

The Impact of Interactive Mass Media in Voters' Education for the 2023 General Election in Nigeria: Overcoming Challenges and Fostering Informed Decision-Making

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the significant role of mass media in voters' education, focusing on its potential impact on the upcoming 2023 general election in Nigeria. Drawing on the Agenda Setting Theory and the capabilities of interactive communication, the study examines how mass media can effectively bring issues to the forefront of public attention, fostering engagement and understanding among diverse audiences. The inclusive nature of various mass media outlets, coupled with technological advancements enabling interactive features, presents a promising avenue for overcoming barriers in educating both literate and non-literate individuals. However, challenges such as perception biases, rural disparities, and practical hindrances must be addressed to fully unlock the potential of mass media in voters' education. The paper emphasizes the need for high-quality, carefully crafted messages delivered through collaboration among media organizations and relevant stakeholders to ensure the success of voters' education initiatives.

Keywords: Mass media, Voters' education, 2023 general election, Agenda Setting Theory, Interactive communication, Inclusive approach and Perception biases.

INTRODUCTION

A general election's success depends on effective voter education. It offers crucial details on voter registration, the voting procedure, and obligations. Voter education may be implemented in Nigeria through a variety of means, including as town hall meetings, places of worship, open areas, and educational institutions. It is also possible to employ traditional mass media and social media channels. Particularly crucial is the mass media's role in preparing Nigerian voters for the approaching elections in 2023. In general, voter knowledge is essential to the election's success.

Education of Voters

Voters' education is fundamentally about enlightening individuals on the intricacies of the voting process. It goes beyond a mere understanding of the procedures; it encompasses the knowledge and actions voters should possess before, during, and after participating in general elections. This comprehensive effort, spanning over time, aims to equip voters with the essential knowledge required for active and meaningful involvement in specific elections [1]; [2].

In essence, voters' education is a purposeful and well-organized initiative geared towards providing voters with the necessary information, timelines, and materials relevant to the specifics, nature, and procedures of particular elections [3]; [4]. Recognizing the election-specific nature of voters' education is vital, as the social and political dynamics associated with elections may vary from one instance to another.

For effective voters' education, the information must be detailed, clear, and systematically delivered to the target audience in the most appropriate form, locations, and time through suitable channels. Addressing key aspects of the specific election is crucial, including voter eligibility, registration, verification of names on voter rolls, and procedures for obtaining, handling, and safeguarding voter cards. Furthermore, it involves providing comprehensive details about the type of election, its schedule, the political positions at stake, participating political parties, and the identities of candidates, especially in cases involving independent candidates.

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A robust voters' education program should inform voters about the locations and convenient access to polling stations, the process of obtaining, understanding, and completing ballot papers, the act of casting votes, and the permissible items to bring or leave behind at polling centers. Additionally, it should guide voters on the steps to take after voting and the peaceful means to voice complaints and objections [4]; [2]; [1]; [4].

The Need for Voters' Education

Voters' education is pivotal in sparking interest and encouraging active participation among voters in elections. By offering comprehensive information on various aspects such as the nature and significance of the election, voter registration, polling centers, and potential transfers of polling units, it aims to underscore how political officeholders impact individuals and society as a whole. Emphasizing the constitutional right to vote, rather than a mere privilege, is also a key goal.

In a democratic process, voters' registration precedes voting, and effective voter education ensures the success of this process by providing timely information about registration schedules, venues, requirements, and the steps to collect voter cards. The ease of casting votes on election day is indicative of the success of the electoral process, and voters' education plays a significant role in providing clear information about designated voting centers.

Voters' education also focuses on the structured nature of the voting process, guiding individual voters through the necessary steps to cast their votes effectively. This includes information about the names, slogans, and logos of political parties, facilitating quick identification on ballot papers. In cases of independent candidates, voters' education extends to familiarizing voters with their names for swift recognition and selection.

Awareness about electoral offences and their associated penalties is a crucial aspect of voters' education. By informing voters about what constitutes an offence and the consequences, this education serves a dual purpose: deterring voters from engaging in such offences and empowering them to recognize and report any observed electoral misconduct. It also outlines the proper procedure for reporting electoral offenders to the relevant authorities, contributing to the integrity of the electoral process.

Mass Media's Role in Voter Education

The mass media, synonymous with mass communication channels, serves as a cornerstone institution designed to collect, process, and disseminate information, ideas, and attitudes to a broad and geographically dispersed audience

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concurrently [5]; [6]. With the ability to efficiently reach a significant portion of the population in modern societies, including various communication vehicles such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television outlets, the mass media plays a crucial role in raising awareness.

Recognized as a powerful tool for societal transformation, especially in the political realm [7], mass communication channels are acknowledged for their rapid dissemination of messages to the public domain [8]. This effectiveness stems from their capacity to provide information, education, and entertainment to a wide audience, extending well beyond the immediate vicinity of the information source [9].

Utilizing Nigeria's Mass Media for Voter Education

Nigeria's diverse array of government and privately-owned newspapers, magazines, radio, and television organizations positions the mass media as an influential platform for conducting voters' education [10]; [11]. With over six hundred and twenty-five radio and television stations and more than one hundred newspapers and news magazine titles, the reach of Nigeria's mass media extends to both urban centers and numerous rural communities [13]; [14]. Leveraging this extensive reach, especially through radio and television, in voters' education initiatives is poised to yield significant results.

Radio and television broadcasts, with their audio-visual format, are particularly effective for educating illiterate and semi-literate individuals. The use of visual aids allows for easier explanation, illustration, and demonstration of crucial aspects of voters' education. Even newspapers and magazines, primarily targeting literate audiences, can enhance comprehension by incorporating photographs, images, and cartoons, making information accessible to those with limited literacy levels.

Agenda Setting Theory and Mass Media's Role in Voter Education

The Agenda Setting Theory provides a theoretical foundation for employing mass media in voters' education, especially in preparation for the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Stemming from Bernard Cohen's observation in 1963, this theory highlights the mass media's influence in directing public focus toward specific issues [12]; [15]. Mass media shapes political agendas by steering public attention, influencing perceptions of political figures and activities, and consistently presenting content that guides public opinion, knowledge, and sentiments [12].

Nigeria's newspapers, magazines, radio, and television programs have the potential to bring voters' attention to crucial topics in voters'

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education, prompting reflection and discussion. While the agenda-setting role is not automatic, consistent efforts can shape public consensus based on the issues highlighted. This creates an opportunity for mass media to educate voters on pre-voting, voting, and post-voting activities, offering in-depth explanations, analyses, visual aids, and demonstrations.

It is crucial to establish a defined media agenda, endorsed by mass media as catalysts for societal and political progress. A mutual understanding between the mass media and relevant proponents of voter education campaigns is necessary to address issues and preferred voting conduct effectively. This collaboration involves organizations such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Nigerian Press Council (NPC), and National Orientation Agency (NOA).

Unlocking the Potential of Mass Media in Voters' Education for the 2023 General Election

The involvement of mass media in voters' education for the upcoming 2023 general election presents a promising avenue for the success of awareness campaigns, offering a potential boost to overall effectiveness. Mass media possesses the unique ability to bring crucial issues to the forefront of public attention, making it a reliable method to ensure that voters' education receives the attention it deserves amidst other societal concerns [7].

Interactive Communication and Technological Advancements

Interactive communication has become integral to education, with technological advancements enabling mass media to incorporate interactive elements into message delivery. Broadcast programs now allow immediate audience participation through features such as audio and video calls, text messaging, social media, and emails. This interactive approach enables the public to actively engage with voters' education messages, seeking clarifications and providing input. Online versions of newspapers and magazines further facilitate interaction through comments and reactions, allowing the mass media to closely monitor audience responses and identify areas that may require additional emphasis.

Addressing Barriers through Inclusive Approaches

Collaboration among various mass media outlets effectively addresses barriers to voters' education. Each medium's unique attributes complement the limitations of others, accommodating both literate and non-literate audience members. The inclusive approach ensures that individuals who may struggle with reading newspapers and magazines can still access information through television and radio broadcasts. Simultaneously, literate individuals have

the option to peruse print media, benefiting from enduring messages compared to the transient nature of radio and television programs.

Quality Standards in Message Delivery

Voters' education messages conveyed via mass media must meet high-quality standards. These messages are carefully crafted to be free from flaws, incorporating comprehensive information, approach, personnel, style, as well as illustrations and demonstrations where applicable. Utilizing the expertise of specialists in relevant fields of knowledge further contributes to the success of these messages, recognizing that the effectiveness of message delivery is dependent not only on "what is said" but also on "how it is said."

Barriers to Overcome in Mass Media Involvement

Despite the potential of mass media in voters' education, certain barriers must be acknowledged and addressed.

Perception Challenges

One barrier stems from the perception of the Nigerian mass media as elitist, particularly by the majority of the population in the lower class. This suspicion may hinder the acceptance of politically-oriented media content, including voters' education, leading to a failure to achieve set objectives.

Rural Disparities and Lack of Trust

Rural areas often receive less attention from the mass media, contributing to the belief among residents that media content, including voters' education, is not meant for them. Additionally, a lack of trust between citizens and the political class poses another obstacle, stemming from past instances of unfulfilled promises, leading to a general loss of interest in electoral processes and related media messages.

Practical Hindrances

Challenges such as inadequate electricity supply, economic hardships, and a preference for entertainment content in the media can hinder the effectiveness of voters' education messages. Factors like high costs of cable TV subscriptions, unreliable terrestrial television, and unstable electricity supply limit access to media information, particularly in rural areas. Widespread poverty further restricts the average Nigerian's ability to purchase newspapers, magazines, or subscribe to online platforms, discouraging engagement with voters' education in the media.

Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive and collaborative effort from both media organizations and relevant stakeholders to ensure that voters' education reaches its intended audience and contributes to informed decision-making in the 2023 general election.

CONCLUSION

The prospects of mass media involvement in voters' education for the 2023 general election are considerable, offering a promising avenue for success. The ability of mass media to bring crucial issues to public attention and foster interactive communication underscores its potential impact on raising awareness and enhancing overall effectiveness. Collaborative efforts among various media outlets, coupled with advancements in technology, create opportunities to overcome barriers and reach diverse audiences, ensuring

inclusive voter education. However, challenges such as perception biases, rural disparities, and practical hindrances necessitate focused attention and strategic interventions. By addressing these challenges and ensuring the delivery of high-quality messages, mass media can play a pivotal role in empowering voters, fostering informed decision-making, and contributing to the success of the democratic process in the 2023 general election in Nigeria.

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