PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF CANDIDATE AND VOTING PATTERN IN ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: A DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT
The thrust of this paper is to critically examine the level of political participation and voting behaviour of Nigerian citizens in the electioneering process. The paper also seeks to assess the extent to which participation and voting behaviour contributed to the credibility and success of the polls. To this end, the study applies the system theory as basis of analysis and content analysis in its discussion. The study concludes that effective political participation and the voting behaviour of citizens is critical to the effectiveness of the political process and it is thus recommended amongst other things that for political stability to be maintained, the electoral process must be accommodating, and allow for expression of the electoral freedom of the people as well as giving cognizance to the socio-economic wellbeing of the people. Thus, to avoid dissatisfaction, the political candidate should emphasis and give attention to workable political institution and improve on their official public performances and the political aspirants in all elections should give attention to those factors that influences public perception and improve on them among others.

INTRODUCTION
Public perception of candidates is an integral part of the electoral process; it determines the voting pattern in a given state, especially in an optimal political situation. Generally speaking, people are interested in casting their vote for a candidate that has high personality that is characterized by the interest of the masses than selfish candidate void of civil society's interest. According to Campbell et al (1960), the investigation of voters' perceptions of candidates enduring personal orientations seem to be of growing importance since political scientists in the United States at least, are changing their perception (thinking) about determinant of voting behaviour. The older approaches of voting behaviour in United States of America (USA), concentrate primarily on the issues concerning the candidate determinant and partisan group connections.

However, Miller et al (1996) aver that recent writers opine that the public (voters) may focus on personal qualities of the candidate to gain important information about his or her characteristics relevant in examining the individual's performances. Kinder (1986) opines that the public perceptions are based, in some part, on the degree to which political candidate conveys admirable qualities or characteristics. For instance, in 2000 election in United States of America (USA), it was obvious that the presidential candidate themselves believed in the imperativeness of such determinants. United States, reported that George Bush potency of leadership and recognition during his campaign was coated and floated with a 'slogan' that portrayed his qualitative character as "Bush Gore-seek 2000" in Florida.

According to Hayes et al (2004) and Mendelsohn (1996) the fact that the news media consistently and increasingly concentrate on the image of the candidate at the expense of policy matters, it is likely that the voters also tend to pay earnest and better attention to the politician's traits. Jones and John (1996) and Pierce (1993) declare that in line with this personality traits, it has been found to account for a greater percentage of the variance in candidate preference than traditional political programme. Conover (1991), and Glass (1985), also opined that since interest in the way voters perceived politicians' leadership characteristics is a recent development little is known about it; in fact, some authors did investigate which personality traits, voters may consider as significant in political candidate.

Miller et al (2000) argue that integrity, trustworthiness, competence and good leadership were central to proto-typical conception of an ideal politician. Moreover, some people perceived their leader as charismatic and others as democratic leaders, and used this yardstick to determine the best candidate during the election process. Moreover, voters' party identification although, it is relatively becoming absolute in the developed or rich countries of the world, has significant influence on the voting pattern in the developing countries of the world. Examples include Africa countries such as Nigeria, Chad, Gambia, Sudan among others.

Bales (2000) points out that political parties' involvement and identification still play an influential role in the voting pattern in the state, seeing that candidate must operate on a platform of political party and the voters also try to align with the party they deem suitable to them. In addition, many studies revealed that the existence of partisan stereotype

that could corner voter's influence as well as memory about candidate matter abounds (Conover et al, 1989) and these affect their decisions making process and thus discarding relevant information about certain choices they had made. This means that voters could exhibit in group favouritism that is hinged on tribalism, nepotism and ethnicity. According to Tajfel (2001) social identity approach may explain the reasons for party identification and its significant impact on voters' perception or behaviour in spite its decline overtime. It is of the view that individual strive to create a positive and outstanding position of their in-group interest (party) compared to other group, resulting in the well-known phenomenon called in-group nepotism.

Bundey and Flument (1971) declare that it takes only the slightest categorization to generate in-group nepotism. Its application to political environment, means that party identification need to be essentially strengthened (strong) in order to induce more positive evaluation of one's party candidate relatively to other party candidate. Moreover, public perception of candidate and voting pattern wholly rest on the voter's choice and political party influences. Thus, the main thrust of this paper is to examine public perception of candidates and voting pattern in elections in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications
Public Perception
The social phenomenon known as public perception can be seen as the difference between an absolute truth based on facts and virtual truth shaped by popular opinion. Public perception consists of the desires, wants, and thinking of the majority of the people. It is the collective opinion of the people of a society or state on an issue or problem. Public perception is not necessarily inaccurate or based on something other than the truth. The public at large can often receive enough factual information in order to form a general perception about the public figure, celebrity or industry without relying on innuendo or unfounded rumours. There can be instances, however, when public perception of a situation is affected by other issues, such as cultural bias or prejudice. A defendant accused of a heinous criminal act may or may not be guilty of the actual crime, but public perception of that type of crime can be difficult for a jury to ignore while deliberating.

Some situations can be compounded by their negative effect on public perception. For example, the revelation that a number of professional baseball players had used illegal performance-enhancement substances angered many fans, but also challenged the public perception of baseball as a relatively drug-free sport. Public perception of a given situation can be unrealistically positive or negative, which can become problematic whenever the true facts emerge and corrective action must be taken. This is why many people feel very conflicted when a perceived good person is accused of a crime or a perceived bad industry is not penalized for its actions (*Wikipedia*, 2016).

Celebrities, politicians and corporations all face the same scrutiny by the public they serve, and it can be very difficult to overcome a negative public perception. While individual companies may strive to do the right things for the right reasons, public perception of industry as a whole can make those things much more challenging to put into motion. Political figure therefore must also consider public perception while campaigning for office. For example, both candidates face difficult perceptional issues during the 2008 – US presidential election – campaign. The Republican candidate, John McCain, was portrayed by the public and media as too old for the position and Barrack Obama the Democratic candidate was perceived by the public as an Ivy league elitist or ineffectual commander in chief. Public perception may not be generally inaccurate because the public is exposed to various source of information. Walter (1992) opines that democracies tend to make a mystery out of public perception (or opinion) with declaration that "there are skilful organizers of perception who understood the mystery well enough to create majorities on election day".

Voting Pattern
Voting pattern is a form of electoral behaviour, understanding voter's behaviour can explain how and why decisions are made either by public decision makers, which has been a central concern for political scientist or by the electorate. To interpret voting pattern or behaviour both political science and psychology expertise were necessary and thus the field of political psychology emerged. Political psychology researchers study ways in which affective influence may help voters to make more informed voting choices (*Wikipedia*, 2016).According to Juma (2011), voting pattern or behaviour is a set of attitudes and beliefs towards elections at the national as well as, at the local level. That is a collection of

attitudes, values, and beliefs of individuals in a given society which they exhibit towards elections both at the local, national and international level.

Harrop and Miller (2000) argue that voting behaviour is a pattern of political participation mostly taking place in some democratic societies where people react to certain laid down values, principles and beliefs, how they choose their leaders. These beliefs could be based on age, sex, ethnicity, religion, regionalism, tribalism and education. The role of candidates in shaping voting choice has generated much research and at least as much as the controversy since modern electoral behaviour research began in the 1960s. Much of the controversy surrounds the personalization of politics and whether political systems, and especially parliamentary systems – are becoming more leader oriented.

Clarke et al (2009) argues that the decline of social structure as an influence on voting choice, especially in European democracies, has led to much debate about what may be replacing it, one explanation sees voting as becoming more issue based with parties and candidates emphasizing issues that they believe will attract support as well as promoting their ability to resolve them. According to Euginia (2015), the engagement of citizens in public affairs is the benchmark of the liberal democratic system. The availability of participation opportunities and the concomitant enabling processual and institutional pre-requisites, allied with positive political orientations to the political system, make it possible for citizens to choose their leaders at elections and also influence the public policy process, and ultimately, the longevity of the democratic system of government.

Theoretical Framework of the Study
This paper adopts the system theory in political science which is a highly abstract, partly holistic views of politics, influenced by cybernetics. The adaptation of system theory to political science was first conceived by David Easton in 1953. In simple terms, Easton's behavioural approach to political system could be seen as a delimited (i.e. political systems have precise boundaries) and fluid system of steps in decision making. Easton (1961) argues that changes in the social or physical environment surrounding a political system produces "demands" and "supports" for action or status quo directed as "inputs" towards the political system, through political behaviour. He added, that the demands and supporting groups stimulate competition in a political system, leading to decision or

"outputs" directed towards some aspects of the surrounding social or physical environment. Easton added that after the decision or output is made it interacts with its environment and it produces change in the environment in form of outcome, and when a new policy interacts with its environment (public) outcomes may generate new demands or supports and groups in support or against the policy in a new policy on the same related matter. This is followed by feedback loop, thus making the input-output system a cycling system.

According to Easton (1971), the political system (complex system takes input from sub-complex system, (the political committing) in forms of demands through groups or pressure group, and when this demand is/are relatively articulated and presented to the central government, it results in an authoritative decision called output. In line, public perception therefore, constitutes an imperative input to the public decision making process as regards to the choice of candidate and voting pattern in the state or local government. The public perception of candidate is central to policy decision making and electoral process.

In fact, Easton (1971), avers that, it is the public perception that determines the voting behaviour and hence the choice of candidate who eventually represent the public. Easton therefore, opines that policy decision making emanates from the environment or society or political community. Consequently, undermining the public or civil society or political community, directly, affect the voting pattern and the kind of candidate that is decisively produced.

Factors that Influences Public Perception of Candidates and Voting Pattern in Nigeria
The factors that influences public perception of candidate and voting pattern in Nigeria are enumerated below;
- **Institutional Design:** One of the major factors that influence public perception of candidates and voting pattern is the form of political institution in place. The major distinction is between presidential and parliamentary system, although a few countries such as France, Switzerland, Nigeria and Several Latin American democracies sit between the two systems and are often classified as semi-presidential. The defining characteristics of a presidential system is the popular election of the president, thus directing public attention to the

individual who occupies the position. Furthermore, making presidential systems candidate – centred is the fact that party discipline is usually weak, since the president's political survival does not depend on the unity of the governing party. By contract, parliamentary system encourages collective responsibility, so that the executive is both dependent upon the confidence of the members of legislature and accountability, so that in contrast to presidential systems, party discipline becomes a primary factor in maintaining executive authority (*Wikipedia*, 2016).

Michael (2000) contends that parliamentary systems have begun to move closer to the presidential model over the past several decades. For example, British prime ministers, have accumulated considerate power and authority. In part, this developed as a consequence of the increased complexity of modern decision making, which has produced a large cadre of advisors. McAllister and White (2014) argues that the second institutional effect over which there is little disagreement is electoral system design.
Electoral systems are easily manipulated by politicians and parties since they are rarely constitutionally embedded unlike presidentialism or parliamentialism. As a consequence, electoral systems are often subject to repeated reform by party elites especially in newly democratizing countries.

- **Candidates and Party Decline:** The way citizens perceived candidate is closely associated with how they perceived political parties. Popular feelings between the public attachment and support for a particular candidate is quite very strong in parliamentary systems. For instance, some of the earliest studies in Great Britain revealed that citizen's perception of party leaders were associated with the popular images of parties to the extent that they were almost indistinguishable. Partnership can change popular perception of candidates in two ways (1) partisanship can shape how voters view candidates and the trait and qualities they regard – as important. Secondly as partisanship declines, it can provide candidates with more independence, freed from the party rules and policies (Coleman 2000).
Scarrow (2014) avers that across all but a handful of democracies of the central and Eastern Europe – party membership has declined

dramatically from the high point recorded just after the end of the second world war.

- **The Mass Media:** The mass media represents the arena within which political competition take place. According to Lau and Redlausk (2006) mass media gained political attention in the early 20th century; the dominant media then was the newspaper and radio. However, since 1960s, television has become the dominant communications medium, and this has forced political actors to adjust their priorities in a manner that would have been unimaginable just a decade earlier. They added that more recently the internet has made substantial in roads into political communication.

Clarke et al (2011) argue that television also has stimulated the first campaign debate between the major political leaders. The first nationally televised debate was held in the United States between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy presidential election campaign and it was credited with winning Kennedy the presidency. Television changed the relationship between voters and candidates by using visual images, rather than the printed word or voice, to communicate information. This has necessarily focused attention on the personalities of candidates, since it is easier for television to disseminate information through a familiar personality, who can present the party's policies more effectively in comparison to the printed words.

Prior (2007) avers that the rise of the internet as a communication medium adds a further layer of complexity to the relationship between voters and candidates. Early research suggested that the major parties with their greater command of resources, would dominate the new medium, resulting in offline pattern of competition being replicated in the virtual world. However, the expansion of social media produced a different pattern; voters now have an unprecedented choice in the political information that they choose to access. They may seek large amounts of political information or, equally, they may eschew all politics altogether. This is clearly visible in the last 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. Technological change is constantly changing the opportunities for candidate to communicate with voters through the mass media. Mass media therefore, influence the public perception of candidate and voting pattern by painting and colouring the personality positively or negatively.

- **Candidate Traits:** The images or traits that voters associate with candidates and leaders enable them to make an informed judgment or perception about the personal qualities that would make the person an effective representative. Personality trait-judgment is a daily political-context assessment acts, which is useful in guiding the public during voting choice. McAllister (2011) opines that the importance of candidate traits in shaping the vote first came into international prominence in the 1960s when researchers observed that while party identification did not change much, election outcomes did. He added which aspects of candidate's image or traits matter most in shaping the vote identifying the most salient traits had been a rich vein electoral research. Kenney (2011) opines that the traits that mostly shape overall candidate public perception and voting pattern include competence, character, empathy. Public perception of candidate and voting pattern is an imperative electoral process. The images and traits that voters associate with candidates and major political leaders clearly do matter. These traits contribute suitably for election, which in turn has a tangible impact on the vote that he attracts as seen in the last 2023 presidential election where the candidate of the Labour Party in the Presidential election Peter Obi was able to galvanize a lot of votes from the youths and many Nigerians because of his person trait and not just the party.

- **Demographic Factor:** The demographic factors such as race and ethnicity do influence public perception of candidate and voting pattern in the states. In some countries age is a significant determining factor for voting. In Nigeria, for instance unless you are 18years old you are not eligible by law to exercise a voting right (*Wikipedia*, 2016).The socio economic characteristics of a population expressed statistically, such as age, sex, educational level, income level, birth rate, death rate, average size of a family, average age at marriage etc. has significant impact on the public perception of candidate and voting pattern.

  Ethnicity promotes tribalism, favouritisms, nepotism and religious bigotry in the society and equally influence the view of the public concerning the candidate and the voting pattern. Racism is another demographic factor that influences public perception and voting pattern, it is recorded that the white vote more than the black. Race, religion, gender includes some predominant attributes that voter consider in the choice of candidates for an election. Voters are largely

drawn to candidates who share their demographic profile. When voters feel a sense of resemblance, they are likely to trust political leaders or candidates and feel confident in their policy decision (Wood 2016).

- **Political Socialization:** The perception of the candidate by the public and voting pattern is highly determined by the level of political socialization of the citizens or society (i.e. the political communities). According to Michael and Delli (1998), political socialization give birth to a political culture and a political generation. That is a group of individuals, similar in age, who share a general set of political socialization experience leading to the development of shared political orientations, that distinguish them from other age group in the society. People of a similar age tend to be exposed to shared historical, social and political stimuli. A shared generational outlook develops when an age group experiences a decisive political event in its impressionable years – the period from late adolescence to early adulthood when people approach or attain a voting age and begins to think more seriously about politics. Similarly, younger people have less clearly defined political beliefs which make them more likely to be influenced by key societal events.

  Kenneth (1973) asserts that people develop their political values, beliefs, and orientation through interactions with agents of socialization which includes, parents, teachers, friends, co-workers, military colleagues, church members or associates etc., which influences their decision making in the long run.

- **Peer Group Influence:** Peer group according to English Dictionary refers to a group of people of approximately the same age, status, and interests. It is a social and primary group of people who have similar interests, age background, or social status. The members of this group contains hierarchies and distinct patterns of behaviour (*Wikipedia*, 2016).

- **Religion:** Religion has an overriding influence on public perception of candidate and voting pattern. Chrysanthis et al (1991) argues that there are two differences sources of ideological voting; he argued that promoting an idea may allow the individual to feel a sense of satisfaction if they have improved the life of others, and that even if there is no effect on other individuals may still be content in knowing they have done the right thing. He added that using religion as one of the ideologies shows that some religions will support and others object

laws regarding abortion, marriage, or alcoholic drinks depending on the nature of the law. These religious ideologies significantly influence the choice of candidate by the public and also the voting pattern.

- **Gender / Age:** Johnson et al (2003), in their study of Latin Americans' voting behaviour, focused on the influence of language, majority group and gender on voting pattern. They opine that gender has a significant role and impacts in public decision making. Sanbonmatsu (2002) looks at the different stereotypes associated with men and women regarding candidate beliefs, issues, competency, and traits and voter gender. In regards to gender stereotypes, he declares that the general population tends to view woman as more capable to understand issues as regards to dealing with women rights, whereas men are more capable to deal with issues such as foreign policy and defence. Moreover, women are most likely prone to stress than men, and many a time they cannot withstand prolong stress. Therefore, protracted stress during voting impact negatively on their turn out.

CONCLUSION

It had been identified that a number of factors influence the perception of the public and the voting pattern, especially candidate trait, political institution, political socialization and political party decline, stewardship and accountability. It is quite obvious that the public understood the reality of political institution in place and the challenges of the corrupt practice. In the wake of public perception and its development all over the world, political aspirants need to change their orientation and political ideologies that are centred on selfish ambitions. For the political aspirant or candidate to make valid contribution to the political institution and voting pattern in the state and local government, it is necessary to improve upon their efficiency and effectiveness in governance viva-viz of their antecedents.

In line with the foregoing, it is clear that public perception of candidate and voting pattern is gaining development and a trend of changes. It is clear that changes are not static, and for any political institution to survive, grow and be established, it must be willing and able to anticipate unexpected public perception (challenges) and put in much effort to improve positively and accordingly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are proffered;

- For political stability to be maintained, the electoral process must be accommodating, and allow for expression of the electoral freedom of the people as well as giving cognizance to the socio-economic wellbeing of the people.
- To avoid dissatisfaction, the political candidate should emphasis and give attention to workable political institution and improve on their official public performances.
- The political aspirants in the all elections should give attention to those factors that influences public perception and improve on them.
- Since public perception plays a vital role in the voting pattern or behaviour. There should be dynamic planning polices and effective strategies in the area of political socialization by the state and local government.
- The public or political community should avoid unnecessary money gratification in order to avoid biases in their perception (judgment).
- To avoid political disharmony and dichotomization, the politician should redress their political values and priority

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