

## **Mass Media, Voter Education and the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Voter education is critical to successful elections, and the mass media can be effectively engaged to achieve it. Nigeria's mass media are efficient socio-politico message delivery channels which can be relied upon to educate voters for the 2023 general elections. This paper provides perspective from the Agenda Setting Theory to show that Nigerian mass media can successfully draw public attention to pertinent election-related issues to enhance participation in the 2023 general elections through voter education content. The paper shows that the media must team up with INEC and government public enlightenment agencies to trigger public discussions on electoral matters and assist members of the public in getting up-to-date information by providing necessary details, analyses, illustrations and demonstrations. The paper identifies the elitist perception of the media, apathy to political issues, and distrust of politicians as the constraints to voter education by the mass media. The paper recommends that all tiers of government, INEC, NPC, NOA, political parties and other stakeholders in the 2023 general election should participate in voters' education. The government and politicians should cultivate the electorate's trust through impactful trust-building activities.

**Key Words:** Voter education, general election, agenda setting, electoral process, mass media

### **INTRODUCTION**

The successful conduct of any general election depends on the level of enlightenment of voters about the electoral process and what is expected of them. This much-needed voter enlightenment can be achieved through effective voter education. Voters' education provides valuable information on voters' registration, the voting process, and all that is expected of voters before, during and after elections (Adepoju, 2022; Ogbu, 2020).

Several channels of voter education can be explored in Nigeria. Notable among them are group interactions in town hall meetings, places of worship, village squares, motor parks and other public gatherings; advocacy; engagements with students in schools/campuses of higher institutions; social media platforms and the conventional mass media of newspapers, magazines, radio and television. Without prejudice to the other channels of voters' education, this discourse focuses on the role of the mass media in voters' education concerning the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

### **CONCEPTUALISING VOTERS' EDUCATION**

In simple terms, voters' education is the enlightenment of voters on voting. From a broader perspective, voters' education covers what voters need to know and do before, during and after voting in general elections. The preceding covers various activities over time (ACE Project, 2022).

Voters' education is the deliberate, planned and comprehensive provision of requisite knowledge to voters for active and productive participation in specific elections (Ogbu, 2020). From another angle, voters' education is the process of acquainting voters with the necessary information, schedules and materials about specifications, nature and processes of particular elections (Okon, 2014; Adepoju, 2022). This suggests that voters' education is election-specific as the social and political realities associated with elections may vary from one election to another. Voters' education has also provided information and persuasions necessary to motivate and prepare voters to participate fully in general elections (ACE Project, 2022). Accordingly, for any voter's education to be effective, it must be detailed, lucid and systematically delivered to the target audience in the most appropriate form, locations and time through the most appropriate channels.

Voters' education is expected to cover all the vital aspects of the particular election under focus. Among them are issues of eligibility to vote; voters' registrations; confirmation of names on voters' registers; and how to collect, manage and secure voters' cards. It also deals with the provision of information on the nature of the election; election calendar/timetable; political offices being contested for; the names, logos and images of participating political parties, as well as the names and photographs of candidates (especially where independent candidates are running for offices). A good voters' education is expected to acquaint voters with knowledge of locations and easy access to voting centres; how to access, interpret and fill in ballot papers; the casting votes; what to bring and what not to bring to polling centres; what to do after voting and how to report complaints and register objections peacefully (Okon, 2014; Ogbu, 2020; ACE Project, 2022; Adepoju, 2022).

#### NEED FOR VOTERS' EDUCATION

Voters' education is essential in any given election because it instigates the interest and participation of voters in the electoral process. This is achieved through the adequate provision and interpretation of information on the nature of the election, the relevance of the election to voters, voters' registration, voting centres and transfers of polling units initially registered by voters, voting procedure, election-related offences and the penalties they attract (Nigerian Finder, 2022a). The aims of voters' education include sensitising the electorate on the nature of specific elections in terms of the category of political office holders to be elected, how their positions in governance affect voters and their tenure in office. These details are provided by voters' education to indicate the relevance of the election to the voters and society in general to encourage mass participation.

The public needs adequate information about who is eligible to vote and who is not. This eligibility may be in age, nationality and period of residence in the country. In sensitising members of the public in this area, there is a need to emphasise that such eligibility is not a privilege but a constitutional right of citizens. The public must also be acquainted with participating in an election as a voter is a civic responsibility expected of every eligible voter.

In a democratic process, voting in an election is usually preceded by voters' registration. This means that no matter the qualification and willingness to participate in the electoral process, the public can only exercise that right if they are duly registered. In other words, the process of voting in an election begins with voters' registration. Effective voter education ensures the success of voters' registration by providing information about it ahead of time. Information regarding registration schedules regarding dates, times, venue and requirements is brought to the electorate's knowledge before and throughout the exercise. These bits of information are usually presented to the electorate to motivate individuals to register correctly as voters and to consolidate the registration by indicating where and how to collect voters' cards and cross-check names on the list of registered voters.

The ease with which the electorate votes on election day indicates the success of the electoral process. Given this, voters' education emphasises providing adequate information on designated voting centres. This is to make it easy for voters to know where to vote and how to get there quickly. There is usually a provision for registered voters to transfer their polling units as it best suits their convenience. This also is to encourage the electorate to vote. Accordingly, voters' education supports this process by adequately informing voters about the conditions and procedures for transferring their polling units.

Voting is procedural. It is not haphazard. Individual voters, therefore, need to be acquainted with voting procedures to make the exercise as hitch-free as possible. Voters' education goes a long way in making voters aware of what they are expected to do to vote successfully so that their votes can count and be counted. Voters' education in this regard intimates voters with the name, slogans and logos of all political parties fielding candidates in the general election so that voters can quickly identify the parties they wish to vote for on the ballot papers. Suppose independent candidates are allowed to contest in the election. In that case, voters' education goes further to acquaint voters with

the names of independent candidates as they appear on the ballot papers to expedite identification and selection by voters. Voters must usually thumbprint on the provided spaces corresponding to their chosen political parties or candidates. This is because their votes can be voided if they thumbprint wrongly. This aspect must be well-explained and demonstrated for the voters to ensure a thorough understanding of the process.

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actions constitute electoral offences, and these actions are usually well-defined. This ensures that everyone participating in the election (including voters) knows what constitutes electoral offences and the penalties they attract. Even while it is said that "ignorance is not an excuse in law", voters need to be adequately tutored on electoral offences and the attendant repercussions to guarantee their abstinence from such. Voters' education is very effective in familiarising voters with electoral offences, thus serving the dual purpose of discouraging them from indulging in electoral offences and enabling them to identify and report observed electoral offenders. As a result, voters' education equally clearly spells out the procedure for effectively reporting electoral offenders to appropriate authorities in the overall interest of the electoral process.

#### MASS MEDIA AND VOTER EDUCATION

The media of mass communication (mass media) are formal establishments whose primary objective is to source for, process and disseminate information, ideas and attitudes to a large, public, heterogeneous and widely dispersed audience simultaneously (Umuerrri & Galadima, 2012; Assay, 2010). The mass media effectively reaches many people in any modern society with a vast array of information with remarkable speed and volume. They refer to the vehicles of mass communication, and each mass medium is powerful in its own right (Hasan, 2014). These formal organisations of interest in this discourse are newspapers, magazines, radio and television establishments, which are potent organs for creating awareness.

The mass media has been described as a vital instrument to foster change in any society, especially in the political terrain (Ibagere, 2009). This is because the media of mass communication have been generally referred to as the fastest route to the public space (Abimbola, 2022). The media of mass communication are so described because they can make messages available to members of the audience far beyond the immediate proximity of message sources, and they are very effective for informing, educating and entertaining the audience (Orhewere & Onosu, 2012)

The above mass media descriptions show that they are viable channels for voters' education in Nigeria. The country has many government and privately-owned newspapers, magazines, radio and television organisations. Nigeria has a pluralistic and fairly advanced mass media industry that accommodates the country's diversity (Pate & Mojaye, 2014; Osazee-Odia & Ijeh, 2017). Available records show over six hundred and twenty-five radio and television stations and over one hundred newspapers and news magazines titles in Nigeria (Nigeria Finder 2022b; Adegboyega, 2021). While newspaper and magazine circulation may be restricted to urban centres, radio and television coverage extends to all urban areas and many rural communities. With this widespread reach of the mass media in Nigeria (especially radio and television), engaging Nigerian media in mass communication in voters' education is likely to achieve great results.

With particular reference to the audio and audio-visual messages relayed by radio and television, voters' education targeted illiterate and semi-literate members of the public stand chances of being effective. This is because the nature of broadcast content makes it easier to explain, illustrate and demonstrate critical components of voters' education messages with audio/visual aids to all voters, irrespective of their educational levels. Even newspapers and magazines that are supposed to reach

only literate voters can accommodate photographs, images and cartoons that even illiterate and semi-literate voters can learn from because "a picture can speak more than a thousand words".

#### AGENDA SETTING AND MASS MEDIA INVOLVEMENT IN VOTERS' EDUCATION

The Agenda Setting Theory provides a theoretical framework for using mass media in voters' education ahead of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. The tenets of the theory are traceable to the observation of Bernard Cohen in 1963 that although the mass media may not be successful most times in telling members of the audience "what to think", they are very successful in telling them "what to think about" (Ijeh, 2012; Asemah, Nwammuo and Nkwam-Uwaoma 2017). The mass media generally set agendas on political issues by forcing public attention on specific issues, building public images of political actors/activities and consistently presenting content that suggests what members of the public should think about, know about and develop feelings about (Ijeh, 2012). This suggests that Nigerian newspapers, magazines, radio and television content can be used to draw voters' attention to relevant subjects of voters' education in such a way as to influence them to take note of the issues, ponder on them and talk about them. Thus, the mass media can be explored to kick-start public discussions on issues related to voting in elections by the relevant authorities interested in executing voters' education as elections approach.

Voters' education goes beyond the mere provision of information, and this is where the agenda-setting function of the mass media comes into play. According to Folarin (1998), mass media can set the agenda for elections by the quantity and frequency of the election-related messages they dish out; the prominence accorded the messages, the degree of conflict generated and the cumulative effects of the concerted efforts of the mass media over time. The agenda-setting by the mass media for voters' education is not automatic. However, with consistent and concerted execution, the public consensus evolves from the public agenda set by the mass media.

The agenda-setting by the mass media on elections creates an avenue for the media to educate voters on how to effectively participate in prescribed pre-voting, voting, and post-voting activities. The theory recognises that the mass media will provide information on voting (Ugondo, 2018) and go deeper to educate voters through detailed interpretations, linkages, analyses, illustrations, interactions and demonstrations. They continue to supply additional regular updates with facts, figures, education and enlightenment needed to help the the public engage in fruitful discussion and decide on the issues at stake. This is because the ways, frequency and depth with which the mass media present issues to the public significantly influence the importance of such issues and what the public knows and feels about them (Ijeh, 2014).

It is essential to point out here that the agenda-setting function of the mass media needs to emanate from a media agenda. The mass media, as agents of social and political development (with or without influence from the partisan leanings of their owners), have to first agree on and adopt what is the ideal situation (media agenda) before selling it to the public through agenda-setting (to trigger a discussion as a public agenda) and "agenda building" (through the provision of facts, linkages, analyses, illustrations, interactions and demonstrations) while the discussion lasts. In the case of voters' education, the mass media and relevant initiators of the awareness campaign (such as the Independent National Electoral Commission [INEC], Nigerian Press Council [NPC] and National Orientation Agency [NOA], among others) need to agree on the issues to handle and what the ideal voting behaviour should be before commencement.

#### MASS MEDIA EXECUTION OF VOTER'S EDUCATION

As indicated in this discourse, mass media execution of voters' education requires concerted, consistent and cumulative efforts of all mass communication media available to public members at any time. The process needs coordination so that some mass media do not distract the target audience from the voters' education efforts of other mass communication media or work at cross purposes to

cancel out gains made. It should therefore be teamwork and coordinated by the relevant public organs like INEC, NPC, NOA, and Federal and State Ministries of Information, among others).

Another critical aspect in the execution of voter education campaigns by the mass media is the identification of sub-sets of the audience and what communication modes are best for reaching them. Mass media audience is impersonal and heterogeneous: It cannot be effectively educated via homogeneous messages, modes and delivery channels. The execution, therefore, needs to be strategic, tactical, and flexible.

The need to adopt a mix of available mass media and media content is closely related to the above. The initiators of voter education campaigns would be making a grave mistake if they attempted to select some media and exclude others. With viable and credible mass media-related unions and associations, it is easier to carry all journalists and other media workers along in the execution of voters' education. This way, all media content and message delivery modes are harnessed in a mix. Some critical newspaper and magazine contents that can be deployed for voters' education are news reports, editorials, cartoons, features, columns and photographs/images. On their part, the audio-visual media of radio and television can deploy news reports, news commentaries/analyses, documentaries, drama/playlets, spot announcements, continuity tit-bits, discussion programmes, vox pops, audio and video phone-in programmes and other forms of audience interactive programmes.

The effectiveness of voters' education through the mass media rests on the principles of objectivity. Media workers involved in voters' education must realise that the enterprise is a "media agenda" and not that of political parties and politicians. They must therefore stay focused on the successful transformation of the "media agenda" to the "public agenda" and then to favourable public resolutions. The mass media participating in voters' education should resist the temptation by political parties and politicians to introduce slants into the voters' education messages to give them an advantage over the opposition in any way.

#### PROSPECTS OF MASS MEDIA INVOLVEMENT IN VOTERS' EDUCATION

The involvement of the mass media in voters' education for the 2023 general election holds prospects for the success of the awareness campaign, which can contribute to its overall success. This is because the mass media draw the attention of members of the public to issues they present. It is challenging to sweep matters under the carpet when they are topics of mass media messages (Ibagere, 2009). By extension, the deployment of the mass media for voters' education is a sure way to guarantee that it is not ignored or overshadowed by other societal issues.

Education is best delivered in an interactive atmosphere. Gone are the days when the mass media were assumed to lack interactive two-way communication. Technological evolution has made it possible for all forms of mass media to explore interactive mechanisms in message delivery, even if it may be at different levels. For example, many broadcast programmes now accommodate instant interactions with the audience through audio and video telephone calls from or to the studio, GSM text messaging, social media posts and emails. Public members can initiate conversations with the mass media by asking questions on issues presented, seeking clarifications and making inputs to voters' education messages. Newspapers and magazines with online versions equally accommodate instant interaction among readers via the comment/reaction mechanisms usually provided for in many of their online contents. These interactions provide much-needed opportunities for the mass media to engage with their audience to enhance message delivery. This interactivity is an advantage for voters' education for the 2023 general election. It enables the mass media to easily monitor audience reactions to their messages to identify areas that need more emphasis.

The mass media is credited with overcoming almost every barrier to voters' education, especially when they collectively engage. The features and capabilities of others surmount the limitations of one medium. Members of the audience who cannot read newspapers and magazines can learn from

watching and listening to television and radio programmes. In contrast, literate audience members who miss broadcast programmes can read newspapers and magazines conveniently since print media messages are permanent, unlike transient radio and television programmes.

Voters' education messages disseminated through the mass media are expected to be of high quality. The contents are typically generated and processed so that blemishes are eliminated, and adequate elements to enhance effectiveness, such as appropriate depth of information, approach, personnel, style, illustrations and demonstrations, are infused as much as possible. Another prospect of using the mass media for voter education is that their messages are usually prepared with inputs from experts in the field of knowledge covered. This enhances success because effectiveness in message delivery is not all about "what is said" but "how it is said".

#### BARRIERS TO MASS MEDIA INVOLVEMENT IN VOTERS' EDUCATION

It will be erroneous to assume that the mass media will be a magic wand for voters' education in Nigeria. Irrespective of the powers of the mass media to bring about positive socio-politico changes in society, they have their limitations when it comes to voters' education in Nigeria. These limitations are hinged on the reality that mass media content consumers are selective of what they consume (Osazee-Odia & Ijeh, 2017). The first barrier is the perception of the Nigerian mass media as elitist by the ordinary people, who are the majority in the country. Many people in the lower class, who form a substantial part of the target audience for voters' education, tend to suspect the mass media and media workers of "being too close to the government and politicians for comfort" (Oso, 2013). As a result, any politically-oriented media content (including voters' education) may be perceived from a prejudiced point of view. If this happens, voters' education through the mass media will not achieve set objectives.

It has been pointed out that there is a relatively high level of political apathy in the rural areas of Nigeria, where a significant fraction of the population resides (Eze, 2004). These areas have been described as usually excluded from the attention of the Nigerian mass media, which are seen as largely urban-concentrated and urban-oriented. In light of the above, many rural dwellers believe that mass media content (including voters' education) is not intended for them.

Another barrier to the consumption and believability of mass media messages on voters' education is the trust deficit between the citizens and the political class, especially in Nigeria. This is because politicians have been noted for making fantastic promises during campaigns and abandoning the same to self-serving after winning elections (Ijeh & Oghiagbepha, 2019). This has made the majority of the electorate lose interest in elections and messages concerning elections, including voters' education in the media.

Voters' education requires practical demonstration with pictorial and visual images, and this can better be achieved through television, newspapers and magazines. Still, poor electricity supply, poverty, and audience preference for entertainment content in the media are other factors inhibiting the media's role in voters' education. The cost of subscription to cable television and the unreliability of terrestrial television, poor/unstable electricity supply make it difficult for them to access media information. The country's poverty level has limited an average Nigerian's ability to buy newspapers and magazines and even subscribe to online newspaper platforms, which require data for network services. Ironically, even those who can afford television viewing by providing their sources of electricity, the majority of them prefer entertainment content like movies to other programmes like news and analyses. All these make many target audiences shun voters' education in the media.

#### CONCLUSION

Voters' education is critical to Nigeria's successful conduct of the 2023 general elections. While the government, INEC, NPC, political parties/candidates and their supporters have their role in the

election's success, the voters' informed participation goes a long way in determining the success or failure of the exercise. Therefore, efficient voter education must be carried out to acquaint voters with the voting procedures, electoral offences to avoid, and avenues for complaints.

The mass media is a very powerful organ of information dissemination, social change communication, social mobilisation and socio-political education in Nigeria. The Nigeria mass media industry is a strong one. It has proved to be an efficient socio-political message delivery channel which can be relied upon for voters' education for the 2023 general election.

The Agenda Setting Theory of mass communication also shows that the Nigeria mass media can successfully draw the public's attention to pertinent issues that will help voters participate effectively in the 2023 general elections through voters' education content. To do this successfully, the Nigerian mass media are expected to join forces and work as a team to fashion out the mass media agenda, which they will attempt to convey to their audience as public agenda to trigger discussions among members of the public. As the public discussion progresses, the mass media are expected to assist members of the public in concluding the discussion by providing necessary details, analyses, illustrations and demonstrations.

However, the Nigerian mass media can be constrained in their voter education efforts by audience prejudices arising from their being perceived as elitist or compromised by members of the public. There is also some apathy to political issues among some sections of Nigerian, especially in the rural areas. These people believe that mass media messages in Nigeria are mainly urban-oriented and that the government and politicians only remember rural areas during elections. This bias can limit the effectiveness of mass media voters' education efforts for the 2023 general elections.

Closely related to the issue of exclusion of rural dwellers by Nigerian mass media is the perceived distance between government/politicians and the rural areas. There is an unhealthy notion among rural dwellers that the government and politicians only remember them during elections. Voters' education messages, in whatever form (including through the mass media), may be treated with levity, a situation that will negatively affect their overall success.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are put forward to enhance the success of voters' education through the mass media during the 2023 general elections:

1. The government at all levels, INEC, NPC, NOA, political parties and other stakeholders in the 2023 general election should get involved in voters' education initiatives.
2. The Nigerian mass media should be engaged in voters' education for the 2023 general election as team players with the government, INEC and other stakeholders.
3. As an institution, the government and politicians should take drastic steps to close the gap between them and the masses to prevent a situation where voters' education messages are received with bias.
4. The Nigerian mass media should accommodate the rural areas and rural dwellers in their regular coverage to eliminate prejudice against their voters' education messages during elections.

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