronbach's alpha .64. The confirmation factor analysis measure of reliability revealed the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy at .62, with the Bartlett's test of sphericity at approxi. Chi-square 107.23,  $df(55)$ ,  $p < .001$ . This reveals that the test is valid for the present study.

TMS: This is a 13-item scale designed to measure mindfulness in state-like experience during meditation. Each participant responded to a 5-point option format ranging from 0 – not at all to 4 – Very much. Some of the items in the scale include “I experienced myself as separate from my changing thoughts and feelings”, “I remained curious about the nature of each experience as it arose”, “I was more interested in just watching my experiences as they arose, than in figuring out what they could mean”.

This self-measure questionnaire was subjected to validity measures, using 80 individuals who exercised their franchise during 2023 general election in Nigeria ( $M_{age}; 20.80$ ,  $SD; 3.26$ ). The reliability (Internal consistency) of this scale is at Cronbach's alpha .66. The confirmation factor analysis measure of reliability revealed the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy at .67, with the Bartlett's test of sphericity at approximately, Chi-square 198.82.,  $df = 78$ ,  $P < .001$ . This reveals that the test is valid for the present study.

We obtained measure of well-being using 24-item adult version with eight components merged to form a single measure of overall well-being. The 24-item self-report inventory was scored on 11-point option format ranging from worst possible, poor, not at all worthwhile, strongly disagree, not true, etc. = 0 to best possible, excellent, completely worthwhile, strongly agree, completely true of me = 10. The response pattern depends on the component. Some of the sample items include: Overall, how satisfied are you with life these days? In general, how would you rate your physical health? How often do you show someone in your community that you love or care for them? How often do you worry about being able to meet normal monthly expenses? Other items

include: In general, how happy or unhappy do you feel? How would you describe your sense of belonging to your local community?

The instrument was subjected to reliability test prove its suitability in the present study by using 80 undergraduate students who participated in the 2023 general as voters, ( $M_{age}=20.80$ ,  $SD = 3.26$ ). The internal consistency was reliable Cronbach Alpha = 0.69. Regarding confirmatory factor analysis, we found Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy at 0.61, with the Bartlett's test of sphericity at approximately Chi-square 525.46,  $df = 276$ ,  $P < .001$ . This reveals the suitability of the instrument in the present study.

### Procedure

We requested the undergraduate students of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University who reported for their usual lecture and 98% having first experience of voting during the 2023 general election to participate in this study. The participants were requested to fill the questionnaire on mindfulness, decentering and well-being. Regarding ethical consideration, the participants were informed that the study was to ascertain how they felt regarding participation in 2023 general election vis-à-vis their well-being. Informed consent was obtained by providing a section in which they were asked to check "yes" or "no" on their willingness to participate in the study. Those who chose "yes" were given the questionnaire to fill. We also assured the participants of confidentiality of the information they were to supply. The data collection lasted for two weeks.

### Design/Statistics

Cross-sectional design was adopted for this study. Cross Sectional design is a type of design used when investigating relationship between two or more variables, and it is suitable when data are collected at one point in time (Shaughnessy et al., 2003; Anyaegbunam et al., 2023).

Multiple linear regression analysis was employed to analyze the data collected for this study. Bivariate correlation analysis was done to look out for strengths in linear relationships among the variables (Laerd Statistics, 2018). Multiple linear regression analysis is a statistical tool that allows a researcher to examine how multiple independent variables are related to a dependent variable (Higgins, 2005).

### Results

**Table 1**

**Mean, standard deviation and inter-correlation of mindfulness, decentering and components of well-being (n = 594)**

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Mindfulness	31.96	9.80	-									
2. Decentering	36.56	8.25	-.06	-								
3. PHMHPF	17.57	5.92	-.04	.03-								
4. MP	17.08	6.30	.05-.01	-.19**	-							
5. CS	17.90	6.80	.05	-.08*	.03.47**	-						
6. Relationships	16.10	6.22	.13**	-.02	.13**	.27**	.33**	-				
7. CSS	16.04	6.97	.10*	-.10*	.12**	.22**	.25**	.39**	-			
8. FES	14.15	6.85	-.02	-.03.13**	.19**	.23**	.27**	.44**	-			
9. Affect	17.66	7.45	.05	.03.14**	.21**	.13**	.19**	.28**	.24**	-		
10. Life Satisfaction	19.37	5.50	-.06	.10**	.25**	.07	.02	.02	.07	.13**	.08**	-

Note: SD = Standard Deviation, PHMHPF = Physical/Mental Health and Physical Function, MP = Meaning and Purpose, CS = Character and Sharing, CSS = Community and Social Support, FES = Financial Evaluation and Stability, \* < .05; \*\* < .001

The result from the Pearson correlation analysis showed that mindfulness was positively related to the relationships component of well-being ( $r = .13, p < .001$ ) and community and social support ( $r = .10, p < .05$ ) dimensions of well-being. There was however no significant relationship between mindfulness and other dimensions of well-being; physical/mental health and physical function ( $r = -.04, p > .05$ ), meaning and purpose ( $r = .05, p > .05$ ), character and sharing ( $r = .05, p > .05$ ), financial evaluation and stability ( $r = -.02, p > .05$ ), affect ( $r = .05, p > .05$ ) and life satisfaction ( $r = -.06, p > .05$ ). Furthermore, decentering was negatively related to character and sharing ( $r = -.08, p < .05$ ), and community and social support ( $r = -.10, p < .05$ ) dimensions of well-being; however, decentering was positively related to life satisfaction ( $r = .10, p < .001$ ). Decentering was however not related to other dimensions of well-being; physical/mental health and physical functioning ( $r = .03, p > .05$ ), meaning and purpose ( $r = -.01, p > .05$ ), relationships ( $r = -.02, p > .05$ ), financial evaluation and stability ( $r = -.03, p > .05$ ) and affect ( $r = .03, p > .05$ ).

**Table 2**

**Predicting Well-being from Mindfulness and Decentering**

Model	B	SEB	$\beta$	t	p	95% CI	R <sup>2</sup>	F
Age		.20	.41	.02	.50	.614	[-.60; 1.01]	.28 2.80 (6,593)*
Gender		-.23	2.61	-.00	-.09	.928	[-.70; 4.23]	
Location		-3.16	2.62	-.05	-1.20	.228	[-5.38; 4.90]	
Decentering		-.37	.15	10-2.49	.013	-.08; .67]		
Mindfulness		-.44	.17	-.10	-2.63	.001	[-.78; -.11]	

Note:  $\beta$  = Regression coefficient; SE = Standard Error; t = Population t value; p = Probability level; CI = Upper & Lower Confidence Interval.

In table 2, predictor variables; mindfulness and decentering significantly predicted well-being, with significant model fit  $F(6,593) = 2.80, p < .05$ , accounting for 28% of the variance in well-being. Independently, decentering positively predicted well-being ( $\beta = .10, t = -2.49, 95\% CI [.08, .67], p < .05$ ), and mindfulness negatively predicted well-being ( $\beta = -.10, t = -2.63, 95\% CI [-.78, -.11], p < .001$ ).

**Discussion**

The present study investigated the role of decentering and mindfulness on well-being of first time voters after the conduct of election. The study showed that decentering positively predicted wellbeing; thus, an increase in decentering would bring about an increase on the well-being of first time voter. This finding however confirmed the first study hypotheses, which stated that decentering would significantly and positively predict well-being. The outcome of an election, especially if it is not favourable to voters may bring about painful feeling to the voters; however, decentering helps people to not negatively react to such painful experience, which shields them from the symptoms of anxiety and depression (Shoham et al., 2017). At the core of this effect is the decentered approach, by forming new perspectives to the perception of the event, which tailors appropriate emotional reaction (Ong et al., 2012).

In such situation, the individual sees other explanations to the outcome of the event, such as election, embracing hope, which reduces the ways such outcome influence well-being. This is influenced by objective evaluation about the event and its outcome, which provides plausible explanation to the event and its outcome. However, notwithstanding the dearth of research exploring the role of decentering on well-being of first time voters after election, the study outcome aligned with the findings of McCracken et al. (2024), as the authors showed that

decentering improved the well-being of people with chronic pain, through the reduction in psychological distress. Similarly, decentering was found to reduce negative emotions and increase positive emotions among people feeling distress, with dissatisfaction with life (Naragon-Grainey et al., 2023).

However, the study showed that mindfulness negatively predicted well-being; thus, an increase in mindfulness would lead to a decrease in well-being. This finding did not confirm the study hypothesis which stated that mindfulness would significantly and positively relate to well-being. Surprisingly, this finding was in contrast to the findings of scholars (e.g. Ding et al., 2020; Gootjets & Rassin, 2014; Interkamhang et al., 2020; Keng et al., 2011; Schutte & Malouff, 2014), who all showed how mindfulness was positively related to different dimensions of well-being. An explanation to this differed finding may be linked to trait mindfulness approach to the study, which is said to only be increased through constant mindfulness practices (Goldberg et al., 2015). Thus, with the absence of mindfulness practices, evident in the studies linking positive impact of mindfulness in improving the well-being of people, such outcome may not be present in trait mindfulness, since constant mindfulness practices increase trait mindfulness. In addition, merely paying attention to the present moment in mindfulness may temporarily relieve negative emotions associated with loss of election capable of altering well-being of first time voters. As such, a long term positive effect of mindfulness on well-being of first time voters after election may not be achieved.

By implication, the study proposed the importance of embracing decentered perspective on the evaluation of events and the outcome due to its positive effect evident from the study. Such should be installed in the thought processes of people before adulthood, which would help them navigate through different hurdles of life they may encounter. With this, it would be easier for them to reprocess events and outcomes, such as an election, draw on different explanation, and trigger positive emotions, which is beneficial to the well-being of people. In addition, notwithstanding the findings showing mindfulness reducing the well-being of first time voters after an election, mindfulness practices need to be part of day-to-day training to help improve trait mindfulness, which have been shown to be beneficial to the well-being of people. In addition, Positive Psychotherapy Interventions (PPI) should be extended to citizens after elections so as to enhance well-being by exposing them to mindfulness practices, as well as teaching decentering in evaluation of events after the election. This may assist in reintegrating and ensuring peaceful coexistence after the election, through accepting the situation, finding ways to embrace positive emotions, and ensuring physical, mental, social and emotional well-being of the citizens.

### **Limitations and suggestions for future study**

Study limitation draws from well-being of first time voters generally assessed, without considering citizens that are on the winning ends. The premise of this is that the well-being of first time voters may be negatively affected when they are on the losing end of an election which they took part in; thus, citizens whose candidates they supported won an election may not be affected by the outcome of the election. Also, the study draws limitation from the inability of the study to be generalized to the entire population, since it made use of an educational institution as the study population. A percentage of subset of the country's population should make up the study population, so that, the study outcome can be generalized to the country's population. Future study on this should independently study role of decentering and mindfulness on well-being among citizens whose participants won an election, and those whose participants lost an election, since different individuals have their respective candidates for an election.

### **Conclusion**

The study's findings suggest link between well-being and mindfulness in the presence of decentering among first-time voters. The well-being of first-time voters is paramount, and the outcome of the election may either increase or decrease it depending on the candidate and party supported during the election. Decentering was found in this study to promote the well-being of first-time voters. However, notwithstanding the findings of mindfulness to decrease the well-being of first time voters as evident from the present study, mindfulness combined with decentering as positive psychotherapeutic practice is encouraged after election. Thus, positive psychological intervention using mindfulness and targeted at promoting the well-being of first-time voters

should integrate decentering for better effectiveness. Therefore, this study advanced that mindfulness practice should combine with decentering in order to promote effectively the well-being of first-time voters.

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