Digital Political Communication and Youth Electoral Participation in Nigeria's 2023 General Election: Opportunities, Constraints and Democratic Implications

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Abstract

The expansion of social media has altered the ways political actors communicate with citizens and the ways citizens encounter electoral information. Nigeria's 2023 general election provides an important context for examining this transformation because digital platforms were prominent in campaign communication, political mobilisation and public debate. This article examines the opportunities and constraints associated with social media engagement and youth electoral participation during the election. It adopts a qualitative documentary research design, drawing on the Independent National Electoral Commission's report on the 2023 general election, the European Union Election Observation Mission's final report, and selected scholarly studies of digital political communication in Nigeria. The analysis is organised around four themes: political information and voter education; youth mobilisation and networked participation; misinformation and polarisation; and the relationship between online engagement and formal electoral participation. The evidence indicates that social media widened access to campaign messages, enabled citizens to discuss candidates and issues, and provided channels for civic monitoring. However, the same platforms facilitated the rapid circulation of misleading content, coordinated political messaging and identity-based hostility. The article argues that online visibility should not be treated as equivalent to turnout or sustained democratic participation. Digital mobilisation is most valuable when it is connected to credible voter education, accessible electoral institutions, media literacy and protections for freedom of expression. Because the study relies on documentary sources, it does not claim to measure the independent causal effect of social media on individual voting behaviour.

Keywords

Social media; youth; electoral participation; political mobilisation; Nigeria; 2023 general election; digital political communication

1. Introduction

Elections are not only moments of choosing political representatives; they are also processes through which citizens receive information, debate public issues, evaluate political alternatives and communicate demands to those seeking office. The growth of social media has expanded the channels through which these activities take place. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok allow political parties, candidates, civil society organisations, journalists and ordinary citizens to circulate information with speed and relatively low barriers to entry. They also make it possible for users to respond to political messages, organise networks and challenge official narratives.

Nigeria's 2023 general election was conducted in an environment in which online political communication was highly visible. The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM, 2023) described social media as an important tool for information exchange, campaigning and mobilisation, while also documenting its use to attack opponents and spread false information. The Mission noted that political camps used online teams and that Facebook and Twitter were prominent campaign platforms. It also identified strong online engagement among supporters of some candidates, particularly among younger users.

The scale of youth registration made this development politically significant. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2024) reported 37,060,399 registered voters aged 18–34, representing 39.65 per cent of the registered electorate. This large demographic presence makes youth participation an important consideration in

assessing Nigeria's electoral democracy. Yet registration, online discussion, campaign volunteering and actual voting are distinct forms of participation. A citizen may be highly active online but unable or unwilling to vote; another may vote without maintaining a visible digital presence.

This article examines the opportunities and constraints associated with social media and youth electoral participation during Nigeria's 2023 general election. It addresses three questions: How did social media create opportunities for political information and mobilisation? What challenges limited its democratic value? And what does the 2023 experience suggest about the relationship between online engagement and formal electoral participation? The central argument is that social media broadened the communicative space available to young Nigerians, but its contribution to democratic participation depended on the credibility of information, the inclusiveness of digital access and the capacity of electoral institutions to sustain public trust.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Social media and political participation

Social media refers here to internet-based platforms that enable users to create, share, discuss and circulate content through networked communication. Political participation is understood broadly as citizen activity intended to influence political processes, public decisions or the selection of leaders. It includes voting, campaigning, contacting representatives, attending political meetings, participating in civic organisations, discussing public affairs and monitoring government or electoral institutions.

Digital participation can complement conventional participation, but it should not be confused with it. Posting a campaign message, sharing voter information or debating a candidate may indicate political interest; none of these activities alone establishes that a user registered, collected a permanent voter card, reached a polling unit or cast a ballot. This distinction is essential when evaluating claims that online mobilisation automatically increases electoral turnout.

2.2 Agenda-setting theory

Agenda-setting theory, associated with McCombs and Shaw (1972), explains how media attention can influence the importance audiences attach to public issues. In a social media environment, agenda-setting is more dispersed than in a traditional mass-media system. Political parties, candidates, influencers, journalists and ordinary users compete to make particular issues visible. Hashtags, trending topics and repeated sharing can amplify issues, although visibility does not necessarily indicate broad public agreement or factual accuracy.

2.3 Networked communication and connective action

Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) account of connective action helps explain how digital networks can facilitate political participation without requiring all participants to join a formal organisation. Individuals can circulate personalised messages, connect with loosely organised groups and contribute to collective campaigns through sharing, commenting and content creation. This framework is useful for understanding the visibility of youth-led online political communities during the 2023 election. However, networked participation can be uneven, short-lived and vulnerable to manipulation.

3. Methodology

The article adopts a qualitative documentary research design. It relies on secondary materials rather than original survey, interview or experimental data. The principal sources are INEC's Report of the 2023 General Election (2024), the EU Election Observation Mission's Nigeria 2023 Final Report (2023), and published scholarly studies addressing social media, voter education and political participation during the election.

The documents were examined thematically. Relevant passages were grouped under four analytical categories: (1) political information and voter education; (2) youth mobilisation and online participation; (3) misinformation, polarisation and digital rights; and (4) the limits of online engagement as an indicator of voting behaviour. The analysis compares institutional observations with findings reported in existing academic studies.

The method has limitations. Documentary analysis cannot establish the individual-level causal effect of social media exposure on voting decisions. It is also dependent on the scope and methods of the original reports and studies. Accordingly, the article presents an interpretive assessment of documented patterns rather than new statistical

findings. No primary respondents were recruited, and no original survey data were generated for this article.

4. Social Media and the 2023 Electoral Environment

The EU EOM (2023) reported that social media served as a major channel for campaign communication and mobilisation during the election period. Political camps used online teams at federal and state levels, while candidates maintained dedicated accounts and communication networks. The Mission's monitoring covered Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok, among other platforms, and identified the rapid movement of information between platforms and WhatsApp groups.

This environment created opportunities for political actors to communicate directly with voters. Candidates could publish campaign messages, explain policy positions, respond to criticism and circulate event information without relying exclusively on traditional media gatekeepers. Citizens could also compare claims, question public officials and circulate content that might otherwise receive limited mainstream attention.

The EU EOM's monitoring further documented strong online engagement around the presidential contest, including substantial activity among supporters of Peter Obi. The report observed that this online engagement was particularly visible among young people. Such observations demonstrate the political significance of digital networks, but they should be interpreted carefully: online engagement metrics capture activity on platforms, not the full electorate and not necessarily the number of people who subsequently voted.

4.1 Youth voter education and political awareness

Social media can support voter education by circulating information about registration, voter-card collection, polling procedures, candidate platforms and electoral rights. Its interactive character also allows users to ask questions and share explanations within peer networks. Wonuola and Ajijola (2025), in a study focused on youths in Ilorin, reported that social media voter-education posts were associated with respondents' understanding of candidates' agendas and participation in the 2023 presidential election. Their study illustrates the potential value of targeted digital civic education, although its local sample should not be treated as representative of all Nigerian youths.

The INEC register shows that young people constituted a substantial part of the registered electorate. INEC (2024) recorded more than 37 million registered voters aged 18–34. This figure underlines the importance of youth-focused information, but it does not by itself establish the proportion of young people who voted. Effective voter education must therefore go beyond campaign slogans and provide clear, timely and verifiable procedural information.

4.2 Networked mobilisation and political expression

Digital platforms lowered some barriers to political expression. Young people could participate in debates, organise online communities, create campaign content and share concerns about governance. These activities may strengthen political efficacy by giving citizens opportunities to express preferences and see their contributions circulate beyond immediate social circles.

Somorin (2025) similarly examined social media engagement and citizen participation in Nigeria's 2023 presidential election, identifying the role of digital platforms in information sharing, civic engagement and public opinion. Okon, Ojedor and Moshood (2025) also analysed social media in the 2023 general elections and discussed the importance of platforms such as Twitter in political communication. Taken together, these studies indicate that digital campaigning had become an important feature of Nigeria's electoral communication environment.

Nevertheless, networked mobilisation is not automatically inclusive. Access to smartphones, reliable electricity, affordable data and digital literacy varies across socioeconomic groups and geographical areas. People with limited connectivity may be less visible in online political discussions even when they are politically interested. Women and other groups may also face harassment that discourages public participation. The EU EOM (2023) reported concerns about online intimidation and noted that female candidates were less active on social media partly because of reported fears of gender-based online harassment.

5. Constraints on the Democratic Value of Social Media

5.1 Misinformation and disinformation

The speed and scale of digital communication make it difficult to verify every political claim before it spreads. The EU EOM (2023) documented false or misleading content during the campaign and around polling days, including claims about candidates, endorsements and electoral developments. It also noted that misleading content moved rapidly across platforms and that information gaps contributed to the circulation of unverified narratives.

Misinformation can confuse voters about procedures, candidates and results. Disinformation, where false material is deliberately circulated to deceive, can be used to damage reputations, intensify distrust or influence perceptions of electoral legitimacy. Both weaken the quality of public deliberation when users share content without checking its source or context.

5.2 Polarisation and identity-based hostility

Digital platforms can connect people with similar political preferences, but they can also intensify hostility between opposing groups. The EU EOM (2023) observed derogatory online expressions and political discussions framed around ethnic and religious identities, particularly in highly contested political contexts. Such communication can shift attention away from policy debate and encourage citizens to interpret political disagreement as hostility between identity groups.

5.3 Unequal access and participation

Digital participation depends on material and social conditions. Data costs, network coverage, device ownership, disability access and digital literacy affect who can participate and how consistently. An online campaign that reaches connected urban users may not reach rural communities or citizens with limited access to digital devices. Social media should therefore complement, rather than replace, radio, community engagement, printed voter information and other accessible forms of civic communication.

5.4 Online engagement and electoral turnout

A central analytical caution is the difference between digital activity and voting. The presence of millions of registered young voters and high levels of online campaign activity does not demonstrate that social media caused a corresponding increase in turnout. Voting is shaped by several factors, including trust in electoral institutions, perceived competitiveness, security, logistics, access to polling units, economic conditions and individual political preferences.

The EU EOM (2023) documented concerns relating to the electoral environment, technology, information integrity and public confidence. These factors form part of the context in which citizens decide whether and how to participate. It is therefore more accurate to regard social media as one influence within a wider political and institutional environment than as a single explanation for youth turnout.

6. Discussion

The 2023 election demonstrates the dual character of social media in contemporary Nigerian politics. On one hand, platforms widened the circulation of campaign messages and enabled citizens to engage in political discussion. They created opportunities for youth expression, peer-to-peer voter education and the monitoring of electoral developments. On the other hand, the same communication infrastructure enabled misleading content, coordinated attacks and polarising narratives to circulate quickly.

The findings support a qualified understanding of digital mobilisation. Social media can make political participation more accessible and visible, but its democratic value depends on the quality of the information environment and the ability of citizens to convert online interest into meaningful action. A campaign that generates likes, reposts and trending hashtags may demonstrate visibility without demonstrating informed choice, electoral inclusion or actual turnout.

The findings also point to the importance of institutional trust. Electoral management bodies need to communicate clearly and promptly, particularly when technical problems or delays create uncertainty. Where official information is unavailable or difficult to verify, rumours can fill the gap. Civil society organisations, news organisations, universities and fact-checking initiatives can help strengthen information integrity, but they cannot substitute for transparent and accountable electoral administration.

Finally, digital inclusion should be understood as a democratic concern. Youth engagement strategies should not focus exclusively on the most visible users or platforms. They should recognise differences in language, geography, gender, disability and socioeconomic status. Online communication is most effective when connected to accessible offline civic education and opportunities for citizens to participate beyond the campaign period.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This article examined the opportunities and constraints associated with social media and youth electoral participation during Nigeria's 2023 general election. The documentary evidence indicates that digital platforms played an important role in campaign communication, political discussion, mobilisation and the circulation of electoral information. They provided young citizens with additional channels for political expression and engagement. At the same time, misinformation, identity-based hostility, online intimidation and unequal access limited the democratic benefits of digital participation.

The article concludes that social media should be understood as an enabling environment rather than a guarantee of electoral participation. Online engagement can support democratic involvement, but it cannot be used as a substitute measure for voting or as proof that digital campaigns independently determine electoral outcomes.

The following recommendations arise from the analysis:

1. **Strengthen digital voter education:** INEC and civil society organisations should publish clear, accessible and multilingual information on voter registration, voter-card collection, polling procedures and electoral rights. 2. **Improve timely official communication:** Electoral authorities should provide prompt, consistent updates during critical stages of the electoral process to reduce information gaps. 3. **Expand media and digital literacy:** Schools, universities and community organisations should teach citizens how to verify sources, identify manipulated content and distinguish opinion from evidence. 4. **Protect inclusive political expression:** Political parties, platforms and public institutions should address online harassment and intimidation, particularly where these practices discourage women and young people from participating. 5. **Promote transparent platform practices:** Social media companies should improve transparency around political advertising, coordinated inauthentic behaviour and the handling of election-related harmful content, while respecting freedom of expression. 6. **Connect online mobilisation with offline participation:** Youth organisations should combine digital campaigns with town-hall meetings, campus engagement, community forums and non-partisan civic education. 7. **Support further empirical research:** Future studies should use representative surveys, interviews and platform-data analysis to examine how online exposure relates to voter knowledge, political efficacy and actual turnout across different regions and demographic groups.

A more resilient democratic culture requires more than high levels of online activity. It requires informed citizens, inclusive participation, credible institutions and an information environment in which political disagreement can take place without manipulation or intimidation.

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