

**SACRED VOTES: THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON VOTER BEHAVIOUR
AND CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES IN NIGERIA'S PARTY POLITICS**

Hanaah Ebunoluwa ADEYEMI¹

ABSTRACT

Religion forms a special part of social lives in Nigeria as it plays out to identities, networks, and moral systems, which are routinely used by the political forces to serve their objectives. We examine in this seminar paper how political parties make religious appeals and measures to endorse their campaign approaches and how religion influences voter behavior. By employing the political sociology theories, and the study of religion and politics, the empirical evidence of studying the electoral cycles in Nigeria in 2015, 2019, and 2023 is done through the prism of this paper, with the objective of illuminating the mechanisms of political decision-making. Such mechanisms are religious identity, clerical and elite legitimacies, religious endorsements, and networks. Based on this, (1) religion is used as both a fundamental identity and signaling mechanism to voters, (2) political parties and candidates use religious rhetoric and leaders to mobilize, persuade and legitimate their candidacies, and (3) campaign strategies are becoming more modern with a convergence between digital communication and faith networks, leading to unprecedented challenges to democratic accountability and inter-communal solidarity. The statements follow the hypothesis that religion is the foundational identity as well as an indicator to voters. At the end of the paper, there are some recommendations on the future research provided, and the implications on electoral administration are given.

Keywords: Religion, Political parties, Voters, Electoral cycles.

¹ **Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo. Department of Political science, faculty of social sciences**

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is considered to be one of the most religious countries in the world and religious affinity has influenced the moral customs, cultural codes, and political stewardship of the population. The identity of religion is an aspect of social structure per se which is characterized by the same or very similar religious worship, a close relation to the body of Christian or Muslim people, and the induced great power of clerics and religious groups (Afrobarometer, 2024). Other than being a medium of spiritual and community, religion is a powerful political aspect. Taking into consideration the mobilization potential of the religious, political actors engage in religious appeals regularly, pursue religious associations with respected clergy members, and rely on symbolic forms of religious representation as a means of enhancing their legitimacy and winning elections.

Although there is already an extensive literature on the subject of ethnicity, clientelism and patronage in the Nigerian politics, the way religion has been used in

Nigerian politics especially in elections is in a sense not studied exhaustively and rather dated empirically. The bulk of the already existing literature tends to ignore the actual mechanisms by which religion exerts its effects on voter perception, sets the key terms in political rhetoric and forms the basis of the campaign strategies. The present elections especially in 2015, 2019, and 2023 has highlighted the importance of this question as new patterns in the religious mobilization, more innovative expanses of faith-based online networks, as well as more pronounced clerical engagement in partisan politics emerge (CSIS, 2023; Afrobarometer, 2024).

The gap that this paper seeks to fill is to examine how religion functions as a feature of political identity and means of information transmission in the electoral process of Nigeria. It even conceptualizes religion as a factor in the arena of political competition, not as the background cultural influence that most people regard. The research involves the reference to the background theoretical literature on religion and electoral politics, mixed-methods design adapted

to the Nigerian context and empirical understanding of three most recent general elections in the country. Specific consideration is paid to the role of political parties and candidates in the interaction with religious networks, the ways in which they position campaign rhetoric as having religious overtones and strategically exploit symbols of religious life. Similarly, the paper addresses the interpretation of religious cueing in electorates, and the navigations of the electorates in reaction to religious cues and on how these indicators determine the votes.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

To give analytical background clarity, this section defines and contextualizes key concepts that form core to this research religion, political parties, voters and electoral cycle in respect of accepted academic literatures and the Nigerian political context.

Religion

When referring to the situational context of religion, the study defines religion as a set of beliefs, practices, and moral

structures that imbue meaning, define identities, and establish networks of communities (Durkheim, 1915; Clarke, 2018). Nigerians, in particular, are not only spiritually religious, but also politically religious in that religion as a socio-political force determines the cultural standards, establishes a strong sense of group cohesion, and a social foundation of political action (Kukah, 1993). In addition to being faith practices, the two major religions, Christianity and Islam are political identities, which parties and candidates tend to use to seek popular electoral support (Afrobarometer, 2024). This paper will use the perspective that religion is an essential identity as well as a signaling device, which can serve to inform political tastes using not just symbols but also the acts of clerical endorsements, as well as faith-based social networks.

Political Parties

Political parties are placed associations that aim at gaining political power to rule using the assistance of elections, mobilizing the voters and organizing political rivalries (Aldrich, 1995). Parties also serve as bargaining vehicles, patrons

and coalition-builders. In the Nigerian context, parties serve as elite bargainers, distributors of patronage and build coalitions on an ethnic religious and regional basis (Omotola, 2009). The incorporation of religion in party strategies represents the way of integrating religion, which consists of selecting candidates to portray faith demographics, a religious appeals-based approach to campaigns, and the development of alliances with powerful clerics (Ojo, 2014). In Nigeria with its plural religious environment, one often finds a division between party approaches: on the one hand, appeals to religious faith identity, on the other hand, seeking to avoid using sectarian polarization.

Voters

Voters are the members of the society that play the electoral process by exercising their choice that establishes lingering political leadership. Political sociology continues to stay true to that view and is based on a conglomeration of identity-based loyalties, issue preference, and elite cues which have produced a pattern in voter behavior (Campbell et al., 1960).

Religious affiliation should serve as a quick assessment (heuristic) of candidates in a low-trust institutional environment with little campaigning that is policy-oriented, such as in Nigeria (McCauley, 2014). The support of religious leaders, religious media, and religious congregations can have considerable impact on perception, turn out, and mobilization of voters.

Electoral Cycles

Electoral cycles can be defined as the rotating cycle of electoral processes of pre-election campaigns, voting and post-elections, around which the structure of political competition occur (Norris, 2004). General elections in Nigeria occur at four-year intervals and hence the patterns of religious mobilization and political conduct may be repeatedly observed. The 2015, 2019 and 2023 elections, which are empirical nutrients of this research demonstrate the changing practices of religion use, especially the incorporation of digital communication networks to religion networks. All these have increased the potential mobilizing and polarizing risks and opportunities of religion in the electoral playing field.

Such theoretical explanations place religion firmly in the centre of analytical development, in the interpretation of Nigerian electoral politics conceived broadly as a category that engages dynamically with party politics, voter patterns, and the rhythms of the electoral calendar. This framing accords with the research hypothesis which is that religion in Nigeria can not just be considered a cultural setting but also an active power that determines the political competition, voter selection and subsequently elections and democracy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religion and Voter Behaviour: Theoretical Perspectives

Religious scholarship on political behaviour finds three primary ways in which religion mediates the effects of the vote: identity voting, cues and heuristics, and elite mediation. These two mechanisms do not necessarily exclude one another, but more frequently coact within a self-reinforcing dynamic in which religion is politically salient.

First, identity-based voting is based on social identity theory which argues that people get their sense of identity by at least partly by being members of a social group, such as a religious group. Religiosity is therefore one of the core social classifications that would influence political parties and electoral decisions. Other critics of the cross-cutting cleavage argument include Horowitz (1985), who adds that voters can support co-religionists because of perceived shared interests as well as the threat of extinction or denial of access to state resources. In Nigeria, this mechanism is further intensified due to the crossing of religion with ethnicity and region, further increasing identity messages (Unhas HJSIS, 2023).

Secondly, cueing and heuristics also works out in political situations whereby the voters do not access clearly labeled policy information or do not possess the resources to analyse complicated political programmes. Howsoever, in such cases the religious endorsements, religious rhetoric, moral framing develops into strong heuristics that shape the voting of voters. These cognitive shortcuts are

especially persuasive according to Popkin (1991), when represented by trusted clerical authority figures. This is supported by empirical research on the elections in Nigeria indicating that faith leaders have been found to be opinion leaders and their declarations have been found to change the voting intentions.

Third, the role of religious institutions and leaders, as elite level intermediaries between the political class and grassroots community, is put into focus by the elite mediation and brokerage networks. Religious organisations all over the world and in particular in Nigeria fulfil not just moral roles, but also offer services to the community, sinews of solidarity, and channels of mass mobilisation. The study of Pentecostalism and political processes in Nigeria shows that Pentecostal churches have developed organisational resources and political networks that enable them to implement closed-loop mobilisation, often relating congregants in a manner that renders spiritual and political appeal less distinct. Collectively, these theoretical approaches highlight the fact that the impact of religion on voter behaviour is symbolic and structural and

functions through identity, informational signals, and institutional structures.

Religion and Campaign Strategies

Religious sentiment is not something that is simply responded to by political actors in Nigeria but rather shaped and mobilised by them in strategic interventions. According to the literature, it has mentioned at least four common ways that political parties and candidates have managed to embrace religion in their electoral campaign strategies. The most direct instruments are endorsements and visible alliances, when parties attempt to gain the public endorsement of a high-profile cleric, or faith-based organisation in order to project the appearance of legitimacy and trustworthiness to co-religionists. This kind of endorsement is meant to act as signals of identity as well as signals that would reduce the uncertainty of the voters.

The use of religious symbolism and messaging are a less direct strategy where politicians intertwine religious symbolism or messaging into campaign speeches and manifestos by referencing

scripture, moral lessons or religious idioms. This will enable the candidates to firm their positions with the value system of the voters without being vocally sectarian in an attempt to win their allegiance and support. Ticket balancing and candidate selection are more structural with respect to the issues of religion. Running mates or candidates can be chosen based on their religious orientation with the aim of sustaining amicable relations among the religions or with the aim of swaying the support of a given religious block. The case of the controversy over by the so-called same-faith tickets in Nigeria demonstrates the potential of this approach to render the process either mobilising or polarising. The network mobilisation utilises the material and structural resources of religious establishments. Religious institutions are used to conduct voter education campaigns, campaigns events and mobilisation campaigns, citing it as a non-political event. The literature of faith-based mobilisation reveals that faith-based mobilisation networks can be exceptionally effective given that they leverage pre-existing trust and cohesion.

The Nigerian Context

The above dynamics are especially strong in Nigeria, where the proportion of Christians and Muslims is almost equal with each group focused on particular geographical areas. This religious picture is also compounded by the increasing influence of revivalist pentecostal movements as well as the various Muslim clerical networks in the nation. As Afrobarometer (2024) says, Nigerians have extremely positive rates of trust in religious leaders wherein faith-based identity is strongly related to the approach on corruption, governance, and social trust, which all determine the voting behavior.

The latest electoral cycles provide depictions of such dynamics in real time. The 2023 general elections were characterized by increased religious rhetoric, which has grown since the All Progressives Congress announced it would be using a Muslim-Muslim ticket. This decision attracted heated debate and some critics argued that it increased the salience of religion in this campaign and shifted voter mobilisation tactics (SSRN analysis papers; current news reports).

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Analyses and observers of this time, 2022/2023, indicate that there was an increase in use of religious rhetoric, a heightening of clerical support, and involvement of faith-based networks in turnout operations. In the case of Nigeria, therefore, religion plays not only a passive role as a cultural context but also as a dynamic variable in determining the voter pattern as well as the strategy of the political dinner. The salience of its effects is enhanced by the language of identity politics, legitimized by elite mediation and deployed by political elites to gain electoral leverage.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study is integrative whereby the author has incorporated three theories including social identity theory, cueing/heuristic models of voter behaviour and the elite-broker model in examining the role of religion in the Nigerian electoral scene. In the light of Theories of Social Identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Horowitz, 1985), the concept of religion is viewed as a salient identity with the capacity to inform personal worldviews in addition to creating social networks, political

identities and voting patterns especially where it coincides with ethnicity and regional attachment. In a political environment such as that of Nigeria where party institutionalisation is low, where policy differences are small and voters lack entree to authoritative sources of information, citizens gravitate toward heuristics simple mental shortcuts in deciding their preferences. Religious cues, which include approval and blessing by venerable clerics, religious rhetoric, symbolic associations, and moral framing presents a very potent indicator that can be evaluated by the voter to test the credibility of candidates and their compatibility (Popkin, 1991).

These views are supplemented by the elite-broker model (Wantchekon, 2003; Stokes et al., 2013), which points to religious leaders and organisations as the intermediaries between the political elites and grassroots communities. Such actors have a tremendous influence, both as mobilisers and as opinion leaders, and translate political messages into religious discourses, mobilise turnout efforts, and lend their moral authority to candidates. These brokers are in turn strategically

approached by political parties and candidates with a view to gain access and utilise their embedded trust network and their organisational capabilities in terms of electoral mobilisation.

In such a context, it is anticipated that combined strategies of campaigns including symbolic religious appeals, prestigious endorsement and mobilisation of faith-based networks within the networks would prove highly useful in translating any religious orientation into concrete votes. Nonetheless, these methods have their own dangers such as the risk of increasing sectarian rifts, risk of losing the support of the middle ground voters and also a risk of counter-mobilisation by other religious communities. The model also lends itself to explaining some of the most important empirical puzzles in Nigerian elections, e.g., how candidates with little party apparatus can achieve high vote-shares in regions where they have particularly strong religious credibility, and vice versa, why such outright sectarian rhetoric can result in the diminished turnout of more moderate layers of the electorate. The possibility to synthesise

these theoretical strands therefore provides this study with a holistic perspective in examining how religion and electoral politics have interacted in Nigeria, especially in 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections, when religious identity has had a strong presence, informational cues and elite mediation have been most pronounced and politically significant.

CASE STUDIES AND MECHANISMS: RELIGION IN THE 2015, 2019, AND 2023 NIGERIAN ELECTIONS

The position of religion in Nigerian electoral politics has not been fixed rather has taken various turns along with the shifts in partisan politics, leadership and the overall socio-political framework. In the 2015, 2019, and 2023 general elections, religion has been interacting with other dynamics including incumbency advantage, anti-corruption campaigns and security concerns, but has in each case been shaping voter perceptions, campaign strategies, and mobilisation patterns. Here, chronological review of the three elections is mixed with a thematic

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analysis of the process involved in the role of religion as it affected voter behaviour.

2015: Consolidation and Identity Politics under Security Pressure

The 2015 election became a watershed, when the All Progressives Congress (APC) that presents the opposition dethroned the long-ruling People Democratic Party (PDP). Although anti-incumbency, economic frustrations, and the Boko Haram insurgency took centre stage in national politics, religion was an underpinning issue in several states with strict religious majorities. Religion overlapped with ethnicity and region, and strengthened voter linkages, in the regions where voters understood the election as the means of securing group interests. Nonetheless, blatant sectarian mobilisation was not rampant; the parties preferred to engage in coalition building, cross-regionalism and anticorruption rhetoric as a means of attracting a national constituency. It is evidence of the identification and the mechanism of socialisation because the common religious background leads to both strengthened trustfulness and solidarity

but prevents overt sectarianism among actors in order to ensure viability of their coalitions.

2019: Incumbency, Pentecostal Visibility, and Moral Signalling

The re-electionment of the Muhammadu Buhari, who was running on the APC Party, in 2019 anchored on the incumbency principle and party consolidation as well as a loyal northern Muslim base. However religion was still an advent evident election instrument. Religious endorsements and moral framing of politics became increasingly more common, especially in rural regions where religious leaders are very trusted by the voters (Afrobarometer, 2024). The emergence of the more visible political leadership of Pentecostal leaders especially stood out; the churches they formed offered convenient voter education, mobilization and messaging platforms. This is in line with the network mobilisation measure where faith institutions particularly Pentecostal churches that had in place disciplined membership structures were useful platforms of turnout mobilisation, transportation to elections centres, and as

modus operandi to transmission of messages. The themes of integrity, faithfulness, and family values were also used by the candidates, and the value-alignment mechanism is directly connected to the religious voter group as a higher priority concerning moral sincerity.

2023: Muslim–Muslim Ticket and the Heightened Salience of Religion

The forthcoming 2023 general election is the most explicit blending of religion and campaigning in Nigeria in recent histories. There are three dynamics that are outstanding.

1. Muslim-Muslim ticket controversy - Most national debates were centred around the decision by the APC to present both its presidential and his running mate as Muslims. This decision did not only invigorate the fundamentalists in certain constituencies but also catalysed highly motivated counter-mobilisation in other constituencies, exhibiting the mechanism of reactive mobilisation, where divisive religious rulings elicit counter-mobilisation, and coalesce opposing

groups. The furore placed religion at the epicentre of campaign discourses, and attracted unprecedented media coverage by clerics, civil society groups and the press.

2. Faith-leader endorsement and trust- The faith-leader endorsement and trust indicate that Nigerians have more faith in religious leaders compared to the political structure (Afrobarometer, 2024). Therefore, explicit and implicit endorsements had a great weight that served as heuristics in low-information situations. Parties went out of their way to win the blessing of clergy so that they could tap into these circles of trust and on certain occasions faith leaders took a direct role of urging their members to vote on behalf of certain candidates.

3. Turnout and discourse influence - The election witnessed one of the lowest voter turnouts in the history of Nigerian democracy ever since democracy was established. Analysts attributed this in part to the polarising aspects of religious language which could have inspired internal wings and deterred entry into the political arena by moderates. The online and offline religious othering reinvented

the spirit of campaigning and demonstrated the dual identity of religious mobilisation: it can reinforce loyalty, as well as alienate prospective swing voters. As a collective whole these mechanisms account for the fact that religion is both a durable element of elections in Nigeria as it alters senses, determines lower level decision-making, offers organisational infrastructure, and can be deployed strategically to mobilise actors although with the risk of enhancing polarisation.

RELIGION IN ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES: PATTERNS, EFFECTS, AND DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATIONS

There are numerous methods that Nigerian political parties use to exploit religion both as a potential tool of mobilization and as a foundation of legitimacy. These incorporate the administrative backing of religious figures, incorporation of religious rituals and staged interfaith show to imply inclusion. Such endorsements can be direct like attendance or photo options with the clergy or indirect like the use of rewards. The selection of its candidates

also forms part of the religious balancing act where parties also tend to present candidates who have strong religious amplifications. Yet, Muslim Muslim ticket has shown that such a decision elevates sectarian conflicts as demonstrated by the 2023 APC Muslim-Muslim ticket. The campaign messages can borrow religious idioms and moral language in order to achieve a quiet underlying fit with the beliefs of the voter or at least the seeker of moral credibility (and they are not going to use overt sectarian appeals). On the ground, religious networks both church and mosque networks mobilize and organize logistics, such as transportation, communication chains, and small-group mobilization on one side, and in the digital world, platforms, such as WhatsApp or Telegram, facilitate the spread of religious memes, clips of sermons, and direct messaging, at times driving mobilization (and even misinformation).

As shown by empirical analysis, religion has a strong political influence, but still, it is not deterministic. Religious signals have the potential to enhance the chances

of voters to vote the candidate of the same religion or act on the recommendation of the clergy, but they are moderated by ethnicity, class, policy position and clientelistic relationships. Such cues have the most dramatic effect when the political institutions have lost public trust and the religious leaders might be trusted more as sources of advice. But over-reliance on religious assertions diminishes an independent judgment of voters and on policy-rich campaign based politics. What is more, instrumentalization of religion can be counterproductive, leading to polarization, exclusion, and voter apathy as the 2023 elections have shown with lower turnout related to accusing the faith of sectarianism.

Democratically-wise, religious networks have the potential to foster civic engagement and increasing political participation yet the element of partisan entanglement is a threat.

CONCLUSION

Nevertheless, religion remains as one of the most powerful influences that affect electoral politics in Nigeria even after

decades. It does not just work on the level of personal faith, but on a very deep identity level, where people feel driven to the polls by their ideals of community, their association to their community, and the religious authority of religious figures that they trust. Religion acts as a heuristic mechanism, and it is able to guide political choices by perceived moral compatibility or spiritual validity among voters notably in situations when political institutions are quashed, or when there is lack of finances on the policy discussion. Religious networks with links operating on the basis of churches, mosques or religion-based organizations are already established vehicles of political organization, diffusion of messages and turnouts.

Yet in recent years especially during the electoral cycles of 2015-2023 political parties have become very skillful at the art of tactically using these religious resources to promote their causes. Tactics have moved beyond old modes of clerical blessing and illusionary candidate endorsement and into more advanced, digital mediated campaigns that use targeted messages to infiltrate faith

groups. Even though this has intensified the political role of religion, it has increased the possibility of the possibility of the weaponization of religious identity in the winner-takes-all political games. An example of such a discourse is the controversy around the Muslim-Muslim ticket in the 2023 elections which led to sectarian divisions, the alienation of portions of the residential base, and weakened the sense of the political process to be inclusive.

These forces are further complicated by the rapid diffusion of digital communication, where the social media and encrypted messaging systems may make the process of spreading of religiously charged narratives (both, true and false) much faster. Polarization is more challenging to escape and even more probable in such a setting because information bubbles created through personalized algorithms further entrenches pre-existing biases and damper cross-cutting communication. The long-term central role of religion in Nigerian politics during elections thus spells potential and perils: the possibility of civic participation.

To attain successful democratic governance in Nigeria, there is the need to balance carefully between activating the mobilizing potential of communal life of faith-based communities to encourage active citizenship on the one hand, and guarding against the use of manipulative tactics by power brokers that would transform or reduce religion into a political game or tool to serve vested interests. This will need a mixture of effective civic education, clear campaigning behavior, cross-religious collaboration and regulatory control of political communication, especially online. Religion could only be a positive factor in the democratic process by such steps but not a divisive and mistrustful factor.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The results emphasize that focused efforts are required to ascertain that the role of religions in politics improves and does not compromise the practice of democracy. To start with the civic education in faith-based contexts should be enhanced with the collaboration of

religious leaders to foster non-partisan, issue-based political awareness. This would allow mobilizing the latent power of the faith networks without pressuring voters about adhering to a religious identity. Second, places of worship that are used as partisan campaign platforms against electoral laws should be closely monitored and the actions reported to the civil society groups and electoral management bodies (INEC). This kind of supervision would not let religious platforms become the means of compulsion or discrimination. Third, interfaith civic coalitions built on democratic principles and neutral voter education bears the promise of mitigating polarization by creating cross-cutting coalitions that shift the zero-sum landscape of religious politics toward a more positive-sum politics of competition. Lastly, and because faith-based misinformation is common on the Web, it seems reasonable that regulatory systems will be needed to demand transparency in political advertising over the Internet, fine deliberate misinformation, and impose certain limitations on religion-connotated political adverts circulated online.

The methodological design of study relies strongly upon the analysis of comparative cases along with secondary sources, which is rather a consistent limitation. Origination research on the causal effect of clerical endorsements on electoral preferences is supposed to be carried out in terms of original survey experiments. It might be even more revealing to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in certain worship areas, i.e., churches and mosques, to gain a deeper understanding of the politics of mobilization and the internal debate reacting among religious leaders. Also, it would be worth disseminating the way the politically oriented messages are organized religiously using digital networks to get more insight on online mobilization patterns and misinformation. These research questions would provide more varied evidence to inform both policy and practice in reducing risk and making the democratic possibilities of religion an electoral reality.

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