

Religious Affiliations, Political Literacy, and Voting Behaviour among Female Voters in Nigeria: A Comparative Regional Analysis

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Abstract

In Nigeria, the substantial cultural differences between the Northern and Southern regions are argued to explain lower political literacy and the reliance on religious affiliations of candidates as the main determinants of voting among women. Despite a significant number of studies on the influence of religion in politics, data on how religious affiliation affects the political choice of female voters is quite scant. Consequently, this study conceptualizes religion, gender, and political outcomes (election outcome) in the Nigerian context and utilizes statistical analysis to compare women voters from both of Nigeria's regions. Using survey data collected June-July 2022 from 2011 respondents in the North and 2204 from the South, we demonstrate there is a difference in the influence of religion on the voting choices of women voters in the North compared to the South. Such regional differences have severe adverse implications for the exploitation of women voters during elections in Nigeria.

Keywords: Gender, Elections, Religion, Political Literacy, Democracy, Voter Education.

Introduction

In Nigerian politics, religion is generally regarded as a *Tour du Force* (Ikem, Ogbonna & Nwoke, 2019). Ayantayo (2009) observed that political affiliations and voting outcomes are justified and sustained by religious affiliations in the Nigerian political space. The appeal to religious affiliation in order to win an election has become the order of the day for candidates following the transition to democracy in 1999 (Obadare, 2018). However, studies interrogating the relationship between religion and voting behavior in Nigeria are few and tend to be descriptive and lacking in theoretical underpinning. While religion is widely referred to as determining election outcomes, the commentaries that present the case often lack a rigorous methodology and robust analysis (Ogbu, 2014).

The robust studies present more mixed evidence. Obadare (2018) employed statistical data from voting behavior during the presidential elections 1999-2015 and argued there was weak evidence to support a consistent relationship existing between religious affiliation and voter choices in Nigeria. The data demonstrated that religious affiliation had no significant impact on the outcomes of the 1999 and 2003 presidential elections, a minor impact on the outcome of the 2011 presidential elections but a significant impact on the

2015 presidential election result (Obianyo, 2010). These findings reiterate Ishiyama (2012) and Bratton et al. (2012) arguments that tribal affiliation has greater influence. They noted when people find themselves in power, they often help those who belong to their tribal group and so voters seek benefits on tribal rather than religious lines. Hence, it is suggested that ethnicity is a more prominent factor in voting behavior than religion. However, Obianyo (2010) conclusion that the relationship between religious affiliation and voting in Nigeria is weak but not nil remains debated. Evidence shows a correlation between Christian religious affiliation and support for the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria. Hence, Obianyo (2010) argues that there is a probable positive association between Christians in Nigeria and PDP. It requires emphasizing that although there is research needed to assess if Muslim voters are attached to the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), there are indications that the personality of then President Muhammad Buhari, whose stronghold is the Muslim-dominated Northwest and the Northeast, gives the APC an edge with Muslim voters. A further indication is the APC offered a Muslim-Muslim ticket in the 2023 presidential elections and benefitted within the Muslim-dominated Northern region despite the PDP's candidate being a Muslim from the North. Such evidence indicates that there is greater complexity to voting behavior than simply following religious affiliation.

There is a significant divergence in the participation and voter turnout rates among female Nigerians. According to Ayantayo (2009), there are prevalent social norms and thoughts that suggest that beyond religion, there are other factors that affect the propensity of females to participate in politics in Nigeria. These are argued to include low confidence due to the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society, the lack of internal democracy, and threats of political violence (Akpan, 2018). To counter the former, Ada (2016) argued there was a need for educating Nigerian women, irrespective of their religion, to increase their participation at all levels. For women, it highlights the importance of political literacy, as well as overcoming other cultural factors driven by religious traditions. Focusing purely on female voters, this research is designed to explore how voting is influenced by religious affiliation, as well as the relationship between voting and patriarchal social norms and the political literacy levels of women comparing the two regions to develop a more nuanced but holistic picture of what drives the political participation patterns of female Nigerians.

Review of Literature

The Nigerian Political System

Political parties are important democratic institutions as they act as the basis or platforms through which citizens have input into governance (Dalton et al, 2011). Political parties aggregate like-minded citizens with common political inclinations and goals and promote their interests, acquire power for their societal subsection, and develop policy platforms to benefit their support base. For democracy to flourish, it is essential for political parties and their candidates to provide adequate information on their platforms to offer an informed choice to non-aligned citizens. Mass media play an important role in informing citizens and

holding politicians to account both during elections and once elected (Ojekwe, 2016). Multi-party systems allow for a greater diversity of opinions and voices within the political arena. In Nigeria, specifically under the Fourth Republic, this was achieved in 2002 when a Supreme Court judgment liberalized the process of party formation and registration. An array of parties emerged and at the 2019 general elections, about 73 candidates competed for the office of the president. However, liberalization failed to create strong institutions. Party politics proved prone to abuse and fraud by unscrupulous elements and there was a lack of accountability (Luqman, 2009). Party funding and spending were unregulated and party leaders used and disbursed funds as they wished. The minority of elites who control the wealth of the nation, known as “godfathers”, use their wealth and privilege to influence the structure and outcome of power. Their backing saw two major contenders emerge – the APC and PDP. The PDP controlled both the presidency and the National Assembly from when it was founded in 1998 until 2015. The APC, which was formed in 2013 was an amalgamation of three opposition parties, and has since the 2015 general elections replaced the PDP. The party captured the presidency in the 2015 general elections – two years after its formation. Ironically, the parties of the fourth republic, instead of acting as platforms for specific ideological issues, have fallen under the power of Nigerian elites and are used as a vehicle for the realization of political power and influence. Hence, defection has become a common phenomenon, during elections politicians move between parties to guarantee themselves tickets and victory. For example, Atiku Abubakar defected from the PDP to the APC to stand as President in 2007 and from the APC back to the PDP in 2019; Muhammadu Buhari defected from the All Nigeria Peoples Party to the Congress for Progressive Change in 2011; Peter Obi and Rabiu Kwankwaso defected from the PDP to the Labour Party and the New Nigeria Peoples Party respectively in the recently conducted 2023 presidential elections.

Political Literacy in Nigeria

Such complexities require well-informed citizens to navigate the system. Studies have highlighted the importance of political education within the relatively young democracies of Africa. Enu and Eba (2014) argued that democracy can be taught and learned to enable society to serve as a watchdog on government and hold it responsible for its actions. However, how literacy interacts with the influence of religious or tribal affiliation is under-explored in African contexts. Osimen, Anegbode, and Oyewole (2018) among others highlight the nexus between education and democracy, political behavior, voter apathy, and electoral turnout in Nigeria. Onapajo (2012), using Nigeria as their case study, noted that the provision of free education at the primary school level fosters pro-democratic civic and political engagement in a weak democracy like Nigeria. For them, primary schooling promotes increased interest in politics and participation in voting as well as community activities. Political education also helps citizens make informed choices, and shun electoral fraud, malpractices, and violence (Ameachi, Okechukwu & Ikechukwu, 2018). However, political literacy remains low among Nigerians, Svoboda (2020) noted Nigerians wallow in

stark ignorance and acute illiteracy about the entire electoral process and so are easily manipulated by politicians who prey on ethno-religious sentiments. Similarly, vein, Jenke & Huetell (2016) argued that to combat the incessant cases of violence in elections, voter education is not only paramount but also necessary and credible institutions such as the Electoral Management Body (EMB), government agencies and NGOs should enlighten the public on the consequences of electoral fraud and violence. Furthermore, Barna (2016) argued voter education is needed to help citizens understand their roles in the entire political process and build their confidence in participatory opportunities. He emphasized the role of Religious Leaders, Civil Society, and NGOs, community-based organizations, tribal rulers, opinion leaders, academic communities, professional and labour organizations, etc in cascading information into societies. Biu (2006) also identified structural issues like the secrecy of voting during elections and electoral codes of conduct which needed to be implemented and taught.

Religion, Gender, and Voting Behaviour

Religion influences all aspects of people's lives in Nigeria: cultural, economic, social, and political albeit in different ways. Monotheistic or highly polytheistic societies see religion as having a negligible impact on politics. But the religious divide of 50% Muslim, 48% Christian, and 2% others creates a situation where religion can be a key determinant factor in the country's political evolution (Falana, 2010). Hence, several studies have interrogated the subject of the intersection of religion and politics in Nigeria. Kukah (1992:17) argued that "*no one can aspire to or hold political office in Nigeria without pretending to be religious*" suggesting Nigerian politics represents a hegemonic tussle between the religions as aspirant leaders deploy religion as a tool for power acquisition. Obianyo (2010) similarly argues religion is the main instrument used by the political class to earn the support and votes of the electorates, only after ethnicity. Like ethnicity, religion, scholars argue, is used to create a false dichotomy among the people while the political class that deploys this maintains a united front in the balkanization of the people (Maduagwu, 2011). Ilesanmi (1995) explained that the deep-seated interaction between religion and politics in Nigeria could have both positive and negative effects depending on how it is handled. It is to this end that he proposed a new model of religious-political interaction called dialogic politics: a way of communicating politics such that religion is targeted at the public good and not primordial sentiments. Following Jurgen Habermas, Ilesanmi's idea of dialogic politics is aimed at ameliorating the negative effect that religion can have on politics. Onapajo (2012) shows, however, that such a model was never implemented. Instead, religion became a societal and political fissure which was then exploited throughout the Fourth Republic in Nigeria. He thus advocated the need for the constitution to assign roles to religious leaders in the process of conflict management in the country. Lenshie and Akipu (2014), reflecting on the reality suggested the interplay of politics and religion has made the country a hotbed of crises which are often of religious coloration. Obadare (2018) has also demonstrated that religious power struggles have intensified due to the rise of Pentecostalism and the

challenge it is now posing to Islam within political struggles for state power. Hence religion is a political battleground that when invoked by politicians has a strong emotional impact not only on voting behavior but also on societal relations as political divisions take on a religious dimension (Ikem, Ogbonna, and Ogunnubi, 2019)

The influence of religion on politics has led to calls for Nigeria to be declared a secular state (Ojo, 2019), although the constitution states that a balance of power between the Muslim and Christian faiths, with split party tickets, should be maintained (Ogbu, 2014). Samuel and Anadi (2021) argue Nigeria needs to ensure the separation of the state from religion as the country has had to grapple with the negative effect of not doing so, the challenges from extremist forms of Islamism and the rise of Boko Haram being one consequence (Svoboda, 2020) as well as the more fundamental ideas of Pentecostalism (Adelakun, 2023). itself as a major political force through the enormous followership and placement in positions; while Ojo (2019) reiterates the need for the state to deemphasize religion in politics given the highly divided state of the country. These reasonably new developments may have led to religious affiliation being a more important factor in the most recent two elections and see its influence being on an upward trajectory. The influence of religion may be greater on those least politically literate and confident in making independent choices at the ballot box, within the patriarchal Nigerian system women generally may turn to religion for guidance to a greater degree than their male counterparts (Makama, 2013). level moderates the impact of religion on political outcomes with a major focus on female voters. To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first study to assess this.

Research has found that religion has a significant influence on female Nigerians' participation in politics, not only in terms of voting but also in engagement with civic culture. Studies such as Makama, (2013), Kukah (2013), and Akpan (2018), have highlighted the differing dimensions of the relationship. Udoh et al., (2020), for example, argued that the problem is not a function of religion but can be traced to the African culture that places more value on men than on women. They noted that a male child is generally celebrated and accorded more respect than a female child, and it is this prejudicial thinking that translates to the devaluing of women's participation in the realm of politics (Ogbogu, 2012). Hence some scholars highlight that inequalities are not a factor of religion but culture (Adeboye, 2005). Other scholars argue, however, that differences between the religions, and the greater patriarchal culture within Islamic communities, lead women in the predominantly Muslim north to be more disadvantaged than their Christian counterparts in the south (Adamu, 2008). But research is patchy and the results are mixed when comparing women's participation and voting behavior across the north-south divide in Nigeria.

This study seeks to address this gap, focusing on the factors that influence women's voting behavior in the 2015, 2019, and 2023 general elections. Exploring the influence of religious and tribal affiliation, the influence of patriarchal traditions and deference to males (husbands, fathers, etc.), and the levels of political literacy allows the building of a more holistic understanding of gender equality and the nature of inequalities for women in Nigeria comparing the Muslim Northern and Christian Southern regions. The study

deliberately does not compare voting influences between genders as the key purpose is to understand the inequities that exist for women within the nation. Based on the existing research two hypotheses were formulated:

Hypothesis 1: There is a highly significant relationship between religious affiliation and political literacy on political outcomes for the female electorate in Northern Nigeria.

Hypothesis 2: There is a minimal but significant relationship between religious affiliation and political literacy on the political outcome of the female electorate in Southern Nigeria.

Methodological Design

The research focuses on two main areas, controlling for other socio-cultural variables pertinent to the position of women in Nigeria. These areas are:

1. The role of religion in the choice of candidate in elections
2. Political Literacy level as a Moderating factor on how religion affects the choice of candidate in elections

To meet the analytical objectives, the research followed a quantitative methodological approach for collecting the data among the Nigerian female voters in the target region. The data was collected through a questionnaire-based survey administered face-to-face and online via smartphones. The survey asked about the demographic characteristics of the participants, information about their religions and self-declared political literacy levels (measured as their perceived levels of knowledge and confidence in their ability to assess candidates' platforms), and the factors that influenced their voting choices. The analytical procedures employed a combination of frequency analysis, Regression, and One-way ANOVA Tests to determine the measures of dependence for hypotheses 1 and 2.

The survey was administered by a professional market research company to ensure a representative sample of females from across the regions (the sample, by region and state, is shown in Table 1). The target was to have 2,000 respondents from Northern and Southern Nigeria to make a total of 4,000 respondents. To this end, a link was created through which respondents could fill in their responses to each question. Challenges were experienced in the administration of the survey due to the difficulty of reaching women in interior communities where the bulk of the women are not literate and without at least an Android phone. These respondents were surveyed face to face and with the help of an interpreter who sought to interpret each question in the survey to suit the respondents' language or dialect. The translator completed the survey filling in the responses picked by the respondents on the link. There is also the limitation that the dynamic interplay between religion and political literacy is likely to be different from one community to the other, and so voting behavior will be impacted in varying ways. This is a challenge for all surveys that aspire to be completely representative. The limitation is recognized and accepted that the results are an aggregate but may not reflect every possible situation.

Table 1. Sample by geographical region, state, and dominant party

Geopolitical zone	Location	Selected State	State Governors' Political Party
North-West	North of the Niger	Kano	APC
		Kaduna	APC
North-Central		Kwara	APC
South-East	South of the Niger	Abia	PDP
		Delta	PDP
South-South		Edo	PDP

At the end of this process, a total of 4,268 respondents filled in the questionnaire. This represents 0.01% of the 4.4m registered female voters in Nigeria. From the questionnaire administered, a total of 2204 respondents (representing 51.6% of the respondents) were from the North while a total of 2011 respondents (47.1% of the respondents) filled in the questionnaire from the South. Similarly, of the 4268 respondents, 53 of them (1.2% of the respondents) did not indicate the region they resided in. The small number of non-responding outliers were disregarded and are not included in the analysis. The full demographic breakdown of the respondents is detailed below in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic breakdown of Survey Respondents

Variables		Frequency	
		North	South
Age	Under 18	5	5
	18 – 24	618	450
	25 – 34	869	582
	35 – 44	653	665
	45+	59	309
Educational level	No formal education	377	166
	Primary education	541	190
	Secondary education	598	248
	Tertiary education	688	1407
Employment Status	Unemployed	274	154
	Full employment	337	570
	Part-time employment	336	309
	Self-employed	771	486
	Seeking opportunities	255	222
	Retired	4	109
	Prefer not to say	227	161
Occupation	Urban skilled	283	574
	Urban unskilled	280	286
	Rural skilled	384	305
	Rural unskilled	452	173
	Housewife	365	202
	Student	193	166
	Not working	240	284
	Others	7	21
TOTAL		2204	2011

Results

To achieve the objectives of the study, a Factor Analysis was conducted. Given that more than a question was asked relating to the influence of religion, political literacy, and political influences on voting behavior excluding religion, factor analysis was used to reduce all these questions to a single variable. Factor analysis is usually carried out to reduce the number of variables, however, two statistical tests were conducted to determine the suitability of factor analysis. First, the Kaisers-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling and the Bartless test of sphericity. The Kaisers-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) is a measure of sampling adequacy that gives a score with a recommended level of 0.5 while the Bartless test of sphericity is

significant if its significance level is not more than 0.05, thereby indicating that there is adequate inter-correlations between the items. In this study, the measure is well over 0.5 for the two Factor Analysis models estimated. Similarly, the significance value of the Bartless test shows that the value is less than 0.05. Thus, the conclusion from these tests allows for the use of factor analysis which establishes the strength of the relationship among the questions within each grouped variable. Principal axis factoring was used as an extraction method. Thus, from this process, single factors were selected for choice of the electorate and religious affiliation. The results of the factor analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Result of Factor Analysis of Political Literacy

Variable Factor Analyzed For	Variables Factor Analyzed		KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy score	Bartless Test of Sphericity Sig.
	Question	Component Matrix Result		
Political influences on voting behaviour	Party of candidate	.734	.760	.000
	Character of candidate	.726		
	Region of candidate	.706		
	Role of Political Influencers	.697		
	Influence of the media	.661		
	The policy of the party/candidate	.649		
Religion	Religion and political choice in LG elections	.805	.679	.000
	Religion and political choice in state-level elections	.798		
	Religion and political choice in Federal elections	.791		

Subsequently, this study tests the fundamental questions which guide the research. Employing a multiple regression analysis to examine how religious affiliation and political literacy can predict the political outcomes of the female electorate in the North and the South. In conducting this analysis, a mean value of the questions factored for religious affiliation and political literacy was utilised as the independent variables while a mean variable of the questions factored for political outcome indicators was used as the dependent variable. The summary of the regression result is presented thus.

Table 4: Summary of Results of Regression Analysis Showing How Religious Affiliation and Political Literacy Predict Political Outcomes of Female Electorate in the North and South

Region	RESULT FOR ANOVA		RESULT FOR COEFFICIENT	
	F	Sig.	B	Sig
North	539.406	.000	(REL) 0.267 (Pol. L) -1.791	.000 .000
South	158.981	.000	(REL) 0.133 (Pol. L) -1.645	.000 .000

The results presented in Table 4 indicate that both religious affiliation and political literacy exert statistically significant effects on political outcomes for the female electorate in Northern Nigeria. According to the ANOVA results, the significance value (sig) of .000 is below the accepted threshold of 0.05, indicating a significant relationship. Similarly, the F-test yields an F-ratio greater than 1, further confirming the impact of religious affiliation and political literacy on political outcomes in the region. Upon closer examination of the coefficients, the significance value (sig) of 0.000, falling below the acceptable threshold of 0.05, underscores the statistical significance of both variables. Specifically, the coefficient (B-value) for religious affiliation is 0.267, suggesting that for every one-unit increase in religious affiliation, there is a corresponding increase of 0.267 in political outcome indicators for female voters in Northern Nigeria. Conversely, the coefficient for political literacy is -1.791, indicating that for every one-unit increase in political literacy, there is a decrease of 1.791 in political outcomes for female voters in the region. This means that;

Hypothesis 1: *There is a highly significant relationship between religious affiliation and political literacy on political outcomes for the female electorate in Northern Nigeria* is proven correct.

In addition, as shown within the analysis reported in Table 4, both religious affiliation and political literacy demonstrate statistically significant predictive capabilities concerning political outcomes for the female electorate in Southern Nigeria. Analysis of the ANOVA results reveals a significance value (sig) of .000, which falls below the predetermined threshold of 0.05, indicating a notable relationship. Similarly, the F-test produces an F-ratio exceeding 1, further corroborating the substantial association between religious affiliation, political literacy, and political outcomes in the region. Delving deeper into the coefficients, it is observed that the significance values (sig) for both religious affiliation and political literacy are 0.000, underscoring their statistical significance. Specifically, the coefficient (B-value) for religious affiliation stands at 0.133, implying that for every one-unit increase in religious affiliation, there is a corresponding increase of 0.133 in political outcomes for female voters in Southern Nigeria. While significant this is a lower correlation between religious affiliation and voting. Conversely, the coefficient for political literacy is -1.645, indicating that for every one-unit increase in political literacy, there is a decrease of 1.645 in

political outcomes for female voters in Southern Nigeria. This means that Hypothesis 2: There is a minimal but significant relationship between religious affiliation and political literacy on the political outcome of the female electorate in Southern Nigeria is proven although the differences between females in the North and South are not as marked as predicted.

Discussion

The analysis results reveal a positive correlation between religious affiliation and electoral outcomes in both regions, albeit at varying degrees. These findings echo earlier studies examining the influence of religion on electoral choices (for example Ayantayo, 2009). These findings are also not unique to Nigeria as a nascent and fragile democracy. For instance, a 2016 survey conducted by Barna (2016) in the United States explored factors influencing voters' candidate preferences. It found that 75% of evangelical respondents attributed a significant influence to religion in their political decision-making. Additionally, the survey revealed that non-evangelical born-again Christians attributed 30% of their electoral choices to religion, while notional Christians allocated 10% influence to their religious beliefs and 9% to their pastors. Among adults without ties to Christianity, religion influenced 15% of their electoral decisions, while atheists or religious skeptics reported no impact of religious beliefs on their voting behavior. These findings underscore the substantial influence of religion on electoral choices, even within Western democracies.

Similarly, several studies focusing on Nigerian elections have elucidated the intersection of religion and political choices. Obadare (2018) illustrated the impact of religion on the 2011 Nigerian elections, while Ojo (2019) demonstrated its influence on voters' decisions in the 2015 elections. Okolie et al, (2021) further examined the role of religion in shaping political preferences, concluding that it not only influences electoral choices but also contributes to the underdevelopment of democracy. These authors highlight the detrimental aspects of the influence of religion in Nigerian politics, arguing that it serves as a vehicle for perpetuating violence, fostering ethnic consciousness and solidarity, acquiring power and socioeconomic gains, and perpetrating mass killings and destruction, particularly in the context of contention between Islam and Christianity for political power *"religion in Nigeria functions as a means for the perpetration of violence, fueling ethnic consciences and solidarity, acquisition of power and socio-economic gains, massive killings and the wanton destruction of lives and vandalizing of property of those considered infidels or who pay allegiance to other religions"* (Okolie, 2021:23)." These are factors relating to the political environment which are likely to hinder or prevent the participation of women (Akpan, 2018).

Jenke and Huettel (2016) attempt to explain further why religion is likely to exert an influence on the electoral choice of female voters in Nigeria. They noted that voter choices have often been defined by the rational choice model which claims that voters decide their candidate of choice at the polls by looking out for the attributes of the candidates, weighing those attributes in the order of their importance, and then picking the candidate who possesses those attributes that align with his or her preferences. The attributes that voters

look out for are either policy attributes such as key issues or non-policy attributes such as issues of religion, and ethnicity, et al. Jenke and Huettel (2016:35) explain this thus:

First, policy and identity variables have different statistical properties. Policy variables are treated like attributes in a multi-dimensional space, like that for other economic decisions; voters prefer candidates whose policies are closest to their own desired positions (e.g., minimal distance in that space). Identity variables, however, are treated like a set of social categories; voters prefer candidates to the extent that voting for that candidate increases their self-perceived status within each category. Second, and critically, policy and identity compete to shape voter choice.

As the factor analysis shows these factors are important for the female voters surveyed, and they cut across both regions in influencing voter choices to some extent. Therefore, it appears that many Nigerian females will seek out the candidate of choice by assessing which one is most likely to cater to improving the economy, providing infrastructure, improving the state of education and health, or even providing security, depending on her specific concerns and priorities. But she is also faced with making a choice that will ensure that her social group – be it ethnic or religious – and its interests are protected or even benefitted by the election of one candidate more than another. Suffice it to say that it is not enough that a candidate shares this social group with the voter but more about how the voter self-identifies and the groups with which the voter feels they are most identified. If they are identified as part of a category that is viewed as of less value, they might prioritize voting for the candidate that will offer this identity the most benefits to avoid marginalization (McGarry, 2024). This explains why a voter can be Christian but choose not to vote for a candidate who is Christian because their identity as a Christian may not be the identity marker that she, the voter, prioritizes at the point when an election is called. Castle et al (2017) also highlight that the extent of religiosity of the individual will matter, alongside a range of other socio-economic factors that they feel are germane at the time of a contest. Where and when a voter chooses to identify with the social group, the issue that arises and subsequently determines her choice is how well the policy utility and the identity utility are synchronized and represented in a candidate. It is almost impossible to see a voter vote for a candidate that she is aware cannot provide the policy utility but satisfies her identity utility. This explains why even political candidates that campaign largely on the strength of divisive elements like religion also make promises that satisfy the policy utility (Jenke & Huettel, 2020). In return, the voter is convinced that such a candidate can meet both needs of hers. When a voter feels her identity is threatened, her identity utility needs to be protected. Hence, a closer look at the responses of the Northern respondents reveals that Northern respondents who are Christians will place a priority on their religion. This stems from the high state of insecurity and 'perceived' threat to their Christian faith within the North, and so the vote is a protection from marginalization (McGarry, 2024).

The place and methodology of the religion are also a factor that must be mentioned. Where a religion maintains a conservative stance on its preservation and adherence to its tenets, the probability that its adherents will allow it to influence every aspect of their lives is higher

(Svoboda, 2020; Adelakun, 2023). In Islam, the issue of *wala*, or the duty of support or loyalty to one's faith has been a subject of interrogation for centuries (Wilks, 2022). While it is clear, as stated in *Surah an-Nisa, Ch.4: V.59* that Muslims are expected to vote only for leaders who are most deserving of the position, the criterion for choosing a leader poses challenges and has been an instrument for political mobilization towards religious ends by politicians. Makrum (2019) noted that the first two criteria for choosing a leader in Islam are first, having faith in Allah, and second, justice and trustworthiness. A leader is not just a leader but one who is seen as a bridge that binds humans and Allah. Hence, when *Kufr* (Unbelievers) are elected above Muslims, it might pose a threat to Islam and endanger the Sharia'h. The argument that some Muslim clerics in Nigeria have often put forward when pushing this agenda has been that only a Muslim will protect the interest of Islam. The effect of this can be seen in how Muslim voters in the North rallied around the NPC in the First Republic and Buhari in the 2015 and 2019 elections. The Christian faith, on the other hand, has been more liberal on whether a Christian should vote for another Christian where persons of other faiths are standing for elections. The desire to even go out to vote has been minimal among this demography in Nigeria until the 2023 elections. The liberal nature of Christianity affects how it influences voting behavior, explaining the lower but yet visible influence of religion in Southern Nigeria. Islam, on the other hand, has been deployed as a tool of mobilization and so creates difficulty in achieving secularity. Put simply, and as our data shows, female voters in the Muslim-dominated North are more swayed by religious affiliation than their counterparts in the South.

Relevantly this study pinpointed a variance in the significance of the relationship between religious affiliation and political choice of female voters in the two regions, reflecting the historical antecedents that shape the North and South of Nigeria. As a result of the influence of colonialism and the advent of the Hausa-Fulani caliphate, Islam held sway in the North while Christianity held sway in the South. This has acted as the foundation for the role religion still plays (Kukah, 1993). Kukah captures how religion has come to influence political choice when he states that

"Whereas other parts of Nigeria have tended to concentrate on democracy and the building of a secular state, the Muslims in Nigeria have focused more on some form of a theocracy and a variant of feudalism...the reason is that religion has been conscripted into the politics of the country, no thanks to the legacy of the dead, but not buried, Hausa-Fulani caliphate the tensions generated by the colonial state laid the foundations for most of the tensions that persist today" (Kukah, 2013, 1-6).

Leaders in the North, ably aided by the low levels of Western education and the high level of Islamic education, have made elections seem like a contest between the Muslim faithful and the kaffir (non-Muslims). The situation is different in the South where the various religions are allowed to co-exist. Hence, religious leaders admonish their followers to vote along religious lines or have a stronghold on the political choice of their followers, women in particular, in the North.

The negative relationship between political literacy and electoral outcomes in both regions can also be explained by the lack of adequate political information on the part of the citizenry, regardless of region. In fact, and independent of the region, Lukman (2019) regarded Nigerians as “*political illiterates*”. Eme-Uche and Eme (2023) surveyed the extent of political literacy and posited that the lack of it did not “...enable them to show concern for the wellbeing and dignity of others when contemplating political situations and decisions (Eme-Uche & Eme 2023:40).” The woeful situation with regards to the lack of political literacy in Nigeria has been highlighted by a range of studies (see Luqman, 2009; Maduagwu, 2011) as well as how this leads to election outcomes being determined by the wrong narrative and motive. A former Minister and Presidential candidate in the 2019 elections, Oby Ezekwesili, puts the situation thus:

The understanding of governance is still a bit distorted; people believe that for you to have a role in governance you must be an appointed official but governance as a construct requires the engagement of the citizens. There is a demand and supply side to governance...If those who are citizens don't play their active citizenship well, there is no demand side for governance and the lack of this will make the supply side which is those in governance do anything they like. They will behave like monopolies; they have no pressure to deliver results. (Ezekwesili, 2019)

Suffice it to say that there is always a penchant for scholars to confuse the level of education with political literacy. This explains why some conclude that political literacy in the South is far above what is obtainable in the North. Ojo (2020), as well as many journalistic commentators, showed this when they erroneously concluded that the more educated the people are, the better they are at making informed electoral decisions. This error stems from the incorrect assumption that literacy is the same as political literacy. As the results have shown, that a person is educated does not mean s/he will be able to make rational decisions in key critical areas like politics or the economy. Across Nigeria, independent of educational attainment, there are problems with political literacy which is not aided by the complexities and corrupt and unethical practices that impede the transition to full democracy.

Conclusion

Research into the determinants of voting behaviors has been a subject of debate for numerous decades if not centuries. However, findings often lack granularity and fail to fully capture the complexities of regional realities. Societal dynamics, particularly concerning political campaigning and social movements at the regional level, raise pertinent questions about how political outcomes are shaped by interactions with religious groups and interests, alongside the role of traditional religions in developing countries like Nigeria. The Nigerian government's perception of religion primarily serves as a tool for political mobilization, consistently surfacing as a pivotal indicator in successive elections. Nevertheless, discernible fragments of disparities exist in the extent of religious influence on political activities across regions. Undoubtedly, the pervasive influence of religion on the

populace in the North elucidates the significant relationship between religious affiliation and the political choices of female voters in that region, a phenomenon not mirrored in findings from the South at the same level; although they remain an influential presence. These realities, while incontrovertible, need not necessarily yield negative effects. Through the judicious promotion of Western education within the country as a whole, but particularly within the Northern region, the entrenched influence of religion over political choices can gradually diminish. An elevated level of political literacy education stands as the crucial conduit to fostering political development. Research demonstrates the importance of specific literacies that can combat citizens making ill-informed and self-defeating choices. In this context, and in particular, focusing on supporting the increased political literacy of females, this approach will positively impact the level of political participation in the polity, countering the deficiencies in the independent decision-making that is prevalent at present.

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