

Regional Dynamics in Nigerian Politics: Voting in the 2023 Presidential Elections

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Abstract

Amid the geo-political and religious divide, we examine the voting pattern and voter behaviour in Nigeria's 2023 Presidential election. We challenged established electoral theories, demonstrating that ethno-religious affiliations predominantly drive voter mobilisation by considering other factors like socioeconomic conditions and elite communication. We employed three multivariate quantitative techniques in our analysis. We considered the four leading candidates from the incumbent party, the main opposition, the third force and the spoiler candidate as we focused on the voting pattern in the six geo-political zones. Our result highlights how regional and religious identities shape voting patterns, overshadowing socioeconomic grievances. We find variations in voting patterns between the Muslim-majority North and the Christian-dominated South. Regions with higher voter turnout and higher poverty rates favour the incumbent party candidate and the main opposition candidate. Regions with higher unemployment rates were less inclined to support the incumbent party's candidate. Our findings on voter mobilisation in response to economic policies have direct implications not only for democracy but for public policy, particularly in areas related to economic stability. Overall, our analysis provides a multidimensional perspective on the electoral dynamics and informs targeted political strategies and understanding of voter behaviour.

Keywords: Electoral Strategy; Polarisation; Geopolitical Dynamics; Elite Messaging; Socioeconomic impact

1. Introduction

Since the return to constitutional democracy in 1999, Nigeria has marked six general elections, with the most recent presidential poll conducted on 25 February 2023 reflecting deep polarisation across regional and ethnic lines. This polarisation echoes the country's diverse culture, with identity and affiliations deeply embedded within the political structure. Although there is a constitutional commitment to religious diversity, the political reality often sees religion as a central player. The customary rotation of presidential power between the Muslim North and Christian South, an unwritten agreement embedded in some party constitutions, faced unprecedented challenges in the 2023 election cycle. Amidst the deteriorating economic conditions and worsening poverty rates, opposition parties leveraged these crises. The election period, set against a backdrop of economic decline and increased poverty, provided fertile ground for opposition strategies and created a unique opportunity to examine the link between economic conditions and electoral outcomes. The amended Electoral Act that set a nine-month campaign period offered a strategic window for political elites, thereby providing sufficient time for political messages to reach the electorate. While 18 candidates were on the ballot, this analysis is confined to the foremost four, given their pivotal influence on the election narrative and the distinct profiles of the six geo-political zones in the country. Thus, we aim to examine the link between socio-political identities and voter behaviour in Nigeria's diverse ethno-religious environment, focusing on the 2023 Presidential elections.

Extant literature posits that a confluence of socioeconomic, emotional, and political factors shapes voter behaviour. A strong academic consensus finds that local affiliations and perceptions of candidate proximity play a decisive role in electoral preferences. This inclination stems from the perception that local candidates are more likely to effectively represent their constituents' interests and concerns. Consequently, numerous studies have identified a robust correlation between regional identification and a preference for candidates from the same locale, indicating that this relationship significantly shapes voter behaviour and attitudes.

Researchers studying the impact of socioeconomic factors on voting behaviour have found the relationship to be significantly inverse. (Rosenstone, 1982) found that adverse economic conditions could depress voter turnout. The study of Azzollini (2021) specifically emphasised how unemployment rates can have differing effects at the micro and macro levels, potentially affecting electoral participation. (Lewis-Beck and Martini, 2020) noted that voters' perceptions of macroeconomic performance play a key role in their decisions, although partisanship can disrupt but not "completely corrupt" this link. Lyngé and Martínez I Coma (2022) provided a unique perspective by analysing 317

African presidential elections, observing that GDP per capita directly influences African voter turnout, with more voters likely to turn out during economic booms and stay home during economic busts.

Recent studies have highlighted the profound links between candidates' locations and election voting patterns. Guarnieri & da Silva (2022) demonstrated that voters often decide based on their information about a candidate, particularly from large areas where information is easily disseminated. Collignon & Sajuria (2018) found that strong regional or tribal identities significantly influence voting patterns, leading people to support candidates from their regions or groups. Herodowicz et al. (2021) further explored this by studying the spatial distribution and civic participation in elections, finding that economic factors have spatially polarised voting preferences. In a study conducted by Held (2023), the findings indicate a notable distinction in what drives support for the populist radical right within Dutch politics. The research shows that competence messages, which emphasise the abilities, qualifications, and effectiveness of a candidate or party, have a significant positive impact on support for the populist radical right. (Sigler, Neal and Martinus, 2023) showed how brokerage⁴ impedes the transmission of information and how this impacts both the actors and their networks. The study highlighted how coalitions send political messages and target mutual rivals through social media, illustrating the relationship between political messaging, psychological and social influences, and media platforms shaping public reactions to political matters. This highlights the importance of information dissemination in large areas and the role of regional or tribal identities in voting behaviour.

In contrast, socioeconomic policies concerning wealth distribution, social welfare, and economic regulations do not appear to sway voters in the same direction. Bäck *et al.* (2023) examine the impact of elite communication on voter behaviour, emphasising its significant influence on affective polarisation. Martins and Veiga (2014) found that conservative governments tend to receive fewer votes when voter turnout is high, unlike liberal governments. They opined that voter turnout increases in closely contested elections. In the political discourse and democratic process, the power of elite voices can potentially sway or manipulate public sentiment. In a review of a psychological analysis of the causes of voter turnout, Harder and Krosnick (2008) deduced that characteristics of a specific electoral contest can inspire or discourage turnout, making it difficult to pinpoint what can happen, especially if the election is closely contested.

Like many modern democracies, disenfranchisement remains a pressing in Nigeria. It is defined as the deprivation or suspension of the right to vote has been a subject of considerable academic scrutiny.

⁴ Brokerage is a process through which actors gain strategic advantage from being in-between two others ((Sigler, Neal and Martinus, 2023).

The scope has recently broadened to include economic status, criminal records, and immigration status as focal points of disenfranchisement (Manza & Uggen, 2006). A significant body of literature examines the deprivation of voting rights due to criminal records. Studies show that deliberate modification of electoral districts can marginalise certain groups, nullifying their electoral influence (McCarty et al., 2009). In analysing socioeconomic in urban economies, Tonkiss (2017) suggested that the concentration of economic power and resources in urban areas creates disparate social classes with varying interests and degrees of political influence. Those on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum may feel disenfranchised and may mobilise to vote for policies and representatives that promise to address these disparities. The economically privileged are likely to support the status quo that favours their continued prosperity. This stratification of urban economies not only influences the policy platforms of candidates but also shapes voter turnout and preferences, often resulting in a political echo of existing inequalities. Thus, the economic division and its attendant social stratification are important in understanding the political dynamics and voting patterns in different geo-political zones.

From the established body of research on various factors affecting voting behaviour globally, we deduce that there needs to be more comprehensive studies that integrate all these elements within the context of African elections, particularly with a focus on Nigeria since the Electoral Act was amended. The overarching implication is that there is a need for further research to fill this gap, specifically to understand the influence of socioeconomic conditions, elite communication, and media strategies on voter behaviour in Nigeria's electoral setting. Overall, we identified a gap in the understanding of how elite communication affects voting behaviour in Nigeria, especially considering religious and geo-political divides. It challenges the existing frameworks and provides a critical understanding of the socioeconomic issues influencing voter turnout.

2. The Political Setting

2.1. Key Political Parties: Incumbent, Opposition, Third-force and Spoiler

Nigeria had eighteen political parties going into the 2023 elections. The key reason stems from the constitution⁵ prohibiting independent candidates from promoting unity in a diverse country, a provision that also faces criticism for limiting electoral choice. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) was the ruling political party in Nigeria from 1999 to 2015 and is now the main opposition party. PDP lost the Presidential elections to the All Progressives Congress (APC) in 2015, now the incumbent party. The Labour Party (LP) is seen as the third force, and the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP) is viewed

⁵ Section 221 of the 1999 Constitution states: *No association, other than a political party, shall canvass for votes for any candidate at any election or contribute to the funds of any political party or the election expenses of any candidate at an election* (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

as the spoiler party as they only have a hold in one state. For the 2023 election, APC's candidate, Bola Tinubu, a Yoruba Muslim, chose a Muslim vice-presidential candidate, breaking recent norms and focusing his campaign on continuity. PDP's main opposition candidate, Atiku Abubakar, a Fulani Muslim from the North-East, chose a Christian vice-president from the South-South zone, campaigning on national unity. The third-force party, LP, fielded former Anambra state Governor Obi and the spoiler party, NNPP, fielded another former Governor, Kwankwaso. Both Obi and Kwankwaso decamped from the PDP. Obi, an Igbo Christian, focused his campaign on youth support, while Kwankwaso, a Muslim from the North, based his campaign on trust. An attempt to merge the third-force parties failed (Olokor, 2022; PremiumTimes, 2022), as the new Electoral Act⁶ required nine months before the general elections.

2.2. Financial Inducement and Contemporary Issues

Financial inducements can have a perceptible impact on voter behaviour, especially in areas where poverty is widespread. In the Nigerian political setting, the use of money to influence voter decisions, commonly known as 'vote buying', is a significant concern. Although many factors determine the outcome of elections, the promise of immediate financial gain can significantly influence voters struggling with economic difficulties. Conventional wisdom says that political campaigns require a significant amount of financing. However, wealth alone has not determined election outcomes. Some candidates, like Olusegun Obasanjo, Umaru Yar'Adua, and Goodluck Jonathan, succeeded without solely relying on wealth, reflecting the influence of incumbency at various levels. While Nigerian law previously capped Presidential campaign spending at N1 billion (\$2.4 million), it has been raised to N5 billion (\$12 million). Presidential candidates must also campaign across six geopolitical zones, covering 923,770 km², which adds to expenses. The new electoral law dictates campaigns should begin six months before election day, with three months following primary elections considered an unofficial campaign period.

Financing in Nigerian political campaigns plays a significant role, with estimates for winning a Presidential election reaching as high as \$2 billion (Irede, 2022). In the past two decades, campaigns have cost at least \$100 million, sometimes exceeding \$300 million. Major political parties sold Presidential forms at high prices, accessible only to the wealthy. The ruling party's form cost N100 million (\$235,000), while the opposition party, PDP, charged N40 million (\$95,000). Winning candidacy involves indirect costs, such as winning over party delegates from 774 local areas, with reports of thousands of dollars (Ramalan, 2022) given to delegates by both ruling and opposition party aspirants. The high costs have led some to challenge money's political influence through crowdfunding or joining other parties with lesser fees. Most notable was how Obi benefited from the social media movement

⁶ The 2022 Electoral Act As Amended. (*Nigerian Electoral Act 2022*, 2022)

to raise funds via social media platforms. Knowing that finance alone does not win elections, certain issues are used to neutralise money's influence using a brokerage process (Sigler, Neal and Martinus, 2023). For this to happen, the political elites dictate narratives, and recent elections have seen key issues such as fuel subsidy, Naira redesign, and insecurity take centre stage. While the outgoing President made progress in combating terrorism in the northern regions, he failed to defeat them entirely, leading to terrorism spreading to other areas, including his North-West region. The terrorists, often from the Fulani ethnic group, were called Fulani bandits. This label, however, carries political undertones, with failures of the outgoing President being attributed more to his ethnicity than to his character or political party. The communication of opinionated leaders was used to influence voters' opinions, thereby influencing the public policy process (Bäck *et al.*, 2023). The electoral successes of politicians such as Obasanjo, Yar'Adua, and Jonathan, who did not rely solely on financial power but also on the benefits of incumbency, show that money is not the only factor at play. However, the ability to finance widespread campaigns across Nigeria's geopolitical setting is a powerful factor in rallying support and enhancing a candidate's visibility. This factor points to the importance of electoral oversight to maintain the democratic process's credibility and prevent the influence of financial incentives on voter decision-making.

2.3. Voter Polarisation and Elite Communication

The key tools used for mobilising voters were religious institutions, which led to polarisation. Religious organisations actively registered voters, expecting to produce block votes. Candidates used identity politics, emphasising shared characteristics like religion or ethnicity, to align with political movements or candidates representing their group's interests. While effectively rallying support, this strategy perpetuated divisions and exclusionary politics, diverting attention from policy issues. During the 2023 election, the Muslim-Muslim ticket of APC's Bola Tinubu polarised northern voters, and audio clips revealed candidates asking religious leaders to mobilise support. For instance, Obi had to deny that he called the election "a religious war" (Sahara Reporters, 2023) when audio was leaked about his discussion with a pastor asking him to mobilise his followers to vote for him as the only Christian candidate. Similarly, when Abubakar deleted a tweet regarding the extrajudicial killing of a Christian lady who was accused of blasphemy by her Muslim colleagues, the action forced him to make a statement on why he deleted the tweet (Edeme, 2022), but the initial response was used against him to misrepresent his views, given he had a huge following from the Christian communities across the country. Overall, clusters from both religions actively campaigned, and sensitive statements were used against candidates in areas where they were unpopular.

The emergence of the G-5, a group of five serving Governors with diverse interests, further emphasised regional, ethnic, and religious lines. This group emerged after the leader, Nyesom Wike, lost the Presidential primaries to Atiku Abubakar. He had the hope of merging as the Vice-Presidential candidate following a panel nomination by the national working committee and the Board of Trustees. However, Abubakar named his counterpart Ifeanyi Okowa, the governor of Delta State from the South-South region, as his running mate (Akpan, 2022). Wike also called for the resignation of the PDP Chairman, who is a northerner, to balance the power between the Presidential candidate and the party leadership. His requests were not implemented during the campaign. As a result, internal dissent by Wike and his group of governors within the opposition PDP party erupted, insisting the presidential ticket should have gone to the South after President Buhari's Northern tenure.

Endorsements from influential G-5 Governors such as Benue State's Ortom and Rivers State's Wike played decisive roles in polarising the electorate, influenced by ethno-religious considerations. Endorsements from Governors like Oyo State's Makinde, due to ethnic solidarity, swayed voters in regions fiercely contested between PDP and APC. Governors from the South-East exercised caution in support, recognising LP candidate Obi's influence in their regions, resulting in his victory where PDP traditionally had support. The internal challenges and defections among PDP's G-5 Governors seriously eroded the party's unity and traditional support base, delivering a fatal blow to PDP's chances and boosting APC's prospects in the 2023 election. Strong ethno-religious appeals, campaign rhetoric, and alignment and realignment of political figures significantly shaped the electoral outcome. Riera and Madariaga's (2023) argument about the influence, identity-based cues, issue frames, and cognitive confirmation bias on public reaction to political issues provides a critical lens to understand the emergence of the G-5 in Nigeria. The G-5, a group of five serving Governors with diverse interests, epitomises the regional, ethnic, and religious lines in Nigerian politics. These governors have capitalised on the existing social and cultural cleavages to emphasise their distinct identities and interests.

The formation of the G-5 highlights how political identities are not static but shaped by the environment and circumstances in which they occur. The governors used identity-based cues, such as religion, ethnicity, and region, to resonate with specific voter groups, aligning their political messages with those groups' perceived values and beliefs (Igbinador, 2023). Issue framing also played a role in the emergence of the G-5. By positioning themselves in opposition to or in alignment with various political decisions and policy stances, they framed their political identity and objectives in a way that would resonate with their target audience. Lastly, cognitive confirmation bias, where individuals are more likely to accept information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes, helps explain

why the G-5's emphasis on regional, ethnic, and religious lines could be so effective in mobilising support. They could entrench divisions and rally support further by tapping into existing biases. The emergence of the G-5 reveals the non-negotiable existing regional identities and cognitive processes that Riera and Madariaga (2023) describe. The G-5's strategy emphasised identity-based cues and framed issues that exploited existing biases, demonstrating how politics is often shaped by deeply ingrained social and cultural factors rather than objective policy analysis alone.

3. Methodological Approach

We present a methodologically robust examination of Nigeria's 2023 Presidential election, using multivariate quantitative techniques to analyse voting patterns across the country's six geopolitical zones. This rigorous approach is essential for clarifying the variety of factors influencing voter decisions, crucial for comprehending the connections between social welfare, sustainable democracy and development. Our regional comparisons shed light on the different socioeconomic conditions affecting electoral outcomes, which is of great value in sustainable development research and must account for geographic disparities in resource allocation, economic prospects, and societal well-being. Furthermore, by integrating socioeconomic indicators such as poverty and unemployment rates, the research establishes a tangible connection between voters' economic conditions and their political preferences. This reflects the essence of sustainable development, which aims to harmonise social equity and economic development. We consider voter turnout as the most suitable variable because our study relates to understanding the factors that influence the rate at which eligible voters participate in elections. Other factors include the unemployment rate, MPI, the share of registered voters, population share and the percentage share of religion by population across the geo-political regions. Economic conditions, including unemployment rates, can significantly impact voter turnout (Rosenstone, 1982). The data analysis techniques we employed in this study are descriptive analysis for individual variables and multivariate quantitative analysis with cluster analysis, logistic regression and factor analysis.

3.1. Cluster Analysis

Cluster analysis will help us identify distinct groups and clusters of states based on similarities in voter turnout and the associated characteristics. Each cluster consists of states with similar voting patterns and demographic characteristics. Cluster analysis was utilised to categorise states into distinct clusters based on key socioeconomic and demographic indicators, such as unemployment, MPI, and religious composition, which are thought to influence voting behaviour. The process started with data selection and preprocessing, where states were filtered according to specific regional classifications and the data was standardised for consistency. The critical step of feature selection involved choosing relevant variables, with a focus on unemployment, MPI, and religious demographics. Standardisation of these

features was essential to ensure equal contribution to the clustering process. The optimal number of clusters, set at six based on the regional classifications provided, was determined. The K-Means clustering algorithm was then applied, iteratively assigning states to the nearest cluster mean until stable. Post-clustering analysis categorised each state into one of the six clusters, allowing for an understanding of regional commonalities and differences. The final step was interpreting these clusters, assessing what they represented in terms of the original features and their potential implications for regional voter behaviour and socioeconomic demographics.

3.2. Logistic Regression

Logistic regression will predict whether a region has above or below median voter turnout. The method provides us with odds ratios for each predictor, which will be interpreted in terms of voter behaviour. Logistic regression was employed to explore the relationship between voter turnout and various socioeconomic and demographic variables. The process began with data preparation, where voter turnout was dichotomised into high or low categories based on the median value. Key independent variables such as unemployment rate, MPI, and religious demographics were selected for the model. The logistic regression model was then constructed and trained to predict the probability of high voter turnout using these selected features. The model's performance was evaluated using a confusion matrix and metrics like accuracy, precision, and recall, providing insights into its predictive capability. Finally, the results were interpreted to understand the influence of different factors on voter turnout, with the logistic regression coefficients indicating the impact of each variable on the likelihood of higher voter turnout, keeping other variables constant. This analysis served as a significant tool for understanding the dynamics of voter behaviour across various regions.

3.3. Factor Analysis

In conducting the factor analysis, we will first standardise the dataset to ensure uniform scale and variance across all variables, as factor analysis is sensitive to the variances of the variables. This process involves transforming the data such that each variable has a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. We will then apply Factor Analysis to the standardised data, a statistical technique designed to uncover latent factors that explain observed correlations among variables. The number of factors to be extracted will be determined based on the Kaiser criterion (eigenvalues greater than 1) or parallel analysis, ensuring we retain only those factors that contribute significantly to explaining the variance in the data. Factor loadings, representing the correlation coefficients between the variables and the factors, will be computed to interpret the factors. These loadings will help in identifying which variables are most strongly associated with each factor, thereby revealing underlying dimensions within the data. Rotations (such as Varimax rotation) may be used to achieve a more interpretable factor structure. The final step involves interpreting these factors and understanding them as

composite variables that capture the essence of the correlations among multiple original variables, thereby providing insights into the underlying structure of the dataset.

3.4. Data

We relied on publicly available data from various sources. The demographic data was retrieved from the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and the World Population Prospects. The Labour Force Statistics (LFS) data 2020Q4 on the NBS website for data on Nigeria's unemployment rate. The values were estimated by dividing the employed people by the labour force figure. The data was extracted by taking those out of the labour force. We used the published reports from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) for the registered voters for 2023. The data for religion across subnational governments in Nigeria was adopted from the empirical estimates of Ostien (2012), as religion is not recorded in the country's official population census. The poverty data uses the multidimensional poverty index (MPI) from the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (2022). The MPI measures poverty in developing countries by complementing the traditional monetary poverty measures (of \$1.90 per day) and simultaneously capturing the acute deprivations in health, education, and living standards that a person faces. The MPI is calculated by multiplying the incidence and average intensity of poverty. The multidimensionally poor share of the population is multiplied by the average proportion of dimensions in which poor people are deprived (Alkire *et al.*, 2022). The MPI reflects the share of people in poverty and the degree to which they are deprived of nutrition, schooling, cooking fuels, sanitation, drinking water, electricity, housing, and basic household assets like radio, computer, telephone, motorbike, etc. Given we are dealing with elections, we use the classification of the National Bureau of Statistics (2022) to consider those over the age of eighteen (MPI 18+) in our analysis.

4. Results

Even though we use data from the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) in this study, our focus is on the six geo-political zones, each representing diverse ethnic, religious, and political dynamics. Table 1 shows the classification of the geo-political zones in Nigeria and the voter turnout during the 2023 Presidential elections.

Geo-political Zone	Number of States	States	Percentage Turnout
North-Central	7	Benue, FCT Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau	29.4%
North-East	6	Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, Yobe	28.8%
North-West	7	Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Zamfara	31.7%
South-East	5	Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo	21.7%
South-South	6	Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo Rivers	21.4%
South-West	6	Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun Oyo	27.9%

Table 1: Classification of States in Nigeria and Geo-Political Zones

The northern region has the highest voter turnout, more than the southern region. However, there is a distinction between the South-West and the other geo-political regions, which is closer to the figures in the north. The North-East zone is characterised by significant ethnic diversity, including Kanuri and Fulani groups, and is predominantly Muslim. Politically, it has been a focal point for insurgency and conflict, notably involving the Boko Haram group, which has impacted its stability and development. However, this feature contributes to the influences on regional governance and national politics. The North-Central, often referred to as the Middle Belt, is characterised by remarkable ethnic and religious diversity, including numerous minority groups alongside larger Hausa, Fulani, and Yoruba populations, with Christianity, Islam, and traditional beliefs coexisting. This diversity has led to unique political dynamics, often resulting in tensions and conflicts, influencing electoral politics and regional governance. The North-West, characterised by its large population, conservative Muslim identity, and historical political prominence, holds significant voting power and influence, though concerns arise regarding the dominance of regional leaders.

In the southern region, the South-East is dominated by the conservative Christian Igbo ethnic group, which emphasises cultural values, consensus-building, and historical struggles for autonomy, all critical in shaping electoral outcomes. The South-South region, rich in oil and ethnically diverse with groups like the Ijaw, Igbo, and Ogoni, is predominantly Christian. This political narrative in this zone focuses on resource control, environmental concerns due to oil exploitation, and agitations for greater regional autonomy. The South-West, home to the religiously diverse Yoruba people and the country's economic hub, Lagos, reflects a liberal culture fostering free speech and vibrant social media engagement. This region's voting decisions reflect regional culture and values rather than merely ethnic affiliations, as evidenced by strong support for the outgoing president in previous elections.

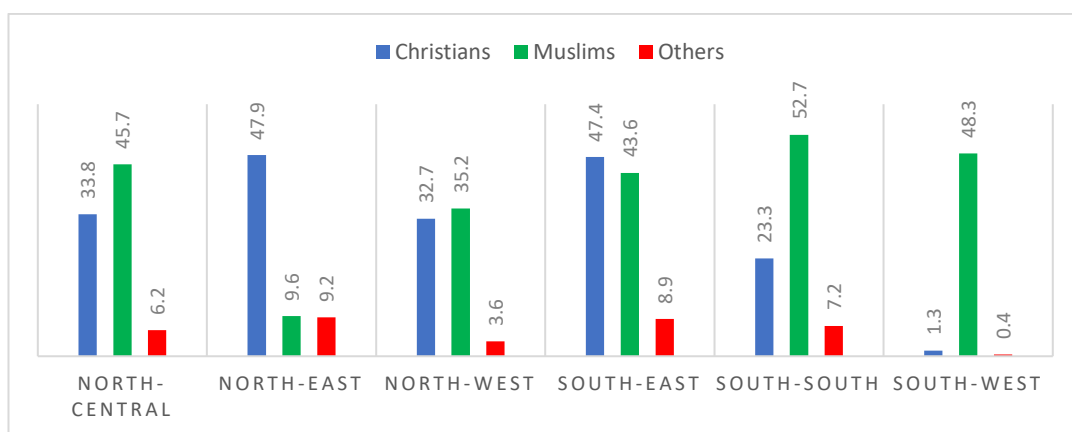


Figure 1 Percentage share of Religion by Population, based on Ostien (2012)

Figure 1 shows the distribution of religious affiliation across Nigeria. The distribution is the estimation of Ostien (2012), and following Burr *et al.* (2015) that religion is intergenerational, we assume the distribution remains valid now. The northern region is more religiously conservative, with the Hausa

and Fulani people forming the majority in the North-West. The primarily Christian Igbo are the largest ethnic grouping in the South-East. The South-South is predominantly Christian with mixed ethnic tribes. The more religiously diverse Yoruba people are the largest group in the South-West, where identity is heavily influenced by regional culture and values. The North Central and the South-West regions have a similar religious population of Christians and Muslims above 40%, which means one of the major religions will find it hard to dominate if religious polarisation is considered.

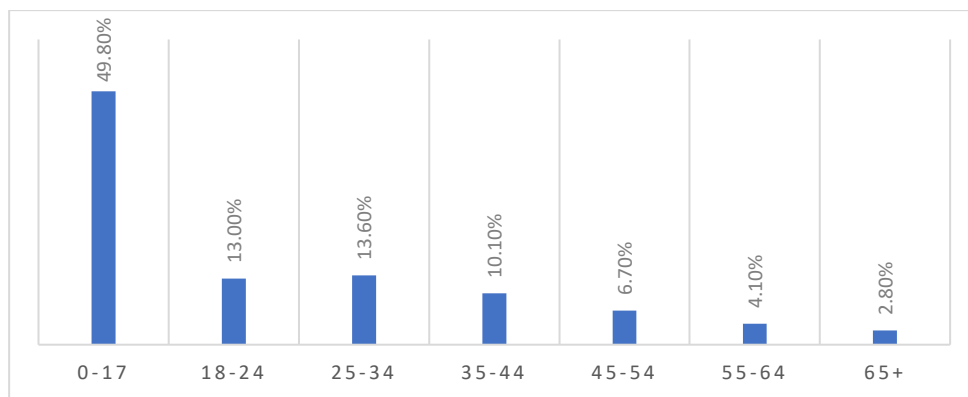


Figure 2 Nigeria's population age structure (World Population Prospect, 2022)

Figure 2 exemplifies Nigeria's vibrant and youthful population, where 26.6% of its citizens fall within the age bracket of 18 to 34. This age group, constituting 53% of the voting-age population dominate the voting population, making the campaign targets for the politicians. They are also one of the groups reported to be disenfranchised (INEC, 2020). The youth in Nigeria face many socioeconomic challenges, such as unemployment and poverty, like the rest of the population. These challenges hinder their political participation and engagement.

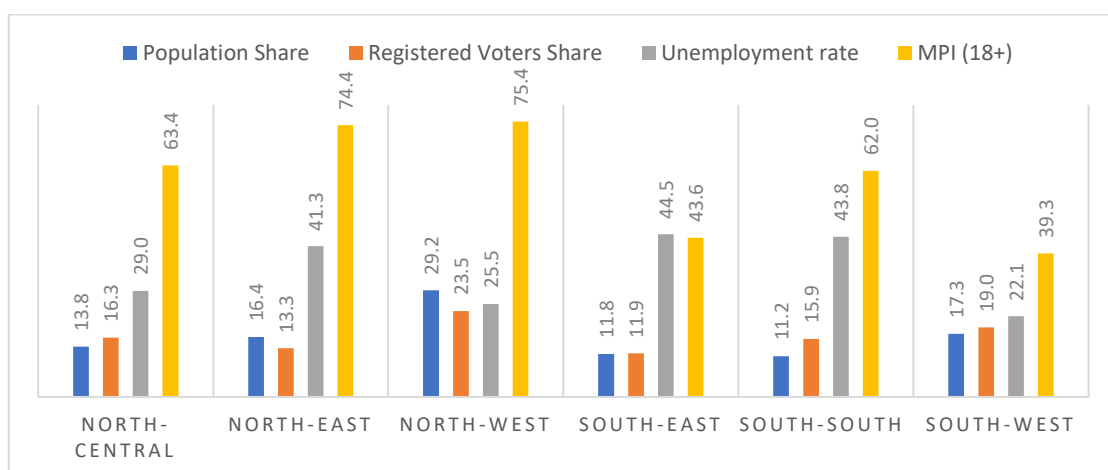


Figure 3 Share of Population, Registered voters, unemployment, and MPI across the zones

Figure 3 illustrates the population distribution and corresponding socioeconomic challenges across the geo-political zones in Nigeria. The North-Central zone of Nigeria demonstrates a contrast of

political engagement and economic hardship. The population share stands at 13.8%, indicating a moderate size within the demographic setting. However, the share of registered voters is 16.3%, which is higher than the population share. The strong voter registration drive is a sign of political activism and a response to the economic conditions. The unemployment rate is at 29.0%, below the national average of 33%, still showing significant economic challenges and the need for targeted job creation policies. The MPI figure of 63.4 underscores that a substantial portion of the adult population endures multidimensional poverty, highlighting the necessity for policy interventions. The North-East region holds a considerable 16.4% of the country's population but reveals a lower registered voters share of 13.3%, which is a consequence of the impact of regional conflicts on voter registration activities. The high unemployment rate of 41.3%, above the national level, reflects severe economic distress, which is intensified by ongoing insurgency and instability in the area. The MPI of 74.4%, the highest among the zones, signals acute multidimensional poverty. With the largest population share of 29.2%, the North-West is a densely populated zone. Despite this, the share of registered voters is 23.5%, which is somewhat less than the population share, hinting at possible gaps in electoral participation that may need to be examined. The zone also faces high unemployment at 25.5%, indicating economic underperformance that could benefit from economic revitalisation strategies. The exceedingly high MPI of 75.4% suggests deep-seated levels of adult multidimensional poverty.

In the southern region, the South-East zone accounts for 11.8% of the population share, demonstrating an equitable level of political engagement with its registered voters, nearly mirroring the population percentage at 11.9%. The unemployment rate at 44.5% is the highest in the country. However, the MPI of 43.6% points to only moderate levels of multidimensional poverty, which is relatively lower compared to other zones. The South-South has an 11.2% share of Nigeria's population. The share of registered voters, 15.9%, implies a more politically active and engaged populace. This is in stark contrast to the high unemployment rate of 43.8%, which hints at considerable economic difficulties that persist despite the oil wealth. The MPI at 62% is also high, reflecting that the revenue from natural resources is not translating into better living standards, reflecting on the higher civic engagement. The South-West, making up 17.3% of the national population, exhibits a higher registered voters share of 19.0%, potentially indicative of effective voter registration processes and civic participation. This zone enjoys the lowest unemployment rate among the ones analysed, at 22.1%, which could suggest the presence of more robust job markets and a diversified economy. The MPI of 39.3%, the lowest among the zones, corroborates the suggestion of relatively better living conditions, which may be attributed to higher educational levels and healthcare access. The better economic circumstances seem to have a positive correlation with political engagement, as seen in the healthy voter registration figures.

4.1. How the Geo-Political Zones Voted

The 2023 Nigerian presidential election demonstrated the connections between socioeconomic factors, voter behaviour, ethno-religious considerations, and unemployment rates. The aggregate votes saw the ruling party's Tinubu win by 36.6%, and the runner-up, Abubakar, from the main opposition, PDP, won 29% of the votes. Obi from LP, one of the two third-force parties, had 25.3%, and Kwankwaso came fourth by gaining 6.2% of the total votes. The split of the opposition here shows that if they had stayed together, they would have won. Many factors can be attributed to the split, but polarisation is at the centre, as shown in Figure 5.

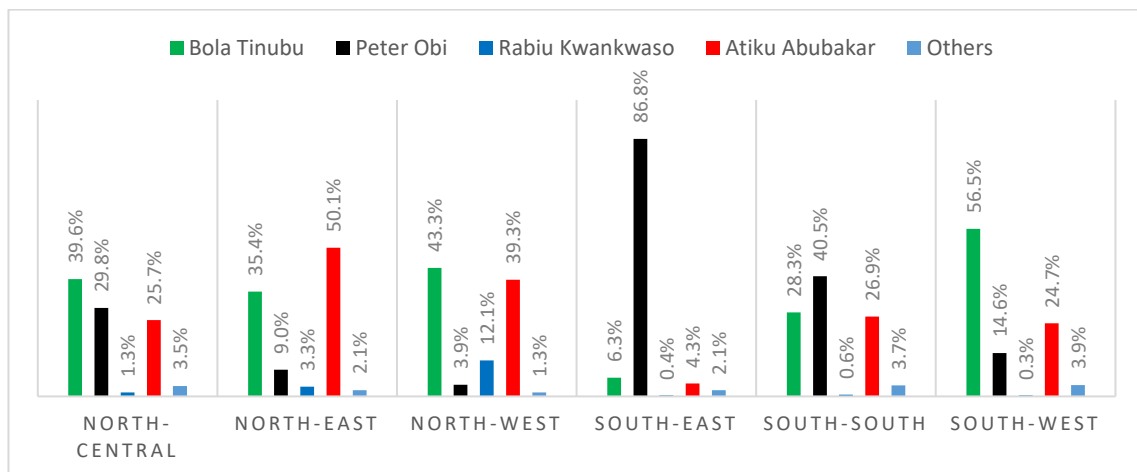


Figure 4 Voting Pattern at the 2023 Presidential Elections

The support of Tinubu from the incumbent party is regional, with a stronghold in the South-West where he secured 56.5% of the votes, suggesting a robust home base advantage. In the northern geo-political zones, he maintained substantial backing, especially in the North-West and North-Central, with 43.3% and 39.6%, respectively, indicating a widespread appeal across these regions. However, his support in the South-East could have been more extensive, where the third-force candidate, Obi, dominated. This reflects a significant regional disparity in his voter base. Atiku demonstrated a strong regional preference, with overwhelming support in the North-East at 50.1%, likely reflective of his political and ethnic affiliations in the region. He also had a considerable presence in the North-West with 39.3% of the votes, but the spoiler candidate played a role in that.

Contrastingly, in the southern zones, Atiku's support could have been more pronounced, with the least being in the South-East, where he received a mere 4.3% of the votes, indicating his appeal was significantly more limited in the southern parts of the country. The appeal of Kwankwaso, the spoiler, was primarily concentrated in the North-West, where he received 12.1% of the votes, suggesting strong regional support likely tied to his local influence and networks. Across other geo-political zones, his numbers were marginal, reinforcing the notion that his political influence is predominantly regional within the North-West. Obi's support was heavily skewed towards the South-East, where he received

an overwhelming 86.8% of the vote, indicating a solid regional stronghold. He also enjoyed considerable support in the South-South, securing 40.5% of the votes. However, his appeal in the northern regions was significantly lower, with the North-West zone showing the least support at 3.9%, underscoring a marked north-south divide in his voter base.

When considering the combined North (North-Central, North-East, and North-West), Atiku appears to be the most popular candidate, with significant support, especially in the North-East. Tinubu also shows a strong presence in the North-Central and North-West but less so in the North-East. In contrast, Kwankwaso's influence is largely within the North-West, and Obi's appeal in these regions is limited. In the combined South (South-East, South-South, and South-West), Obi dominates the South-East and has substantial support in the South-South, while Tinubu is the leading candidate in the South-West. Atiku and Kwankwaso have notably less influence in the southern regions. Voter turnout varied, with the North-West having the highest at 31.7%, perhaps indicative of higher electoral engagement, and the South-East and South-South showing the lowest at 21.7% and 21.4%, respectively, which could suggest factors such as voter apathy or disenfranchisement at play.

4.2. Multivariate Analysis of the Voting Patterns

Table 2 shows the cluster analysis of the voter behaviour and voting patterns in Nigeria. The cluster analysis, which organised states into four distinct clusters based on unemployment, Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), and religious demographics, and how the regions voted offers significant insights into regional voting patterns and behaviours.

Cluster	Geo-Political Zones
0	South-East and South-South
1	North-Central and South-West
2	North-West
3	North-East

Table 2 Cluster Analysis of Geo-Political Zones

Cluster 0 combines the Southeast and South-South. These regions share similar socioeconomic profiles, such as unemployment rates, poverty levels, and population distribution. The similarity in these factors suggests comparable economic conditions and challenges. The voter turnout and support for political figures in these regions were similar, indicating a common political climate and voter behaviour pattern as they voted for the third-force candidate, Obi. The composition of religious groups in these regions is similar, which influences the social and cultural aspects relevant to voter behaviour. Cluster 1 combines North-Central and South-West as these regions exhibit similar patterns in terms of economic development, unemployment rates, and poverty levels. Such similarities influence the public's perception and interaction with political processes. The data show similar voting patterns in these regions, which is due to shared political preferences or responses to regional issues.

The incumbent candidate won in this cluster by over 10%. The religious and social makeup of these regions could be contributing factors to the way these regions are grouped, affecting various aspects of regional life, including politics.

Cluster 2 is represented by the North-West, owing to its unique regional characteristics. Being the sole region in this cluster suggests distinct characteristics in terms of its economic conditions, region, demographic makeup, and political setting. The voter turnout and preferences in the region demonstrate unique voting behaviours and preferences driven by religious and regional affiliation and socioeconomic factors. The region divided its votes between APC with all-Muslim candidates, the opposition with a leading Muslim candidate and the spoiler—Kwankwaso, who dominated in Kano. Cluster 3 is about the socioeconomic conditions in the North-East. Like Cluster 2, the uniqueness of this cluster indicates that the zone has a set of socioeconomic and demographic features that set it apart from other regions. Political Dynamics: The regional inclinations favoured Atiku, who is from the zone. However, the Muslim-Muslim ticket of APC and the Vice-Presidential candidate of the party attracted votes for the incumbent party. The voter turnout patterns in this region are influenced by its specific regional characteristics, which differ significantly from the other clusters.

Table 3 and Table 4 provide an overview of the states' clustering based on their characteristics and the performance of the logistic regression model in predicting the low voter turnout. The logistic regression model's performance in predicting voter turnout was assessed using a confusion matrix and a classification report.

	Predicted Low Turnout	Predicted High Turnout
Actual Low Turnout	5	3
Actual High Turnout	1	3

Table 3: Confusion Matrix

	Precision	Recall	F1-score	Support
Low Turnout (0)	83%	62%	71%	8
High Turnout (1)	50%	75%	60%	4
Accuracy			67%	12
Macro Average	67%	69%	66%	12
Weighted Average	72%	67%	68%	12

Table 4: The Classification Report

The confusion matrix revealed that the model correctly predicted low turnout in 5 instances (true negatives) but incorrectly predicted high turnout in 3 cases (false positives). Conversely, it had one false negative (incorrectly predicted low turnout) and correctly identified high turnout in three instances (true positives). The classification report shows the precision for predicting low turnout

(class 0) was 83%, indicating the model is relatively accurate in identifying regions with low voter turnout. However, its precision for high turnout (class 1) stood at 50%, showing less reliability. In terms of recall, the model successfully identified 62% of low-turnout instances but missed some. The overall accuracy of the model was 67%, which points to moderate performance due to the data size.

In our logistic regression analysis, voter turnout is the dependent variable. We consider the independent variables, population share, share of registered voters, unemployment (LFS, 2021Q4), MPI (18+), and religious demographics (Muslims, Christians, Others), to investigate their influence on voter turnout. The regression results are summarised in Table 5.

Variable	Coefficient	Std Err	z	P> z 	[0.025	0.975]
Constant	354.1476	338.669	1.046	0.296	-309.631	1017.926
Population	0.9604	0.971	0.989	0.322	-0.942	2.863
Registered Voters	-1.2262	1.201	-1.021	0.307	-3.581	1.128
Unemployment	-0.0346	0.050	-0.687	0.492	-0.133	0.064
MPI (18+)	-0.0078	0.032	-0.247	0.805	-0.070	0.054
Muslims	-3.5054	3.389	-1.034	0.301	-10.147	3.136
Christians	-3.5140	3.379	-1.040	0.298	-10.137	3.109
Others	-3.6259	3.391	-1.069	0.285	-10.272	3.020

Table 5: Logistic Regression Output

The coefficients represent the log odds of high voter turnout for each variable. However, the p-values for most of these coefficients exceed the 0.05 threshold, suggesting that they are not statistically significant predictors of high voter turnout at a 5% significance level. Additionally, the model's constant, or intercept, despite having a high value, is not statistically significant either, as indicated by its p-value of 0.296. The model's overall fit, denoted by an R-squared value of 0.3262, shows a moderate relationship between the predictors and the binary outcome of high voter turnout. This implies that while the model identifies some level of association between the variables and voter turnout, the relationship needs to be stronger to be considered highly predictive. However, none of these variables showed statistically significant coefficients, suggesting that within this dataset, factors such as population size, registered voters, unemployment rates, poverty levels, and religious demographics do not have a statistically significant impact on voter turnout. This lack of statistical significance is a limitation of our study attributed to the sample size.

The factor analysis, including the specified socioeconomic, demographic, and political variables, along with the presidential candidates, resulted in the following factor loadings.

Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
Unemployment					
rate	-0.456	0.652	-0.173	-0.132	0.046
MPI (18+)	0.711	0.535	0.130	-0.023	0.005

Voter Turnout	0.883	-0.216	-0.049	-0.068	0.140
Muslims	0.975	0.078	-0.006	-0.002	0.003
Christians	-0.974	-0.076	0.003	0.002	-0.005
Traditional	-0.941	0.117	0.006	0.001	0.000
Tinubu	0.639	-0.402	-0.266	0.025	0.035
Abubakar	0.751	0.375	-0.210	0.140	-0.044
Obi	-0.921	0.056	0.116	-0.043	-0.059
Kwankwaso	0.695	0.012	0.630	-0.051	-0.053

Table 6: Factor Loadings

Factor 1 shows strong loadings on voter turnout, MPI, and religious demographics, suggesting a link between socioeconomic conditions, religious makeup, and electoral participation. This factor implies that regions with higher voter turnout and higher poverty rates favour the incumbent party candidate, Tinubu and the main opposition candidate, Abubakar. This reflects the influence of socioeconomic conditions on voter preferences, particularly in regions experiencing higher levels of poverty, where financial inducement plays a key role (Sigler, Neal and Martinus, 2023). Factor 2 shows a high positive loading on unemployment and a negative on Tinubu, indicating a potential relationship between unemployment rates and support for the incumbent party candidate. This factor also points to the effect of financial inducement by the incumbent. This means that regions with higher unemployment rates, like the South-East and South-South, are less inclined to support the incumbent party's candidate unless they are induced financially. It suggests voter discontent in economically struggling regions, potentially benefiting the third-force candidate.

A strong loading on Kwankwaso dominates factor 3, indicating this factor represents political alignment and regional influence related to this candidate. This factor captures the unique political influence and appeal of the Kwankwaso slogan, particularly in the North-West, where he acts as a 'spoiler' candidate, drawing support away from the traditional incumbent and the main opposition candidate. However, the distracting factor in this area will also include financial inducement from the incumbent. Factor 4 and Factor 5 show mixed loadings, suggesting ambiguous interactions between socioeconomic conditions, religious demographics, and support for different political candidates. They represent voter preferences that are influenced by a combination of economic, demographic, and political factors. These factors capture regional variations that are less straightforward in terms of political leanings. The factor analysis shows that regions affected by poverty and unemployment have varying inclinations towards the incumbent, opposition, and third-party candidates. The presence of Kwankwaso as a significant factor in certain regions indicates his role in altering traditional voting patterns, potentially influencing the overall electoral outcome.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The election was a tight, polarised contest, and Nigeria's economy was in bad shape, meaning that higher turnout was expected. Ethnic, religious, and regional identities heavily influenced voter behaviour. Financial inducement played a big role in key regions like the North-West due to socioeconomic conditions. Active youth and female voter participation played a significant role across the regions, especially in the areas where the third-force candidates dominated. The voting pattern in the elections follows the findings of Lyngé & Martínez i Coma (2022) and Lewis-Beck & Martini (2020) that socioeconomic factors tend to influence voter behaviour in developing countries. The South-East, with a 44% unemployment rate and a low Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) at 8%, gave Obi 86% of votes. North-West and South-West, with 25.5% and 22.1% unemployment rates, voted for Tinubu with 43.3% and 56.5%, respectively. The voting pattern seems to support Burden & Wichowsky's (2014) study, which argued that unemployment brings out more voters. Turnout was low despite the closeness of the elections and the poor state of the economy. Voter numbers were 21.7% in the South-East, 27.9% in the South-West, and 31.7% in the North-West. The outcome showed that incumbents or strong parties had better "winning strategies," with disenfranchisement being a concern (Rodon, 2017). Of 93 million registered voters, only around 25 million valid votes were counted, indicating potential dissatisfaction or disconnection with the political process. Youth, women, and people with disabilities were targeted, but turnout was still low, reflecting an urgent need to address disenfranchisement. (Hoffmann, 2023), highlighted this issue, which is uncommon to marginalised groups of youth, women, and people with disabilities (INEC, 2020). According to the World Population Prospects data (2022), Nigeria has 219,867,000 people; about half are over 18 years old. The 15-24 age group faces a disproportionately high unemployment rate, so campaigns targeted the youth vote.

In the North-West, 90.7% Muslim, the Muslim-Muslim ticket was key for Tinubu's votes. In the South-East, over 80% Christian, Obi (a devout Catholic) got over 80% of the votes. In the South-West, a nearly equal mix of Muslims and Christians, Tinubu's results were mixed. He lost to Obi in Lagos (where Obi's ethnic group has a large voting bloc) but won in Ondo and Ekiti, two heavily Christian states, nullifying the straightforward ethno-religious appeal. This factor contributed to the main opposition's polarisation when they were inclined to select a Fulani Muslim from the Northern region. This led to Obi leaving for LP and Kwankwaso for NNPP (Olokor, 2022; Premium Times, 2022). Therefore, Tinubu's win is attributed to a strategic misstep by the opposition party for being divided with breakaways and internal party rifts with the G-5. Had there been no breakaway within the opposition and internal rifts, the results would have been different. Lastly, the failure to nominate Wike as the vice-presidential candidate cost the PDP crucial votes. Wike's influence could have secured votes from Rivers, Oyo, Abia, Enugu, and Benue, states aligned with the G-5 governors, potentially bridging the gap of less than two million votes that led to the PDP's loss to the APC. This shows the penalty for violating the

political agreement—the main opposition's refusal to follow the rotation agreement between the Muslim North and the Christian South presented an advantage to the ruling party, potentially allowing them to maintain power under a Muslim-Muslim ticket.

The analysis from Nigeria's recent election suggests that voter decisions, influenced by ethnic and religious ties alongside economic conditions and elite messaging, signal a more mature electoral engagement. Since transitioning from military to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria's democratic journey has been full of challenges, including electoral misconduct and violence, often fuelled by political exploitation of ethnic and religious divides. The 2023 election results hint at a shift towards voting based on governance quality and economic policies rather than solely on identity politics. However, financial inducements and disenfranchisement are significant factors that blur the issue of governance. This evolution is vital for democracy's deepening, where electoral choices are grounded in governance performance. Yet, the enduring impact of ethnic and religious identities on voting reveals a divided national identity, posing challenges to the democratic ideal of inclusiveness. In a democracy, the mosaic of identities should enrich political discourse, but in Nigeria, it often leads to division and conflict, highlighting the urgent need for political reforms aimed at fostering unity and participatory governance. Similarly, we linked economic conditions and voter behaviour in Nigeria to mirror global democratic trends. Areas with higher poverty rates showing a preference for certain candidates reflect voters' reactions to economic policies and promises, while areas with higher unemployment rates demonstrating less support for the incumbent point to dissatisfaction with economic leadership. We show the critical role of economic management in upholding democratic legitimacy and stability. In democracies around the world, economic downturns frequently result in electoral setbacks for incumbents, whereas economic growth tends to boost their support. Thus, effective economic governance is essential for sustaining democracy.

The influence of elite messaging on voter mobilisation in Nigeria reflects a global phenomenon where political narratives and media play a significant role in shaping public opinion and electoral outcomes. In Nigeria, this involves managing diverse ethnic and religious narratives, which can either promote inclusivity or deepen societal divides. Responsible political communication can enhance voter turnout and encourage informed electoral choices, which are crucial for a vibrant democracy. Conversely, when misused, it can deepen societal divisions and weaken democratic processes, highlighting the need for responsible political discourse and media practices that encourage unity and informed democratic participation. The analysis of voter preferences, economic conditions, and political messaging in the context of Nigeria's 2023 Presidential election sheds light on significant democratic themes both within Nigeria and globally. It points to the challenges and opportunities democratic

systems face in managing diversity, ensuring economic development, and promoting constructive political dialogue. These insights contribute to a broader understanding of democratic practices and challenges in diverse societies, offering valuable lessons for strengthening and evolving democratic systems worldwide.

This study shows that examining voter behaviour in Nigeria is relevant to current research in development policy, theory, and analysis as it sheds light on the political dynamics and their relationship with development in a rapidly evolving society. The factor analysis shows that regions affected by poverty and unemployment have varying inclinations towards the incumbent, opposition, and third-party candidates. We showed the potency of religion as a mobilising force in Nigerian politics, illustrating how political elites utilise brokerage through religious narratives to neutralise campaign issues and intensify voter polarisation.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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