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ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE ON THE VOTING PATTERN OF ELECTORATES IN NSUKKA URBAN IN THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS.

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ABSTRACT

The use of social media to gain support of the electorates at the time of campaign has advanced to a level where mobilization, massages and organization can easily be taken to those interested. The adoption of social media in this digital generation have paved way in presenting of information, opportunities to readers, and has helped in developing of different strategies. This have helped the electorates to decide on the voting patterns as they choose their preferred candidates no matter his or her political party which is based on their choice for the way that they will be governed by using some form of national policies and ideologies. The aim of this study was to determine the level of social media influence on the voting pattern of electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general elections. Descriptive survey research design was used by the researcher for this study. The study was based on 86 populations in Nsukka urban, in Enugu state that was used as the sample size. Purposive sampling method was applied for this study. The major instrument used for the collection of data from the populace was a structured questionnaire while descriptive statistics was used in the analysis of the data. The results showed that contributors among the populace reported that social media influence has significant effect on the voting pattern of the electorates. Social media usage accessed in the political campaign by political parties in Nsukka urban fascinated the knowledge of the electorates and as well articulated with the electorates to show that it is the only means to change the political discourse. The most preferred social media platform used was the WhatsApp. The study concludes that Social media generally influenced the voting pattern of electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general election. This study provided data that could be used in designing policies and programs for the assessment of social media influence on the voting pattern of electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general election. The best social media platform to be used and can influence the voting pattern of the electorates in Nsukka urban in the general elections is the WhatsApp.

Introduction

The use of social media by different political parties in Nigeria to gain support at the time of campaign has advanced to a level where massages, advertisement, manifestos, mobilization and organization can easily be taken to those supporters that are eligible to vote. The adoption of social media in this digital generation have paved way in presenting of information, opportunities to readers, and has helped in developing of different strategies which helps the contestant to get closer to the audience of which has seen not to be available in the past two decades [Paulo Rita et al., 2023].

Due to the growing adoption of social media, recent statistics have proved that younger generations worldwide spend more than an average of 6 hour as they are linked to a socialization network [Ortiz-Osina, 2019]. With this, the electorates often use social media platforms like twitter and Facebook so as to communicate directly with the people entitled to vote [Soerensen, 2016; van Dalen, Fazekas, Klemmensen, & Hansen, 2015]. This is because direct communication can easily be established by the politicians with their followers through social media plat forms [Bimber, 2014; Kruikemeier, Sezgin, & Boerman, 2016]. Some of the information obtained from a certain voter during the time of campaign are related to other voters so as to influence them by means of other internet mediums such as Facebook, Blogs, Chat rooms, Naira land etc. [Sulaiman, 2017].

Debate has shown that social media campaigns have significant effect on viewers attitude and voting behavior [Trystan et al., 2003] and as well important influence on the electorate [Nasser, 2013]. Formally, only political manifestos of parties usually determine the success of elections which no longer takes place because, voting behavior recently has become extremely complex due to social media campaigns [Nasser, 2013]. Barack Obama in his 2008 presidential campaign proved the benefits of using social media such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to relate his message to followers which includes fundraising, advertising and advance work, organized in all the 50 states of America [Aindrila et al., 2014].

Where some political parties still depend on the old-style of campaigning such as the use of posters, cardboard, rallies, house-to-house campaigning to win voters, so many other politicians have realized that social media has high influence on the voters [Aindrila et al., 2014]. The main intension of using social media by the constituencies is to entice and generate responsiveness between people at low cost. Political parties are becoming progressively conscious of the worth of social media to fascinate the knowledge of voters and which they have realized that it is the only way to reach out and articulate with voters that could change the democratic political discourse of their party (Aindrila et al., 2014).

Some of the benefits of social media had been reported by scholars of which includes that it reduces and as well eliminates information irregularity by improving voters information access to platforms with different media [Adasa et al., 2020]. Shao and Wang 2017 reported that voters can make informed decisions about their partisan choices. Social Media ultimate benefit is that it has helped to reduce the government control of information [Adasa et al., 2020]. Kaur 2015 reported that social media encourages the development of civic engagement. Social media platforms offer access to information to a large extent to voters than ever before and has attracted attentions considerably where practitioner explore their political information as described by De Zúñiga et al. (2017).

This report is to assess social media influence on the voting pattern of electorates in Nsukka urban in the just concluded 2023 general elections. The role of the social media like Facebook, twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp will also be investigated so as to know its outcome in the just concluded election.

Statement of the Problem

Election malpractice like rigging, the use of political thugs and stuffing of ballot boxes which has been a major challenge in the outcome of election results in Nigeria have been challenging over the years. Because of this, the introduction of Bimodal

voters' accreditation system (BVAS), form E8 and INEC-result viewing portal (IREV) etc., where introduced by Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) so as to present a transparent result in order to reduce the level of violence and malpractice involved during the time of election. This research tries to assess the new voting pattern introduced by INEC to know if it offers solution to the problem during election and how influential the mass media accepts the voting pattern of the electorates. This will be focused on the experience on electronic voting during the election and how it seeks to impart emotions, hopefulness upon the candidates. The opinions, and expectations from the uploaded results from electorates will be accessed as a form of information available through social media.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to determine the assessment of social media influence on the voting pattern of electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general elections. The specific objectives are:

1. To find out the extent to which the electorates in Nsukka urban are exposed to social media.
2. To determine the extent to which social media influence the voting pattern of electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general election.
3. To access the extent of social media usage in the 2023 political campaign by political parties in Nsukka urban.
4. To find out the most preferred social media platform in Nsukka urban by electorates in the 2023 general election.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does the electorates in Nsukka urban are exposed to social media?
2. To what extent does social media influence the voting pattern of electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general election?
3. How would the extent of social media usage be accessed in the 2023 political campaign by political parties in Nsukka urban?

4. What is the most preferred social media platform used in Nsukka urban by the electorates in the 2023 general election?

Literature Review

Some of the important emphasis identified from the reports associated to social media and the voting method are seen to be encouraging. The presence of internet/social media results to higher voters' involvement because it is a form of avenue through which challenges in democracy can easily be addressed as agreed by Berge (2017). Social media is also a platform where conventional social interactions of new ideas are offered (Berge 2017). According to Adasa et al., (2020) voter's participation is seen to be relatively different from the voting patterns. A sudden modification in the electorates partiality from a more favored political group against the other due to the level of influence in changes in political ideology, structure, policies, system and leadership is referred to as a voting pattern (Adasa et al., 2020).

Social media platform offers a completely new and advanced channel in conventional social relations of electorates as reported by Berg (2017). Chen (2016) in his descriptions states that, due to the network effect of social media in some area, there is a possibility of increasing political participation of the electorates due to the positive influence on online and offline civic engagement as a result of the use of information. The extent to which the electorates are exposed to social media have been deliberated by authors. Zainon and Hashim (2017), enlightened that the level of political participation through social media by electorates appears to be highest among young people. Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) confirmed that online social media expression in his report is meaningfully related to situational political contribution. Usually, the outcome of social media on online political participation appears to associate with that offline political participation, as argued by Skoric et al. (2011).

Greenhow and Li (2013) in their report exhibited an optimistic connection between social

media and political involvement. This according to Adasa et al., (2020), stresses the importance of the current study in connecting social media to voting patterns of electorates. As we progress in this current study, Civic engagement encourages different forms of political participation, which consequently contributes to electoral involvement, but not a change in voting patterns, which allows people to express their voting preferences (Wagle 2006). The extent to which social media influence the voting pattern of electorates in general election has been a beat concern. Lee et al. (2018a, b) clarified that, unlike people who do not use social media, active users are more probable to participate in political activities as well as voting preferences.

The political advantage with social media is that it decreases, eliminates, information irregularity by improving voters' information access platforms with other media platforms [Adasa 2020]. With this, social media could be employed as a principal means for political campaigns. Casteltrione (2015) in his view, explained that internet and social media is one of the catalysts that inspires people to partake in political campaign. Therefore, the extent of social media usage in political campaign has been increased by political parties. The Internet and social media have seen to be modern source that offers new channels in traditional media and the diversified path it provides for people are believed to be active in political campaign [Adasa et al., 2020]. Casteltrione (2015) further explained that scholars view the Internet and social media as a mere political reinforcement for people that are already interested in politics. From his explanation, it shows that the political Internet and political social media rekindle the spirit in people but only for those who are already politically motivated.

Some of the popularly known social media platforms are the Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube etc. The most preferred social media platform used by electorates during election have seen to be of great interest because the electorates see it as a medium through which they gain popularity.

Facebook (McGirt 2009) and YouTube (Miller 2008) are reported to be the first two social media platforms that were successfully used during the presidential election of Barack Obama in 2008. WhatsApp has currently gained popularity because its application is free, requires minimum data, accessible, inexpensive, easy to use and does not require typing skills. With this, WhatsApp could be used as a prevailing means for political campaigns. In India, WhatsApp platform used in their last election developed a vast network of WhatsApp groups [Murgia et al., 2019] and was estimated to have about 530 million users [Bharadwaj, 2021]. The use of WhatsApp has shown to be one of the best platforms for political campaigns, and its use has spread around the world, particularly in developing democracies, giving room for parties to be able to access voters who are otherwise hard to reach (Renno, 2019).

Empirical Review of Latest Studies

Voting patterns is the sudden change by the electorates as they choose their preferred candidates no matter his or her political party which is based on their tastes for the way that they will be governed by using some form of national policies, ideologies, leadership, systems, and political structures [Adasa et al., 2020]. In such voting pattern, switching of preferences by the voter from one political party to another could be sudden or occurs in every electoral period and this is referred to by Key (1995) as secular realignment [Adasa et al., 2020].

Some of the voting patterns commonly identified among some of the nationalities like the United States of America (US) and Australia, is the party's ideologies which defines voter's decisions and are fundamental to the lives of the citizens [Smith et al. 2012]. Ideology matters a lot as soon as voting pattern change abruptly. The financial crises and economic recession faced by US in the time of president George W. Bush resulted to the decisive winning of Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election [Adasa et al., 2020]. The economic process used by Downs (1957), analyzed political apathy extensively before it turned into a considerate topic of

argument. In his report, he claimed that voters would not find it normal to join in elections on the basis of egocentric motivation alone. Some political economists have upheld this impression, but others emphasized that this assessment opposes the evidence (Carmines and Huckfeldt, 1996).

Some of the major reasons that results to these changes in the voting patterns include people's political disposition, political affect, and political participation. Another main issue is the level to which people attend to and connect to political voices [Adasa et al., 2020]. Some political commentators involved in political and ideological discussions, deliberate with the expectation of strengthening political loyalty.

Incorporation of political parties into social media (SM) have shown some significant effect which have brought about new governmental procedures (Manjoo 2016), that allows people communicate more freely. Such process has helped to create persuasive social groups that establishes some form of solidarity that can lead to protests against a political party's unfavorable policies. Some of the examples of the influential social groups include the Brexit in the U.K., Black Lives Matter campaigns in the United States, the hacker collectives of Eastern Europe and Russia, (Manjoo 2016). The voting pattern during the time of election from the various groups could be determined by the governmental polices that favors the country.

Theoretical Frame Work

The technological determinism theory serves as the foundation for the study. The extreme claims that technology advances in accordance with an "internal logic independent of social influence" and that "technological change determines social change in a prescribed manner" are currently refuted by the technological determinism theory, according to Kline (2001). A more moderate perspective that emphasizes the autonomy of technological change and the formation of society by technology is known as technological determinism (Allan, 2015). In his study,

Bimber (1994) provides additional evidence supporting Kline's notion of technological determinism, which is defined as the belief that physical objects are an essential component of the rules that "determine history rather than human will." According to Allan (2015), the definition of technological determinism excludes human agency, making it inapplicable to the great majority of viewpoints that acknowledge the impact of technology. We can place deterministic theories along a continuum, with harsher determinists emphasizing the autonomy and power of technology and softer determinists allowing for more social control and context. This is consistent with Smith and Marx's (1994) similarly moderate description.

Methodology

The situation under the research method is keen in discovering the phenomena that transpired and appeared to be comparable in some certain circumstances. The research method employed in this report is a data which comprises the use of questionnaire. The feature of illustrations from this research method presented through questionnaires permits a scholar to set a standard regarding the population concerned for the study, and presentation trends that are established to discover what is in the report (Ohaja 2003, P. 11 cited in Anorue et al., 2012). Before this, the best design to be used, the population of the study, sample size and sampling technique are considered in the report in order to discover the circumstance involved.

Research Design

The best research design approved all through in the report of the assessment of social media influence on the voting pattern of electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general elections is survey method. This has proved in most reports to be a suitable method that gathers reactions for the accomplishment of an intended research project as it carefully investigates, examines facts and findings from a large population. The research problems

obtained are effectively addressed by the researcher when survey method is used.

Population Of the Study

The population preferred in the research involves the audience who are up to the voting age that are residents of Nsukka urban in Nsukka Local government area of Enugu state. The population of people in Nsukka urban in Enugu state from the national bureau of statistics (2022) was obtained to be 444,100.

Sample Size

The sample size was calculated using the online calculator by Wimmed and Dominick (2013). The sample size of 86 was calculated from the total population of people in Nsukka urban that was obtained to be 444,100.

Sampling Technique

The sampling technique to be used for this study is the purposive sampling technique. It comprises of a simple size of 86 from Nsukka urban with the population of people obtained to be 444,100. As a result of this, the simple random sampling technique would be the best suited for this research.

Data Presentation and Analysis

A total of 86 questionnaires were displayed and returned for the analysis. A positive response was achieved from the respondents used and there was not much difficulty as the questionnaires were filed.

Table 1: The extent the electorates in Nsukka urban are exposed to social media.

S/n	Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
1	No extent	9	10.47
2	Can't say	21	24.42
3	Moderately	45	52.33
4	To some extent	10	11.63
5	To a very large extent	1	1.16
	Total	86	100.0

The extent the electorates in Nsukka urban are exposed to social media are presented as a data with different categories as shown in Table 1. The response from the analyzed categories was observed to have the highest frequency of 45 for moderately. This was followed by can't say with frequency of 21, to some extent with frequency of 10, no extent with frequency of 9 and to a very large extent with a frequency of 1. Therefore, the extent the electorates in Nsukka urban are exposed to social media have proved to be moderate from the report presented on the given data in Table 1.

Table 2: The extent social media influence the voting pattern of electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general election.

S/n	Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
1	No extent	8	9.30
2	Can't say	19	22.09
3	Moderately	51	59.30
4	To some extent	6	6.98
5	To a very large extent	2	2.33
	Total	86	100.00

The extent social media influence the voting pattern of electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general election are shown in Table 2 with the different categories. The analyzed categories were observed to have the highest frequency of 51 for moderately from the respondents. This was followed by can't say with frequency of 19, no extent with frequency of 8, to some extent with frequency of 6 and to a very large extent with a frequency of 2. The extent social media influence the voting pattern of electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general election has also proved to be moderate from the given data in Table 2.

Table 3: The extent social media usage be accessed in the 2023 political campaign by political parties in Nsukka urban.

S/n	Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
1	No extent	1	1.16
2	Can't say	6	6.98
3	Moderately	19	22.09
4	To some extent	52	60.47
5	To a very large extent	8	9.30
	Total	86	100.00

The extent social media usage be accessed in the 2023 political campaign by political parties in Nsukka urban was determined as shown in Table 3 with five categories as mentioned earlier. From the scores, to some extent gave the highest frequency of 52. This was also followed by moderately with a frequency of 19, to a very large extent with a frequency of 8, can't say with a frequency of 6 and no extent with a frequency of 1. To some extent which gave the highest percentage from the scores shows the extent social media usage was accessed in the 2023 political campaign by political parties in Nsukka urban.

Table 4: The most preferred social media platform used in Nsukka urban by the electorates in the 2023 general election.

S/n	Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
1	Radio	13	15.12
2	Newspaper	10	11.63
3	Television	15	17.44
4	Facebook	10	11.63
5	WhatsApp	33	38.37
6	Twitter	3	3.49
7	YouTube	2	2.33
	Total	86	100.00

The most preferred social media platform used in Nsukka urban by the electorates in the 2023 general election was determined as shown in Table 4 with seven different forms of media. From the data, WhatsApp got the main frequency of 33. Then others like television, radio, newspaper, Facebook, twitter and YouTube had frequencies of 15, 13, 10, 10, 3 and 2 respectively. WhatsApp from the analysis had shown to be the most preferred social media platform used in Nsukka urban by the electorates in the 2023 general election.

Discussion Of Findings

Research Question One: The extent the electorates in Nsukka urban are exposed to social media.

The extent the electorates in Nsukka urban are exposed to social media from the response for the different categories analyzed was observed to be possible based on the measure applied. The exposure to social media on the electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general elections, was found to be moderate from the assessment which gave the highest percentage and was based on the size of the frequency from the distributed questionnaires. This proves that the adoption of social media has paved way in presenting of vital information, opportunities to electorates, and has helped in developing of different strategies which helps the different contestant to get closer to the electorates of which has seen not to be available in the past two decades as reported by Paulo Rita et al., [2023]. Berg (2017) reported that social media platform offers a completely new and advanced channel in conventional social relations of electorates. From this assessment, it has been proved that direct communication can easily be established by the electorates with the politicians through social media plat forms as reported by Bimber, (2014) and Kruikemeier et at., (2016) and as well have shown to influence the voting pattern of the electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general elections. From this report, the theory shows that technological advances in accordance with social influence determines social change in a prescribed manner by the technological determinism theory as reported by Kline (2001).

Research Question Two: The extent social media influence the voting pattern of electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general election.

The assessment established from the different categories shows that the extent social media influence the voting pattern of electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general election was moderate. Some of the argument presented so far has shown that social media campaigns have significant effect on viewers attitude and voting behavior [Trystan et al., 2003] and as well important influence on the electorate [Nasser, 2013]. According to Adasa et al., (2020) voter's participation is seen to be relatively different from the voting patterns. Voting patterns is the sudden change by the electorates as they choose their preferred candidates no matter his or her political party which is based on their tastes for the way that they will be governed by using some form of national policies, ideologies, leadership, systems, and political structures [Adasa et al., 2020]. Initially, manifestos by political parties usually determine the success of elections and the influence of voting pattern of electorates, which today no longer takes much effect because, voting behavior recently has become extremely complex due to social media campaigns [Nasser, 2013]. Lee et al. (2018a, b) clarified that, unlike people who do not use social media, active users are more probable to participate in political activities as well as voting preferences. Some of the major reasons that results to social media influence in the voting patterns of electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general election could possibly include people's political disposition, political affect, and political participation.

Research Question Three: The extent social media usage be accessed in the 2023 political campaign by political parties in Nsukka urban.

Social media usage accessed in the 2023 political campaign by political parties in Nsukka urban from the data presented showed that to some extent gave the highest percentage which was greater than other scores from the frequency distribution. Sulaiman, (2017) reported that some of the information obtained from a convinced voter during the time of campaign are related to other voters so as to influence them by means of some internet mediums such as Facebook, Blogs, Chat rooms, Naira land etc. Based on this level of access to social media in the 2023 political campaign by political parties in Nsukka urban, political parties are becoming progressively mindful of the worth of social media to fascinate the knowledge of voters and which they have realized that it is the only way to

reach out and articulate with voters that could change the democratic political discourse of their party [Aindrila et al., 2014]. Adasa et al., (2020), reported that social media usage during political campaign by political parties has great political advantage that decreases, eliminates, information irregularity by improving voters' information access platforms with other media platforms. From this, social media could be employed as a principal means for political campaigns by political parties in Nsukka urban. Social media have been seen to be modern source that offers new channels in traditional media with the diversified path it provides for people are believed to be active in political campaign [Adasa et al., 2020].

Research Question Four: The most preferred social media platform used in Nsukka urban by the electorates in the 2023 general election.

Out of the seven forms of social media platforms tested as assumed to be used in Nsukka urban by the electorates in the 2023 general election, it was observed that the most preferred from the data was the WhatsApp with its frequency having the highest percentage (38.37%). WhatsApp presently gained acceptance than other social media used because its application requires minimum data, is free, available, cheap, easy to use and does not involve much typing assistances. In India, WhatsApp platform used in their last election developed a vast network of WhatsApp groups [Murgia et al., 2019] and was estimated to have about 530 million users [Bharadwaj, 2021]. The use of WhatsApp has shown to be one of the best platforms for political campaigns, and its use has spread around the world, particularly in developing democracies, giving room for political parties to be able to access voters who are otherwise hard to reach (Renno, 2019). With the result presented, WhatsApp have been seen to be used as a prevailing means for political campaigns in Nsukka urban by the electorates in the 2023 general election. The most preferred social media platform used by electorates in Nsukka urban during the general election have seen to be of great interest because the electorates see it as a medium through

which they gain popularity. Social Media ultimate benefit during the time of election, as reported by Adasa et al., (2020), is that it helps to reduce the control of information by the political party that is in government. Where some political parties still depend on the old-style of campaigning such as the use of posters, cardboard, rallies, house-to-house campaigning to win voters, so many other politicians have realized that social media has high influence on the voters [Aindrila et al., 2014]. Though, some other electorates often use some other social media platforms like twitter and Facebook so as to communicate directly with the people entitled to vote [Soerensen, 2016; van Dalen, Fazekas, Klemmensen, & Hansen, 2015]. Technological deterministic theories placed with harsher determinists emphasizing the autonomy and power of technology and softer determinists allowing for more social control and context is consistent with Smith and Marx's (1994) description.

Summary of finding

The assessment of social media influence on the voting pattern of electorates in Nsukka urban in the 2023 general elections shows that its exposure was moderate and has paved way in presenting of vital information. Social media influence has significant effect on the voting pattern of the electorates. Social media usage accessed in the political campaign by political parties in Nsukka urban fascinated the knowledge of the electorates and as well articulated with the electorates to show that it is the only means to change the political discourse. The most preferred social media platform was the WhatsApp because its application requires minimum data, which is free, available, cheap and easy to use.

Recommendation

Based on the assessment, these recommendations are presented from the results of the findings: the extent of social media exposure on the electorates and its influence on the voting pattern of the electorates in Nsukka urban in the next general elections has to be improved to a very large extent.

The best social media platform to be used so as to influence on the voting pattern of the electorates in Nsukka urban in the next general elections should be WhatsApp.

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