

Influence of Social Factors on Election Outcomes in Benue State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of social factors on election outcomes in Benue State, Nigeria, focusing specifically on ethnoreligious factors and socio-economic conditions. The research was guided by Rational Choice Theory, which posits that voters make calculated decisions based on perceived benefits and costs. Using a descriptive survey research design, the study collected data from 422 respondents across Benue State's 23 Local Government Areas through a structured questionnaire. The findings reveal that ethnoreligious factors significantly influence electoral outcomes, with ethnic affiliation emerging as the strongest determinant of voter choice. Regarding socio-economic conditions, the study found that income level was the most significant factor particularly in determining vulnerability to vote-buying. Employment status and education level also demonstrated strong correlations with voting behavior. The research concludes that both identity-based factors and economic considerations play crucial roles in shaping electoral outcomes in Benue State, with ethnic considerations often superseding other factors in voters' decision-making processes. The study recommends that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) implement comprehensive voter education programs emphasizing issue-based voting over identity-based considerations. Additionally, it suggests that the state government develop targeted economic empowerment programs to reduce voters' vulnerability to financial inducements during elections. These findings contribute to the understanding of electoral behavior in diverse societies and offer practical suggestions for improving electoral integrity.

Keywords: *Influence, Social, Factors, Election Outcome.*

Introduction

Elections represent a fundamental pillar of democratic governance, serving as the primary mechanism through which citizens exercise their political will and

choose their representatives. Globally, the integrity and outcomes of elections are significantly influenced by various sociopolitical factors that shape voter behavior, campaign dynamics, and electoral processes (Diamond & Morlino, 2020). Studies by prominent political scientists like Pippa Norris and Robert Dahl have consistently demonstrated how socioeconomic conditions, ethnic composition, religious affiliations, and political institutions interact to determine electoral outcomes in both established and emerging democracies.

The interplay between sociopolitical factors and election outcomes has become increasingly complex in the 21st century, particularly with the rise of social media, economic globalization, and changing demographic patterns. Research by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) highlights how sociopolitical polarization, institutional weaknesses, and economic inequalities can significantly impact electoral processes and outcomes across different political contexts. These factors often manifest differently across regions and countries, reflecting unique historical, cultural, and institutional arrangements.

In Nigeria, Africa's most populous democracy, the electoral landscape is particularly shaped by its diverse ethnic composition, religious divisions, and regional economic disparities. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigerian elections have been characterized by intense competition among different sociopolitical groups vying for power and resources (Omotola, 2019). The country's federal structure, with 36 states and a federal capital territory, has created a complex web of political relationships where local, state, and national interests intersect and sometimes conflict. According to research by Ibrahim and Hassan (2020), factors such as ethnicity, religion, and patronage politics continue to play crucial roles in determining electoral outcomes across different parts of Nigeria.

The Nigerian electoral system has undergone significant reforms over the years, yet sociopolitical factors continue to influence voting patterns and electoral outcomes significantly. Studies by Ikeanyibe (2021) demonstrate how factors such as godfatherism (political patronage), money politics, and ethnic mobilization have become entrenched features of Nigeria's electoral landscape. These elements often override policy-based considerations in determining electoral outcomes, particularly at the state level where local power dynamics are most intense.

In Nigeria, a nation characterized by its diverse ethnic composition and multifaceted sociopolitical challenges, electoral processes are often fraught with tension and conflict. The role of ethnicity in shaping political allegiances, coupled with the influence of political elites and the often-volatile nature of party politics, complicates the electoral landscape (Osaghae, 2004). Furthermore, socio-economic conditions, such as poverty and unemployment, can exacerbate tensions and influence voter behavior, often leading to patterns of voting that reflect not only personal interests but also group identities.

(Adebayo, 2020). This interrelationship signifies the importance of analyzing the socio-political contextual factors that shape electoral outcomes across the country.

According to research by Gyong and Ogwuche (2022), Benue State's electoral dynamics are heavily influenced by factors such as ethnic competition between the Tiv, Idoma, and other ethnic groups, agricultural economic interests, and religious affiliations. The state has also experienced significant security challenges related to farmer-herder conflicts, which have become increasingly politicized and influence electoral preferences and outcomes.

Local studies conducted in Benue State have revealed how traditional institutions, communal associations, and religious organizations play crucial roles in shaping electoral behavior and outcomes. Research by Akende (2021) demonstrates that voting patterns in Benue State often reflect deep-seated sociocultural allegiances rather than purely ideological or policy-based considerations. The state's political landscape is further complicated by issues of resource allocation, power-sharing arrangements between different ethnic groups, and the influence of external political forces from both northern and southern Nigeria.

Therefore, this study seeks to assess the influence of social factors on election outcomes in Benue State, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

This paper seeks to achieve the following objectives to;

- i. Examine the role of ethnoreligious factors in determining electoral outcomes in Benue State.
- ii. Assess the influence of socio-economic conditions on electoral outcomes in Benue State.

Conceptual Review

Electoral Outcomes

Electoral outcomes are the results of a voting process that determine the selection of political representatives and the formation of government at various levels, from local to national. These outcomes can influence policy directions, governance structures, and the overall functioning of democracy within a state. Electoral outcomes are significantly shaped by a combination of factors, including voter behavior, political party strategies, sociopolitical contexts, and institutional frameworks. Understanding these outcomes requires a thorough analysis of how votes are cast and the implications of those votes for the political landscape.

At their core, electoral outcomes are measured through the votes received by candidates or parties in an election. They reflect the collective preferences of the electorate, encompassing how demographic factors—such as age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status—impact voting behavior. As highlighted by Verba et al. (1995), understanding who votes and why is central to interpreting election results. Voter turnout and participation are critical components of electoral outcomes, as a higher turnout often signals greater public engagement and can lead to different political results compared to elections with low turnout.

Additionally, electoral outcomes are influenced by the political context in which elections occur. This context includes the sociopolitical environment, characterized by factors such as political stability, the presence of violence or intimidation, and the level of public trust in electoral institutions. For example, in a politically repressive environment, as noted by Norris (2012), electoral outcomes may reflect not merely the preferences of the electorate but also the extent to which individuals feel safe and empowered to vote. In Nigeria, where elections can be marred by violence and interference, the actual outcomes may not always represent the true will of the people (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The role of political parties and candidates also plays a significant role in shaping electoral outcomes. Strategies employed during campaigns, including the framing of issues, outreach to specific demographics, and coalition-building, can directly influence voter preferences. As Papageorgiou (2010) points out, the manner in which political parties engage with the electorate and address key concerns affects both voter mobilization and preferences. The competition between parties, particularly in a multi-party system, may heighten the significance of electoral outcomes, as parties vie for support through promises, manifestos, and public engagements.

Institutional frameworks also substantially impact electoral outcomes. The electoral system in place—whether it be first-past-the-post, proportional representation, or a mixed system—determines how votes are translated into seats and influence the political representation of different groups within society. Different systems can lead to varying degrees of party fragmentation and representation, consequently shaping the political landscape. According to Lijphart (1999), the design of electoral systems can significantly affect the nature of political competition and, subsequently, the outcomes of elections.

In the context of Nigeria, particularly in states like Benue, electoral outcomes cannot be divorced from the sociopolitical factors unique to the region, including ethnic affiliations and socio-economic conditions. These elements deeply influence voters' choices and the resulting electoral landscape. For example, during the last election cycle in Benue State, local issues such as land conflicts and ethnic rivalries played a pivotal role in shaping voter preferences (Adebayo, 2020).

Social Factors

Social factors refer to the intersection of social and political dynamics that influence individual and collective behavior within a society. These factors encompass a range of elements, including cultural norms, social structures, ethnic identities, political institutions, and economic conditions, all of which shape the ways in which people engage with political processes and institutions. Understanding sociopolitical factors is crucial for analyzing political behavior, governance, and the outcomes of political activities, especially in contexts characterized by diversity and complexity, such as Nigeria.

At the social level, factors such as culture, ethnicity, and class play significant roles in shaping individuals' political attitudes and behaviors. Cultural norms dictate how individuals interact in their communities and can influence voter behavior by aligning political preferences with communal values. As highlighted by Huntington (1996), cultural identities often underpin political affiliations and can create divides that shape electoral outcomes, especially in multi-ethnic societies. In Nigeria, for example, ethnic identities are powerful determinants of political loyalty and influence voting patterns significantly (Osaghae, 2004).

Social structures also determine how power and resources are distributed within a society. For instance, class stratification can influence access to education, wealth, and political participation, leaving marginalized groups without a voice in political processes. As emphasized by Bourdieu (1986), social capital—a critical element of social structure—shapes political engagement, with individuals possessing more social capital typically enjoying better access to political resources and influence. This stratification can create imbalances in political participation and representation, affecting electoral dynamics.

On the political side, institutions and governance structures are key components of sociopolitical factors. The effectiveness and legitimacy of governmental institutions can impact public trust and civic engagement. According to North (1990), strong institutions promote effective governance and civic participation, while weak institutions can lead to disenchantment and apathy among the citizenry. In Nigeria, institutional weaknesses, corruption, and electoral malpractices undermine public trust, leading to reduced voter turnout and engagement in political processes (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Political factors such as party systems, electoral laws, and the behavior of political elites also shape the sociopolitical context. Political parties play a crucial role in aggregating interests and mobilizing voters; their strategies can significantly influence electoral outcomes. The nature of political competition—whether cooperative or adversarial—shapes how sociopolitical factors play out during elections. As posited by Stolle and Hooghe (2005),

political trust and participation are influenced by the perceived integrity and accountability of political actors, which directly affects voter mobilization.

Another important consideration is the impact of socio-economic conditions on sociopolitical factors. Economic disparities can exacerbate social tensions, especially in societies with high levels of inequality. Economic challenges, such as unemployment and poverty, can lead to political instability and conflict, as marginalized groups may resort to protests or violence to express grievances. The interplay between economic conditions and political stability is vital; as Gregoratti (2020) notes, socio-economic challenges often lead to heightened political activity, influencing electoral outcomes and governance.

Finally, in the context of Benue State, Nigeria, social factors are particularly relevant. The state's ethnic composition, coupled with historical land disputes and socio-economic challenges, creates a complex political landscape. Ethnic affiliations can be amplified by local issues, resulting in local interpretations of broader sociopolitical trends (Adebayo & Akpan, 2021). Understanding how these sociopolitical factors interact is essential for comprehensively analyzing electoral outcomes in the state.

Ethno Religious Factors

Ethnoreligious factors are the intersection of ethnicity and religion that influence social interactions, group identities, and political behaviors within a society. These factors are of paramount significance in shaping the political landscape, especially in diverse nations with multiple ethnic groups and religions. Ethnoreligious identities can profoundly impact an individual's political affiliation, voting behavior, and engagement with the broader political system. Understanding these factors is essential for analyzing political dynamics, conflict, and electoral outcomes in contexts characterized by pluralism, such as Nigeria.

Ethnicity refers to shared cultural traits, language, customs, and histories among groups of people, creating a sense of belonging and identity. Religion, meanwhile, encompasses shared beliefs, practices, and values that bind individuals together under a common faith. In many societies, these two elements intersect, creating ethnoreligious categories that profoundly shape group dynamics and social relationships. As noted by Horowitz (1985), the interplay of ethnic and religious identities can lead to both solidarity and division, influencing how groups mobilize politically and engage in governance processes.

In Nigeria, the interplay between ethnic and religious identities is particularly pronounced, playing a central role in the country's political framework. The country is home to a mosaic of ethnic groups, including the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, alongside numerous smaller ethnic communities. These groups often possess distinct cultural identities and political aspirations. Additionally,

Nigeria is divided along religious lines, with significant populations of Muslims and Christians, often concentrated in different regions. This ethnoreligious diversity has been a source of both rich cultural heritage and intense political conflict (Ake, 1996).

The significance of ethnoreligious factors in Nigerian politics is evident in electoral behavior. Political parties often align themselves with specific ethnic and religious groups, leveraging these identities to mobilize support. As Osaghae (2004) observes, political campaigns frequently exploit ethnoreligious sentiments, reinforcing group loyalties and exacerbating divisions. For instance, candidates may use religious rhetoric or emphasize ethnic affiliations to rally their bases, which can lead to polarized voting patterns and heightened tensions during elections.

Conflict arising from ethnoreligious factors is another critical concern in Nigeria. The competition for political power, resources, and representation often ignites tensions between groups, resulting in violence and civil strife. Ethnoreligious factors can exacerbate grievances, as marginalized groups seek recognition and representation within the political framework. According to a report by the International Crisis Group (2021), the persistence of ethnoreligious conflicts in Nigeria threatens national unity and stability, underscoring the need for inclusive governance that accommodates the diverse interests of various groups.

Moreover, ethnoreligious factors significantly influence policymaking and governance. Ethnic and religious affiliations can shape the priorities of political leaders and the implementation of policies, often leading to favoritism and discrimination. This has implications for the equitable distribution of resources and public services, as policies may reflect the interests of dominant ethnoreligious groups while neglecting minority voices (Adebayo & Akpan, 2021). Such dynamics can create cycles of discontent and conflict, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization and estrangement among different groups.

Empirical Review

Isiaq, Adebisi & Bakare (2018), wrote a paper on “Ethnicity and election outcomes in Nigeria: Interrogating the 2015 presidential election”. The objective of this paper is to investigate the effects of ethnicity on the outcome of the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. In order to achieve this, the descriptive-statistical analysis of the official election results released by the country’s Election Management Body (INEC) as well as a historical analysis of past presidential elections in Nigeria was adopted. The findings revealed that the major contestants received bloc votes from their various states and geo-political zones. This indicated that candidates appealed to ethnic sentiments to garner votes. The policy implication of this scenario includes the fact that ethnic bloc voting destroys inter-ethnic accommodation and efforts at nation building.

It is, however, recommended that efforts should be intensified towards providing a compelling statutory set of principles for nation building and national integration which will in turn guarantee the peaceful co-existence for people of diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Salahu (2023), conducted a study on “Politics, religion and electoral outcomes in Nigeria: The 2023 presidential election in perspective”. This paper examines the extent to which religion has influenced politics in Nigeria. It equally examines the roles played by the two dominant religions in Nigeria, Islam and Christianity, in shaping the outcome of the 2023 Presidential election. Although, this study made do with secondary data as sourced from the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC, it however adopts a combination of both the quantitative and qualitative techniques in analyzing the outcomes of the election. Running a critical analysis of the Presidential election results, with respect to the strongholds of the candidates of the three leading political parties, the Peoples Democratic Party, All Progressive Congress and the Labour Party vis-à-vis the strongholds of the two major religions in the country, a strong nexus was drawn between religion, politics and electoral outcome in Nigeria. Findings revealed that the two major religions played major roles in the determination of electoral outcomes in the 2023 Presidential election. This paper therefore posits that religion plays a critical role in determining electoral outcomes in Nigeria, and suggests that for the nation to develop, we need to grow our democracy far above religion among other diversities plaguing the state. This could be done through mass re-orientation of the citizens by socialization agencies such as the National Orientation Agency, Religious and Political Institutions.

Furthermore, Alabi, Jamiu & Lawal (2023), conducted a study on “Identity politics and its implication on the Nigerian electoral process”. This paper discusses the impact of identity politics on the Nigerian electoral process, with a focus on the 2019 general elections. The emergence of identity politics, which relies on ethnicity, religion, and regionalism to shape voters' preferences, has had far-reaching consequences on political discourse and election outcomes in Nigeria and other parts of the world. The paper draws on Social Identity Theory (SIT), as theoretical frame work which posits that individuals derive a sense of identity and self-esteem from their membership in social groups, to explain how group membership shapes attitudes and behaviors in the electoral process. The paper argues that while identity-based mobilization may provide short-term electoral gains for some politicians, it undermines the principles of inclusivity and diversity that are essential for a thriving democracy. The impact of identity politics on the Nigerian electoral process is not always positive, as ethnic and religious identities have often been used to mobilize violence and undermine the democratic process. Furthermore, the use of identity politics in political discourse can lead to the exclusion of certain groups and the formation of polarized and divided communities. The study found that in the 2019

presidential election, ethnic and religious identities played a significant role in determining voting patterns. The study also found that voters were more likely to support candidates who they perceived as representing their group's interests. These findings are consistent with the predictions of SIT, which posits that group membership plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes and behaviors. The paper highlights the need for political parties and candidates to focus on critical issues such as economic development and security, rather than relying on ethnic and religious identities to mobilize voters. It is also essential to promote intergroup dialogue and cooperation to foster national unity and social cohesion. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the need for a more nuanced and inclusive approach to politics that recognizes the division and polarization of diversity of identities and interests in Nigeria. The study recommends that political leaders, civil society organizations, and the media should encourage an inclusive political discourse that emphasizes the importance of unity and cooperation over.

Nnabuihe, Aghemalo & Okebugwu (2014), wrote a paper on "Ethnicity and electoral behaviour in Nigeria". The electoral choice of Nigerians are ethnically coloured as party formations are ethnically designated and motivated. The analysis below shows that political parties in Nigeria do not have national platform hence political party that is formed from the majority ethnic group dominate the said region and 2/3 majority is almost difficult to attain except if major parties go alliance. The study began with an examination of the history and electoral behaviours of Nigerians. The result of the first and second republics and their voting patterns have been mapped using the results of these elections to determine the ethnic colouration of the electorate. More so, the researchers further their findings to identifying institutional structures that have aided ethnicity to mar democratic consolidation in Nigeria, various approaches were adopted to study ethnicity in Nigeria and findings showed that ethnicity is the major factor militating against the evolution of the truly modern and democratic nation where the interest, wellbeing and the rights of people are protected.

Theoretical Framework: Rational Choice Theory

This paper is anchored on the Rational Choice Theory. Rational Choice Theory (RCT) represents a fundamental framework in political science and economics that seeks to explain how individuals make political decisions, including electoral choices. Originally developed by Anthony Downs in his seminal work "An Economic Theory of Democracy" (1957), RCT posits that political behavior is fundamentally driven by calculated self-interest and utility maximization.

The theory assumes that individuals are rational actors who carefully weigh costs and benefits before making political decisions. According to Riker and Ordeshook (1968), voters engage in a calculus of voting where they consider

the potential benefits of their preferred candidate winning, the probability that their vote will be decisive, and the costs associated with voting. This rational calculation can be expressed through the equation $R = PB - C$, where R represents the reward from voting, P is the probability that one's vote will be decisive, B is the differential benefit from the preferred candidate winning, and C represents the costs of voting.

Central to RCT are several key assumptions about human behavior in political contexts. First, individuals are assumed to have complete or nearly complete information about their political choices and can rank their preferences consistently. Second, people are believed to act in ways that maximize their expected utility or benefits. Third, these preferences are considered to be transitive, meaning if option A is preferred to B , and B is preferred to C , then A must be preferred to C (Green & Shapiro, 1994).

In electoral contexts, RCT suggests that voters support candidates or parties that they believe will maximize their personal or group interests. Ferejohn and Fiorina (1974) expanded this understanding by introducing the concept of minimax regret, suggesting that voters might act to minimize their maximum possible regret rather than simply maximizing expected utility. This helps explain why people vote even when the probability of their vote being decisive is extremely low.

The theory has been particularly useful in explaining patronage politics and clientelistic relationships in developing democracies. Stokes (2011) demonstrates how rational choice frameworks help understand why voters might support politicians who offer immediate material benefits over those promising long-term programmatic policies. In the Nigerian context, scholars like Omotola (2019) have applied RCT to explain how voters navigate complex patronage networks and make strategic choices in response to offers from political godfathers.

However, critics like Green and Shapiro (1994) argue that RCT's assumptions about human rationality and perfect information are often unrealistic. They contend that voters frequently make decisions based on incomplete information, emotional attachments, or social pressures rather than purely rational calculations. Contemporary applications of RCT have therefore evolved to incorporate bounded rationality, recognizing that voters make reasonably rational decisions within the constraints of limited information and cognitive capacity.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to examine the influence of sociopolitical factors on election outcomes in Benue State. This design is appropriate as it allows for systematic collection and analysis of data from a

representative sample of the population to draw valid conclusions about the relationships between variables.

According to the Independent National Electoral Commission's voter register for the 2023 general elections (INEC, 2023), the total registered voter population in Benue State is 2,777,727. This population is distributed across the state's 23 Local Government Areas (LGAs), comprising eligible voters who have participated in recent electoral processes.

Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table for determining sample size from a given population, for a population of 2,777,727, the recommended sample size is 384. However, to account for possible non-responses and ensure better representation, the sample size is increased by 10%, bringing the total sample size to 422 respondents.

The study employs stratified random sampling technique to select respondents. The 23 LGAs in Benue State serve as the strata, ensuring representation from all geographical areas. The sample size of 422 is proportionally allocated across these LGAs based on their voter population. Within each LGA, simple random sampling is then used to select individual respondents, ensuring that every registered voter has an equal chance of being selected.

For data collection, a structured questionnaire titled "Sociopolitical Factors and Electoral Outcomes Questionnaire (SFEOQ)" is developed. The questionnaire uses a five-point Likert scale with response options: Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Undecided (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). The instrument is divided into sections addressing different aspects of sociopolitical factors and their influence on electoral outcomes. To ensure validity, the instrument is subjected to expert review and pilot testing.

The data analysis employs descriptive statistics, specifically mean and standard deviation. A criterion mean of 3.0 is established as the decision rule, being the average of the five-point scale ($5+4+3+2+1=15/5=3.0$). Mean scores above 3.0 indicate agreement or positive influence, while scores below 3.0 indicate disagreement or negative influence. Standard deviation is used to measure the spread of responses and determine the consistency of respondents' views. Lower standard deviation values indicate greater consensus among respondents.

The results are presented in tables showing the mean scores and standard deviations for each item, accompanied by interpretations based on the established decision rule. This analytical approach provides a clear understanding of how different sociopolitical factors influence electoral outcomes in Benue State.

Data Analysis

Table 1: Role of Ethnoreligious Factors in Electoral Outcomes

Statement	SA(5)	A(4)	U(3)	D(2)	SD(1)	Mean	SD	Decision
Ethnic affiliation influences voters' choice	185	140	37	35	25	4.01	1.10	Accepted
Religious identity determines voter support	170	145	42	40	25	3.94	1.12	Accepted
Majority ethnic groups' candidates have advantage	175	150	40	32	25	3.99	1.09	Accepted
Religious leaders' endorsements influence voting	165	155	45	37	20	3.97	1.08	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Table 1 demonstrates strong evidence of ethnoreligious influence on electoral outcomes in Benue State. The highest mean score (4.01) was recorded for ethnic affiliation's influence on voters' choice, suggesting this is the most significant ethnoreligious factor. The influence of majority ethnic groups' candidates (mean=3.99) and religious leaders' endorsements (mean=3.97) also showed strong impact. All statements scored well above the criterion mean of 3.0, with relatively consistent standard deviations (1.08-1.12) indicating reliable response patterns across the sample.

Table 2: Influence of Socio-economic Conditions on Electoral Outcomes

Statement	SA(5)	A(4)	U(3)	D(2)	SD(1)	Mean	SD	Decision
Economic status influences voting decisions	180	145	40	35	22	4.01	1.09	Accepted
Employment status affects participation	175	150	37	35	25	3.98	1.11	Accepted
Education level influences voting choices	165	155	42	35	25	3.95	1.10	Accepted
Income level determines vote-buying vulnerability	190	140	35	32	25	4.04	1.08	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 2 reveals strong correlations between socio-economic conditions and electoral outcomes. Income level's influence on vote-buying vulnerability showed the highest mean score (4.04), suggesting economic vulnerability significantly impacts electoral integrity. The influence of general economic

status (mean=4.01) and employment status (mean=3.98) also demonstrated strong effects on voting behavior. All items scored notably above the criterion mean of 3.0, with standard deviations ranging from 1.08 to 1.11, indicating consistent agreement across respondents about the significant role of socio-economic factors in shaping electoral outcomes.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings of the study revealed that ethnoreligious factors play a significant role in determining electoral outcomes in Benue State. Ethnic affiliation emerged as the most influential factor in shaping voters' choices, indicating that voters tend to support candidates from their ethnic groups regardless of other considerations. The study also established that candidates from majority ethnic groups have a considerable advantage in electoral contests, suggesting an inherent bias in the electoral system that favors numerical ethnic majority. The study found that religious identity and religious leaders' endorsements substantially influence voting patterns in Benue State. Religious leaders were found to wield significant influence over their followers' electoral choices, with their endorsements often translating into electoral support for specific candidates. This finding underscores the deep interconnection between religious institutions and political processes in Benue State, where religious identity serves as a crucial factor in electoral mobilization and voter decision-making.

Regarding socio-economic conditions, the study revealed a strong correlation between economic factors and electoral outcomes in Benue State. Income level emerged as a crucial determinant of voters' vulnerability to electoral manipulation, particularly through vote-buying practices. The findings indicate that economically disadvantaged voters are more susceptible to financial inducements during elections, potentially compromising the integrity of the electoral process. The study also established that employment status and educational level significantly influence political participation and voting choices. Voters' economic status was found to shape their political preferences and level of engagement in the electoral process, with better-educated and employed voters showing more independence in their voting decisions. These findings suggest that socio-economic empowerment could be crucial in promoting more informed and autonomous voting behavior among the electorate in Benue State.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of social factors on electoral outcomes in Benue State, Nigeria. The findings reveal a complex interplay between identity-based factors and economic considerations in shaping electoral behavior and outcomes. The study conclusively demonstrates that ethnic affiliation and religious identity remain powerful determinants of voting patterns, with ethnic considerations often superseding other factors in voters' decision-making

processes. The significant influence of religious leaders in shaping electoral choices further emphasizes the entrenchment of identity politics in Benue State's electoral landscape.

Additionally, the study establishes a strong connection between socio-economic conditions and electoral behavior, highlighting how economic vulnerability can compromise electoral integrity through increased susceptibility to vote-buying and other forms of electoral manipulation. The findings suggest that economic empowerment and educational advancement could significantly enhance the quality of electoral participation and decision-making among voters. Overall, the study underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to electoral reforms that addresses both identity-based influences and socio-economic challenges in Benue State's electoral processes

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends thus;

- i. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should collaborate with civil society organizations to implement comprehensive voter education programs that emphasize issue-based voting over ethnic and religious considerations, while promoting awareness about the long-term implications of identity-based voting patterns in Benue State.
- ii. The state government should develop and implement targeted economic empowerment programs aimed at reducing voters' vulnerability to financial inducements during elections, particularly focusing on job creation and skills development for economically disadvantaged voters to enhance their resistance to vote-buying practices.

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