*Research article*

# SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE AS A CATALYST FOR ELECTORAL SUCCESS OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN AFRICA: INSIGHTS FROM NIGERIA'S 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS



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**Abstract.** This paper examines the influence of social media on the electoral success of political parties in Africa, drawing insights from Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. The role played by social media during the electioneering process for the 2023 general elections in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. The social media was a big force in the general elections, as Nigerians witnessed a new dimension different from the usual, due to the efficacy of the platforms. Anchored on the premise of the communication theory, the paper concludes that social media reshaped elections in Africa, increased the potential of prospective voters, and enhanced hope for better future electioneering. However, a lot of misinformation and disinformation was generated on social media, though educative but misleading. Based on the analysis of the gender and age structure of voters, the author concludes about their representation in social networks. The efficacy of the social media platforms did not determine the winner of 2023 Nigeria's presidential election but improved the electioneering process and system in Nigeria, as the candidate with the highest support on social media was a force but not a winner. To maximize the positive impact of social media in Nigerian elections, there is a pressing need for responsible digital political engagement. While social media platforms provide a space for political participation, they must be regulated in a way that balances free speech with the need to curb misinformation and fake news.

**Keywords:** social media influence, electoral campaigns, presidential elections, political parties, electoral process, democratic stability, political participation, generation Z

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## INTRODUCTION

The role of social media platforms in democratic stability is gaining new momentum in the world today. Social media has been significant in electoral politics, inspired by the

election of Barack Obama by the "Facebook generation" in 2008[1]. Social media has become an indispensable instrument for political parties, candidates, and their supporters for campaigns and appeal messages to a wide audience[2]. In African politics, social media has become a tangible instrument for political parties [Bello, Inuwa-Dutse, Heckel 2019]. These parties are ideologically based and are influenced by ethnic factors [Gribanova, Grishina 2023]. Politicians and party supporters are able to make more connections to voters in a small digital community by sending appealing messages and manifestos and organizing online political campaigns before an election. Social media is a faster medium that allows messages to spread rapidly, amplifying their reach and impact [Alegu et al. 2020].

Nigeria registered about 156 million active internet users in February 2023[3], more than half of the country's population. Furthermore, the Centre for Democracy and Development, in its publication on social media and 2023 election campaigns, asserts that the number of active social media users has increased from 27 million to 36 million ahead of the 2023 general elections[4]. This indicates that a large number of Nigerians have tapped into different social media platforms, which is a factor that can account for a change in the dimension of politics and election attitude from what it used to be in Nigeria.

Social media has positively reshaped election dynamics, with the hope of changing the old political order and prospective future elections. However, the negative impact of social media is to the detriment of Nigeria's polity, due to the advancement of political propaganda and to the spreading of unrealistic and misleading information able to stir ethnic consciousness, which could breed disunity. A progress in digital literacy can contribute to this proliferation of misleading political content, posing a challenge to a healthy political environment and the integrity of electioneering processes. The Nigerian government has introduced regulatory measures for social media in response to the frequent spread of impactful but unreliable information that threatens the ethical standards of politics and elections. However, many Nigerians view such regulations as an attempt to restrict their freedom of expression [Arikenbi, Omobude, Oigiangbe 2022]. It is crucial for social media users to cultivate awareness and a mindset that minimizes destructive political noise, ensuring a conducive environment for free and fair elections.

Social media platforms bring people together, creating an entity for political participation and sharing of opinions freely without discrimination. It has promoted digital literacy and ensured transparency in an algorithmic process of important steps toward establishing a healthier online political environment that empowers voters to make informed decisions [Igbinedion, Ajisebiyawo 2023]. However, its direct impact on

[1] Luckscheiter J. Bots and Biases: The Role of Social Media in Nigeria's Elections. An Interview with Dr. Tobi Oluwatola. *Heinrich Boll Stiftung*. 26.10.2022. https://ng.boell.org/en/2022/10/26/bots-and-biases-role-social-media-nigerias-elections (accessed: 11.03.2025)

[2] Chukwu N. From hashtags to ballots: how an army of social media consultants and influencers impacted Nigeria's 2023 elections. *Techcabal*. 06.07.2023. https://techcabal.com/2023/07/06/social-media-campaign-nigeria-elections/ (accessed: 11.03.2025)

[3] Jaiyeola T. Soaring data usage fuels Nigerians' record N5tn telecom spending in 1yr. *Business Day*. 14.01.2025. https://businessday.ng/technology/article/soaring-data-usage-fuels-nigerians-record-n5tn-telecom-spending-in-1yr/ (accessed: 11.03.2025)

[4] Jibrin I. Social media and the 2023 election campaigns. *Premium Times*. 17.02.2023. https://premiumtimesng.com/opinion/582551-social-media-and-the-2023-election-campaigns-by-jibrin-ibrahim.html (accessed: 11.03.2025)

election outcomes remains unclear. In the 2023 Nigerian presidential election, the All Progressives Congress (APC) secured victory despite being less active on social media compared to the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Labour Party (LP). This suggests that social media presence alone did not determine the election's outcome. Supporters of the PDP and LP responded differently to the results, with many expressing dissatisfaction. Some political analysts attributed this reaction to misinformation circulating on social media. However, social media played a crucial role in the Labour Party's unexpected victory in Lagos, traditionally an APC stronghold and the home state of its presidential candidate. This outcome underscored the influence of online engagement in shaping political dynamics. Many believe that it has transformed and modernized Nigeria's electioneering process.

The impact of social media on the 2023 presidential election can be viewed from two perspectives. Supporters argue that it has contributed to the growth of Nigeria's electoral system and offers hope for future elections. On the other hand, critics believe that social media has done more harm than good by spreading misinformation and disinformation, which influenced public perception of the election. Several opinion polls and online surveys predicted outcomes favoring different candidates. However, a common observation is that many social media users are vocal online but do not actively participate in the voting process [Ogundare, Seriki, Edun 2023]. While social media serves as an educational tool, it does not determine election results, as it fails to reach many illiterate voters, who form a significant portion of the electorate. This paper examines the influence of social media on the electoral success of political parties in Africa, using Nigeria's 2023 presidential election as a case study.

While social media has become a powerful tool in modern electioneering, its direct influence on electoral outcomes remains debatable. The 2023 Nigerian presidential election showcased the contrast between digital engagement and grassroots political structures. While urban social media activism played a role in shaping political discourse, the election outcome suggests that other factors, including political party structures, economic incentives, and voter mobilization strategies, had a more decisive impact. Previous analyses have often attributed electoral results to rural voting patterns without adequate empirical backing. This article seeks to move beyond such assumptions by critically examining voting behaviors across electoral districts and assessing the balance between rural and urban influences in shaping the final outcome.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Election

Elections serve as a key mechanism for ensuring democratic accountability and enabling the smooth functioning of democratic governance in a political system [Ogundare, Seriki, Edun 2023]. They facilitate the transfer of political power from one administration to another, allowing citizens to choose their leaders based on their interests and aspirations [Madu, Ebikeme, Micah 2024]. As a fundamental aspect of procedural democracy, elections provide a platform for candidates to gain public support through their political manifestos and ideologies. They also give citizens the opportunity to express their preferences by selecting leaders whose policies and programs align with

their needs. In essence, well-conducted elections offer voters a range of choices, ensuring that governance reflects the collective will of the people [Ali, Gambo, Hayatu 2017].

There is no gainsaying that, over the years, elections have become a driver to exercise democratic accountability and transparency in government, to test a responsive candidate in a political leadership. For instance, it was claimed that in 2020, Donald Trump lost his opportunity to retain continuity in his presidential position in the United States of America due to a lot of deaths and casualties during the pandemic period, in addition to his authoritarian lifestyle[5]. Elections are "an act of checks on the government to establish a responsible and responsive government, since the elected are aware that they may not be for another term unless they fulfilled their promise to meet the aspiration or satisfaction of the electorates who give their mandate" [Ogundare, Seriki, Edun 2023: 33–34]. Ayeni-Akeke [2008] asserts that the fear of being rejected by the electorates in another term since the election is a process makes leaders comply with the will of the people.

An election is a fuzzy concept, which can have slightly different meanings depending on the electioneering process and procedure of each country. Generally speaking, an election is the process of advancing a candidate that wins the primary election in a political party to test his or her popularity among different political parties, seeking the citizen's mandate into political office. It is the final stage of the electioneering process, in which the people confirm and affirm candidates for different political positions, such as legislative and executive branches, both at the national level and regional levels, for the smooth running of government under a peaceful political atmosphere. However, in this paper, the election is viewed as an important tool that provides a responsible candidate and government to ensure procedural and substantive democracy in a state.

## Social Media

Social media is a platform that connects people to the knowledge of political participation; which gives political parties a way of reaching the voters. It is a platform where people can present their opinions and express their interests, where political parties can lead their campaigns and rally support [Agbim, Etumnu, Iredibia 2023: 349]. The social media outlets like X[6], Instagram, Facebook[7], and WhatsApp enable political candidates and party supporters to reach a large community through their platforms [Shadrach, Apuke, 2020]. It is a platform that candidates use to reach millions of audiences with their messages, manifestos, and intended policies. Baym [2015] asserts that social media is a platform best described as a social web, where users create, pass, and exchange information. It is a powerful digital social tool that enhances communication and its various dimensions, from informational and networking to content sharing and participation.

This explains social media as a platform where users pass their content and engage with other people's content [Kaplan, Haenlein 2010; Igbinedion, Ajisebiyawo 2023]. As

[5] Bennet B., Rogers T. How Donald Trump Lost the Election. *Time*. 07.11.2020. https://time.com/5907973/donald-trump-loses-2020-election/ (accessed: 11.03.2025)

[6] Blocked in the Russian Federation (Editor's Note).

[7] Instagram and Facebook belong to Meta, which is recognized as an extremist organization and banned in the Russian Federation (Editor's Note).

early as 2007, Boyd and Ellison defined social media as web-based services that are characterized by three features: they "allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" [Boyd, Ellison 2007: 211]. This definition shows the core roles of social media as an agent of passing information and communication. In the context of this paper, social media is a platform to exercise democratic activities of the electioneering process to enhance and pass information that will appeal to the users participating in voting and political activities.

## THE ROLES OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN AN ELECTION: A GLOBAL VIEW

The role of social media in democratic processes in the world cannot be overemphasized. They played an influential role in elections in many developed Western countries. Long before the advent of social media in its modern sense, in 1992, Bill Clinton, the candidate for the Democratic Party in the US presidential elections, used what was named "pop media" (interactive forms of TV and radio shows) to establish a better connection to the voters and to enhance his personal image [Diamond, McKay, Silverman 1993; Igbinedion, Ajisebiyawo 2023]. This tactic contributed to the victory of the Democrats in the 1992 presidential elections. Another candidate for the Democratic Party made successful use of social media in 2008: Barack Obama's election campaign was dubbed by some "Facebook Elections" due to his extensive use of social media, such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, which helped him to win the votes of the younger generation [Johnson, Perlmutter 2011]. As these two examples show, social media power adds value to the image of candidates contesting for election when properly utilized.

Social media ascertains the level of democracy in the United Kingdom, as all the political parties are available on social media. Social media was actively used by both dominant rival parties in the 2024 UK General Election, "the first TikTok election," according to some analytics[8]. Prior to that, in 2019, both Labour Party and Conservatives were competing in their use of Twitter, Facebook, and other social media to win over voters.[9] Social media was used to reshape many issues before, during, and after the elections, such as racism and healthcare problems. One of the key roles of social media was to enlighten the citizens on matters arising before and after the election.

In developing countries, social media has played a fundamental role in the development of electioneering, particularly in Zambia's election of 2021 and the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. During those, the youth of the two African countries appeared articulate, motivated, and well-informed on social media platforms [Kohnert 2023], which gave elections in these countries a new outlook and a hope for a

[8] "The first TikTok election": Are Sunak and Starmer's digital campaigns winning over voters? *The Guardian*. 01.06.2024. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jun/01/parties-starmer-sunak-digital-campaigns-social-media-tiktok (accessed: 11.03.2025)

[9] Rajan A. General election 2019: Five lessons from the 'social media' election. *BBC*. 13.12.2019. https://www.bbc.com/news/election-2019-50785051 (accessed: 11.03.2025)

positive development in the future. Nevertheless, it is observed that social media can also serve as an agent of misinformation and be used to the detriment of opposition candidates during the election campaigns by the supporters of political parties with large social media audiences. And while the degree of insanity in the socio-political clime is controlled to some reasonable extent in developed countries, the task is more challenging in developing countries such as Nigeria, where the latest general election was held in 2023[10]. This political noise on social media, if not properly controlled, can pave the way for unethical electoral practices, which may be detrimental to human security, national security, and the holistic development of the state.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Traditional election studies suggest that voter behavior is influenced by a combination of socioeconomic factors, political structures, and access to information. While some scholars argue that rural voters are more susceptible to clientelism and traditional party loyalty, others emphasize that urban voters, despite their access to digital platforms, may also be influenced by economic incentives and political structures. This study draws on communication theory and analyzes elements of political participation and digital democracy to determine the role of social media in Nigerian elections. Rather than assuming that the rural population was the primary factor in shaping the 2023 election outcome, this study examines how both urban and rural voters engaged with political campaigns, considering party mobilization efforts, voter turnout rates, and election results at the district level.

The theory of communication was developed by Claude Shannon in his paper titled "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," first published in 1949, and was based on earlier works by H. Nyquist and R. Hartley. According to this theory, information is transmitted from its source to destination via a channel that is perturbed by a chance variable of noise, thus introducing a measure of uncertainty into the process of communication [Shannon, Weaver 1998].

This theory leads to the following assumptions:

i. The information gathered from the noisy channel (for example, social media) must be processed and extracted for the essence of it to be utilized;

ii. The receiver (social media users) must have the ability to reconstruct the message or information to limit errors;

iii. The capacity to limit the errors depends on the channel capacity (in this case, social media users' intellectual capacity and judgment);

If this theory is properly utilized, all the information coming from the noisy channel (social media) will achieve the goal of development. The limitation of this theory is its complex mathematical basis, which may prove confusing for a layman who is not mathematically oriented. However, an effort has been made in this study to remove the barrier by reducing the theoretical part to a logical and simple explanation, in such a

[10] Onyemachi F. How Social media changed the face of politics in Nigeria. *Business Day*. 09.04.2023. https://businessday.ng/technology/article/how-social-media-changed-the-face-of-politics-in-nigeria/ (accessed: 11.03.2025)

way that the readers will be able to know the relevance of this theory to the present study.

The theory is relevant to this study in the sense that all information concerning election campaigns on social media before, during, and after elections must be handled by subscribers and users of different social media platforms intelligently. If information is not properly understood, it can be misleading and even dangerous, ultimately resulting in political instability, insecurity, and war, detrimental to the stability of a state. Let us see how the information on election matters was handled by users of social media during the 2023 presidential elections.

## INSIGHTS FROM NIGERIA'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Table 1. **Nigeria's Presidential Election Result**

| Political Party | Number of Voters, million | % |
|---|---|---|
| All Progressives Congress (APC) | 8,8 | 36.61 |
| Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) | 7 | 29.07 |
| Labour Party (LP) | 6 | 25.4 |
| New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP) | 1,5 | 6.23 |

Source: INEC[11].

The table above shows the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) results from the 2023 Nigeria's presidential election. The results indicate that APC candidate, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, won the election. But the winner had lower social media presence than the candidates of PDP and LP. This indicates that establishing a broad base in social media does not translate to winning an election in Nigeria. The results suggest that social media platforms are not polling units where the winner of the election is determined. The impact of social media was felt during the 2023 general election, but it had no significant influence on the outcome of the election.

An analysis of Nigeria's 2023 presidential election highlights the importance of political party structure in determining electoral success. The two candidates from parties with well-established political structures—Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the APC and Atiku Abubakar of the PDP—secured the highest number of votes, finishing first and second, respectively. In contrast, Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP), despite having a strong presence on social media and a large online following, finished a close third. While Obi was a significant force in the election, social media influence alone did not bring the victory to his party: apparently, political party structure played a more decisive role than online engagement. This aligns with the reports that during the elections, the LP lacked adequate representation in some polling units, which may have weakened its performance at the grassroots level.

[11] 2023 Presidential Election Results. *Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) IREV.* https://www.inecelectionresults.ng/ (accessed: 11.03.2025)

Table 2. **Demography of the 2023 General Elections Eligible Voters in Nigeria**

| Category | Number of Registered Voters | Share |
|---|---|---|
| 2019, Overall | 84,004,084 | 100% |
| 2023, Overall | 93,469,008 | +11.3% (increase to 2019) |
| Male | 49,054,162 | 52.5% |
| Female | 44,414,846 | 47.5% |
| Age (18–34) | 37,060,399 | 39.65% |
| Age (35–49) | 33,413,591 | 36.75% |
| Age (50–69) | 17,700,270 | 18.94% |
| Age (70 and above) | 5,294,748 | 5.66% |
| Students | 26,027,481 | 27.8% |
| Farmers/Fishermen | 14,742,554 | 15.8% |
| Housewives | 13,006,939 | 13.9% |
| Persons with Albinism | 21,150 | 24.5% (of all registered voters with disabilities) |
| Persons with Physical Impediments | 13,387 | 15.7% (of all registered voters with disabilities) |
| Persons with Blindness | 8,103 | 9.5% (of all registered voters with disabilities) |

Source: Yakubu M. Nigeria's 2023 Elections: Preparations and Priorities for Electoral Integrity and Inclusion. INEC. 17.01.2023. https://inecnigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CHATHAM-HOUSE-LECTURE-Final-Final-2.pdf (accessed: 11.03.2023)

Table 2 above presents the demographic structure of eligible voters in Nigeria during the 2023 general elections, which reveals that the youth population tops age distribution, according to the INEC list. The youth were motivated through the social media platforms and were full of hope and enthusiasm to change what they perceived as inept political leadership. Social media has been an important medium to educate and inspire the youth about the electioneering process, as 32.9 million active users occupied social media platforms in Nigeria, of which the majority were young people[12]. However, notwithstanding the positive role of social media in the 2023 election, the goal of the youth to replace the older political leaders was not achieved despite being the largest share of eligible voters.

By all indications, many factors account for this. The historical analysis of the 2019 presidential election may serve as a reference point, when a younger candidate for the presidential office, Fela Durotoye, who was not yet 50, made effective use of social media channels and won the support of many young Nigerians on social media platforms, but 80% of those did not have voter cards and, therefore, were not able to cast their vote for him[13]. Young people are active users of social media platforms, but they are not

[12] Onyemachi F. How Social media changed the face of politics in Nigeria. *Business Day*. 09.04.2023. https://businessday.ng/technology/article/how-social-media-changed-the-face-of-politics-in-nigeria/ (accessed: 11.03.2025)

[13] Olaito Y. Nigeria Decides 2023: Can Nigerian Youth Sway? *The Cable*. 25.02.2023. https://thecable.ng/nigeria-decides-2023-can-nigerian-youth-sway/ (accessed: 11.03.2025)

necessarily politically active in the more conventional sense of the term. Over time, the youth have gradually become a source of information noise on social media in political matters. A lot of them did not vote at all during the election; some registered to vote but did not collect their voter cards. Although Nigeria's population of over 222 has the largest proportion of youth in the world, with 70% of Nigerians being under 30 and 42% being under 15 years old[14], this potential has not been effectively utilized by the younger people themselves. Their political enthusiasm is often hindered by the lack of organization on their part; and merely noise-making on social media platforms cannot effect a change. This further supports the submission that globalization, here manifested as a social media revolution, has become rather a curse than a blessing to the developing societies [Shamsudeen 2023].

The supporters of #EndSARS, Obidient group, and other activists on social media platforms, such as Twitter, have ultimately brought over 6 million votes for Peter Obi (LP) through campaigning and advocacy—an impressive result for a brand-new political force, no doubt. But the election was won by Bola Tinubu (APC candidate) with his more than 8 million votes[15]. There are some other facts that cannot be ignored in this matter, though: the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent prolonged closures of universities in Nigeria, and the stringent monetary policy with the introduction of a new naira note to avoid vote buying, which, in the end, did not have any significant effect on the 2023 general elections [Omoyeni 2023]. Some of these students were affected by the hard economic situation before the election; they could not leave the school for home, resulting in a political apathy on their part. Another angle, which goes beyond the utilization of social media channels, was the high poverty rate of the Nigerian population: according to World Bank data, almost half of Nigerians are living in poverty.[16] The redesign of the naira note, therefore, though it had its effects, was not able to satisfactorily solve the vote-buying problem, as the wealthy political parties were still able to buy people's minds [Omoyeni 2023].

Thus, it can be said that the 2023 presidential election result in Nigeria was beyond the instrumentality of social media power. The prevailing poverty situation welcomed the use of money politics during the general elections. Additionally, in some places, some citizens were not allowed to exercise their right to vote due to violence and political thuggery, and in some parts of the country, there were significant delays in the arrival of the INEC officials with election materials, resulting in frustration and political apathy. Summing it all up, although social media proved to be a useful platform for mobilization, it still may not guarantee winning general elections, as seen in the 2023 presidential election.

Section 134 (2b) of the amended 1999 Constitution provided that for a candidate to be declared the winner of an election, he/she must have the highest number of votes cast

[14] Akinyemi I. A. Nigeria's growing population can be an advantage with better data and a policy focus on young people. *The Conversation.* 11.07.2023. https://theconversation.com/nigerias-growing-population-can-be-an-advantage-with-better-data-and-a-policy-focus-on-young-people-209530 (accessed: 11.03.2025)

[15] 2023 Presidential Election Results by States (Declared by INEC). *Vanguard.* https://vanguardngr.com/2023-presidential-election-results-by-states (accessed: 11.03.2025)

[16] Oluwatobi O., Alli W. Four charts show Nigeria is not a rich country. *Business Day*. 22.02.2025. https://businessday.ng/columnist/article/four-charts-show-nigeria-is-not-a-rich-country/ (accessed: 11.03.2025)

at the polls, with at least 25% of the votes cast in the election in each of the two-thirds of all states and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja[17]. The verdict of the Supreme Court on 26 October 2023 upheld the earlier pronouncement of the tribunal court on the validity of the election, but there are gaps to be addressed in the future. If the interpretation of section 134 (2b) is that Abuja is assumed to have the status of a state, there arises a need for further clarity for future reference since, mathematically, two-thirds of the states in Nigeria are 24. What will be the two-thirds of the states if the Federal Capital Territory is given the status of a state? Will the federal capital territory have three senates like the other equivalent states? These are issues to be addressed.

Section 64 of the Electoral Act stipulated that "A collation officer or returning officer at an election shall collate and announce the result of an election, subject to his or her verification and confirmation that the (a), number of accredited voters stated on the collated result are correct and consistent with the number of accredited voters recorded and transmitted directly from polling units under section 47 (2) of this Act, and (b), the votes stated on the collated result are correct and consistent with the votes or results recorded and transmitted directly from polling units under section 60 (4) of this Act."[18] This electoral mandate was unfulfilled in the 2023 presidential election, due to the problem of technical glitches experienced by INEC [Ogundare, Seriki, Edun 2023].

The demographic breakdown of eligible voters in the 2023 Nigerian presidential election offers valuable insights into the potential influence of rural and urban populations on the final outcome. While the official results do not explicitly categorize voters by rural or urban areas, occupational and age-based classifications provide useful proxies for understanding voting patterns. One of the most notable categories is students, who made up 27.8% of registered voters. Given the high concentration of tertiary institutions in urban centers, it is reasonable to assume that a significant portion of this group resides in cities. Social media activism was particularly strong among students and young professionals, many of whom supported the Labour Party (LP) and its candidate, Peter Obi. However, despite their online engagement, turnout among this group may not have been high enough to translate their digital influence into electoral victory.

In contrast, farmers and fishermen accounted for only 15.8% of registered voters, a demographic category largely based in rural areas. Historically, rural voters in Nigeria have exhibited strong loyalty to established political parties, particularly the APC and the PDP. These parties have long-standing grassroots structures, enabling them to mobilize voters effectively through community networks, traditional rulers, and patronage systems. The election results suggest that this group played a crucial role in securing victories for APC and PDP in many rural districts, reinforcing the importance of offline political structures over social media influence. Similarly**,** housewives made up 13.9% of the electorate, a category that includes both rural and urban dwellers but is likely skewed towards rural communities where traditional household structures are more common.

[17] Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999. *National Library of Nigeria.* https://nigeriareposit.nln.gov.ng/items/a1eb9942-661f-41d7-969e-01e69a6c8c5d/full (accessed: 11.03.2025)

[18] Electoral Act, 2022. *Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette.* 29.03.2022. Vol. 109. № 61. Pp. A353–463.

Many women in these areas rely on local political leaders and family networks for political guidance rather than social media. The ability of APC and PDP to reach this demographic through grassroots mobilization further strengthened their electoral performance in rural and semi-urban regions.

These trends highlight a key factor in Nigeria's electoral dynamics we already mentioned above: while social media played a significant role in shaping political discourse, it did not necessarily translate into votes, particularly in rural areas where digital access is limited and traditional political structures dominate**.** The Labour Party, despite its strong urban appeal, struggled to secure victories in many rural constituencies, partly due to its weaker grassroots presence. Meanwhile, APC and PDP leveraged their established networks to secure votes across both rural and urban areas, ultimately determining the election outcome. To bridge this gap in future elections, political parties aiming to challenge the dominance of APC and PDP must expand beyond digital campaigns and invest in grassroots structures. Effective voter mobilization in rural areas requires a combination of direct engagement, physical party presence, and addressing local economic concerns. Additionally, policymakers and electoral bodies must work towards increasing political awareness and participation across all demographics to ensure a more representative electoral process.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: A DISCURSIVE EXPLORATION

The 2023 presidential election in Nigeria highlighted the enduring significance of political party structures in determining electoral outcomes, despite the increasing role of social media in shaping political discourse. While social media platforms played a crucial role in mobilizing support, raising awareness, and fostering political engagement—especially among young and urban voters—the election results demonstrated that digital enthusiasm alone is insufficient to secure victory without a well-established grassroots network. Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the APC and Atiku Abubakar of the PDP emerged as the top two candidates, primarily due to their parties' entrenched structures, nationwide presence, and longstanding political influence. These parties had deep-rooted support across various demographics, with party loyalists, financial resources, and an extensive network of polling unit agents ensuring effective voter mobilization and result collation.

On the other hand, Peter Obi of the Labour Party gained immense popularity on social media, where his candidacy was propelled by an energetic online movement, particularly among young Nigerians and urban dwellers disillusioned with the traditional political establishment. However, this digital momentum did not translate into electoral dominance. The Labour Party's limited physical presence across the country, especially in rural areas and strongholds of the major parties, hindered its ability to compete effectively. Reports indicated that LP lacked agents in several polling units, affecting its ability to monitor vote counting, challenge irregularities, and consolidate grassroots support. This outcome underscores the limitations of social media as a tool for winning elections in Nigeria. While it is effective for political communication, voter education, and mobilization, the absence of an extensive ground operation diminishes its impact on actual voting patterns. The 2023 election reinforced the idea that electoral success in

Nigeria still hinges on the strength of party structures, strategic alliances, and grassroots penetration rather than social media popularity alone.

Social media platforms have played a significant role in mobilizing youth, fostering political discourse, and raising awareness about governance issues. With 32.9 million active users, predominantly young people, social media has become a crucial tool for political engagement in Nigeria. However, despite this enthusiasm, the anticipated youth-driven electoral revolution did not materialize. Historical trends, such as the 2019 presidential election where Fela Durotoye leveraged social media but failed to secure substantial votes, suggest that many politically active youth online lack voter registration or do not participate in the actual electoral process.

The 2023 presidential election in Nigeria highlighted the gap between online activism and real-world electoral influence. While social media provided a platform for advocacy, debate, and virtual victories for the Labour Party (LP) candidate, the final outcome was shaped by factors beyond digital engagement. Money politics played a significant role, as candidates from the two dominant parties, APC and PDP, had the financial resources to mobilize voters, secure loyalty, and sustain extensive grassroots operations. In contrast, LP faced financial and logistical constraints, limiting its ability to compete effectively. Additionally, voter suppression through intimidation and strategic disenfranchisement affected opposition strongholds, weakening the impact of social media-driven mobilization.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) also faced logistical failures, including delays in election material distribution, malfunctioning of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), and inconsistencies in result transmission. These challenges created doubts about the credibility of the process and limited opposition parties' ability to contest irregularities effectively. Thuggery and electoral violence further influenced the election, with reports of ballot box snatching and disruptions at polling units discouraging voter participation[19]. Political apathy, especially among rural voters who were less engaged with social media-driven campaigns, also played a role. While online platforms generated enthusiasm among young and urban voters, the election reaffirmed that a strong grassroots structure remains crucial in determining electoral outcomes. Ultimately, the 2023 election reinforced the reality that while social media is a powerful tool for political engagement, it remains secondary to entrenched political structures, financial resources, and institutional factors in shaping electoral success.

Two dominant perspectives emerge in analyzing social media's role in Nigeria's elections. The first, held by proponents, argues that social media has enhanced democratic engagement by fostering political participation and shaping discourse. The 2023 election, in their view, was notable for breaking away from ethnic-based voting patterns, with candidates receiving support across regional lines. While social media did not determine the election outcome, its potential to shape future elections remains significant [Ezeigbo, 2024]. Conversely, critics argue that social media's impact on election results remains tenuous. While it serves as a powerful tool for political

[19] #NigeriaElections2023: Killings, BVAS, ballot box snatching mar polls. *Punch*. 26.02.2023. https://punchng.com/nigeriaelections2023-killings-bvas-ballot-box-snatching-mar-polls/ (accessed: 11.03.2025)

education, it is also a breeding ground for misinformation, propaganda, and political grandstanding. The high volume of unverified and misleading content contributes to unrealistic electoral expectations and erodes democratic stability. While social media platforms facilitated political discussions and voter mobilization, their reach was limited in rural communities where Internet penetration remains lower. However, this does not imply that rural voters were passive or uninformed. Many relied on local networks, traditional media, and community influencers for political engagement. Moreover, even within urban areas where social media usage was high, its impact was constrained by issues such as voter apathy, electoral violence, and systemic challenges like vote-buying. Thus, attributing election results solely to a rural-urban divide oversimplifies the complexity of Nigeria's electoral landscape.

## LOOKING BEYOND

This study highlights that while social media plays a crucial role in modern election campaigns, it cannot, on its own, secure electoral victory. Nigeria's 2023 presidential election demonstrated this reality, as the All Progressives Congress (APC) emerged victorious despite the Labour Party (LP) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) enjoying stronger online support. However, social media has significantly transformed Nigeria's electioneering landscape, especially between 2019 and 2023, by increasing political awareness, mobilizing young voters, and amplifying public discourse. To maximize the positive impact of social media in Nigerian elections, there is a pressing need for responsible digital political engagement. While social media platforms provide a space for political participation, they must be regulated in a way that balances free speech with the need to curb misinformation and fake news. Government agencies should develop policies to counter political propaganda and misleading content without suppressing democratic expression. Similarly, social media strategists and political actors must prioritize responsible messaging to prevent online sensationalism that can mislead or polarize the electorate.

Beyond the digital space, strengthening Nigeria's democratic process requires institutional reforms. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) must improve electoral transparency and address longstanding challenges that undermine public trust in the system. Political parties must recognize that social media campaigns alone are insufficient; they need to establish strong grassroots structures, ensure their presence at polling units, and engage directly with voters across different regions. Furthermore, collaborative efforts between the government, electoral bodies, and political parties should focus on eliminating vote-buying, a practice that continues to undermine free and fair elections. If these measures are effectively implemented, social media can transition from being a platform dominated by political rhetoric to a powerful tool for deepening democracy in Africa. It has the potential to shift political campaigns towards issue-based discussions, promote credible candidates, and enhance the overall integrity of the electoral process. By fostering greater political participation and transparency, social media could ultimately contribute to a more inclusive and accountable democratic system.

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*Научная статья*

# СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ МЕДИА КАК КАТАЛИЗАТОР ЭЛЕКТОРАЛЬНОГО УСПЕХА ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИХ ПАРТИЙ В АФРИКЕ: ОПЫТ ПРЕЗИДЕНТСКИХ ВЫБОРОВ В НИГЕРИИ 2023 ГОДА

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**Аннотация.** В статье рассматривается влияние социальных сетей на электоральный успех политических партий в Африке на примере президентских выборов в Нигерии, которые имели место в 2023 г. Роль, которую сыграли социальные средства массовой информации (СМИ) в ходе предвыборного процесса в этой африканской стране, была достаточно важной. Благодаря эффективности онлайн-платформ нигерийцы стали свидетелями нового измерения избирательного процесса, отличного от привычных ранее медиа пейзажей. На основе теории коммуникации, в статье делается вывод о том, что социальные медиа изменили ход электорального процесса в Африке, расширили возможности потенциальных избирателей и укрепили надежду на более справедливые выборы в будущем. Однако социальные медиа породили много дезинформации, хотя и познавательной, но вводящей в заблуждение. На основе анализа половозрастной структуры избирателей автор делает вывод об их представленности в социальных сетях. Эффективность социальных медиа-платформ не определила победителя президентских выборов в Нигерии в 2023 г., но улучшила политический процесс и систему выборов в стране, поскольку кандидат с наибольшей поддержкой в социальных сетях хотя и не смог вырваться в победители президентской гонки, но обрел политический вес. Чтобы максимизировать положительное влияние социальных сетей на выборы, необходимо обеспечить ответственное цифровое участие в политической жизни. Хотя социальные медиа-платформы предоставляют пространство для политического участия, они должны регулироваться таким образом, чтобы уравновесить свободу слова и необходимость пресечения дезинформации и фейков.

**Ключевые слова**: влияние социальных сетей, избирательные кампании, президентские выборы, политические партии, избирательный процесс, демократическая стабильность, политическое участие, поколение *Z*

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