

**POLITICAL CAMPAIGN MESSAGES AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE: A STUDY OF
2023 GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION IN AKWA IBOM STATE**

By

Joseph Peter Iniodu
Faculty of Media and Communication Studies
University of Uyo, Uyo.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the influence of political campaign messages on electoral violence during the 2023 Akwa Ibom State gubernatorial election. The population of the study comprised all the registered voters in Akwa Ibom State - 2,119,727. Using a descriptive survey design and a multi-stage sampling technique, data were collected from 378 residents through a structured questionnaire entitled “Questionnaire on Political Campaign Messages and Electoral Violence in the 2023 Akwa Ibom State Gubernatorial Election (QPCMEVAISGE). Face and content validation of the instrument was carried out by one expert in media and communication studies and one expert in test, measurement and evaluation in order to ensure that the instrument had the accuracy, appropriateness and completeness for the study under consideration. The reliability coefficient obtained was 0.78, using Cronbach’s Alpha and this was high enough to justify the use of the research instrument. After the data collection the data were analyzed using frequency distributions and percentage analysis. Findings revealed that the majority of respondents were highly exposed to campaign messages, which were largely perceived as inciting, inflammatory, and reflective of ethnic and tribal sentiments. A significant proportion of respondents indicated that these messages strongly contributed to electoral violence, affecting both voter participation and the overall conduct of the election. The study highlighted the roles of campaign messaging in shaping voter perception and behavior, emphasizing that irresponsible communication can exacerbate conflict in competitive political environments. Based on these findings, the study recommended regulatory enforcement, issue-based campaigning, enhanced civic education, ethical media practices, and proactive monitoring of social media to reduce campaign messages that portend election-related violence. The study contributes to knowledge by linking agenda-setting and framing theories to the communication–violence nexus in emerging democracies, providing empirical insights for policymakers, electoral bodies, and political actors.

KEYWORDS: Political Campaign, Electoral Violence, Campaign Messaging, Voter Perception.

INTRODUCTION

Democratic governance depends largely on informed citizen participation, where voters make electoral decisions based on access to credible political information. Political campaigns serve as the primary medium through which candidates communicate their ideologies, policies, and leadership visions. Campaign messaging, therefore, plays a critical role in shaping voter perception, engagement, and participation. In modern governance systems, communication remains central to how citizens interact with political institutions, as governments serve as the frontline for citizen interactions and are vital to economic development and sustainability (Amuzat, 2025). However, the tone and framing of such communication can influence public behaviour. Campaign messages that are inflammatory or emotionally charged may contribute to hostility

among political supporters, thereby increasing the likelihood of electoral violence. According to Nathaniel & James (2025), declining civility in public discourse can negatively impact audience engagement and the overall credibility of radio programs.

In recent years, political communication has undergone significant transformation due to advancements in media technologies. The 2023 Nigerian elections were marked by the extensive use of digital platforms, enabling rapid dissemination of campaign messages and wider voter reach (Hassan, 2023). While this development has enhanced political participation, it has also facilitated the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and emotionally charged narratives. A major impediment to effective information dissemination is the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, which distort public understanding of critical issues (Kingsley & James, 2025).

Studies show that contemporary political messaging increasingly relies on emotional appeals, identity politics, and persuasive framing techniques that can intensify political polarization (Aonover et al., 2026). In Nigeria's diverse socio-political environment, such messaging can reinforce ethnic and regional divisions, creating tensions among political supporters.

Electoral violence remains a recurring challenge in Nigeria's democratic process. It includes acts such as intimidation, physical attacks, destruction of campaign materials, and voter suppression (Yusuf and Saminu, 2023). Evidence from the 2023 elections indicates a rise in politically motivated violence, particularly in highly competitive states.

The 2023 Akwa Ibom State gubernatorial election exemplifies this trend. Campaigns were characterized by intense competition, widespread dissemination of messages, and reports of violence. Certain campaign slogans and narratives were perceived as provocative, contributing to clashes among supporters and the destruction of political materials.

Despite extensive research on electoral violence, limited attention has been given to the role of campaign messaging as a trigger for such violence. This study addresses this gap by examining how political communication influenced electoral violence in the 2023 Akwa Ibom gubernatorial election.

Statement of the Problem

The 2023 Akwa Ibom gubernatorial election witnessed intense political competition among major parties. Campaign messaging during this period often included provocative slogans and identity-based narratives, which heightened tensions among supporters. Incidents such as destruction of campaign materials, restriction of opposition campaigns, and clashes among party supporters were reported.

However, the extent to which these campaign messages contributed to electoral violence remains unclear. This study seeks to determine the influence of political campaign messaging on electoral violence, voter participation, and election outcomes.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent were residents of Akwa Ibom State exposed to campaign messages during the 2023 gubernatorial election?
2. What are residents' perceptions of political campaign messages?
3. To what extent did campaign messages influence electoral violence?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Campaign Messaging and Contemporary Electoral Dynamics

Political campaign messaging has evolved from traditional persuasive communication into a highly strategic and technologically mediated process. In modern democracies, campaign messages are not only designed to inform voters but also to shape perceptions, identities, and emotional responses. Recent studies show that political communication in Nigeria's 2023 elections was characterized by increased digitalization, emotional appeals, and the strategic use of narratives to mobilize voters (Hassan, 2023).

The expansion of digital platforms has significantly altered the nature of campaign communication. Social media, in particular, enables rapid dissemination of political messages, often without adequate gatekeeping mechanisms. This has created an environment where misinformation, disinformation, and emotionally charged content can thrive. Empirical evidence suggests that disinformation campaigns played a notable role in shaping electoral discourse in Nigeria, influencing public perception and political polarization.

Furthermore, recent research highlights the rise of hate speech and divisive rhetoric as key features of political campaigns. A 2026 study found that the 2023 Nigerian elections were marked by widespread hate speech, particularly along ethnic and political lines, which significantly influenced voter behaviour and heightened social divisions. This indicates that campaign messaging is no longer merely persuasive but can also function as a tool of social fragmentation (Oshinfowokan, 2024).

Electoral violence continues to pose a significant threat to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Recent empirical studies confirm that the 2023 general elections experienced a "disturbing rise in electoral violence," driven by intense political competition, weak institutional frameworks, and the manipulation of identity divisions. This pattern of institutional weakness and exploitation is comparable to governance challenges where fraudsters often exploit complex regulatory frameworks, lack of transparency, weak oversight mechanisms, and limited institutional capacity (Amuzat, 2025). Although this statement refers to procurement systems, it strongly relates to electoral contexts, where weak institutional control similarly enables manipulation, violence, and abuse of political processes.

Electoral violence in Nigeria manifests across all phases of the electoral cycle, pre-election, election-day, and post-election. Contemporary research shows that violence is often used deliberately as a political strategy. Politicians and their supporters deploy intimidation, destruction of electoral materials, and attacks on opponents to influence electoral outcomes.

One of the most critical implications of electoral violence is its effect on democratic participation. Studies indicate that insecurity and violence significantly reduce voter turnout, as citizens avoid participation due to fear for their safety. This reinforces a cycle of weak democratic legitimacy, where elections fail to reflect the true will of the people.

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the intersection between hate speech and electoral violence. The 2023 Nigerian elections provide strong empirical evidence that hate speech, especially when rooted in ethnic or political identity, can deepen divisions and foster hostility among groups.

Aondover et. al. (2026) found that hate speech in campaign communication contributed to increased political polarization, fear-driven voting behaviour, reduced electoral trust, and heightened tensions among supporters.

Similarly, studies on the 2023 Lagos gubernatorial election reveal that ethnic rhetoric and divisive messaging intensified political conflict and reinforced group-based antagonism. These findings align with broader communication research, which suggests that repeated exposure to hostile or threatening messages can normalize aggression and legitimize violent responses among supporters.

The concept of media ecology is crucial in understanding how campaign messages influence electoral outcomes. In Nigeria, the convergence of traditional media (radio, television, print) and digital platforms has created a hybrid communication environment where messages are amplified across multiple channels.

Recent evidence shows that political messaging spreads rapidly through online networks, often reaching large audiences without verification. This amplification effect increases the salience of divisive narratives and accelerates the spread of misinformation. Notably, experimental research demonstrates that targeted messaging can significantly alter online discourse, including reducing or amplifying hate speech depending on content and framing. This suggests that communication itself is not inherently harmful; rather, the content, tone, and framing of messages determine their societal impact. While structural factors such as poverty, weak institutions, and political competition create the conditions for electoral violence, campaign messaging often acts as the immediate trigger.

Recent studies emphasize that political actors exploit identity divisions to mobilize support, emotional and inflammatory rhetoric heightens tensions, and messaging can legitimize aggressive political behaviour. For example, the emphasis on ethno-regional identity in campaign slogans during the 2023 elections contributed to social fragmentation and conflict escalation. This aligns with findings that political elites often instrumentalise communication to mobilise supporters along identity lines, increasing the likelihood of violence. Thus, campaign messaging functions as a catalytic variable, transforming latent tensions into active conflict.

Electoral violence has far-reaching consequences for democratic governance. Recent studies confirm that violence during the 2023 elections reduced voter turnout, undermined electoral credibility, increased voter apathy, and weakened public trust in democratic institutions. In addition, violence can distort electoral outcomes by preventing certain groups from voting, influencing voter choices through intimidation, and disrupting electoral processes. These effects highlight the cyclical nature of electoral violence: as violence increases, participation decreases, which in turn weakens democratic legitimacy and perpetuates instability.

Theoretical Framework

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory, first proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), posits that the media may not dictate what people think, but it significantly influences what issues they consider important. In other words, the frequency and prominence of topics in media and public discourse shape the salience of those topics in the public's mind. This theory has been widely applied to political communication, where campaign messages and media coverage work together to highlight certain issues, personalities, or narratives to the electorate.

In the context of the 2023 Akwa Ibom gubernatorial election, political actors and parties used various communication channels, including social media, radio, television, print media, and outdoor billboards, to repeatedly emphasize specific messages. Examples include slogans like "*It is the Turn of Itu/Ibiono Ibom*" and "*Defend your vote by all means*", which were strategically highlighted to influence voter perceptions and priorities. By continually framing these messages in public discourse, parties set the political agenda, directing citizens' attention to regional entitlements, partisan loyalty, and perceived threats from opposition parties.

The agenda-setting process in this election also illustrates how repetition and visibility of campaign messages can contribute to heightened political tension. When voters are repeatedly exposed to emotionally charged or provocative messages, these issues become central to their perception of the political landscape. In extreme cases, as observed in Akwa Ibom, this increased attention to divisive messages may escalate conflicts among supporters of competing political parties, ultimately fueling electoral violence.

Framing Theory

Framing Theory, developed by Entman (1993), complements Agenda-Setting Theory by explaining how issues and events are presented to the public to influence interpretation and evaluation. While agenda-setting highlights *what* issues are important, framing explains *how* they are presented and understood. In political communication, framing involves the deliberate selection of aspects of a perceived reality to make them more salient, guiding public understanding and emotional responses.

During the 2023 Akwa Ibom gubernatorial election, political messages were often framed to appeal to emotions, identity, and loyalty, rather than reasoned policy evaluation. Three major frames were particularly prevalent:

1. **Conflict Frames:** Opponents were often portrayed as threats or enemies. Slogans like "*Defend your vote by all means*" implicitly encouraged supporters to confront opposition groups, contributing to a climate of intimidation and potential violence.
2. **Identity Frames:** Messaging highlighted ethnic, regional, or community affiliations, such as emphasizing local entitlements (e.g., Itu/Ibiono Ibom). This reinforced in-group/out-group dynamics, intensifying competition and antagonism between supporters.
3. **Mobilization Frames:** Campaign messages often urged supporters to take active measures to protect candidates' interests, which, in a tense environment, translated into physical confrontations, vandalism, and harassment of opponents.

Framing Theory explains why voters not only focus on certain issues but also interpret them in ways that align with the intended emotional or partisan effect of the message. In Akwa Ibom, the

strategic framing of messages amplified polarization among party supporters and indirectly facilitated the emergence of electoral violence. It also shows that how information is presented can be as impactful as the content itself, especially when it triggers fear, loyalty, or anger.

In the 2023 Akwa Ibom gubernatorial election, these theories explain: why repetitive exposure to certain slogans or campaign messages captured public attention (agenda-setting); how the strategic presentation of these messages shaped voter perceptions, emotions, and behaviors, sometimes encouraging violence (framing); and the mechanism through which political actors can manipulate public discourse, heightening partisan loyalty and hostility toward opponents.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey design was used to capture perceptions and experiences of registered voters regarding campaign messaging and electoral violence. The population comprised registered voters in Akwa Ibom State - 2,119,727, as indicated by Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Using Yamane's (1967) method at a 95% confidence level, 384 was the sample size. A multi-stage sampling technique was utilised to select 384 respondents from urban and ten local government areas, within the ten federal constituencies in the State. A structured questionnaire entitled: Questionnaire on Political Campaign Messages and Electoral Violence in the 2023 Akwa Ibom State Gubernatorial Election (QPCMEVAISGE) measured exposure to campaign messages, perceptions of messaging, experiences of electoral violence, and effects on participation and outcomes. Data were analyzed using percentages, frequency distributions.

RESULTS

Table 1

Exposure to Campaign Messages of Governorship Candidates in the 2023 Election

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very High Exposure	206	54.0
High Exposure	92	25.0
Moderate Exposure	73	19.0
No Exposure (0%)	6	2.0
Total	378	100.0

SOURCE: Compiled by the author, 2026

The majority of respondents (65%) reported high exposure to campaign messages, indicating widespread dissemination through various media channels.

Table 2

Respondents' Perception of Political Campaign Messages of Governorship Candidates in the 2023 Election

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Inciting and inflammatory	164	44.0
Persuasive, appealing, and compelling	70	19.0
	112	29.0
Ethnic & tribal movement	32	8.0
All of the above	378	100.0
Total		

SOURCE: Compiled by the author, 2026

The Table indicates that a substantial proportion of respondents, 160 (43.0%), perceived the campaign messages as inciting and inflammatory. Additionally, 112 respondents (29.0%) viewed the messages as reflecting ethnic and tribal sentiments.

Table 3

Perceived Influence on Electoral Violence

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Strong Influence	150	41.0
Strong Influence	180	47.0
Moderate	44	11.0
No Influence	4	1.0
Total	378	100.0

Source: Compiled by the author, 2026

A significant proportion (47.0%) believes campaign messages strongly contributed to electoral violence.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study provide important insights into the role of political campaign messaging in shaping electoral dynamics during the 2023 Akwa Ibom State gubernatorial election. The analysis reveals a clear pattern linking exposure to campaign messages, public perception of those messages, and their influence on electoral violence. These findings are discussed in relation to existing literature and the theoretical frameworks of Agenda-Setting and Framing.

Table.1 shows that a majority of respondents reported high exposure to campaign messages (54.0% very high; 25.0% high). Only 2.0% reported no exposure. This indicates widespread dissemination of messages through traditional and digital media. First, the study found that exposure to political campaign messages among respondents was significantly high. A substantial majority reported either very high or high exposure, indicating that campaign messages were

widely disseminated across multiple communication platforms. This finding reflects the growing influence of both traditional and digital media in political communication, particularly in Nigeria's recent electoral processes. The widespread reach of campaign messaging suggests that political actors were effective in projecting their narratives to the electorate. However, this high level of exposure also implies that the content of such messages had a considerable capacity to shape public opinion and behavior. In line with Agenda-Setting Theory, the frequent and prominent dissemination of campaign messages ensured that political issues dominated public discourse, thereby influencing what voters considered important during the election period. The repeated exposure increased the salience of political narratives, highlighting the power of campaign messaging to influence public perception and behavior (Hassan, 2023).

Beyond exposure, the study revealed that the perception of campaign messages was largely negative. A significant proportion of respondents perceived the messages as inciting, inflammatory, and reflective of ethnic and tribal sentiments, while a smaller proportion viewed them as persuasive and appealing. Table 2 reveals that 44.0% of respondents perceived messages as inciting and inflammatory, while 29.0% viewed them as reflecting ethnic or tribal sentiments. Only 19.0% found the messages persuasive and appealing. This indicates that the dominant tone of political communication during the election was characterized by hostility and identity-based narratives rather than issue-based engagement. Such findings are consistent with recent studies on Nigeria's 2023 elections, which highlight the prevalence of divisive rhetoric and hate speech in campaign communication. The prominence of ethnic and tribal framing further underscores the role of identity politics in shaping electoral behavior. From the perspective of Framing Theory, this suggests that political actors strategically presented information in ways that emphasized conflict and group identity, thereby shaping how voters interpreted political events and actors. This corroborates Framing Theory, suggesting that messages emphasizing conflict and identity shape voter interpretation, reinforcing social divisions and potentially contributing to electoral violence (Aondover et al., 2026).

More importantly, the study established a strong perceived link between campaign messaging and electoral violence. An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that campaign messages had either a strong or very strong influence on the occurrence of violence during the election. Table 3 shows that 88.0% of respondents believed campaign messages strongly or very strongly influenced electoral violence. These findings demonstrate that provocative communication can act as a catalyst for conflict, confirming the communication, violence nexus identified in prior studies (Yusuf and Saminu, 2023). This finding provides empirical support for the argument that political communication can act as a catalyst for conflict, particularly when messages are framed in inflammatory or divisive terms. It aligns with existing literature which identifies provocative campaign rhetoric as a key trigger of electoral violence in Nigeria. The findings suggest that messages encouraging supporters to defend their candidates, combined with narratives emphasizing rivalry and threat, may have contributed to heightened tensions and confrontations among political groups.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate a clear communication-behavior pathway. High exposure to campaign messages increased their salience among the electorate, while the framing of these messages influenced how they were interpreted. The combination of salience and interpretation ultimately shaped behavioral outcomes, including the likelihood of violence. This interaction reflects the complementary roles of Agenda-Setting and Framing theories, where the former determines what issues dominate public attention and the latter influences how those issues

are understood and acted upon. In this study, the interplay of these processes resulted in a political environment where communication not only informed voters but also contributed to conflict dynamics.

The implications of these findings are significant for democratic practice. While political campaigns are essential for voter mobilization and participation, the use of inflammatory and identity-driven messaging undermines democratic stability by fostering division and hostility. The results suggest that the nature and tone of campaign communication are critical determinants of electoral outcomes, not only in terms of voter choice but also in terms of the level of peace or conflict that accompanies the electoral process.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of political campaign messages on electoral violence during the 2023 Akwa Ibom State gubernatorial election. The findings revealed that campaign messages were widely disseminated and largely perceived as inflammatory, identity-driven, or divisive, which significantly contributed to incidents of electoral violence that undergirded that election. High exposure combined with provocative framing created conditions that heightened tensions among political supporters, undermining peaceful democratic participation.

The study highlights the critical role of political communication in shaping both voter perception and behavior, demonstrating that campaign messages can act as catalysts for conflict when not responsibly managed. These findings underscore the importance of regulating political messaging, promoting issue-based campaigns, strengthening civic education, and ensuring ethical media practices. Ultimately, the study provides empirical evidence for policymakers, electoral bodies, and political actors on the need for responsible communication to safeguard electoral integrity, reduce violence, and consolidate democracy in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To reduce the impact of political campaign messages on electoral violence, it is recommended that regulatory bodies enforce guidelines against inflammatory or divisive messaging, while political parties focus on issue-based campaigns rather than ethnic or confrontational rhetoric. Civic and voter education should be strengthened to promote peaceful participation, and media organizations must prioritize balanced, fact-checked reporting. Social media platforms should be monitored to limit the spread of harmful content, and security agencies should respond proactively to early signs of election-related conflict. Finally, continuous research should be encouraged to guide evidence-based strategies for safer and more credible elections.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This study contributes to knowledge by empirically demonstrating the link between political campaign messages and electoral violence in the context of the 2023 Akwa Ibom State gubernatorial election. It shows that high exposure to campaign messaging, particularly when framed as inflammatory or identity-based, significantly influences voter perception and increases the likelihood of violent incidents. The study extends existing theoretical frameworks, including Agenda-Setting and Framing theories, by highlighting their practical relevance in understanding the communication–violence nexus in emerging democracies. Additionally, it provides evidence-based insights for policymakers, electoral bodies, and political actors on how responsible messaging can mitigate electoral violence and strengthen democratic consolidation.

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