



## Issues in Political Campaigns during Nigeria's 2023 Presidential Election

Kelvin INOBEMHE <sup>1</sup>

Wisdom Iheanyichukwu OKEZIE <sup>2</sup>

Nick-Tansi Saint UDEH <sup>3</sup>

Suleiman GARBA <sup>4</sup>

Oluwatobi Enitan MODEYIN <sup>5</sup>

Momoh USMAN <sup>6</sup>

<sup>1, 5, 6</sup> Department of Mass Communication, Glorious Vision University, Ogwa, Nigeria

<sup>1</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5748-0066> <sup>5</sup> <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4187-0500>

<sup>2</sup> Department of Mass Communication, University of Cross River State, Calabar, Nigeria

<sup>3, 4</sup> Department of Mass Communication, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria

<sup>3</sup><https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0054-7228> <sup>4</sup><https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7937-2816>

### Abstract

This conceptual study is a focus on the issues that were given prominence during the campaigns run-up to the 2023 presidential election conducted in Nigeria. This study was mainly conducted to examine critical issues that shaped political campaigns during the period under review. The researchers relied on existing knowledge and studies coupled with personal observation to discuss the issues. The study particularly showed that campaign issues during the issues were mainly about the ethnicity and religious orientations of candidates that vied for the presidential tickets under various political parties. Furthermore, policy issues, power rotation arrangements (written and unwritten) and security matters were also given attention in the campaigns. These issues generated fierce debates among the candidates with noticeable parallels in their stance on each of the items of discourse. Nevertheless, some of the positions depict serious approach to the matters. Some others were just based on insinuations and it was across various political parties that participated in the elections. Consequently, the researchers relied on the findings and concluded that issues on the socio-economic and political growth and development of Nigeria featured prominently during the electioneering campaigns in the run up to the country's 2023 presidential election and recommended that issues are treated with seriousness and mundane others left out of the campaigns

*Keywords: Campaigns, Election, Policy, Politics, Reforms, Voters*

### Introduction

Political communication plays a very important part in determining the outcome of a presidential election process, as it can influence the perception of the people, and in turn, the voting outcome. Political campaigns could be described as a series of events through which messages are passed by political parties, their candidates and allied groups, with the goal of influencing the people to vote in the favour at the polls. It is carefully planned and organised, with parties either telling the people what they can do to better their lives, or why they should not vote for other contenders. In any case, it is the act in which a political party attempts to market its ideas to the voting public.

In a thriving democracy, it is important that political parties and their candidates present sufficient information about their policies, programmes and agenda, to the electorates, to give voters ample information as they throng to the polls. To do this, campaigns come in handy as veritable tools. During campaigns, political parties and their candidates strengthen their relationship with the people, and if properly planned, it will emerge stronger. This implies that there could be positive outcomes from such efforts. Accordingly, campaign strategies have been identified as political factors that influence voting decisions among voters (Kulachai et al., 2025). Through carefully-crafted messages in form of campaigns, political parties and candidates can influence the attitudes and perceptions of voters towards influencing their decisions.

The 2023 presidential elections presented another opportunity for political candidates and parties to present to the voting public of Nigeria what they have planned if given the opportunity to preside over the affairs of the country. Amidst rising insecurity, high cost of living, a dwindling economy and difficulties experienced by Nigerians as a result of the controversial CBN Naira redesign policy, the campaigns brought a mix of propaganda, rhetoric and even misinformation. For the first time in a while, with over 93 million registered voters, of which nearly 40% were youths below 35 (INEC, as cited in Suleiman, 2023), citizens came out in their numbers to effect what they believed to be a change at the presidential level.

What makes the 2023 general elections so special is the crop of politicians who participated in the elections and their large support base across the country, especially among certain groups and locations that determine, to a large extent, who emerges victorious. Political campaigns are central to democratic processes, serving as platforms for political parties and candidates to communicate their visions, persuade voters, and mobilise support. However, the campaigns during the 2023 presidential elections were riddled with multifaceted challenges and issues that undermined its credibility, fairness, and effectiveness. Some other issues were just about the need to win election using all forms of subtle means in the guise of campaigns. This study analysed those issued with a view to serving as a resource for corrections to be implemented as the nation gears up for another round of elections in the coming year.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Political campaigns are important in any democratic process, especially when electorates hit the polls to elect their leaders. Political campaigns present candidates and opportunity to woo prospective voters to their side. Issues such as media bias, ethnic and religious propaganda, misinformation on social media and the candidates' failure to speak to the issues are among problems facing campaigns in Nigeria's electoral system. These problems affect, to a large extent, what the electorates focus on, and in turn, culminates in reduced quality participation in the electoral process.

Though the 2023 general elections have been seen as being one of the country's most contested polls, previous studies into the conduct of the elections, especially at the presidential level have not given the much-needed attention to the issues that surrounded the campaigns preceding the elections. This study therefore seeks to critically look at the issues that characterised political campaigns during Nigeria's 2023 presidential elections and their implications for political communication and democratic development in Nigeria. It is based on participant observation and analysis of secondary data.

### **Conceptual Review and Literature**

#### **The 2023 Presidential Elections: Intrigues and Dynamics**

After decades of military incursion and unstable governance process, Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999, and has conducted several elections since that time. The 2023 general election was the seventh since the 1999 return to democratic governance. This time around, there were several issues in contention including the independence and integrity of the electoral umpire – which is the Independent National Electoral Commission. Therefore, in the quest to demonstrate transparency in its processes, the umpire adopted the use of voter accreditation system christened "Bimodal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) and another for online, real-time result monitoring known as the "INEC Results Viewing (I-REV) portal" (Ojukwu et al, 2023). The elections have been adjudged to be of the most contested polls in the history of the country with the APC, PDP, LP and NNPP as leading parties.

Out of the 18 candidates that participated, the leading 4 hail from the 3 dominant ethnic groups in the country; Igbo, Hausa/Fulani, and Yoruba. From the Hausa/Fulani part was the candidate of the People's Democratic Party and former Vice President; Atiku Abubakar, and for the New Nigeria People's Party was a former Governor of one of Nigeria most populated states – Kano State; Rabiu Kwankwaso. On the other hand was the candidate of the All Progressives Congress, and a former Governor of Nigeria's richest state – Lagos State, Bola Tinubu, who comes

from the Yoruba tribe. And lastly, Peter Obi, a former governor of Anambra State and candidate of the Labour Party.

Upon the 1999 return to democracy, power has always been rotated between the North and the South, though not officially in the constitution. As a result of this, many felt the outgoing President Buhari who comes from the North would have to be succeeded by someone from the South. Within the South exists the South-East, South-South and South-West. Some groups believe the opportunity should be micro zoned to the South-East, who has not had a shot at the presidency since 1999, and who have the lowest number of states in their region. Religion also plays a role in the presidential polls, in such a way that the Presidential and Vice presidential candidates do not come from the same religion.

Despite this, the candidate of the APC, Bola Tinubu who is a Muslim from the Yoruba part of the country, decided to pick a former Governor of Borno State, and a Muslim as well, as his running mate. This action did not go down well with some groups who faulted the motive behind this decision. During the primaries, Tinubu of the APC defeated 24 other aspirants to clinch the party's ticket. Atiku of the PDP won 16 other aspirants. However, that of Obi and Kwankwaso of the LP and NNPP respectively was seamless. Following their failures to emerge flag bearers in the PDP, they both left to seek their political fortunes in other parties (Amaza, 2023).

### **Significance of Political Campaigns in the Electoral Process**

By means of political campaigns, voters receive adequate information to help them in assessing candidates for an election. Political parties and their candidates present their messages to the electorates by using written materials, holding public rallies, using radio jingles and television commercials. Additionally, campaigns shape what the electorates see as being important. By means of agenda-setting and framing, campaigns focus on certain issues and citizens tend to turn their attention to those areas, especially with repeated emphasis. What candidates do is to bring to the fore, issues that they know showcase their strengths and downplay on those areas where their opponents can capitalise on. When politicians are this selective, it affects how the public understands the broader issues, but it also shows how powerful campaigns can be in shaping narratives and public opinion (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016).

In candidates' identity formation and image construction, political campaigns also play a crucial. In many cases, voters base their decisions more on perceptions of a candidate's personality, competence, and trustworthiness than on detailed policy proposals. Campaigns, therefore, invest significant resources in crafting and managing candidate personas. This phenomenon is especially salient in presidential systems, where the personal appeal of individual candidates can outweigh party affiliation. In this context, political branding and emotional appeals become central to campaign strategy, a trend that is amplified by the visual and affective nature of social media platforms (Enli, 2024).

Additionally, campaigns are instrumental in mobilising voters and increasing political participation. By engaging citizens through door-to-door canvassing, phone banking, online outreach, and public events, campaigns help to reduce the information and participation gaps that often characterise democratic elections. In emerging democracies or contexts with low voter turnout, campaign activities can generate enthusiasm, increase political interest, and ultimately boost participation rates.

The credibility of elections can be seen from how a political campaign is carried out. If a campaign is peaceful, people tend to think the elections itself would be peaceful, and the process more credible. On the other hand, when campaigns are violent, it can reduce the confidence of the people in the entire political process. When international election observers want to evaluate the freeness and fairness of elections, they pay a close look at how the campaigns were conducted (International IDEA, 2023; Nwankwo & Dode, 2024).

To conclude, no electoral process can be deemed whole and complete without political campaigns, as they offer a huge platform for voters to be informed, as well as candidates to communicate their proposed policies and programmes to the people. With evolving democracies, especially in developing countries like Nigeria, it is important for campaigns to be carried out in such a way that they enhance the credibility of the polls, and as well positively contribute to the political climate.

### **Issues in Electoral Campaign in Nigeria**

It is well known that political elites use ambiguous rhetoric, which means that throughout the campaign, they employ both polarising and reconciling frameworks (Themnér & Sjöstedt, 2020). However, it is reasonable to reason along the line that politically exposed individuals may need to be circumspect when applying polarising frames because Nigerian laws prohibit the use of tribal, religious and ethnic ties as means to mobilise political support. In order to guarantee that the bulk of the campaign is devoid of divisive speech, the "Electoral Act 2022" may also result in compensation with the aid of reconciliation frames. Candidates that advocate for peace while

also criticising opponents on the basis of their ethnicity are likewise exhibiting the dualism of employing both frameworks. Since using both frames at the same time may allow politicians to employ their discourse more covertly, the message will be categorised as polarising. It is important to stress that the analysis is not normative and that not all divisive talk is harmful or untrue – in fact, it may even be true in some cases. Offering an analytical framework to comprehend the use of polarisation and reconciliation frames in political campaigns is the main goal here.

A crucial consideration when examining the use of polarising and/or reconciling frameworks is the timing and location of the candidates' discourse. Because of the interactions between the campaigns, the candidates have an impact on one another and add to the political conversation as a whole. Themnér and Sjöstedt (2020) explained that tribal, ethnic and religious links are often existing networks that "Big Men" or political leaders exploit in order to secure political support. This is an indication that rhetoric utilised in the political sphere may differ depending on the ethnicity and religious affiliation of the candidates. For example, rhetoric employed in areas where the candidate's ethnic group is majority may differ from the speeches given in areas where the ethnic group of the candidate is minority. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend the context in which the reconciliation and polarisation statement is utilised in order to comprehend the political discourse surrounding the election as a whole. Given that the candidates are more likely to "get away" with using contentious language in their home state than in the opposition's home state, the contextual limitations may make this worse.

Discussions over the race and religion of candidates, as well as the region of the country that should produce the president have dominated discussions in previous elections in Nigeria (Adamo, 2018; Benaiah, 2024; Isiaq et al., 2018; Ojo, 2020). This also applies to the election of 2023 (Eze & Karibi-Botoye, 2024; Muhammad, 2023; Rufai et al., 2024). Discussions regarding the necessity of moving power to the South following eight years of Northerner President Buhari had preceded it (Babalola, 2024). Subsequently, an issue worthy of note was the June 2021 decision by the governors of 17 states from three political parties, which demanded that regardless of the political party of affiliation that their region provides the next president. This is an indication there were series of issues and concerns that precipitated the election.

By and large and after political intrigues, the power-shift idea was adhered to by the APC (Umoru et al., 2022). To carry its flag, they chose a Muslim from the South named Bola Ahmed Tinubu. This approach was also adhered to by the Labour Party when Peter Obi, a native of the South-East portion of the country, emerged as its leader. However, Atiku and Kwankwaso both from states in the North of Nigeria defined the arrangement as they ran on the platforms of the PDP and NNPP respectively. The nomination of Atiku brought about internal party crisis in the PDP as notable members were not pleased by his emergence as the party flag bearer. Among other things, they based their displeasure on the grounds that the party nominee for the president cannot possibly be from same region of that of the party Chairman. Many Nigerians have begun to doubt the idea of choosing a Muslim from the north of Fulani origin to follow a Fulani Muslim president following the announcement of Atiku as the party nominee.

On another note, controversies trailed the selection of a former governor of Borno, Kashim Shettima as running mate of Tinubu owing to the religious composition of the two men – both are Muslims. It was the case because of the unwritten rule that a joint ticket must consider the religious and regional affiliations of candidates to ensure a balance. In essence, this unwritten pact requires that Tinubu being a Muslim from South of Nigeria should have selected a Northern Christian as running mate. Christians, who account for almost half of the population, have taken offence at the Muslim decision, particularly those who live outside of the South-West. It was perceived as grand plot to Islamise Nigeria and the singular act deepened voting along religious lines (Owonikoko, 2025). Interestingly, it caused some prominent northern Christians in the APC to openly stop supporting their party.

There has not been an Igbo president since the civil war ended in 1970, ending the erstwhile Eastern region's aspirations for secession. On account of this and other issues, the ethnic community usually feels a sense of exclusion from the national politics, especially in comparison to its size. The Independent Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) are currently leading a resurgence of secessionist agitations as a result of this sentiment. The emergence of Peter Obi, former governor of Anambra State; a core Igbo state had offered a glimmer of hope. Though there are other contenders of Igbo ethnic group, none matched the following and support for Obi due to his popularity among the young and old of South of Nigeria. Obi's popularity transcends the region, uniting substantial segments of the North-Central geopolitical zone considered to be religiously and ethnically varied than other sections of the Northern region, as well as people in the South-South and South-East zones of the country (Prempeh & Ambibola, 2023).

Aside the religious and ethnic issues of concern during the campaigns, there were other more serious aspects of national growth and development. For example, policy-related discourse in form of state-wide reforms in respect of the economy, security and governance were issues of prominence. Propositions of reforms of these

areas were also significant point of discourse during the campaigns. Though candidates differed on the devolution of power to the subnational government, there were promises on restructuring of the country in a way that reflects inherent complexities. The PDP and APC took policy stances that favour restructuring of the security architecture and proffering solutions to ensure improved security through effective policing but disagreed on how much of the power is necessary for the sub-nationals. The candidate of the NNPP, a former defence minister of Nigeria also demonstrated a similar committed to security through the pledge to encourage massive recruitment into the security apparatus especially the military and police.

Aside the APC that made a bold pledge on seeing a 10 percent annual GDP growth, there was no glaring record of any other party with precise economic growth target. A proposition and pledge of a free marketing economic approach was made by the PDP in which the government if elected would end the monopoly of government in respect of critical sectors of the economy including power transmission, rail transportation and the refining of crude oil. Furthermore, the party also promised to encourage further independence and autonomy of Nigeria's apex bank, the Central Bank of Nigeria for economic growth and overall development of the country. Political parties also promised to reform the monetary policies, boost industrialisation, and revitalise the agricultural sector of the Nigeria's economy. Implementing a balanced or a zero-based budget with no surplus or deficit and boosting economic output are two of the Labour Party's main economic policies, whereas the NNPP seeks to lessen dependency on oil earnings and change the nation's tax structure.

In reaction to the clamour and demand for greater level of power devolution and decentralisation, all parties – aside from the NNPP have pledged to amend the nation's constitution and give subnational entities further authority. All Nigerians must participate in a vigorous discussion on decentralisation of power, according to the NNPP's pledge. It is fascinating to observe that these concepts are not just "not new" but they also share similarities with regard to the important concerns facing the nation right now. For decades, the difficulties of economic reforms to diversify away from oil, improve infrastructure, restructure the governance system, and reform the security sector have remained.

There are several ways in which communication and religious affiliation interact during elections. Individual decision-making is influenced by intrapersonal communication, and voters take their religious values and beliefs into account. Persuasion and information sharing within social networks are made possible via interpersonal contact. Religious communities use group communication to mobilise voters based on shared religious affiliations and to create a feeling of shared identity. Conversely, political themes are amplified by mass media, which also has the power to either strengthen or weaken preexisting religious ties, ultimately influencing election results.

### **Review of Related Studies**

In recent time and owing to the introduction of social and digital media into the election space of Nigeria, scholarly focus has shifted to studies that border of political communication and the ways voters are mobilised to participate in the electoral process. Similar attention has also been given to issues in campaigns. In a study by Fasakin (2023), the researcher explored some of the issues that characterised the elections with a focus on the legitimacy question that hung on the Tinubu's administration. The study showed that some of the issues bordered on the character of the candidate of the APC – Bola Ahmed Tinubu. The researcher noted that the issues around the president's character from when he was elected as a senator in the 1990s to how unsuccessful attempts were made by him to prevent his successor from seeking re-election as governor of Lagos among many other issues. The study concluded that regardless of being declared the winner of the 2023 election, Tinubu and his administration faced legitimacy issues.

Another study was conducted by Agbim et al (2023) with primary focus on the use of Twitter by the Obidient movement during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. Findings of the survey showed that issues that influenced the movement to campaign vigorously bordered on political, social and economic factors in the country. Furthermore, the study also demonstrated that the issue of perceived lack of transparency and political accountability was the major one that led to the emergence of the group. It implies that issues fundamental to the survival of Nigeria were in the front burner during the campaigns as younger voters attempted to lead a campaign they christened "the peoples movement." The study is similar to the current one in respect of the focus on Nigeria's 2023 presidential election.

Eze and Karibi-Botoye (2024) conducted a study with focus on ethnicity and religion in consideration of Nigeria's 2023 election. The study showed that the two factors of religion and ethnicity were major considerations during the election and evidence abound including the voting pattern and number of votes candidates received in the election. This is also closely related to the findings of a study conducted by Muhammad (2023) also demonstrated ethnicity and religion have become inseparable with elections in Nigeria – a situation that played out in the country's 2023 presidential election. On their part, Gabriel and Anietie (2024) evaluated the 2023

general elections and revealed that religious and ethnicity factors play significant roles in the voting patterns of Nigerians during the election. Related studies also showed the influence of ethnicity and politics during the polls (Kertyo & Ityonzughul, 2024; Salisu et al., 2025).

#### Method

This study is a conceptual study and relied on secondary data sources and researchers' personal experiences. Consequently, the researchers relied on articles in journals, and book chapters in addition to the use of official government reports, newspapers, magazines and online sources. From the perspective of the personal experience, the researchers relied on existing knowledge about the use of campaigns and issues that pertains thereto in the mobilisation of the electorate to take part in the electoral process in Nigeria across different election periods in the country. Particular focus was on such issues within the context of the 2023 presidential elections.

#### Discussion- Conclusions

The rationale behind this study is to advance a discourse of the numerous issues that characterised the political campaigns in the electioneering campaigns during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. Based on the conceptual review, opinion review and review of empirical studies above, it is glaring that issues that characterised the political campaigns ranged from religious consideration, power shift and policy discourse. Religious discourses were particularly loud and obvious (Chigbu et al., 2024; Oluwaleye & Aladegbola, 2024; Salahu, 2023; Salaudeen & Isah, 2024). These issues were debated across political lines particularly among the leading candidates of the major political parties that resulted in what was popularly known as "the three horse race." The candidates of the All Progressives Congress (APC), the Labour Party (LP) the New Nigerian Peoples Party (NNPP) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) participated in these debates across platforms – social media, traditional media and offline campaigns in rallies, conferences and public engagements.

The religious issues that characterised the political campaigns stemmed from the age-long religious divide of the country along Christianity and Islam. Whereas the North of the country has a predominant Muslim population, same is not the case in the South where a good number of citizens are Christians. However, the religious sensitivity of the country reflects on its electoral composition and choices (Igbinerediauwa & Omigie, 2023; Moshood & Orunbon, 2023; Opuowei, 2024). Adherents of the two major religious orientations in the country acknowledged the need for balance. However, in the 2023 presidential election, the ruling party APC hierarchy decided on the religions of candidates for presidential and vice presidential positions. Eventually, the party chose a Muslim from the South West and another Muslim from the North East as his running mate. Interestingly, other major parties such as the LP, NNPP and PDP did not disregard the religion factor while choosing their flag bearers as they ensured that it was either Muslim/Christian or the reverse. This became a cause for concern and other candidates talked about the matter during campaigns. Hence, religious became an issue of concern.

Another issue of consideration that was largely debated during the election is that of a power shift (Abua et al., 2025). It is common knowledge that major political parties have a zoning arrangement that rotates power between the North and South of Nigeria. In essence, after eight years of being in the saddle by either side of the divide, power must return to the other. At least, this has been the case since the return to democratic rule on May 29, 1999. After eight years of Olusegun Obasanjo of the PDP, a man from the South of Nigeria, the ticket was zoned to the North and former President Umar Musa Yar'Adua became the party's flag bearer and was declared as winner of the election conducted in 2007. After his demise, Goodluck Jonathan became president and was in charge for two years in addition to the four-year tenure from 2009 to 2015. The 2015 election provided results that saw power shifting to the North and so Muhammadu Buhari was president for eight years – between 2015 and 2023. Therefore, issues relating to power shift to the South were a great deal during the electioneering campaigns of the 2023 presidential elections.

Issues on governance, economic reforms, electoral reforms, security and international relations also formed the core of the discourse of the period of campaigns during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. The candidates of the different political parties differed to agree that there were fundamental problems with governance in Nigeria with the pledge to do things in unique ways if elected. Several parallels were also recorded in respect of the different stances of the candidates on economic reforms. The fuel subsidy was labelled a serious economic challenge that needed to be fixed at all cost. On electoral reforms, candidates also acknowledged the need for continuous reforms to make citizens have trust in the electoral process of the country. On security, candidates disagreed on how much power to grant subnational governments to manage security institutions. Nonetheless, the APC and PDP both pledge to restructure the security sector and bolster policing. The NNPP, whose candidate is a former defence minister made similar pledge and proffered solution to recruit young persons into the security services.

On account of the discourse above, the researchers concludes that different issues of significance to the growth and development of Nigeria featured as prominent matters of discourse during the electioneering campaigns in the run up to the country's 2023 presidential election. Notable among these issues were those that border on the religious and ethnic affiliation of candidates of the major political parties like the APC, LP, NNPP and the PDP. Additionally, the campaigns were also about ethnicity, respect for power rotation arrangement and policy stance.

### Recommendations

Based on the discourse and the conclusion, the researchers offered the following recommendations that:

1. Political stakeholders must work out a plan that considers the political culture that gives preference to issues of importance during campaigns while other parochial sentiments are not given the attention. This implies that sentiments such as religious and ethnicity of candidates must give way for more serious issues that border on growth and development of Nigeria.
2. Political parties must also consider the need to honour agreements whether written or unwritten. That way, cohesion among the various persons and groups within the party structure may be actualised. This can also drive development in both short and long term leading to the overall peace and progress in Nigeria.

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