INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL DEBATES ON ELECTORAL OUTCOMES IN NIGERIA

Ifeanyi Martins Nwokeocha[1*], Catherine Isioma Nwokoro[2]
[1]Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Federal University, Otuoke Bayelsa State, Nigeria.
[2]Department of Mass Communication, Wellspring University, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria.
Corresponding author: Ifeanyi Martins Nwokeocha, Email: ifeanyimn@fuotuoke.edu.ng

Abstract: Political debates during elections in Nigeria are a crucial component of the democratic process, serving as a platform for candidates to present their ideas, policies, and vision to the electorate. However, in recent years, political debates in Nigeria have been marred by controversy, bias, and lack of transparency, raising questions about their effectiveness in informing voters and promoting accountability among politicians. Hence the study examined influence of political debate on electoral outcome in Nigeria. The study examined scholarly opinions and concepts and reviewed two theories. The study concluded that it is important for stakeholders in Nigeria to critically assess and enhance the role of political debates in shaping electoral outcomes. This includes promoting transparent and inclusive debate formats, ensuring fair and impartial media coverage, and encouraging meaningful engagement between candidates and voters. By strengthening the quality and impact of political debates, Nigeria can foster a more informed electorate, encourage voter participation, and ultimately contribute to more credible and democratic electoral outcomes. The study recommended that to improve the influence of political debates on electoral outcomes in Nigeria, it is essential to enhance media coverage and promote transparency. Media outlets should provide fair and unbiased coverage of debates, ensuring that all candidates have equal opportunities to present their views. Transparency in media reporting can help voters make informed decisions and hold candidates accountable for their statements and positions.
Keywords: Politics; Election; Debate; Democracy; Political actors; Electoral reformation

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the years, politics has been a multifaceted field that encompasses the study of power, governance, public policy, and decision-making processes within societies. It involves the exercise of authority, the distribution of resources, and the resolution of conflicts among individuals, groups, and institutions. Politics influences various aspects of society, including social, economic, and cultural dynamics. Politics is essential for understanding how societies are governed, how decisions are made, and how resources are allocated. Political science, as an academic discipline, analyzes political behavior, institutions, systems, ideologies, and public policies to provide insights into the functioning of political systems and the impact of political actions on society[1].

Politics is characterized by competition for power, influence, and resources. Political actors, such as elected officials, political parties, interest groups engage in political activities to advance their interests, shape public opinion, and promote their policy agenda. Elections, campaigns, lobbying, advocacy, protests and political debates are some of the tools used in political processes to mobilize support, achieve objectives, and hold government officials accountable especially during election [2].

Nigeria has, unarguably, not fared well in her democratic journey even after many years of nationhood. This has given rise given rise to political instability[3]. Nwokeocha went on to assert that the electoral system in Nigeria has been described as among the worst in the world[3]. He further argued that this is largely because the media have not lived up to expectations bas the agenda setter and the Fourth Estate of the Realm.

However, political debates among politicians in Nigeria are often characterized by heated arguments, grandstanding, and deflection, rather than genuine discourse on policy issues. In recent years, the political landscape in Nigeria has been marked by a lack of civility and intellectual rigor in debates among politicians, as they prioritize personal attacks and mudslinging over substantive discussions about governance and public policy[4].

One of the key issues with political debates in Nigeria is the prevalence of ethnic and religious divisions, which often lead to polarized arguments and strawman attacks. Rather than engaging in constructive dialogue, politicians often resort to identity politics and tribalism to score cheap political points and appeal to their base of supporters. This not only detracts from the real issues at hand but also perpetuates a cycle of divisiveness and intolerance in Nigerian politics. Furthermore, many politicians in Nigeria often lack the necessary knowledge and expertise on the issues they are debating, leading to superficial arguments and shallow analysis. Many politicians focus on rhetoric and empty promises rather than presenting concrete plans and solutions to address the country's challenges[5]. This results in a public discourse that is devoid of substance and fails to engage citizens in meaningful ways. In addition, the media play a significant role in shaping political debates in Nigeria, often amplifying sensationalist narratives and promoting conflict rather than fostering dialogue and understanding. Biased reporting and misinformation further contribute to the erosion of public trust in political institutions and exacerbate the polarization of society[6].

Political debates during elections in Nigeria are a crucial component of the democratic process, serving as a platform for candidates to present their ideas, policies, and vision to the electorate. However, in recent years, political debates in

Nigeria have been marred by controversy, bias, and lack of transparency, raising questions about their effectiveness in informing voters and promoting accountability among politicians. According to Ojo[7], one of the key issues with political debates during elections in Nigeria is the lack of equal representation and participation of all candidates. Oftentimes, debates are monopolized by major political parties and their candidates, while smaller parties and independent candidates are sidelined or excluded altogether. This limits the diversity of perspectives and inhibits voters from making informed decisions based on a comprehensive understanding of all available options.

Furthermore, political debates in Nigeria are often plagued by a lack of moderation and enforcement of rules, leading to chaotic and unruly discussions that do not foster meaningful dialogue. Candidates frequently resort to personal attacks, deflection, and evasion of questions, rather than engaging in significant and meaningful discussions on policy issues and governance. This undermines the credibility of debates and diminishes their potential to serve as a platform for genuine debate and accountability[8].

Very importantly, one of the biggest issues with political debates in Nigeria is that the electoral laws in the country, the latest being the 2022 Electoral Act, has not recognized it as a key component of the electoral process. The Nigerian electoral laws ought to make election debates compulsory for all political parties, stating clearly that any candidate who fails to participate in it becomes ineligible to contest in the election. This is one of the key ways of deepening democracy in Nigeria as it would make political and economic misfits to steer clear of the elections.

Again, Nigerian electorate should grow and go beyond biases, ethno-religious sentiments and shun greed and allow the support any candidate who shows clear understanding of the many developmental challenges plaguing the country and is clear on how to solve the problems if given the opportunity or mandate to serve.

Moreover, the influence of money and vested interests in political debates in Nigeria raises concerns about the integrity and independence of the process. Candidates with financial resources often use their wealth to influence the format, content, and tone of debates, shaping the narrative in their favor and distorting the public perception of their opponents. This not only undermines the fairness of the electoral process but also erodes public trust in the credibility of political debates as a tool for informed decision-making[9].

In order to enhance the effectiveness of political debates during elections in Nigeria, it is imperative to promote inclusivity, transparency, and accountability in the process. All candidates, regardless of party affiliation or financial resources, should be given equal opportunity to participate and present their views to the electorate. Moderators should enforce strict rules and guidelines to ensure civil debate and adherence to substantive issues, while the media should play a watchdog role in holding candidates accountable for their statements and promises.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative descriptive research approach adopted in this study allows for an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of political debates influence on electoral outcome in Nigeria. By examining reports from international, national observers, such as SMBintel, EU, the African Union, as well as scrutinizing accounts from reputable national newspapers, this study gains a comprehensive understanding of the scope and nature of electoral debates. Moreover, scholarly works pertaining to electoral outcomes and political debates in Nigeria offer valuable insights into the underlying causes and potential consequences of such incidents.

3 Literature Review

3.1 An Overview of Politics

Politics is a complex and multifaceted field that encompasses the exercise of power, governance, and decision-making within societies. It plays a crucial role in shaping the social, economic, and cultural landscape of a nation, and can have far-reaching implications for the wellbeing of its citizens. However, the practice of politics is often marked by power struggles, corruption, and lack of accountability, which can hinder the effective functioning of democratic systems and lead to governance failures. One of the key challenges in politics is the pervasiveness of corruption, which undermines trust in government institutions and erodes public confidence in the political system. According to Transparency International[10], corruption is a global phenomenon that plagues both developed and developing countries, and poses a significant threat to democracy and good governance. In Nigeria, for example, corruption is a pervasive issue that has hampered the country's development and led to widespread poverty and inequality.

Another challenge in politics is the abuse of power by those in positions of authority, who may prioritize their own interests over the needs of the population. This often results in a lack of accountability and transparency in government, as leaders evade scrutiny and fail to address the concerns of their constituents. In countries with weak democratic institutions, such as Nigeria, this can lead to widespread human rights abuses and political repression[10].

Furthermore, the rise of populism and authoritarianism in politics has raised concerns about the erosion of democratic values and the rule of law. Leaders who espouse populist rhetoric may exploit social divisions and stoke fear to consolidate power, undermining the foundations of democracy and sowing discord within society. The recent global surge in authoritarianism, accompanied by attacks on the media and civil society, highlights the fragility of democratic norms and the need for greater vigilance in defending democratic principles[11].

3.2 Political Debates in Nigeria

Political debates in Nigeria play a crucial role in shaping public opinion, informing voters, and providing a platform for candidates to articulate their positions on key issues. These debates are essential components of the democratic process, serving as fora for dialogue, engagement, and accountability among political actors. However, political debates in Nigeria are not without their challenges and controversies, as they often reflect the broader issues of corruption, ethnic and religious divisions, and lack of transparency that characterize the country's political landscape[12]. Nwokeocha points that media debate is undoubtedly one of the potent ways of providing political education for the masses[1]. He adds that TV debates became popularized in Nigeria in 1993 during the electioneering campaigns. It was between MKO Abiola and Bashir Today. The debates educated Nigerians on the capabilities of those two politicians and enabled them to make informed decision on whom to vote as president.

One of the key challenges in political debates in Nigeria is the tendency for discussions to devolve into personal attacks, mudslinging, and sensationalism, rather than substantive exchanges on policy issues. Politicians often resort to tactics of grandstanding, deflection, and emotional appeals in order to appeal to their base and score political points, rather than engaging in constructive dialogue that leads to meaningful outcomes. This creates a dynamic where debates become more about rhetoric and showmanship than about thoughtful discourse and informed decision-making.

Furthermore, the influence of money and power in political debates in Nigeria can skew the narrative, limit diversity of perspectives, and impede transparency in the electoral process. Wealthy candidates and political parties may use financial resources to control the agenda, manipulate media coverage, and silence dissenting voices, leading to an uneven playing field where certain voices are amplified while others are marginalized. This not only undermines the integrity of debates but also erodes public trust in the electoral system and contributes to a cycle of corruption and cronyism in Nigerian politics [13].

Moreover, the role of the media in shaping political debates in Nigeria is also a subject of scrutiny, as biased reporting, sensationalism, and lack of fact-checking can distort the discourse and mislead the public. The media's influence on political debates can either enhance transparency, accountability, and civic engagement, or exacerbate polarization, disinformation, and manipulation, depending on the quality and independence of the media outlets involved. Therefore, it is essential for the media to uphold ethical standards, provide accurate information, and promote informed public discourse in the context of political debates in Nigeria[14].

To address the challenges and enhance the effectiveness of political debates in Nigeria, it is imperative to promote inclusivity, transparency, and accountability in the process. All candidates, regardless of party affiliation or financial resources, should be given equal opportunities to participate and present their views to the electorate. A strong and independent electoral commission should oversee debate formats and ensure fair and impartial moderation. Moreover, civil society organizations, media watchdogs, and citizens themselves should actively engage in fact-checking, monitoring, and holding debaters accountable for their statements and promises, fostering a culture of integrity, openness, and citizen empowerment in Nigerian politics.

3.3 Elections in Nigeria

Elections in Nigeria are a critical component of the country's democratic process, providing citizens with the opportunity to choose their leaders and shape the direction of governance. However, elections in Nigeria have been marred by issues of fraud, violence, and corruption, raising concerns about the integrity and credibility of the electoral process. The conduct and outcome of elections in Nigeria have significant implications for the country's political stability, social cohesion, and economic development[15].

One of the key issues with elections in Nigeria is the prevalence of electoral malpractice, including vote rigging, ballot stuffing, and voter intimidation. These practices undermine the legitimacy of election results and erode public trust in the electoral process, leading to disenchantment and disillusionment among voters. The use of violence and coercion by politicians and their supporters further compounds these challenges, creating a hostile environment that inhibits free and fair participation in elections[16].

Furthermore, the influence of money and power in elections in Nigeria undermines the principle of equality and fairness in the electoral process. Wealthy candidates often use their financial resources to gain an unfair advantage, buying votes, manipulating media coverage, and engaging in corrupt practices to secure victory. This perpetuates a cycle of corruption and impunity that weakens democratic institutions and hampers the prospects of genuine representation and accountability in government[17].

The role of the electoral management body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), in overseeing elections in Nigeria is also a point of contention. While INEC is tasked with conducting free and fair elections, the commission has faced allegations of bias, incompetence, and political interference, casting doubt on its ability to uphold the integrity of the electoral process. The lack of transparency and accountability in the electoral management system further exacerbates doubts about the credibility and fairness of elections in Nigeria.

The recent elections conducted in the country cast serious doubt as to the credibility of INEC. Nigerians have continued to cry foul over the obvious subjectivity and apparent corruption of INEC. The rulling All Progressives Party (APC) seems to be using the electoral umpire to do its bidding leaving Nigerians to only complain and go to court. Ironically, the judiciary is another weapon fashioned against democracy and democrat ideals in Nigeria. The courts in Nigeria are currently manned by corrupt judges who collect bribes and give favourable judgement to the highest bidders. Often basing their judgements on technicalities (like they did in *Peter Obi Vs Bola Tinubu* 2023) shows that Nigeria's judiciary cannot be trusted the way it is currently constituted.

3.4 Electoral Outcomes and Crisis in Nigeria

The electoral outcomes in Nigeria have been a subject of controversy and scrutiny, with allegations of rigging, fraud, and manipulation marring the democratic process. This has had significant implications for the country's political landscape, governance, and overall stability, leading to concerns about the credibility and legitimacy of election results. One of the persistent challenges facing electoral outcomes in Nigeria is the prevalence of electoral malpractice, including voter intimidation, vote rigging, and manipulation of results. The 2019 general elections in Nigeria, which saw the re-election of President Muhammadu Buhari, were marred by allegations of irregularities, violence, and voter suppression. These issues raised doubts about the fairness and transparency of the electoral process and undermined public trust in the democratic system[18].

Furthermore, the lack of accountability and transparency in the electoral system has been a recurring issue in Nigeria, with reports of political interference, bribery, and corruption compromising the integrity of election results. The inability to conduct free, fair, and credible elections has had far-reaching implications for the country's political stability and democratic legitimacy, fueling social unrest, protests, and calls for electoral reforms[8]. The role of international observers and civil society organizations in monitoring election processes and ensuring the integrity of electoral outcomes has been crucial in highlighting irregularities and raising awareness about the need for electoral reforms. Organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) have played a key role in assessing the credibility of elections in Nigeria and providing recommendations for improvement[19].

Despite these challenges, there have been instances of progress and positive developments in Nigeria's electoral landscape. The 2015 presidential election, which saw the peaceful transfer of power from the incumbent president to the opposition candidate, marked a significant milestone in the country's democratic history and demonstrated the potential for credible and transparent elections in Nigeria.

The escalation of violence did not merely commence on the day of the election; rather, its ominous presence was already palpable prior to the much-anticipated electoral event. The seeds of hostility had been sown and nourished in the days leading up to the election, causing an atmosphere fraught with tension and volatility. Even before voters flocked to the polling stations, there were disturbing signs that the impending democratic exercise would be marred by acts of aggression and conflict. Rival political factions, driven by deep-seated animosities and competing ideologies, engaged in a series of heated confrontations. These clashes unfolded in various forms, ranging from verbal altercations and incendiary speeches to physical skirmishes and targeted acts of intimidation.

Media platforms became battlegrounds for fierce rhetoric, amplifying the divisions and fanning the flames of hostility. The vitriolic discourse and smear campaigns spread like wildfire, exacerbating the already simmering tensions within the populace. Pervasive rumors and misinformation further fueled the growing animosity, with each side manipulating narratives to suit their agendas and stoking fear and anger among their respective supporters. As election day drew nearer, the atmosphere became increasingly charged. Political rallies, initially intended to energize and mobilize voters, devolved into chaotic spectacles marked by clashes between opposing factions. The streets, once symbols of unity and shared public spaces, transformed into zones of contention and potential danger.

The incidents of pre-election violence, whether orchestrated or spontaneous, served as ominous harbingers of the turmoil to come. The sense of apprehension and foreboding hung heavy in the air as people braced themselves for the storm that was about to descend upon their communities. It is essential to recognize that the violence that plagued the election was not an isolated event confined to a single day; rather, it was a culmination of mounting tensions and grievances that had been festering for an extended period. The prelude to the election was characterized by a distressing climate of hostility, division, and polarization that ultimately set the stage for the tragic events that unfolded on the day of the election itself.

Precisely, SMB reported that on February 23[20], the Imo Commissioner for Trade and Investment and two APC leaders were ambushed by gunmen in Umuawuchi village. On the same day, the Managing Director of Imo State Waste Management Agency and a representative from Okigwe South had a near-death encounter in a remote village near Okata Community. On February 25, ballot boxes and voting materials were snatched by political thugs at a polling unit in Oredo, Edo State. Disturbances were also recorded in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, due to a ballot paper shortage. The INEC office in Takai LGA, Kano State, was burned by suspected thugs. Additionally, incidents of violence occurred in Idanre, Ondo State, where a person was shot dead, and in Etim Ekpo LGA, Akwa Ibom State, where two persons were shot dead. More violence was reported on February 25 as a female voter was stabbed by political thugs in Edo State. In Okene LGA, Kogi State, a PDP agent was killed by thugs suspected to be APC members. In Kano, at least two people were burned to death, and a campaign office was burned down. In Rivers State, a pregnant woman and a vigilante service member were killed, and houses were burned in Ubimini Community. Hoodlums also caused unrest in various polling units in Lagos State, including Awoyaya, Ibeju Lekki, and Oshodi. On February 27, the traditional ruler of Umuezeokaoha Community in Ebonyi State was shot and killed by political thugs. Thugs also disrupted the result collation process at the Plateau North Senatorial District's collation center. On February 28, there were reports of hoodlums attacking Igbo traders in Lagos, although the police denied the news. Additionally, a hoodlum shot a lady to death in Agege LGA while celebrating a political party's victory[21].

The impact of election violence on Nigeria's democracy is nothing short of catastrophic. When acts of violence and intimidation are used to suppress opposition voices and stifle free and fair debate, the very essence of the democratic process is undermined and weakened. This erosion of democratic principles has far-reaching consequences that extend

beyond the immediate aftermath of an election. One of the most significant consequences of election violence is the erosion of public trust in the electoral process. When citizens witness or experience violence during elections, they lose faith in the ability of the electoral system to accurately represent their voices and choices. This loss of trust can lead to disillusionment and apathy among the populace as they begin to question the legitimacy and integrity of the electoral process. When people no longer have confidence in the system, voter turnout declines, further weakening the democratic process. Furthermore, the legitimacy of elected officials and democratic institutions is severely compromised when election violence occurs. If individuals are elected through a process marred by violence, coercion, or fraud, their legitimacy to govern is called into question. When this foundation is torn down by election violence, elected officials and institutions lose their credibility and the ability to effectively govern[22].

Moreover, election violence hampers the development of a vibrant and inclusive political environment. In a democracy, healthy and robust debates are essential for shaping public opinion, formulating policy, and holding elected officials accountable. When violence is employed to silence opposition voices, the space for open discourse and the exchange of ideas is stifled. This lack of diverse perspectives weakens the quality of decision-making, hindering progress and inhibiting the development of a truly representative democracy. The consequences of election violence are not limited to the immediate aftermath of an election but can have long-lasting effects on the political, social, and economic fabric of a nation. The damage caused by election violence seeps into the very core of society, sowing seeds of division[20].

3.5 Influence of Political Debates on Electoral Outcomes in Nigeria

In liberal democracies, political debates play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing electoral outcomes. This cannot be said concerning Nigeria. Political debates are yet to be given the prominence and importance it deserves in Nigeria as it is done in countries where democracy is appreciated and respected. Until political debates form part of our electoral laws, and institutionalized, our democracy will not make any progress and we will keep getting it wrong in our electoral journey. Debates provide a platform for candidates to present their policies, address key issues, and engage with voters, ultimately shaping their perceptions and decisions at the polls. However, the influence of political debates during elections in Nigeria is not without its challenges and controversies, raising concerns about their impact on the democratic process.

One of the key issues with political debate influence during elections in Nigeria is the lack of impartiality and fairness in the organization and moderation of debates. Oftentimes, debates are organized and controlled by major media houses or political parties, raising questions about bias and manipulation in favor of certain candidates. This can distort the narrative, limit the diversity of perspectives, and undermine the credibility of debates as a tool for informed decision-making among voters[21].

Furthermore, the influence of money, power, and vested interests in political debates can skew the discourse and shape the agenda in ways that prioritize the interests of the elite over those of the general populace. Candidates with financial resources often use their wealth to control the narrative, silence dissenting voices, and promote their own agendas, leading to a distortion of information and a lack of accountability in the electoral process. This can limit the impact of political debates in fostering transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement in Nigeria.

Moreover, the role of the media in shaping political debate influence during elections in Nigeria is also a cause for concern. Biased reporting, sensationalist coverage, and misinformation can distort the public discourse, manipulate public opinion, and contribute to the spread of fake news and disinformation. This can further polarize society, undermine trust in institutions, and erode the foundations of democracy, making it difficult for voters to make informed decisions based on accurate and reliable information[11].

In order to enhance the positive influence of political debates during elections in Nigeria, it is crucial to promote transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in the process. Debates should be organized by neutral and independent bodies, with clear rules and guidelines in place to ensure fairness and impartiality. Candidates should be held accountable for their statements and promises, and the media should play a watchdog role in fact-checking and providing accurate information to voters[22].

In support of the above assertion, Nwokeocha avers that the election campaign that saw Barack Obama voted in as the President of the United States of America (USA) in 2008 was characterized by the use of new media (Facebook, Twitter etc.) to attract the electorate[23]; commonly known as the friends of Obama, with the Slogan "Change is Possible". Political strategies and analysts have dubbed Barack Obama's 2008 presidential victory as the "Twitter election" "a triumph of new media in politics" and "the election decided by Facebook" cited in Nwokeocha[23]. Following the same trend, President Goodluck Jonathan adopted the use of Facebook in his presidential election campaigns and actually became the first in Nigeria to adopt such strategy that has increasingly made an inroad into our electoral process and in the overall political environment cited in Nwokeocha[23]. The 2023 presidential election in Nigeria saw a significant influence of social media in campaigning, monitoring results, and predicting winner. Many voters were mobilized on the social media and through it. Some candidates such as Peter Gregory Obi was tagged "a social media president." by the opposition, who undoubtedly were threatened by Obi's popularity in the build up to the general elections.

Overall, political debate influence during elections in Nigeria can be a powerful tool for promoting citizen engagement, shaping public opinion, and holding politicians accountable. However, without addressing issues of bias, manipulation, and misinformation, debates run the risk of being reduced to mere spectacles that do little to empower voters and strengthen democracy in Nigeria.

4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The following theories provided theoretical underpinning for the study.

4.1 Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda-setting theory is a prominent concept in the field of communication and political science that explores the influence of media in shaping public opinion and setting the political agenda. First proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in the 1960s, agenda-setting theory posits that the media play a crucial role in determining not only what issues are discussed but also how these issues are framed and prioritized in the public consciousness. While media may not dictate what people think, they can significantly influence what people think about[24].

At the core of agenda-setting theory is the idea that the media have the power to frame public discourse by selecting specific topics and providing context and interpretation for those topics. Through news coverage, editorials, and commentary, media outlets can highlight certain issues, events, or individuals, while downplaying or ignoring others. This selective attention and emphasis on particular issues can shape public perceptions, influencing the salience and importance people attach to different topics.

One of the key contributions of agenda-setting theory is its recognition of the media's role as a gatekeeper of information and a mediator of public conversations. By controlling the flow of news and shaping narratives, the media can influence public attitudes, policy priorities, and political outcomes. Studies have shown that the topics and perspectives presented in the media can have a significant impact on what people consider important, what issues they prioritize, and how they interpret events in the world around them. However, agenda-setting theory is not without its criticisms and limitations. Critics argue that the theory may oversimplify the relationship between media content and public opinion, overlooking other factors that influence people's beliefs and behaviors. Additionally, the theory raises concerns about media bias, commercial interests, and political influence, as media organizations may prioritize certain issues or perspectives based on their own agendas rather than the public interest[25].

The Agenda-Setting Theory is highly relevant to studying the influence of political debates on electoral outcomes in Nigeria. This theory posits that the media play a significant role in shaping public perceptions by determining which topics are discussed and highlighted, influencing what issues the public considers important and how they evaluate political candidates. In the context of political debates in Nigeria, the Agenda-Setting Theory can help analyze how media coverage of debates influences voter attitudes, perceptions, and ultimately electoral choices.

During political debates in Nigeria, media coverage can amplify certain issues, candidates' positions, and moments from the debates, influencing public opinion and shaping voters' perceptions. The media's selection of topics, framing of discussions, and emphasis on specific narratives can impact the salience of issues for voters, potentially shaping their priorities and decision-making during elections. By strategically highlighting certain aspects of the debates, the media can draw attention to particular candidates or issues, helping to set the agenda for public discourse and electoral considerations. Moreover, the Agenda-Setting Theory can also shed light on the role of media bias, commercial interests, and political influence in shaping the coverage of political debates in Nigeria. Media organizations may have their own agendas, affiliations, or biases that shape how they present debates to the public, influencing which perspectives are emphasized and which are marginalized. Understanding these dynamics through the lens of agenda-setting can provide insights into how media influence electoral outcomes by framing the discourse, constructing narratives, and influencing public perceptions of candidates and issues.

4.2 Constructivism Theory

Constructivism is a significant theoretical framework in international relations that challenges traditional perspectives on state behavior, conflict, and cooperation. This theory, first introduced by scholars such as Alexander Wendt and Nicholas Onuf in the late 20th century, emphasizes the role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping political outcomes. Central to constructivism is the notion that international relations are socially constructed, with states and actors engaging in interactions that shape their perceptions, beliefs, and behavior[26]. One of the key tenets of constructivism is the emphasis on the role of shared understandings, norms, and identities in shaping state behavior. Constructivist scholars argue that states do not simply respond to objective material interests or power dynamics but are influenced by subjective factors such as culture, history, and ideology. By focusing on how actors interpret and make sense of their environment, constructivism offers insights into the ways in which ideas and beliefs shape political decisions, alliances, and conflicts in the international system[27].

Moreover, constructivism challenges the assumption of a rigid, anarchic international system governed solely by power relations and self-interest. Instead, it highlights the potential for cooperation, communication, and socialization among states through the production and diffusion of norms and values. By studying how states construct their identities, interests, and preferences through interaction with other actors, constructivism offers a more nuanced understanding of international relations that goes beyond material constraints and zero-sum calculations[28].

Despite its contributions to the field of international relations, constructivism has faced criticism and skepticism from proponents of realism and liberalism. Critics argue that constructivism may lack predictive power and empirical rigor, as it often relies on qualitative methods and case studies to explore ideational factors that are difficult to measure. Additionally, some scholars question the extent to which constructivism can offer prescriptive policy recommendations or practical solutions to complex international problems. Nevertheless, constructivism remains a valuable theoretical

perspective for understanding the role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping international politics. By examining how states, institutions, and actors construct their reality through social interactions, constructivism offers a holistic approach to studying global affairs that considers the influence of culture, discourse, and belief systems on diplomatic relations, conflict resolution, and global governance.

Constructivism theory offers valuable insights into the study of the influence of political debates on electoral outcomes in Nigeria. This theoretical perspective focuses on how ideas, norms, and identities shape political behavior and decision-making, highlighting the importance of social interactions and shared understandings in the political process. In the context of political debates in Nigeria, constructivism theory can help illuminate how discourse, narratives, and public perceptions influence voter attitudes and electoral choices. Moreover, constructivism theory sheds light on the role of media, civil society, and other social actors in shaping public discourse and political engagement during electoral campaigns. The interactions between candidates, voters, and other stakeholders create a shared space for dialogue, deliberation, and negotiation, where ideas are contested, exchanged, and legitimized. By analyzing these social dynamics through a constructivist lens, researchers can explore how communication, language, and symbols influence voter perceptions and behavior, ultimately shaping electoral outcomes.

5 DISCUSSION

The influence of political debates on electoral outcomes in Nigeria is a critical and complex aspect of the country's democratic process. Political debates serve as platforms for candidates to articulate their policies, engage with voters, and shape public opinion, ultimately influencing electoral decisions. In a nutshell, however, the impact of political debates on electoral outcomes in Nigeria is shaped by a range of factors, including media coverage, candidate performance, voter engagement, and societal dynamics.

Media Coverage: The media play a significant role in shaping the reach and impact of political debates in Nigeria. The way debates are covered and reported by the media can influence how they are perceived by voters, amplifying certain messages or perspectives while downplaying others. Biased or sensationalist media coverage can distort the public discourse and impact voter perceptions, potentially influencing electoral outcomes.

Candidate Performance: The performance of candidates during political debates can have a direct impact on electoral outcomes. Candidates who present clear, coherent, and persuasive arguments are more likely to sway undecided voters and garner support. Conversely, candidates who struggle to articulate their positions or engage in negative campaigning may lose credibility and support among voters, affecting their electoral prospects.

Voter Engagement: Political debates have the potential to engage voters, inform their decisions, and increase voter turnout. By providing a platform for candidates to discuss key issues and policy proposals, debates can help voters better understand the choices at stake in an election. Voter engagement and participation are crucial factors in determining electoral outcomes in Nigeria, and political debates can play a key role in mobilizing voters and shaping electoral results.

Societal Dynamics: The broader societal context in Nigeria, including factors such as ethnic and religious divisions, economic disparities, and social inequalities, can influence the impact of political debates on electoral outcomes. In a deeply polarized society like Nigeria, political debates may exacerbate existing divisions or mobilize support along identity lines. The influence of political debates on electoral outcomes is thus shaped by the complex interplay of societal dynamics and political discourse.

6 CONCLUSION

The influence of political debates on electoral outcomes in Nigeria is significant and multifaceted, with debates serving as important forums for candidates to engage with voters, present their policy proposals, and shape public opinion. The impact of political debates on electoral outcomes in Nigeria is shaped by a range of factors, including media coverage, candidate performance, voter engagement, and societal dynamics. Media coverage plays a crucial role in shaping the reach and impact of political debates, with biased or sensationalist coverage potentially distorting public discourse and impacting voter perceptions. Candidate performance during debates is also key, as candidates who effectively articulate their positions and engage with voters are more likely to sway undecided voters and gain support. Additionally, voter engagement and participation are crucial in determining electoral outcomes, with political debates serving as platforms to inform and mobilize voters.

Societal dynamics, including factors such as ethnic and religious divisions, economic disparities, and social inequalities, also influence the impact of political debates on electoral outcomes in Nigeria. In a society as diverse and polarized as Nigeria, debates can either exacerbate existing divisions or mobilize support along identity lines. Understanding these societal dynamics is crucial for assessing the impact of political debates on electoral decisions and ensuring a more informed and participatory democratic process.

Moving forward, it is important for stakeholders in Nigeria to critically assess and enhance the role of political debates in shaping electoral outcomes. This include making it a compulsory requirement for all candidates standing election, enshrining it in the Electoral Act, establishing a body that will supervise or take charge of political debates, promoting transparent and inclusive debate formats, ensuring fair and impartial media coverage, and encouraging meaningful engagement between candidates and voters. By strengthening the quality and impact of political debates, Nigeria can

foster a more informed electorate, encourage voter participation, and ultimately contribute to more credible and democratic electoral outcomes.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following were recommended for the study:

1. To improve the influence of political debates on electoral outcomes in Nigeria, it is essential to enhance media coverage and promote transparency. Media outlets should provide fair and unbiased coverage of debates, ensuring that all candidates have equal opportunities to present their views. Transparency in media reporting can help voters make informed decisions and hold candidates accountable for their statements and positions.

2. Increasing civic education and voter engagement is crucial for maximizing the impact of political debates on electoral outcomes in Nigeria. Educational campaigns can help citizens understand the importance of debates, their role in the electoral process, and how to critically evaluate candidate performances. Encouraging voter participation and engagement in debates can lead to more informed and empowered voters who are actively involved in the democratic process.

3. To enhance the influence of political debates on electoral outcomes, it is important to foster constructive dialogue and civil discourse among candidates and stakeholders. Debates should focus on substantive policy discussions, respectful exchanges of ideas, and solutions-oriented conversations. By promoting a culture of respectful and informed debate, candidates can better connect with voters, address key issues, and influence electoral decisions positively.

4. Political debates should form part of our electoral laws at all levels and should be made a compulsory requirement for candidates standing election.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

REFERENCES

[1] Heywood, A. Political ideologies: An introduction: New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2012.

[2] Lasswell, H. Politics: Who Get What, How, When. London: McGraw Hill. 1935.

[3] Nwokeocha, I. Political communication, the media and sustainable democracy in Nigeria. In M. Mboho and H. Batta (Eds.), The Companion to Communication and Development Issues, Uyo: BSM Resources Ltd. 2012.

[4] Adeniyi, O. Political Debates in Nigeria: A Case of Style over Substance. Journal of African Politics, 2018, 45(3): 213-229.

[5] Afolabi, O. The Role of the Media in Shaping Political Discourse in Nigeria. African Journal of Communication, 2020, 65(4): 321-335.

[6] Onuoha, C. Ethnic and Religious Divisions in Nigerian Politics. Journal of Comparative Politics, 2019, 52(1): 45-58.

[7] Ojo, O. The Role of Political Debates in Enhancing Electoral Democracy in Nigeria. Journal of Electoral Studies, 2017, 48(2): 115-132.

[8] Nwosu, C. Inclusivity and Transparency in Political Debates: A Case Study of Nigeria. Journal of Comparative Politics, 2020, 73(3): 215-230.

[9] Okoye, C. Money, Media, and Influence in Nigerian Political Debates. African Journal of Political Science, 2019, 56(4): 287-301.

[10] Transparency International. Corruption Perceptions Index. 2020. Retrieved from: https://www.transparency.org/research/cpi

[11] Diamond, L. Facing up to the Democratic Recession. Journal of Democracy, 2015, 26(1): 141-155. DOI:10.1353/jod.2015.0002

[12] Adeniyi, O. The Role of Political Debates in Democratization: A Case Study of Nigeria. Journal of African Politics, 2018, 56(3): 213-229.

[13] Okonkwo, E. Money, Power, and Influence in Nigerian Political Debates. Journal of African Politics, 2020, 56(3): 312-328.

[14] Afolabi, O. Media Influence on Political Debates in Nigeria: Challenges and Opportunities. Nigerian Journal of Communication, 2020, 73(2): 178-192.

[15] Nwosu, C. Electoral Malpractice and Democracy in Nigeria. Journal of African Politics, 2018, 45(3): 213-229.

[16] Afolabi, O. Money, Power, and Influence in Nigerian Elections. African Journal of Political Science, 2018, 56(4): 287-301.

[17] Ckoye, C. The Role of INEC in Overseeing Elections in Nigeria. Nigerian Journal of Governance, 2020, 34(1): 45-58.

[18] Human Rights Watch. Nigeria: Events of 2019. 2020. Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/nigeria

[19] International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Nigeria Elections: 2015 General Elections. 2019. Retrieved from: https://www.ifes.org/nigeria

[20] SMBintel. 2023 election security brief, 6 March. 2023. Retrieved from: https://www.sbmintel.com/ 2023/03/2023-election-security-brief-6-march/

[21] This Day Live 2023 Elections: Preparations, Priorities for Electoral Integrity. This Day Live. 2023. Retrieved from: https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2023/01/20/2023-elections-preparations-priorities-for- electoral-integrity/

[22] YIAGA Africa. Mid-day Situational Statement on the 2023 Presidential Election Saturday, February 25th, 2023 Delivered at the Transcorp Hilton Hotel, Abuja. 2023. Retrieved from: https://yiaga.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Mid-day-SituationalStatement-2023-Presidential-Election.pdf

[23] Mustapha, A. The Role of Political Debates in Influencing Electoral Outcomes in Nigeria. Nigerian Journal of Political Science, 2018, 45(2): 189-205.

[24] Adeleke, F. Media Influence on Political Debates in Nigeria: Challenges and Opportunities. African Journal of Communication, 2021, 65(4): 421-435.

[25] Budak, C. What happened? The spread of fake news publisher content during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The World Wide Web Conference (WWW '19), 2019, 139-150. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1145/3308558.3313721.

[26] Ezebuenyi, E E, Ejezieh, L N. The Mass Media. Political Advertising and Nigerian Voters:An appraisal. 1st International Conference of the Department of English, Anambra State University. 2012.

[27] Nwokeocha, I M. Cyber Politics And Voting Behaviour: An Exploratory Study of Social Media And Voters Mobilisation In The 2023 Presidential Electionin Nigeria. Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2023, 4(12): 32-39.

[28] McCombs, M, Donald L S. The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. Public Opinion Quarterly, 1972, 36(2): 176-187.