

POLITICAL MOBILISATION AND LOW VOTER TURNOUT: A COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES IN NIGERIA'S 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive review of the political campaign strategies employed by the major political parties, the All Progressives Congress (APC), the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and the Labour Party (LP), in Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. It analyzes the convergence of traditional grassroots mobilization, identity politics, and a new wave of digital-native, youth-led activism. The study utilizes a desktop research methodology to synthesize insights from academic literature, media reports, and official documents. It is framed by a multi-theoretical approach, applying concepts from Political Marketing, Social Movement Theory, and the Political Economy of Clientelism to explain the complex interplay of party messaging, voter behavior, and electoral outcomes. Findings reveal that while the APC and PDP relied on a blend of traditional patronage networks and sophisticated digital messaging, the LP, fueled by the "Obidient Movement," pioneered a populist, grassroots-driven digital strategy that fundamentally reshaped the political landscape. The report uncovers a profound paradox: despite a record high in voter registration, the election suffered from a historic low in voter turnout, a phenomenon attributed to a deep-seated erosion of public trust, disinformation campaigns, and monetization of the electoral process. The conclusion posits that the 2023 election marked a critical juncture in Nigeria's democratic journey, where a new generation of voters demonstrated a powerful capacity for mobilization, even as systemic challenges and traditional political tactics proved resilient. Recommendations are offered to enhance electoral integrity, promote issue-based campaigning, and foster a more robust democratic culture.

Keywords: Political Campaign Strategies, Digital Activism, Identity Politics, Voter Behaviour, Electoral Integrity

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999 marked a critical shift from decades of military dictatorship to civilian rule, ushering in a new era of political participation and pluralism. Yet, more than two decades later, Nigeria's democratic trajectory remains fraught with contradictions. While successive elections have demonstrated incremental institutional reforms, they have also exposed enduring structural weaknesses. As Akinboye (2013) observes, the dominance of identity politics, anchored in ethnicity, religion, and region, continues to shape electoral behaviour and party dynamics, often at the expense of issue-based politics and national cohesion.

The 2023 general elections, the seventh since the democratic transition, were particularly significant. For the first time in over twenty years, there was no incumbent presidential candidate, raising expectations for a genuinely competitive

contest. However, this optimism unfolded amid deep socio-economic and security crises. Rising inflation, youth unemployment exceeding 40%, and escalating insecurity, from insurgency in the North-East to separatist agitations in the South-East, created an atmosphere of tension and uncertainty (Agbibo, 2023). These realities amplified public frustration with a political elite perceived as detached from citizens' everyday struggles.

Further complicating the pre-election climate was the Central Bank of Nigeria's (CBN) controversial currency redesign policy, introduced in late 2022. Although aimed at curbing vote-buying and corruption, the policy triggered severe cash shortages that disrupted trade and livelihoods nationwide (Ezeani & Chukwemeka, 2023). The timing, just months before the polls, fuelled public suspicion about the government's motives, compounding distrust in state institutions.

In response to recurring accusations of electoral malpractice, the Independent National

Electoral Commission (INEC) implemented technological reforms to enhance transparency, notably the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing (IREV) portal. BVAS sought to eliminate multiple voting through biometric verification, while IREV enabled real-time publication of results (Oloruntoba, 2022). These innovations were widely hailed as potential game-changers for electoral credibility. Nonetheless, the elections were marred by technical glitches, delayed result uploads, logistical failures, and renewed instances of voter suppression and violence (International Crisis Group, 2023). Such setbacks underscored persistent institutional weaknesses and raised questions about INEC's operational capacity.

The aftermath of the polls was no less contentious. Allegations of manipulation, coupled with the rejection of results by opposition parties, deepened political polarisation and reignited debates about the fragility of Nigeria's democratic institutions (Suberu, 2023). As Omilusi (2021) and Adebayo (2023) note, systemic challenges, including electoral violence, vote buying, and inadequate infrastructure, continue to erode the integrity of the democratic process, despite technological innovations.

Ultimately, the 2023 elections encapsulate both the progress and paradoxes of Nigeria's democratic evolution. They revealed a citizenry eager for change but constrained by deep-seated mistrust and systemic failure. The low voter turnout, just 27.1% despite a record 93.4 million registered voters, reflects not apathy but rational disengagement born of frustration with unfulfilled promises and recurring electoral irregularities. This disillusionment highlights a critical problem: the widening disconnects between political mobilisation and actual participation. Understanding this gap requires examining how party campaign strategies, entrenched patronage networks, and emergent youth-led digital activism are intersected to produce a paradox of enthusiasm without engagement. The 2023 elections thus offer a revealing lens into Nigeria's ongoing struggle to reconcile democratic aspiration with institutional and socio-economic realities.

Statement of the Problem

The 2023 Nigerian general elections revealed a striking paradox in the country's democratic experience: an unprecedented level of voter registration, particularly among the youth, contrasted sharply with historically low voter turnout. Despite 93.4 million registered voters, only about 25 million, approximately 27.1%, participated in the polls. This discrepancy signals

a deep crisis of democratic engagement and legitimacy.

While technological innovations such as BVAS and IREV were introduced to enhance transparency, persistent institutional weaknesses, socio-economic hardship, and widespread distrust in the political system undermined public confidence. The enthusiasm reflected in voter registration failed to translate into actual participation, suggesting that many citizens, especially younger voters, made a conscious, rational decision to abstain rather than act within a system they perceived as corrupt, exclusionary, or ineffective.

The problem therefore lies in understanding this disconnect between political mobilisation and electoral participation. Specifically, how did the campaign strategies of major political parties, operating within a landscape marked by traditional patronage networks and emerging youth-driven digital activism, fail to convert civic enthusiasm into tangible electoral engagement? This paradox points to a deeper erosion of public trust in Nigeria's democratic institutions, where disengagement functions not as apathy but as a form of political protest systemic dysfunction.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the distinct and converging political campaign strategies of the APC, PDP, and LP in the 2023 Nigerian presidential election.
2. To evaluate the role and effectiveness of digital media and grassroots mobilization as primary campaign tools.
3. To examine how core national issues, such as the economy, insecurity, and identity politics, were framed and utilized by the parties to appeal to the electorate.
4. To assess the impact of electoral reforms, misinformation, and vote-buying on campaign dynamics and voter behavior.
5. To provide evidence-based recommendations for improving future electoral processes and campaign conduct in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Marketing Concept

The political marketing concept is employed to analyse how political parties "sell" their candidates and manifestos to the electorate. It views political campaigns as strategic processes of identifying, packaging, and delivering messages that resonate with voters' needs and aspirations (Asemah & Edegoh, 2012). This framework adopts the philosophy of "voters first" or "customer first,"

whereby political actors attempt to align their campaign strategies with citizens' expectations. It also explains the deliberate use of slogans, jingles, manifestos, and candidate branding to shape public perception (Asemah, Nwammuo, & Edegoh, 2014). In the 2023 election, the importance of a candidate's personality and public image was particularly evident, as campaigns increasingly highlighted personal integrity, competence, and empathy in order to sway undecided voters. This framework thus helps explain how political actors used media to influence decision-making processes by carefully crafting persuasive communication.

Political Marketing and Communication in Emerging Democracies

In emerging democracies, political marketing has become a defining feature of electoral competition, moving beyond ideology to include strategic image management and persuasive communication. Originating from the application of commercial marketing principles to politics, political marketing conceptualises voters as consumers and candidates as brands competing for loyalty (Lees-Marshment et al., 2019; Scammell, 2007). Political parties, in this framework, engage in deliberate image construction, projecting candidates as superior brands with distinctive identities and values that resonate with targeted constituencies (Imam, 2015). Through tailored manifestos, focused messaging, and integrated media strategies, parties seek to align their platforms with voters' expectations, replicating consumer-oriented marketing logic (Venu, 2008). The 2023 Nigerian presidential election vividly demonstrated this approach, as major parties sought to brand their candidates around pressing national issues such as corruption, insecurity, unemployment, and economic hardship (Ojukwu et al., 2023).

A key pillar of political marketing lies in political intelligence and research, systematic efforts to gather and interpret data on voter attitudes, preferences, and priorities. Such research informs message design, policy framing, and campaign communication (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Nabiebu, 2022). In Nigeria, the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) framed their campaigns around continuity and reform, respectively, while the Labour Party (LP) adopted a disruptive narrative built on transparency, accountability, and transformational leadership (Akinyetun, 2020). The LP's campaign rebranded its candidate as a symbol of generational renewal and ethical governance, gaining traction among youths and urban professionals disillusioned with established

political elites (Adekunle & Iredia, 2023).

However, despite the appeal of political branding, loyalty to political brands in Nigeria remains fragile compared to established democracies. Empirical evidence suggests that such loyalty is frequently undermined by short-term electoral incentives, misinformation, and clientelist politics (Van de Walle, 2007; Stokes et al., 2013). Many Nigerian voters continue to prioritise immediate material gains, such as cash inducements or patronage, over ideological or programmatic commitments (Wantchekon, 2003; Ibrahim, 2023). This transactional orientation reflects both the economic precarity of voters and the weak institutionalisation of party systems. Consequently, political marketing in Nigeria often fails to translate into enduring loyalty, as transient incentives and electoral malpractice erode voter trust and long-term engagement (Olubunmi & Folorungo, 2020; Yiaga Africa, 2025).

The proliferation of disinformation and negative campaigning further complicates the political marketing landscape. In contexts with limited regulatory oversight, carefully cultivated candidate brands are easily delegitimised through smear campaigns, propaganda, and digital misinformation (Abubakar, 2012; Hofstadter, 1964). During the 2023 elections, misinformation spread rapidly on platforms such as WhatsApp and Twitter/X, distorting perceptions of candidates and exacerbating polarisation (Akporue & Efebeh, 2023). This trend highlights a core vulnerability of political marketing in emerging democracies: the difficulty of sustaining authenticity and trust in environments where institutional safeguards against manipulation are weak (Ibrahim, 2023).

Traditionally, political mobilisation in Nigeria relied heavily on grassroots structures, town hall meetings, rallies, and door-to-door canvassing, supported by patronage networks and local brokers who mediated between elites and voters (Stokes et al., 2013; Van de Walle, 2007). However, the advent of digital communication technologies has reconfigured these patterns. Social media platforms such as Twitter/X, Facebook, and WhatsApp have enabled direct engagement between citizens and candidates, fostering participatory politics that bypass traditional hierarchies (Afolaranmi & Amodu, 2022; Opeibi, 2019). This digital turn mirrors global shifts where networked activism, digital coordination, and online discourse redefine political communication (Manacorda & Tesei, 2020; Tufekci, 2017).

The 2023 Nigerian presidential election underscored this transformation through the rise of the "Obident Movement," a digitally driven

grassroots phenomenon aligned with the LP's candidate. Powered by online communities, youth enthusiasm, and crowdfunding, this movement effectively bypassed elite-controlled structures, amplifying its message through social media (Adekunle & Iredia, 2023; Akporue & Efebeh, 2023). Earlier studies, such as Chiluwa and Ifukor (2015), have shown how similar digital movements, like the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, demonstrated the power of social media in mobilising citizens outside formal political channels. The "Obidient" experience reaffirmed that digital activism can galvanise civic participation and challenge entrenched political systems, even in contexts dominated by established parties.

Traditional parties, initially sceptical of this digital insurgency, eventually adapted by strengthening their online presence. Both the APC and PDP expanded their social media campaigns to counter the LP's momentum (Adebayo, 2023). Yet, the divergent outcomes of these efforts revealed the disruptive potential of networked mobilisation in reshaping Nigeria's political landscape (Ojukwu et al., 2023). Digital activism now represents a parallel arena of contestation, where legitimacy and influence are negotiated not only through physical rallies but also through virtual engagement (Abubakar, 2012; Sebei, 2021).

Ultimately, the 2023 elections reflected a hybrid political reality: while traditional mobilisation remains indispensable, especially in rural and less connected regions, digital activism has become a central force in shaping narratives, mobilising voters, and redefining engagement (Nabiebu, 2022; Afolaranmi & Amodu, 2022). This convergence of traditional and digital strategies signals a new phase in Nigeria's democratic evolution. It illustrates that in emerging democracies, digital communication is not merely supplementary but transformative, reshaping the logic of political marketing, voter interaction, and participatory governance.

Despite these insights, much of the existing literature remains largely descriptive, often synthesising established theories of political marketing, social movements, and clientelism without critically interrogating their contextual limitations. For instance, the direct transplantation of Western models of branding and voter behaviour tends to overlook Nigeria's unique socio-economic dynamics, weak institutional frameworks, and high levels of political distrust. Future scholarship must, therefore, move beyond descriptive adaptation to examine how these theoretical frameworks operate, or fail, within African democratic realities. Several research gaps emerge from the reviewed

literature. First, there is a paucity of empirical studies examining the effectiveness and sustainability of political branding in contexts dominated by transactional voting and weak institutional trust. Second, few studies have systematically assessed how digital activism interacts with traditional patronage networks to influence electoral outcomes in Nigeria. Third, existing theories of political marketing often assume rational voter behaviour, yet in the Nigerian context, voting decisions are frequently shaped by socio-economic vulnerabilities, ethnicity, and clientelist exchanges. Finally, there is limited exploration of how disinformation, online mobilisation, and hybrid campaign strategies collectively reshape voter perceptions and democratic participation. Addressing these gaps will deepen understanding of political marketing and communication in emerging democracies, offering insights into how modern electoral politics can balance digital innovation with institutional integrity.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a multi-theoretical approach to provide a comprehensive analysis of the complex dynamics of the 2023 Nigerian presidential election. The adoption of multiple theories allows for a nuanced understanding of political communication, campaign strategies, voter behaviour, and the role of digital mobilisation. Scholars such as Asemah (2011) and Asemah, Nwammuo, and Nkwam-Uwaoma (2017) have emphasised the value of communication theories in unpacking the relationship between political actors, the media, and the electorate. Drawing from political marketing, social movement theory, rational choice theory, and the political economy of clientelism, this framework situates the election within both theoretical and contextual realities.

Social Movement Theory (SMT)

Social Movement Theory (SMT) provides a useful lens for analysing the digitally driven mobilisation of the "Obidient Movement." According to the theory, social movements thrive on shared grievances, resource mobilisation, and collective identity formation (Asemah, Okpanachi, & Edegoh, 2017). This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts where citizens feel excluded from mainstream political structures. In 2023, the "Obidient Movement" emerged as a grassroots-driven collective, fuelled by dissatisfaction with governance failures, economic hardship, and political marginalisation. Digital platforms became vital tools for sustaining mobilisation, raising funds, recruiting volunteers, and amplifying voices that traditional structures often silenced. As Asemah et al. (2014) note, social media has

transformed political campaigns by enhancing participatory democracy and enabling bottom-up mobilisation. SMT, therefore, explains how collective identity and digital activism sustained the energy of the movement despite the absence of a strong institutional base.

Rational Choice Theory and the Political Economy of Clientelism

The Rational Choice Theory offers insights into voter behaviour by positing that individuals weigh costs and benefits to maximise personal gains. In the Nigerian context, where poverty is widespread, voters often prioritise immediate benefits such as cash inducements, food, or material items over long-term policy considerations (Asemah & Edegoh, 2012). This behaviour aligns with the transactional logic of elections, where voters calculate what they stand to gain in the short term. However, the Political Economy of Clientelism provides a more structural interpretation by demonstrating how political elites exploit these socio-economic vulnerabilities to maintain control. As Asemah and Edegoh (2012) argue in their study of political communication, elites strategically manipulate information and resources to entrench power, often to the detriment of democratic accountability. In 2023, instances of vote-buying and patronage politics highlighted the deep entrenchment of clientelism, where citizens, trapped in cycles of deprivation, were compelled to accept short-term benefits despite their long-term consequences.

Taken together, these frameworks reveal the multifaceted dynamics of Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. Political marketing explains the deliberate efforts of parties to shape voter preferences through communication strategies. Social movement theory situates the rise of non-traditional political actors within the context of digital mobilisation and collective identity. Rational choice theory and the political economy of clientelism shed light on the persistence of transactional politics and the structural constraints imposed on voter autonomy. By combining these perspectives, the study offers a holistic explanation of how media, mobilisation, and socio-economic realities shaped electoral behaviour and outcomes in contemporary Nigeria.

Review of Empirical Studies

Empirical studies consistently highlight a "paradox of declining voter turnout" in Nigeria, with the 2023 election recording a historic low of 27.1%. This is despite high voter registration rates and electoral reforms, which were expected to boost participation. Research attributes this decline to factors such as low voter confidence, disillusionment with democracy, and the

perceived ineffectiveness of voter education and mobilization campaigns.

Table 1: Voter Turnout in Nigerian Presidential Elections (1979–2023)

Year	Registered Voters (Approx.)	Votes Cast (Approx.)	Voter Turnout (%)
1979	48.5 million	16.8 million	34.6%
1983	65.4 million	25.4 million	38.9%
1993	-	-	35.0%
1999	57.9 million	30.3 million	52.3%
2003	60.8 million	42.0 million	69.1%
2007	61.5 million	35.4 million	57.5%
2011	73.5 million	39.5 million	53.7%
2015	67.4 million	29.4 million	43.7%
2019	82.3 million	28.7 million	34.7%
2023	93.5 million	25.2 million	27.1%

Studies on electoral violence and intimidation suggest that these factors create a palpable fear that suppresses turnout in certain areas, thereby contributing to the overall low participation rate. The effectiveness of political advertising in Nigeria is also questionable. While it raises awareness, it does not necessarily translate into a strong effect on voting behavior. This implies that voters' decisions are more complex, being influenced by factors beyond mere exposure to campaign messaging. The record low turnout in 2023, despite a "humongous PR input," suggests a diminishing return on traditional advertising spend. This indicates that voters, particularly the youth, are more influenced by a candidate's perceived authenticity and policy platforms, which are best communicated through direct, interpersonal, and digitally native channels rather than polished, top-down advertisements.

The Influence of Digital Media

Empirical studies confirm the high effect of social media on political discourse, public opinion, and voter mobilization in the 2023 election. Platforms like Twitter/X, Facebook, and WhatsApp were crucial for real-time information dissemination, community building, and direct engagement between politicians and the public. However, research also notes the negative impacts, including the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and political polarization, which led to a breakdown in constructive political dialogue. Disinformation was rampant, with campaigns setting up media units to produce and reinforce misleading information about their opponents, as well as respond to damaging information targeting their preferred candidate.

Vote-buying, a pervasive feature of Nigerian elections, is driven by acute socio-economic hardship. Research on the subject shows that its prevalence is influenced by partisanship and ethnicity more than poverty alone. Studies indicate that vote-selling is often a practical, not a moral, choice for individuals trapped in clientelist relationships with politicians, providing a short-term solution to immediate material needs.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, desktop research methodology, relying exclusively on secondary data. The research material is a curated collection of publicly available documents, including academic articles and seminar papers from platforms like ResearchGate, Tandfonline, and SSERR. Additional data sources include reports and policy briefs from non-governmental and international organizations like Chatham House, Yiaga Africa, and the Fund for Peace, political party documents, and news and media analyses from reputable sources. The data was subjected to content and thematic analysis. Key themes were identified and interconnected to build a coherent narrative that addresses the research objectives. This approach allows for a macro-level understanding of campaign strategies without the logistical and financial constraints of primary data collection.

Discussion of Findings

1. Campaign Strategies, Strengths, and Weaknesses of the Major Parties

The All Progressives Congress (APC): Incumbency and the Endurance of Traditional Mobilisation

The findings reveal that the APC's 2023 presidential campaign exemplified the resilience of traditional political mobilisation strategies in Nigeria's democratic process. Leveraging incumbency, patronage networks, and elite alliances, the APC effectively consolidated its political base. Bola Ahmed Tinubu's decisive primary victory and subsequent electoral success can be linked to his party's ability to maintain cohesion, co-opt defectors, and secure institutional support. The campaign's slogan, "Renewing Hope," projected a message of continuity and reform, though the absence of sustained public engagement by the candidate shifted focus from issue-based discourse to personality politics.

Theoretically, this aligns with the elite theory of political communication, which suggests that political outcomes in emerging democracies are often shaped by elite bargaining rather than mass ideological persuasion (Pareto, 1935; Mosca, 1939). The APC's emphasis on regional and

religious coalition-building further underscores the persistence of identity politics, reflecting the limited penetration of policy-driven political competition in Nigeria. Despite the rise of digital platforms, the APC's victory demonstrates that entrenched patronage structures and resource-driven mobilisation remain decisive in determining electoral outcomes.

The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP): Internal Fragmentation and Strategic Weakness

Results indicate that the PDP's campaign suffered from severe organisational and ideological disunity, which undermined its competitive capacity. The controversy surrounding the party's decision not to zone its presidential ticket to the South violated longstanding power-sharing norms and triggered resistance from key party figures, notably the G5 governors. This internal crisis weakened the PDP's traditional advantage in grassroots mobilisation and created a perception of moral inconsistency and political fatigue.

Atiku Abubakar's campaign focused on economic reforms and democratic renewal, yet his messaging lacked resonance due to a fragmented party structure and weakened credibility among southern voters. From an analytical perspective, the PDP's experience reflects **institutional decay within dominant-party systems** (Levitsky & Way, 2010), where prolonged incumbency and weak internal democracy erode cohesion and responsiveness. The defection of Peter Obi to the Labour Party illustrates how elite fragmentation can precipitate the rise of alternative political forces by displacing dissatisfied constituencies.

The Labour Party (LP): The Rise of Digital Populism and Participatory Politics

The Labour Party's campaign represented a significant departure from Nigeria's conventional campaign models. Anchored in the "Obidient Movement," the LP relied on digitally mediated, volunteer-driven mobilisation to challenge the established order. Peter Obi's image as a reformist, frugal, and transparent leader resonated strongly with urban youth and middle-class voters disillusioned with corruption and economic stagnation.

The LP's digital-first campaign strategy validates the **theory of networked political communication** (Castells, 2009), where social media platforms serve as alternative arenas for political organisation, resource mobilisation, and agenda-setting. The LP's capacity to galvanise participation without a deep-rooted party structure demonstrates how **digital populism** can disrupt established hierarchies. However, the movement's limited physical infrastructure and lack of representation in rural constituencies constrained

its electoral reach, highlighting the continuing urban-rural divide in digital political engagement.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Major Parties' 2023 Presidential Campaign Strategies

Party	Core Strategy	Candidate & Slogan	Digital Media Approach	Grassroots Mobilisation	Strengths	Weaknesses
APC	Leveraged incumbency, elite alliances, and regional bloc consolidation.	Bola Ahmed Tinubu - <i>Renewing Hope</i>	Used social media on for reinforcement of official narratives and dissemination of campaign messages.	Relied heavily on well-established patronage and networks, traditional party structures, and state resources.	Strong resource base; effective coalition-building; control over state institutions and media reach.	Limited youth appeal; low transparency in candidate communication; dependence on identity politics.
PDP	Appeal to legacy support base with reformist agenda and economic recovery focus.	Atiku Abubakar - <i>Let's Get Nigeria Working Again</i>	Moderate use of social media for outreach and campaign updates, but weakened disunity.	Dependent on traditional polling unit networks, though these were weakened by internal divisions.	Wide national presence; experience in campaign organisation; historical legitimacy.	Internal crisis (G5 governors' rebellion); weak cohesion; loss of southern youth and swing voters to LP.
LP	Disruptive populism and issue-based mobilisation anchored in digital activism.	Peter Obi - <i>The Obidient Movement</i>	Central to campaign; used Twitter/X, WhatsApp, Facebook mobilisation, crowdfunding, and narrative framing.	Relied on volunteerism and youth-driven grassroots networks rather than formal party machinery.	Strong urban youth appeal; credible leadership image; innovative digital mobilisation.	Weak rural presence; limited funding; inadequate institutional structure for national coverage.

2. Misinformation, Electoral Violence, and Their Influence on Voter Behaviour

Empirical evidence suggests that misinformation and electoral violence significantly shaped voter perceptions and behaviour during the 2023 elections. The proliferation of doctored videos, false claims, and propaganda on platforms such as WhatsApp and Twitter/X intensified polarisation and eroded public trust. This reflects the agenda-setting and framing theories (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993), which explain how media narratives—accurate or otherwise—shape political priorities and voter cognition.

Disinformation was used by all major parties as both an offensive and defensive tool, blurring the boundary between campaign communication and psychological warfare. The sophistication of these tactics, coupled with weak digital literacy, contributed to the creation of

fragmented realities and heightened ethnic and religious antagonisms. This underscores findings from information disorder theory, which posits that in transitional democracies, low institutional credibility amplifies the impact of misinformation on electoral legitimacy (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Electoral violence, though less extensive than in previous cycles, persisted as a coercive tool in competitive states. Acts of intimidation, ballot snatching, and targeted attacks on opposition strongholds were recorded across several regions. These behaviours align with the **clientelistic model of African politics** (Van de Walle, 2007; Stokes et al., 2013), wherein political actors rely on both inducement and coercion to secure loyalty and suppress dissent. The persistence of such practices reveals systemic institutional weakness

Table 3: Key Determinants of Voter Behaviour in the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election

Factor	Observed Influence on Voter Behaviour	Empirical Implication
Economic Hardship and Deprivation	Increased vulnerability to vote-buying and apathy due to worsening inflation and unemployment.	Reinforced clientelism; economic grievances became a core determinant of swing votes.
Identity Politics (Ethnic/Religious)	Strong influence on candidate preference, especially in Northern and South-Western regions.	Sustained ethnic bloc voting; limited cross-regional appeal of opposition candidates.
Social Media Exposure	Enhanced youth mobilisation, online activism, and issue-based awareness. However, it also spreads misinformation and polarisation.	Supported LP's rise; increased virtual engagement without proportional voter turnout.
Voter Inducement (Vote Buying)	Widespread transactional voting in rural and peri-urban areas due to economic desperation.	Undermined democratic choice; perpetuated corruption and dependency culture.
Trust in Electoral Institutions	Low trust in INEC and state agencies discouraged participation.	Contributed to voter apathy and declining turnout despite high registration rates.
Electoral Violence	Threats and localised attacks in opposition strongholds suppressed voter turnout.	Created fear, reducing participation among women, youth, and first-time voters.

Overall, the results indicate that Nigeria's 2023 presidential election reflected a hybrid campaign model, blending traditional elite-based strategies with emergent digital populism. While the APC and PDP exemplified continuity through hierarchical, patronage-based politics, the LP introduced participatory and issue-oriented digital activism. However, the endurance of vote buying, identity politics, and coercive mobilisation reveals that structural transformation of Nigeria's political culture remains incomplete.

The paradox of high political awareness, yet low voter turnout reflects civic fatigue and institutional mistrust, reinforcing theories that link weak governance legitimacy to democratic stagnation (Diamond, 2019). The election thus represents both a continuity of old patterns and a symbolic rupture introduced by the digitally empowered electorate. To achieve deeper democratic consolidation, future campaigns must transcend identity-based appeals and invest in issue-driven, transparent, and participatory political communication.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The 2023 elections revealed both progress and persistent contradictions in Nigeria's democratic evolution. While innovations such as the BVAS and IReV portals promised greater transparency, their inconsistent application

eroded confidence in the process. Political parties continued to rely heavily on identity-based mobilisation and patronage networks, reflecting the enduring dominance of transactional politics over issue-driven engagement. Nevertheless, the emergence of the Labour Party (LP) demonstrated that an alternative, citizen-centred model is possible, one that prioritises competence, accountability, and youth participation. To consolidate these gains and address identified gaps, more targeted and actionable reforms are required.

1. Political parties should move decisively away from ethnic and religious mobilisation towards issue-driven campaigns. This entails the development of clear, data-backed manifestos addressing unemployment, security, healthcare, and education. Parties must view voters as stakeholders whose needs should shape policy priorities rather than as resources for exploitation.
2. Rather than general calls for digital literacy, parties and electoral stakeholders should establish structured digital education programmes. These should include social media training for party communicators, collaboration with tech companies to detect misinformation, and public fact-checking

initiatives to counter hate speech and electoral disinformation.

3. To avoid the internal crises that weakened the PDP and other parties, leadership selection processes must become transparent and participatory. Parties should implement internal accountability frameworks, conduct periodic performance audits, and enforce sanctions for impunity and imposition of candidates.
4. INEC must prioritise the consistent deployment, maintenance, and auditing of electoral technologies such as BVAS and IReV. Beyond hardware, staff training, data security, and public demonstrations of these systems should be institutionalised to build confidence and reduce suspicion.
5. A comprehensive review of campaign financing laws is essential to curb vote-buying and political clientelism. INEC, in partnership with the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), should strengthen enforcement mechanisms for expenditure limits and mandate transparent disclosure of campaign funding sources.
6. Voter education should extend beyond pre-election sensitisation to continuous civic engagement. Civil society organisations (CSOs) and the National Orientation Agency (NOA) should collaborate to address political apathy by linking participation to citizens' daily socioeconomic realities.
7. INEC should institutionalise a joint task force with security agencies to prevent voter intimidation and violence. The framework should include early-warning systems, rapid-response mechanisms, and community-based peacebuilding initiatives.
8. Civil society and media organisations should design age-specific programmes that equip citizens, particularly young voters, with skills to discern misinformation and propaganda. Partnerships with universities, influencers, and media houses could amplify credible narratives during electoral cycles.
9. Policymakers and civil society actors should invest in civic technology platforms

that promote transparency and citizen oversight. Tools such as crowd-sourced election monitoring apps and digital whistle-blower portals should be mainstreamed to enhance accountability at all electoral stages.

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