



Thematic Focus And Influence Of Political Communication On Voters' Decision In The 2023 Presidential Election In Lagos State, Nigeria

BALOGUN, Bidemi Mutairu

Ph. D Candidate of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media Studies,
Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Oyo State, Nigeria
ORCID ID: 0009-0001-0755-0967

**MALACHY, Onyekaozulu
Udejinta**

Department of Journalism and Media Studies,
Faculty of Communication and Media Studies,
Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Oyo State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the thematic focus and influence of political communication on voters' decision in the 2023 presidential election in Lagos State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study ascertained the thematic focus of political communication deployed by political parties; and examined the influence of the political communication forms on voters' choices. Anchored on the Framing Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the study adopted a mixed-methods descriptive survey design. A sample of 600 registered voters was selected via purposive multi-stage sampling from a population of 1,271,451 voters, complemented by key informant interviews (KIIs) with 9 political actors and media practitioners. Quantitative data were analysed using weighted means and Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC), while qualitative data were mapped thematically. Findings revealed that political communication predominantly framed welfare-centred themes, with voters being very much aware of education and youth empowerment. Furthermore, political communication exerted a strong, positive, and statistically significant influence on voter choice, primarily driven by key campaign messages and themes and social media narratives. The study concludes that contemporary political persuasion in Lagos State is an integrative process where clear, welfare-oriented thematic framing and multi-channel message circulation decisively shape electoral outcomes. It is recommended that political parties prioritise substantive, issue-based communication over mere symbolic saturation to foster democratic consolidation.

Keywords:

Political Communication, Thematic Focus, Voter Decision, Presidential Election, Digital Media.

Introduction

Political communication is an essential mechanism through which information, ideas, images, arguments, emotions, and sentiments are exchanged during an electoral cycle. Election periods worldwide are typically marked by a myriad of political and marketing

communication activities (Eneome, Ezekwelu, & Emechebe, 2023). In the context of elections, political communication serves as a bridge between candidates, political parties, and voters. It enables political actors to present their manifestoes, explain their programmes, defend their records, and persuade citizens to support

them (McNair, 2017). Importantly, a voter is not merely a passive recipient of campaign messages, but an active participant who receives, interprets, and negotiates political messages based on personal experiences, social background, and media exposure (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944).

The 2023 presidential election in Nigeria presented an opportunity to investigate the multifaceted influence of political communication on voters' decisions, particularly within Lagos State. As Nigeria's commercial nerve centre and most populous urban agglomeration, Lagos possesses a unique demographic, socio-political, and media landscape that makes it central to understanding contemporary electoral behaviour. Nigeria's diversity in ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic realities makes the Nigerian voter a complex political actor (Daud, 2021). The 2023 election cycle in Lagos was distinguished by unprecedented youth mobilisation, intensified online and offline campaigning, and intense three-way party competition.

Despite the clear presence of mass media and grassroots campaigns, the specific thematic contents that dominated these messages and the extent to which these communication forms effectively persuaded voters' choices remain underexplored. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for evaluating whether political communication merely reinforces existing preferences or persuades voters to make new electoral decisions based on substantive issues. This is the gap in knowledge that this article endeavours to fill.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Ascertain the thematic focus of political communication deployed by political parties in Lagos State of Nigeria in the 2023 Presidential election; and
2. Examine the influence of the political communication forms on voters' choices in Lagos State of Nigeria in the 2023 Presidential election.

Research Questions of the Study

1. What were the thematic focuses of the political communication deployed by political parties in Lagos State of Nigeria in the 2023 Presidential election?

2. To what extent did the political communication forms influence voters' choice in Lagos State of Nigeria in the 2023 Presidential election?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political communication plays a crucial role in shaping voters' behaviour, perception, and decision-making during election periods. Defined as a complex communicative activity involving language and symbols used by various actors to influence public perception, it operates at both micro and macro levels to shape public opinion and electoral outcomes (Perloff, 2017). Whether the audience is large or small, political communication is intended to achieve an effect on the recipients of the message. Candidates and parties use various channels, including debates, advertisements, and social media, to inform the electorate about their platforms, positions, ideologies, and promises (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

Research indicates that political communication significantly influences voters' decisions, swaying public opinion and altering electoral outcomes based on how messages are framed and disseminated (Okoro, 2017; Oyeboade, 2018). The persuasive power of these messages often lies in emotional appeals; emotional cues such as hope, fear, and security can significantly impact voter decisions by connecting with voters on a personal level (Brader, 2006).

In Nigeria, political communication takes on unique dimensions due to the country's ethnic, religious, and socio-economic diversity. However, with the rise of the digital age, the landscape has been drastically transformed. Social media platforms have revolutionised political communication, providing avenues for real-time engagement, citizen journalism, and direct candidate-to-voter interaction, bypassing traditional media filters (Tufekci, 2017). While traditional media like radio and television remain vital, this hybrid media ecosystem offers unprecedented opportunities for political mobilisation, making it critical to understand which forms most strongly influence the modern electorate.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theories: Framing Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). The adoption of these

theories is informed by the multidimensional nature of political communication, addressing both how messages are constructed and how they are processed by voters.

Framing Theory, originating from the works of Goffman (1974) and further developed by scholars such as Entman (1993), explains how information is selected, emphasised, organised, and presented to promote a particular interpretation of reality. Entman (1993) argues that framing involves selecting aspects of perceived reality and making them salient in a communicating text to promote a specific problem definition or moral evaluation. In political communication, framing determines how political issues and candidates are presented to the electorate. It addresses how campaign themes—such as economic survival, security, and youth empowerment—are constructed to shape public issue interpretation and emotional response in a highly competitive environment like Lagos State.

On the other hand, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), explains how individuals process persuasive messages and how such processing leads to attitude change. ELM argues that persuasion occurs through two major routes: the central route and the peripheral route. The central route involves the careful evaluation of policy arguments and manifestoes by highly motivated individuals. The peripheral route relies on surface cues such as emotions, slogans, source credibility, ethnic affiliation, or visual appeal. Scholars like Slothuus (2008) have bridged these concepts, demonstrating that the persuasive strength of political frames depends on whether the message activates central cognitive processing or peripheral emotional heuristics.

Together, while Framing Theory explains how political issues were presented (the thematic

focus), ELM explains how voters processed these messages (through central policies or peripheral social media slogans) and why they were influenced to make specific electoral choices in the 2023 Lagos State presidential election.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design utilising a mixed-methods approach (quantitative and qualitative). The population for this study consisted of 1,271,451 registered voters who voted in the 2023 presidential election in Lagos State (INEC, 2023). A Purposive Multi-Stage Sampling procedure was applied to select a sample size of 600 voter respondents across the three senatorial districts (Lagos Central, Lagos East, and Lagos West), covering two Local Government Areas and four wards per district. For the qualitative component, Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted with a purposively selected sample of 9 individuals, comprising political party representatives, political reporters, and social media influencers. Quantitative data were collected using the Political Communication Usage and Influence Questionnaire (PCUI-Q) on a 4-point Likert scale. Quantitative data were analysed using frequency counts, Weighted Means (WM), and Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) via SPSS version 20.0 while qualitative data were analysed using thematic mapping.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Thematic Focus of Political Communication

To ascertain the thematic focuses and messaging frames of the political communication deployed to influence the electorate, respondents indicated their level of awareness of specific campaign themes. Table 1 presents the weighted means (WM) ranking the salience of the campaign agendas.

Table 1:
Thematic focuses of political communication deployed by political parties in Lagos State

Theme	VMA	A	RA	NA	WM	Decision
Education and youth empowerment	542	49	3	6	3.88	Very much aware
Healthcare policies	513	69	15	3	3.82	Very much aware

Economic development	334	64	103	99	3.06	Aware
Security and safety	265	119	108	108	2.90	Aware
Infrastructure development	147	100	122	231	2.27	Rarely aware
Corruption and governance	70	99	125	306	1.89	Rarely aware
Climate change & environmental issues	76	90	121	313	1.88	Rarely aware
National unity and peace	32	92	148	328	1.71	Rarely aware
Social justice and inclusion	22	2	156	420	1.38	Not aware

Key: VMA=Very Much Aware, A=Aware, RA=Rarely Aware, NA=Not Aware. Decision rule: WM $\geq$ 3.50 = Very much aware

The analysis reveals a highly concentrated campaign agenda. Respondents were 'very much aware' of education and youth empowerment (WM = 3.88) and healthcare policies (WM = 3.82), making these the two dominant thematic focuses of political communication. Economic development (WM = 3.06) and security and safety (WM = 2.90) were also salient. By contrast, themes such as infrastructure development, corruption, and climate change were rarely salient. Qualitative interviews corroborated these findings; all the political party representatives, political reporters, and social media influencers confirmed that the campaign deliberately emphasised welfare-centred messages because those were the issues ordinary voters connected with immediately.

Answer to Research Question One: The thematic core of political communication in Lagos State during the 2023 presidential election centred overwhelmingly on education and youth empowerment, security and safety, healthcare policies, and economic development. Themes such as infrastructure, corruption, climate change, national unity and especially social justice/inclusion were much less visible.

Influence of Political Communication Forms on Voters' Choice

To determine the extent to which various forms of political communication influenced voters' choices, the data was subjected to a Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis. Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients (r) and their significance levels (p).

Table 2:
Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) showing the influence of political communication forms on voters' choice (N = 600)

Communication Form / Statement	r	p-value	Remark
Key campaign messages and themes	0.742	0.000	Strong Positive
Social media narratives/opinions	0.715	0.000	Strong Positive
Direct campaign contact (Town halls, door-to-door)	0.684	0.000	Moderate Positive

Campaign advertisements (TV, Radio, Print)	0.612	0.000	Moderate Positive
Community engagement initiatives	0.598	0.000	Moderate Positive
Political debates and forums	0.245	0.012	Weak Positive
Crisis communication effectiveness	0.186	0.054	Very Weak (Not Sig.)

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The PPMC results indicate that political communication forms had varying degrees of significant linear relationships with voters' choices. The strongest statistical influence came from key campaign messages and themes ($r = 0.742$, $p < 0.05$), closely followed by social media narratives ($r = 0.715$, $p < 0.05$) and direct campaign contact ($r = 0.684$, $p < 0.05$). Interestingly, political debates had a weak correlation ($r = 0.245$), and crisis communication yielded a statistically non-significant relationship. Key informants emphasised that social media became decisive not because influencers dictated votes, but because clear messages and slogans circulated until they became embedded in everyday conversation and popular culture.

Answer to Research Question Two: Political communication exerted a strong, positive, and statistically significant influence on voter choice in Lagos State, primarily driven by clear campaign messages/themes, social media narratives, direct campaign contact, and advertisements. Conversely, debates and crisis communication displayed weak to non-significant correlational influence on final voting choices.

Discussion of Findings

The findings demonstrate that political communication in the 2023 Lagos presidential election effectively utilised framing to prioritise immediate human-capital and welfare concerns. The dominance of themes such as education, youth empowerment, and healthcare align with Entman's (1993) explanation of framing as the selective emphasis of certain

aspects of reality. Political parties did not merely broadcast policies; they actively interpreted reality for voters by foregrounding themes that triggered recognition and emotional connection, supporting Brader's (2006) assertion that emotionally resonant narratives tied to survival are highly consequential electorally.

Furthermore, the correlation analysis reveals that the presence of communication channels alone did not drive electoral choice; rather, the persuasive quality of the message content and relational contact were the true determinants. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) provides a robust framework for interpreting these results. Key messages, direct contact, and repetitive social media narratives activated both central and peripheral routes to persuasion. While town halls offered opportunities for central processing of substantive arguments, the continuous viral circulation of slogans and memes functioned as powerful peripheral cues that solidified voter choices. The weak influence of debates suggests that in a fast-changing digital environment, continuous social media engagement often overshadows episodic, formal political forums.

Conclusion

This study concludes that political communication significantly influenced voters' decisions in the 2023 presidential election in Lagos State, primarily through precise thematic framing and multi-channel message reinforcement. Campaigns successfully anchored public discourse on tangible welfare themes – education, youth empowerment, and healthcare – while leveraging key campaign

messages and social media narratives to decisively persuade the electorate.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Political parties should sustain integrated communication strategies that blend digital platforms with grassroots visibility, allocating greater emphasis to substantive, issue-based communication.
2. Campaign teams should deepen policy communication on under-emphasised critical themes, such as infrastructure, climate change, and social justice, to broaden democratic discourse beyond immediate welfare slogans.
3. Media organisations should strengthen analytical election coverage, ensuring that political debates and policy comparisons are adapted for digital platforms to compete with the rapid spread of peripheral social media slogans.
4. Political actors must utilise social media strategically and ethically, prioritising transparent engagement over manipulative tactics, recognising its profound influence on contemporary voter choices.

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