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Multidimensional predictors of voting behaviours among youths of voting age in southwestern Nigeria

[1*]Timilehin Olayinka Omoniyi
[1]Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education, Faculty of Education, University of Ibadan, Nigeria
[1*]Primary author: timmylayinka@gmail.com

***Abstract*—** Despite the critical role of youths in shaping democratic processes in Nigeria, their voting behaviours continue to be influenced by disengagement, inducements, misinformation, and weak civic orientations, undermining electoral integrity and sustainable democratic consolidation. This study investigated how preference for democracy, perception of candidates, media reporting, and party identification influence voting behaviours among Nigerian youth aged 18–35 in the context of a transitional democracy. The study employed a descriptive correlational survey design. A validated structured questionnaire comprising six sections (reliability range r = 0.83–0.91) was administered to a sample of 2,005 registered youth voters selected through multi-stage stratified and systematic random sampling across three Southwestern states. Data collection spanned four weeks through both online and face-to-face administration. Data were analysed using SPSS version 26, employing descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and multiple regression analysis at the 0.05 significance level. Findings revealed significant positive relationships between youth voting behaviours and both preference for democracy ($r = .214$, $p < .05$) and perception of candidates ($r = .267$, $p < .05$). Media reporting ($r = .038$, $p > .05$) and party identification ($r = .049$, $p > .05$) showed no significant relationships. The composite regression model was significant, explaining 12.4% of the variance in youth voting behaviours (Adj. $R^2 = .122$; $F(4, 2000) = 68.847$, $p < .05$). Among the predictors, perception of candidates ($\beta = .263$) and preference for democracy ($\beta = .192$) were significant, while media reporting and party identification made non-significant contributions. The study contributes to political science, youth studies, and electoral education by underscoring the salience of democratic values and candidate perception in shaping youth political participation, with implications for electoral policy, democratic consolidation, and governance in transitional democracies.

Keywords: Media reporting, Nigerian youth, Party identification, Perception of candidate, Preference for democracy, Voting behaviours

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I. INTRODUCTION

ELECTIONS remain the cornerstone of democratic governance, allowing citizens to determine who governs them and how public policies are shaped. Within this framework, voter behaviour becomes central to the legitimacy of democratic processes (Ibrahim & Usman, 2022). Of particular interest is the voting behaviours of young people, often defined as individuals between 18 and 35 years. These demographics form most registered voters in many developing democracies, especially Nigeria (Adebayo, 2019). Yet, despite their numerical strength, youths' voting patterns, motivations, and susceptibility to influences remain debated. Voting behaviours reflects the psychological, sociological, and economic factors determining how individuals vote (Gabriel & Odey, 2021). For youths, voting represents both a civic duty and an expression of political socialisation, trust in institutions, and aspirations for the future.

In Nigeria, the National Youth Policy underscores youth engagement in governance. Initiatives such as the "Not Too Young to Run" campaign and the widespread #EndSARS activism highlight youth political interest (Bello & Ibrahim, 2021). Yet, despite enthusiasm, youth voter turnout in the 2019 and 2023 elections was below expectations. This gap between activism and structured electoral participation explains the need to investigate the determinants of their voting behaviours.

One determinant is preference for democracy, which is the degree to which youths value democratic governance over alternatives like military rule or authoritarianism (Brown & Lawson, 2020). Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999 inspired optimism, but subsequent democratic dispensations have been marred by corruption, malpractice, insecurity, and stagnation. Consequently, many young people question democracy's deliverability (Diamond, 2015). While most Nigerians nominally support democracy, fewer, especially youths, believe it works effectively (Yusuf, 2023). This ambivalence influences voting: youths with stronger democratic preferences vote more conscientiously, while disillusioned peers abstain or engage in transactional voting (Omotoso, 2019). Preference for democracy thus moderates whether electoral choices reflect issues or short-term incentives.

Another critical factor is candidate perception, encompassing charisma, competence, integrity, gender, and ethnicity. For many youths, these qualities shape identification with candidates and trust in their leadership. The 2023 elections highlighted this, as youths rallied behind candidates viewed as credible alternatives to entrenched elites. Social media amplified perceptions of honesty, youth-friendliness, and competence, making candidate image a decisive factor even when manifestos were vague. Generational solidarity also played a role: candidates perceived as youthful or technologically savvy resonated strongly. Conversely, figures linked to corruption or gerontocracy were often rejected despite party dominance. Candidate perception thus acts as a psychological and emotive determinant of youth voting, often rivaling structural factors like party loyalty.

Media, particularly social media, have transformed youth political engagement. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok are now central to mobilisation, debate, and perception-building. Media can inform and mislead while social media provides grassroots narratives and fuels misinformation. Traditional media outlets are often seen as biased, making digital platforms the primary arena of political communication for youths. The #EndSARS movement revealed social media's power to galvanise activism and its risks. Media reporting shapes whether youths trust electoral processes, perceive candidates as credible, and feel motivated to participate in elections. Thus, the media functions as a political education tool and a vehicle for propaganda.

A fourth determinant is party identification, the psychological attachment to political parties. In Nigeria, such attachments often derive from ethnicity, religion, or regional identity rather than ideology. Yet for youths, party identification is shifting. Unlike older generations loyal to dominant parties like the People's Democratic Party (PDP) or the All-Progressives Congress (APC), many young voters are more fluid. The rise of alternative parties in 2023 illustrates this trend, as youths defied traditional alignments to support perceived credible options. Nonetheless, some remain influenced by family, ethnicity, or peers. Therefore, party identification operates both as a stabilising force and a source of disillusionment when dominant parties fail to deliver.

These four variables, the preference for democracy, candidate perception, media reporting, and party identification, do not operate in isolation. Media amplifies candidate images; preference for democracy shapes resistance to inducements (Kramon, 2013); and party attachment may interact with candidate perception, complicating efforts to isolate each factor (Ifeanyi, 2020). With over 70% of its population under 35, Nigeria's context provides fertile ground for analysing these dynamics. Yet unemployment, poverty, and governance failures have fueled apathy and transactional participation among young voters.

The 2019 and 2023 elections illustrate the promise and limitations of youth political engagement. While youths dominated online discourse and grassroots campaigns, voter turnout lagged, and inducement politics persisted. This contradiction makes Nigeria a critical case for studying the interplay of structural and psychological determinants of youth voting behaviours. Existing scholarship has examined individual variables but rarely integrated preference for democracy, candidate perception, media, and party identification into a comprehensive model centred on youths. Many studies also treat young people as a homogeneous group, overlooking variations in their decision-making.

This study addresses these gaps by systematically investigating how these factors shape youth voting behaviours in Nigeria. Given the centrality of youths to Nigeria's democratic future, understanding these dynamics is essential for strengthening electoral participation and democratic consolidation.

Statement of the problem

Democratic governance depends on citizens' active participation, with voting behaviours being central. Youths, who form a significant portion of the electorate, hold immense potential to shape electoral outcomes and the future of democracy. Yet, in developing democracies like Nigeria, their voting patterns raise concerns about quality, consistency, and vulnerability to inducement. Despite their numerical strength, non-ideological factors often sway youth votes, especially money politics. Vote buying, rooted in widespread unemployment and poverty, reduces elections to transactional exchanges, undermining democratic accountability and rational policy evaluation. Another challenge is youths' preference for democracy itself. While democracy remains widely regarded as legitimate, weak institutions, electoral malpractice, and poor governance outcomes erode trust. Disillusioned youths may respond with apathy, abstention, or openness to authoritarian alternatives. Candidate perception also shapes voting behaviours. Although youths ideally value credibility, competence, and relatability, decisions are often clouded by ethnic, religious, and regional biases. Disconnection between candidates and the electorate further fuels abstention or protest voting.

The media plays a crucial but problematic role. Traditional and digital platforms supply political information but are plagued by bias, misinformation, and sensationalism. Social media enables mobilisation yet amplifies fake news and propaganda, influencing inexperienced or first-time voters. Likewise, party identification, a traditional driver of voting behaviours, is weakened in Nigeria by fluid party systems, weak ideological bases, and frequent defections. As a result, youth choices often reflect short-term calculations rather than enduring commitments. Collectively, these dynamics suggest that youth voting behaviours are shaped less by informed, democratic reasoning and more by inducement, distorted perceptions, and institutional weaknesses. Unless these issues are addressed, Nigeria risks undermining democratic legitimacy and sustainability, despite the demographic power of its youth electorate.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Preference for democracy and youth civic orientation

Beyond economic inducements, attitudinal orientations toward democracy strongly influence electoral behaviour. Preference for democracy refers to the normative belief that democratic governance is the most legitimate and desirable system compared to alternatives such as authoritarianism or military rule (Adetula & Falola, 2020). Studies across Africa consistently find that most citizens support democracy in principle; fewer are satisfied with its practice (Alao, 2022). In Nigeria, this paradox is evident in Afrobarometer surveys. For instance, the 2021 round reported that although 69% of Nigerians said democracy was preferable to any other system, only 34% were satisfied with how it worked. Youth are at the centre of this ambivalence (Afrobarometer, 2021). On one hand, they have been at the forefront of democratic struggles, which is evident in movements such as "Not Too Young to Run" and #EndSARS. On the other hand, disillusionment with governance failures, corruption, and electoral malpractice has generated scepticism about whether democracy can deliver.

Studies link preference for democracy with higher political efficacy, turnout, and principled voting. Afrobarometer (2021) argues that citizens with stronger democratic commitments are less likely to engage in transactional voting and more likely to support issue-based campaigns. For Nigerian youths, however, preference for democracy often collides with daily realities of unemployment and insecurity. Arowolo (2019) suggests that this produces a form of "pragmatic ambivalence," where youths endorse democracy as an ideal but remain willing to engage in non-democratic practices like inducement or electoral violence. Importantly, preference for democracy may operate as a moderate factor. Young people who value democracy strongly may resist inducement, scrutinise candidates more closely, and align with reformist parties. Similarly, youths with weak democratic orientation may become apathetic or allow immediate material rewards to dictate their choices. Thus, preference for democracy is not merely an abstract value but a determinant that shapes the rationality of electoral decisions among young voters.

Perception of candidate and electoral choices

Another major determinant of voting behaviours is the perception of candidates. Political psychology literature emphasises that voters often rely on candidate images and attributes as heuristics to guide their decisions beyond party platforms and policies. Candidate perception encompasses evaluations of competence, honesty, charisma, and relatability. In developed democracies, scholars such as Arowolo and Adejo (2022) have shown that candidate traits influence voting outcomes, particularly among undecided or less politically sophisticated voters. In the Nigerian context, where party ideologies are weak and manifestos are often vague, candidate perception plays an even greater role. How they perceive candidates' integrity, credibility, and responsiveness to youth concerns influences young voters. The 2023 Nigerian presidential election provides a striking example. Large segments of youths mobilised behind candidates who were portrayed as outsiders to the entrenched political elite, emphasising attributes

such as honesty, digital savviness, and alignment with generational aspirations. Social media amplified these perceptions, creating strong emotional connections between candidates and young voters. Omotola and Aremu (2023) note that while structural party dynamics remained influential, candidate image was central to youth mobilisation during the elections.

Perception of candidates interacts with other factors: it can diminish the appeal of inducement by offering credible hope for change or amplify the effects of media framing by reinforcing positive or negative narratives. Given weak party identification, the candidate image often becomes the decisive determinant of choice. Thus, understanding youth voting behaviours in Nigeria requires careful attention to how candidates are perceived, particularly regarding integrity, competence, and generational symbolism.

Media reporting and information flow in elections

The media environment is a critical environment in which voting decisions are made. Media reporting shapes what voters know about candidates, how they evaluate political issues, and how they interpret electoral processes. In the past, traditional media such as radio, television, and newspapers were Nigeria's dominant sources of political information. However, with the rise of digital technologies, social media has become the primary space for youth political engagement. The agenda-setting and framing theories provide insights into how the media affects voter behaviour. Adeyemi (2022) argues that media do not tell people what to think but what to think about, while Bello and Ibrahim (2021) emphasise that framing influences how issues are interpreted. These effects are particularly pronounced for Nigerian youths because social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become arenas for political debates, campaign mobilisation, and peer influence.

Empirical studies highlight both positive and negative impacts. On the one hand, media reporting increases political awareness, facilitates exposure to multiple viewpoints, and enables grassroots movements such as #EndSARS. On the other hand, it also fosters misinformation, echo chambers, and polarisation. For instance, Adeyemi (2022) documents how misinformation during the 2019 elections distorted the perceptions of candidates and affected trust in INEC. Media reporting interacts with candidate perception and party identification. A positive media portrayal enhances a candidate's image, while biased or negative reporting can erode trust. Social media also disrupts traditional patronage dynamics by enabling new parties and outsider candidates to reach youths directly. Thus, media reporting is both a direct determinant of youth voting and a contextual factor shaping the salience of other variables.

Party identification and youth political alignment

Party identification (PID) has long been regarded as a stable predictor of voting behaviours. PID is a psychological attachment to a political party that shapes how individuals interpret political information and make electoral decisions (Ugwuanyi, 2021). In advanced democracies, party identification often reflects ideological orientations, such as liberal versus conservative. In Nigeria, however, party identification is weaker and more fluid. Parties are often not differentiated by ideology but by elite personalities, ethnic alignments, or regional loyalties. As a result, while older generations may remain loyal to dominant parties such as the All Progressives Congress (APC) or the People's Democratic Party (PDP), youths exhibit weaker attachments. Arowolo (2019) argues that Nigerian youths increasingly prioritise candidates over parties, reflecting disenchantment with party brands associated with corruption and poor governance.

Yet, party identification still matters. Family and community influence continue to shape partisan loyalties among some youths, while party machinery often provides resources, mobilisation networks, and inducements that affect turnout. PID also shapes how other variables operate: a youth strongly identified with a party may overlook a candidate's weaknesses or resist inducements. At the same time, weak PID increases susceptibility to media narratives and candidate image. The 2023 elections again highlight this dynamic. While some youths aligned strongly with established parties due to ethnic or regional ties, many shifted their support to new or alternative parties based on candidate appeal. This suggests that party identification among Nigerian youths is declining in strength but remains a relevant factor in electoral behaviour.

Nexus between the independent variables and voting behaviours

Studies like Omotola and Aremu (2023) demonstrate that a constellation of interrelated factors shapes youth voting behaviours. Preference for democracy reflects normative orientations that can encourage principled voting or foster apathy. The perception of a candidate provides psychological and symbolic cues that often override programmatic considerations. Media reporting creates an information environment that amplifies or diminishes these influences, while party identification serves as a stabilising or constraining force that varies across individuals. These variables rarely operate in isolation. For example, a youth with a strong democratic preference may resist money inducement, while one with a weak democratic orientation may accept it. Media reporting can strengthen candidate perception or reshape partisan attachments. Candidate image can override party loyalty, while inducements may exploit weak partisan ties. The Nigerian environment accentuates these interactions. Structural conditions of poverty, unemployment, and weak institutions make inducement salient (Mohammed & Yusuf, 2021). Historical experiences with authoritarianism shape preferences for democracy (Eze, 2023). In the same vein, weak ideological party systems magnify the importance of candidate perception (Okoye, 2016). And the ubiquity of social media among youths ensures that media reporting remains a critical determinant of behaviour (Ifeanyi, 2020).

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following objectives are raised and answered in this study

1. To ascertain whether a relationship exists between preference for democracy, perception of the candidate, media reporting, party identification, and youth voting behaviours.
2. To assess the composite contribution of preference for democracy, perception of the candidate, media reporting, and party identification to youth voting behaviours.
3. To ascertain the relative contribution of preference for democracy, perception of the candidate, media reporting, and party identification to youth voting behaviours.

IV. METHODS

Research approach

This study employed a quantitative research approach, which enabled the measurement of variables and the statistical examination of relationships among them.

Research design

A descriptive survey research design of the correlational type was adopted to investigate how preference for democracy, perception of candidates, media reporting, and party identification predict youth voting behaviours. This design was considered appropriate because it allows the examination of relationships among multiple independent variables and a dependent variable without manipulation or experimental control.

Population

The target population comprised Nigerian youths aged 18–35 eligible to vote. This group was chosen due to its numerical dominance in the voting population and its growing significance in political participation across Nigeria.

Research site

A multi-stage sampling technique was used. First, three states in the South-West geopolitical zone were purposively selected. Second, each state's local government areas (LGAs) were stratified into urban and rural categories. Finally, registered youth voters were selected from

these strata using systematic random sampling. Two thousand five respondents participated, proportionally from the selected states and LGAs.

Data collection tools

Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire adapted from validated scales in prior studies and modified for the Nigerian socio-political context. The instrument included six sections: (1) Demographic information, (2) Preference for democracy scale (r = 0.89), (3) Perception of candidate scale (r = 0.87), (4) Media reporting index (r = 0.83), (5) Party identification scale (r = 0.85), and (6) Youth voting behaviours inventory (r = 0.91). Each subscale contained 20 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (4). Expert reviews and exploratory factor analysis confirmed validity, while Cronbach's alpha confirmed reliability (α ≥ 0.80). Data collection spanned four weeks, using online surveys and face-to-face administration depending on infrastructural accessibility.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, and standard deviation) summarised demographic information. Pearson's correlation analysis examined relationships among variables. In contrast, multiple regression analysis assessed the composite and relative contributions of preference for democracy, perception of candidates, media reporting, and party identification to youth voting behaviours.

Ethical considerations

Before the commencement of the study, ethical clearance was obtained from the Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education of the University of Ibadan. All participants were provided with a detailed informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no financial or material inducement was offered. To protect privacy, respondents were not asked to provide names or personal identifiers, and all complete questionnaires were coded numerically. Confidentiality was ensured by securely storing hard-copy questionnaires in locked cabinets and encrypting electronic data with password protection. The collected data were used solely for academic research and presented in aggregated form to prevent the identification of individual respondents.

V. RESULTS

Demographic results

Table 1: Gender of participants

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	908	45.3
Female	1,097	54.7
Total	2,005	100.0

The gender distribution of respondents shows that 908 participants (45.3%) were male and 1,097 (54.7%) were female. This indicates that females constituted a slightly higher proportion of the sample compared to males.

Correlations

A relationship exists between preference for democracy, perception of the candidate, media reporting, party identification, and youth voting behaviours

Table 1: Correlation matrix table on the four independent variables and youth voting behaviours

Variables	Youths' Voting behaviours	Preference for Democracy	Perception of Candidate	Media reporting	Party Identification
Youths' Voting behaviours	1.00				
Preference for Democracy	.214** (.000)	1.00			
Perception of Candidate	.267** (.000)	.041 (.128)	1.00		
Media reporting	.038 (.162)	.211** (.000)	.181** (.000)	1.00	
Party Identification	.049 .072	.048 (.079)	-.075** (.004)	.073** (.006)	1.00

Significant at $p < 0.05$

Table 1 shows that there is a positive significant relationship between youths' voting behaviours and preference for democracy (r = .214**, p (.000) <.05) and perception of candidate (r = .267**, p (.000) <.05). Also, there were no significant relationships between youth voting behaviour and the independent variables of media reporting (r = .038, p (.162) >.05) and party identification (r = .049, p (.072) >.05).

Composite contribution of preference for democracy, perception of candidate, media reporting, party identification to youth voting behaviours

*Table 2: **Composite contribution of all the independent variables on youth voting behaviours***

R Square			Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	
.352[a]	.124		.122	4.281	
ANOVA					
Model	**Sum of Squares**	**DF**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.** **Remark**
Regression	5015.624	4	1253.906	68.847	.000[b] Sig.
Residual	36420.359	2000	18.210		
Total	41235.983	2004			

a. Dependent Variable: Youth voting behaviours

b. Predictors" (Constant): preference for democracy, perception of candidate, media reporting, party identification

Table 2 shows that the composite contribution of the five independent variables (preference for democracy, perception of candidate, media reporting, party identification) to youth voting behaviours was significant ($F_{(4; 2000)} = 68.847$; Adj. $R^2 = .122$; $p<.05$). The table also depicts a coefficient of multiple correlation R = .352[a] and a multiple R^2 of .124. This means that four predictor variables accounted for 12.4% of the variance when taken together. This meant that the joint contribution of the independent variables to the dependent variable was significant and that other variables not included in this model may have accounted for the remaining variance.

Relative contribution of preference for democracy, perception of candidate, media reporting, and party identification to youth voting behaviours

Table 3: Relative contributions of the independent variables to youth voting behaviours

Variables	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	Ranking	t	Sig.
	B	**Std. Error**	**βeta**			
(constant)	18.925	1.542			12.275	.000
Preference for Democracy	.182	.023	.192	2nd	7.913	.000
Perception of Candidates	.225	.020	.263	1st	11.250	.000
Media Reporting	-.034	.019	-.043	4th	-1.789	.074
Party Identification	.023	.016	.031	3rd	1.438	.151

Dependent Variable: Youths' voting behaviours

Table 3 reveals the relative contribution of preference for democracy, perception of the candidate, media reporting, party identification, and youth voting behaviours to youth voting behaviours, expressed as beta weights. It reveals that perception of candidate (β = .263) and preference for democracy (β = .192) were the strongest predictors of youth voting behaviours. In contrast, media reporting (β = -.043) and party identification (β = .031) did not significantly predict youth voting behaviours. Hence, it could be deduced that the independent variables of preference for democracy and perception of the candidate's individual contribution to youth voting behaviours can be taken as the most potent factors. At the same time, media reporting and party identification could have an indirect relationship.

VI. DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that preference for democracy and perception of candidates had significant positive relationships with youth voting behaviours. This suggests that young people who value democratic principles and have favorable perceptions of political candidates are more inclined to participate actively in elections. This finding aligns with the arguments of Mohammed and Yusuf (2021), who posit that strong democratic orientations and candidate evaluations remain critical drivers of electoral participation, particularly among younger cohorts who are often more idealistic and responsive to leadership qualities. On the other hand, media reporting and party identification were not significantly related to youth voting behaviours. This could imply that, despite the increasing role of the media in shaping public opinion, young people may not necessarily translate their media exposure into actual voting decisions. Instead, they might rely more on interpersonal networks or personal judgments about candidates. Similarly, the non-significance of party identification reflects the fluidity of partisan alignment among Nigerian youths, consistent with Omotola (2019), who observed that younger voters in transitional democracies often exhibit weaker partisan loyalties than older generations. The evidence suggests that ideological commitment to democracy and candidate perception are stronger motivators of voting behaviours among Nigerian youths than traditional predictors such as media influence and party loyalty.

The regression analysis showed that the four independent variables contributed significantly to youth voting behaviours, accounting for 12.4% of the variance. This indicates that while the variables considered in the study are essential, other unobserved factors influence youths' participation, such as socio-economic status, peer influence, political efficacy, and trust in electoral institutions. The finding is consistent with the work of Akudolu (2018), who argues that voting behaviours in African democracies is multidimensional, influenced by institutional and contextual factors. Similarly, Adetula and Falola (2020) note that structural conditions such as electoral competitiveness and voter education programmes play vital roles in shaping youth turnout. The significance of the joint contribution underscores the interdependence of political attitudes, candidate perceptions, and contextual variables in influencing electoral engagement. This means that youth voting behaviours cannot be explained in isolation by a single factor but must be understood through the interaction of multiple socio-political determinants.

The analysis of the relative contributions revealed that perception of candidates was the strongest predictor of youth voting behaviours, followed by preference for democracy. This suggests that beyond valuing democracy as a system of governance, youths are more likely to be influenced by their evaluation of individual candidates' credibility, competence, and appeal. This corroborates Adeyemi's (2022) findings, which argue that in emerging democracies, candidate qualities often outweigh party labels in shaping voter decisions. In contrast, media reporting and party identification made weak and non-significant contributions to youth voting behaviours. This result highlights a generational shift in political socialisation, where traditional predictors of political behaviour, such as mass media and party loyalty, appear less influential among young people. This resonates with studies such as (Entman & Schroeder, 2017), who observed that African youths prioritise immediate governance performance and candidate characteristics over entrenched partisan structures. The implication is that youths are issue-driven and candidate-sensitive rather than party-dependent or media-reliant. This finding has important policy implications for political actors and stakeholders: efforts to mobilise youth electorates should prioritise credible candidate selection, transparent campaign strategies, and direct engagement with youth concerns.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study underscores the critical role of youths in democratic development, with a specific focus on the factors that shape their voting behaviours. As the largest demographic group in Nigeria's electoral register, youths hold the power to determine electoral outcomes and influence governance trajectories. However, their voting patterns reveal deep-seated challenges that undermine the prospects of genuine democratic consolidation. First, the prevalence of money inducement in elections illustrates how socio-economic vulnerabilities distort democratic choices. Rather than engaging in issue-based voting, many youths are driven by immediate material benefits, creating a political culture in which accountability is secondary to transactional politics. This weakens the quality of elected leadership and entrenches corruption and short-termism in governance.

Second, the study highlights the importance of preference for democracy as a determinant of youth participation. Where democracy is perceived as failing to deliver socio-economic dividends, youths may disengage from the process or remain apathetic toward electoral participation. If left unchecked, this disillusionment can foster authoritarian nostalgia or encourage the rise of populist movements that undermine democratic institutions. Third, candidates' perceptions remain a decisive factor. Youths are increasingly aware of the need for credible and competent leaders. Yet, in practice, their perceptions are often shaped by identity politics, campaign propaganda, and image branding rather than substantive engagement with policies and governance records. This tension between ideals and reality demonstrates the complexity of youth electoral choices.

The role of media reporting further complicates the landscape. In the digital era, information flows rapidly, but not always accurately. Social media has empowered youths to engage politically but has also exposed them to fake news, misinformation, and partisan narratives. Consequently, the media's framing of political actors often plays a greater role in shaping youth voting behaviours than direct civic education or policy debates. Finally, party identification remains both a stabilising and destabilising factor. In mature democracies, strong partisan ties provide consistency in voting patterns and enable ideological debates. However, the fluid nature of party systems and weak ideological foundations make party identification inconsistent in Nigeria. This often translates into political uncertainty, fluctuating loyalties, or disengagement for young people.

In conclusion, the findings reveal that youth voting behaviours are not merely a product of rational democratic choices but are shaped by a web of socio-economic, institutional, and perceptual factors. Unless these issues are addressed through deliberate reforms and sustained civic education, Nigeria's democracy may continue to face instability. This study, therefore, not only provides a predictive cum empirical basis for understanding youth electoral choices but also explains the urgent need to strengthen democratic values, promote informed participation, and reduce the influence of inducement and misinformation.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Since preference for democracy significantly influences youth voting behaviours, civic and voter education programmes should be intensified in schools, universities, and communities. Emphasis should be placed on the values of democracy, active citizenship, and the role of voting in sustaining democratic governance. Also, campaigns should focus less on party rhetoric and more on candidate qualities and policy proposals that resonate with young people. Political communication strategies should move beyond traditional media and include direct engagement channels such as town hall meetings, peer-to-peer sensitisation, and interactive social media platforms that allow youths to voice concerns and ask questions directly. Political parties need reforms to increase inclusivity and transparency. Youth wings should be strengthened, and young people should be given meaningful roles in party decision-making to build stronger identification and long-term

loyalty. Electoral bodies, civil society organisations, and policymakers should adopt comprehensive mobilisation strategies addressing structural barriers to youth participation, including unemployment and electoral malpractice. Mechanisms for post-election accountability should be institutionalised. Platforms that enable elected officials to report back to young constituents and engage in dialogue will not only improve perceptions but also strengthen democratic trust and sustain youth participation in subsequent elections.

IX. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this article.

X. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available upon request.

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