

AFFECTIVE CAMPAIGN NARRATIVES AND VOTER PERCEPTION IN DELTA STATE'S 2023 GOVERNORSHIP ELECTION

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of affective politics on voter perception of selected political party candidates during the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election. The study was motivated by the increasing use of emotional appeals in political campaigns and the limited empirical attention given to their impact on voter perception in gubernatorial elections in Nigeria. The study adopted a qualitative research design using in-depth interviews as the sole method of data collection. According to INEC's final voter register, Delta State had 3,221,697 registered voters for the 18 March 2023 governorship election. Therefore, based on the population and Taro Yamane sample size calculation with 10% margin of error, the sample size for the study was 100. These participants were purposively selected from the three senatorial districts of Delta State, including party representatives, youth and women leaders, community leaders, traditional rulers, civil society actors, media observers, campaign actors, and politically active citizens. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that candidates employed emotional appeals such as hope, trust, fear, anger, loyalty, pride, and messages of continuity and change to influence voters. The study further found that affective politics significantly shaped voter perception by influencing how voters evaluated candidate credibility, competence, trustworthiness, and leadership qualities. In addition, party loyalty was found to

strengthen the influence of affective politics, as emotionally attached supporters were more likely to accept favourable messages about their preferred candidates while dismissing opposing viewpoints. The study concluded that affective politics remains a powerful determinant of voter perception and electoral behaviour in Delta State. It recommends the promotion of issue-based campaigns, responsible media reporting, and voter education programmes aimed at encouraging critical evaluation of political messages beyond emotional appeals.

Keywords: Affective Politics, Delta State Election, Emotional Appeals, Party Loyalty, Voter Perception.

Introduction

Elections in Nigeria have historically been shaped not only by political issues and party manifestoes but also by emotions and psychological attachments. Since the beginning of the Fourth Republic in 1999, political actors have consistently relied on emotional appeals to influence voter attitudes and behaviour (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023; Abdulazeez, Kadiri & Asemah, 2022). Politicians often use messages that evoke hope, trust, fear, anger, pride, and loyalty in order to gain support and shape public opinion. These emotions are communicated through campaign speeches, political rallies, media appearances, advertisements, and, more recently, social media platforms (Nwaoboli & Ajibulu, 2023). According to Affective Intelligence Theory, emotions influence how voters process political information, evaluate candidates, and make electoral decisions. Consequently, political communication has increasingly become a contest for emotional connection rather than merely a competition of policy ideas. In Nigeria, where political competition is often highly personalised and emotionally charged, affective politics has become a major factor influencing electoral outcomes (Omilusi, 2021).

Several elections in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023 demonstrate the growing influence of affective politics on voter behaviour. The 2015 Rivers State gubernatorial election was characterised by intense political rivalry, emotional mobilisation, patronage networks, and allegations of violence and

intimidation. Political actors framed the election as a struggle for survival and access to political power, thereby generating strong emotions among supporters (Sommie & Egobueze, 2021). Similarly, the 2019 election cycle in Kaduna State revealed how fear, anger, group identity, and perceived marginalisation shaped voter perceptions and political participation. Reports by human rights observers indicated that political tension and emotional mobilisation contributed significantly to electoral unrest and voter behaviour (Human Rights Watch, 2019). In another example, the 2023 presidential election witnessed the emergence of the “Obedient Movement” in support of Peter Obi of the Labour Party (Asemah & Umoro, 2022; Abdulazeez, Kadiri & Asemah, 2022). Unlike previous examples that were associated with coercive mobilisation, the movement was driven largely by hope, frustration with existing political structures, and a desire for change. Through social media and grassroots campaigns, emotional narratives became central to voter engagement and political participation (Agbim, Etumnu, & Iredibia, 2023). These cases illustrate the increasing importance of emotions in contemporary Nigerian electoral politics.

The 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election occurred within this broader context of affective political communication. The election featured Sheriff Oborevwori of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Senator Ovie Omo-Agege of the All Progressives Congress (APC), and Ken Pela of the Labour Party (LP). According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Sheriff Oborevwori won the election with approximately 360,234 votes, representing 53.6 per cent of the total votes cast, while Omo-Agege secured 240,299 votes, representing 35.8 per cent (INEC, 2023). Prior to the election, party primaries, legal disputes, and internal party disagreements generated significant emotional reactions among party supporters. The disqualification and subsequent reinstatement of Sheriff Oborevwori by various courts heightened feelings of anxiety, anger, hope, and loyalty among both PDP and APC supporters (Channels

Television, 2022). During the campaigns, candidates strategically employed affective appeals to influence public perception. Oborevwori's campaign focused on themes of unity, continuity, and stability, while Omo-Agege's campaign emphasised change, reform, and dissatisfaction with the incumbent administration (Vanguard Newspapers, 2023; The Guardian Nigeria, 2022). These emotional narratives were amplified through traditional media and social media platforms, where campaign messages, videos, hashtags, and political commentaries shaped public discourse and voter perception (Akinfeleye & Ojebuyi, 2021; Umejei, 2020).

The socio-economic and cultural realities of Delta State further strengthened the effectiveness of these affective appeals. As one of Nigeria's major oil-producing states, Delta has experienced challenges relating to environmental degradation, unemployment, uneven development, and resource control, issues that often generate strong emotional responses among citizens (Umejei, 2021; Ide & Lind, 2018). The state's ethnic diversity and regional differences also create opportunities for political actors to employ messages centred on identity, inclusion, and regional pride (Okonta, 2019). Consequently, emotions such as hope for development, fear of marginalisation, frustration over governance challenges, and pride in ethnic identity became important elements of campaign communication. Recent studies further demonstrate that emotional narratives, social media campaigns, political litigation, and identity-based appeals significantly shape voter perceptions and candidate evaluations in Nigerian elections (Oyewola et al., 2023; Arowolo & Ogande, 2024; Oyewole & Adinlewa, 2025; Ezedikachi & Ogunsanya, 2025). These developments suggest that affective politics remains a powerful force in shaping political behaviour and electoral choices. Against this backdrop, this study examines the influence of affective politics on voter perception of selected political party candidates during the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing recognition of affective politics as an important feature of contemporary electoral campaigns, most studies on voting behaviour in Nigeria have concentrated on factors such as ethnicity, religion, incumbency advantage, political patronage, and vote buying, while paying limited attention to the role of emotions in shaping voter perception (Adebayo, 2021; Ojo & Ajayi, 2022). Yet, evidence from Nigerian elections between 2003 and 2023 shows that emotions such as hope, fear, anger, trust, pride, and resentment have increasingly become central tools used by political actors to influence public opinion and electoral choices (Omilusi, 2021; Resnick, 2019; Olawale, 2023). Although scholars have examined affective politics in national elections, particularly the presidential contests of 2015, 2019, and 2023, there remains limited empirical attention to how emotional appeals influence voter perception in gubernatorial elections at the state level. This gap is particularly evident in the case of the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election, where campaigns were characterised by emotionally charged narratives of continuity versus change, legal disputes, regional identity, political loyalty, and socio-economic expectations. The absence of focused research on how these affective appeals shaped voters' perceptions of the major candidates limits understanding of the psychological dimensions of electoral behaviour in Delta State. Consequently, this study seeks to examine the influence of affective politics on voter perception of selected political party candidates during the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election, with a view to providing empirical evidence on the role of emotions in shaping electoral decision-making and political behaviour.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Find out the affective appeals used by select political party candidates during the 2023 Delta state gubernatorial election;

2. Ascertain the extent to which affective politics influenced voters' perception of select political party candidates during the 2023 Delta state gubernatorial election; and
3. Find out the role party loyalty play in reinforcing the effect of affective politics on voters' perception of select political party candidates during the 2023 Delta state gubernatorial election.

Research Questions

The following research questions are designed to guide the study

4. What are the affective appeals used by select political party candidates during the 2023 Delta state gubernatorial election.
5. To what extent did affective politics influence voters' perception of select political party candidates during the 2023 Delta state gubernatorial election
6. What role did party loyalty play in reinforcing the effect of affective politics on voters' perception of select political party candidates during the 2023 Delta state gubernatorial election.

Review of Related Literature

Political Communication

Political communication can fundamentally be understood as the purposeful exchange and production of messages among political actors, institutions, journalists, and citizens with the intention of shaping attitudes, facilitating participation, and producing power relations within the public sphere (Nwaoboli, Uchenunu & Asemah, 2024a). It constitutes an interactive process through which meanings about governance, policy, and authority are circulated, contested, and legitimised (Bello, Gbervbie, Ogbemudia, Chukwudi, Ojo & Ezebuilo, 2025). Beyond the mechanical transfer of information, political communication involves the strategic deployment of symbols, metaphors, narratives, and affective cues designed to persuade, mobilise, or pacify particular publics (Nwaoboli, Uchenunu & Asemah, 2024b, 2024c). Through campaign speeches, televised debates,

press releases, memes, and social media posts, political elites seek to manage perception, influence agenda salience, and ultimately guide collective decision-making. This communicative process therefore operates as both a mirror and a motor of political life reflecting public concerns while actively shaping them (Bello, Gberevbie, Ogbemudia, Chukwudi, Ojo, & Ezebuilo, 2025).

A second definition of political communication situates it at the relationship between media and politics, where institutional actors, journalists, and audiences continuously interact to produce, interpret, and circulate political meanings (Ngantem, Nyitse, & Kente, 2024). This perspective is grounded in the notion that communication does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it is embedded within a system of mediated interdependence (Omoevah, Oladele & Asemah, 2022). The political process itself becomes a communicative process in which journalists act as intermediaries who filter, frame, and sometimes even co-create political narratives. Consequently, what becomes newsworthy is often a product of negotiation between political sources and media institutions (Ngantem, Nyitse, & Kente, 2024). Through this relationship, certain policy debates are amplified while others are suppressed, influencing not only what the public knows but also how it interprets reality. The feedback loop between political elites seeking legitimacy and media organisations pursuing audiences produces a dynamic field in which political agendas are constructed, contested, and reshaped daily. Thus, political communication in this sense is a relational process of meaning-making that defines the contours of democratic deliberation itself (Ngantem, Nyitse & Kente, 2024).

Affective Politics

The concept of affective politics has been widely discussed in political science, psychology and communication studies, with scholars offering multiple definitions that highlight the role of emotions in political behaviour (Omoevah, Oladele & Asemah, 2020). According to Marcus,

Neuman and Mackuen (2000), affective politics refers to the influence of emotions such as enthusiasm, fear and anger in shaping how individuals evaluate candidates and make electoral choices. This definition emphasises emotions as central to the political decision-making process rather than peripheral influences.

In a similar vein, Agbaje (2020) defines affective politics as the deliberate use of emotional appeals in political communication to mobilise or demobilise voter participation. This perspective points to the strategic nature of affect in political campaigns, where actors design messages not merely to inform but to stir emotional responses that directly affect turnout and support. Valentino, Brader, Groerendyk, Gregorowicz & Hutchings (2011) conceptualise affective politics as the development of emotional attachments, positive or negative that voters form towards political parties and candidates. These attachments, according to the scholars, often outweigh the importance of issue positions or rational considerations, thereby making emotions a stronger predictor of voter perception.

Adding to this, Huddy, Mason and Aaroe (2015) describe affective politics as the reliance on partisan feelings and affective attachments in forming political judgments, frequently independent of substantive policy debates. This definition underscores the power of emotions in bypassing rational policy evaluation, showing how voters can support or oppose candidates based primarily on emotional identification.

Insights into the 2023 Delta State Gubernatorial Election

Delta State, one of Nigeria's foremost oil-producing states in the South-South region, is marked by its ethnic heterogeneity and political complexity. The state is divided into three main senatorial zones Delta North, Delta Central, and Delta South, each with distinct ethno-political alignments and voting cultures. Historically, these zones have shaped the trajectory of governorship politics in the state. Since 1999, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) has maintained political dominance in Delta,

largely due to its entrenched local networks, access to state resources, and continuity of elite patronage structures (Opone & Ikuni, 2024; Babalola, 2024).

In the build-up to the 2023 gubernatorial election, Governor Ifeanyi Okowa's administration, serving its second term under the PDP, ensured that the party's organisational framework remained deeply rooted across the 25 Local Government Areas (LGAs). The PDP candidate, Rt. Hon. Sheriff Oborevwori, then Speaker of the Delta State House of Assembly, emerged from a contentious primary contest that reinforced Okowa's influence within the party (Opone & Ikuni, 2024). His candidacy symbolised continuity and stability, with campaign messaging centred on infrastructural consolidation, youth empowerment, and economic inclusion.

In contrast, Senator Ovie Omo-Agege, the All Progressives Congress (APC) candidate and Deputy President of the Senate, ran a high-visibility campaign particularly strong in Delta Central, his political base. He focused on urban renewal, industrial growth, and the promise of political change.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) conducted the governorship election on 18 March 2023, with 3,221,697 registered voters across the state. However, consistent with national trends, turnout remained modest less than half of the registered electorate participated (Babajide & Ashindorbe, 2025; Udentia & Udentia, 2024). The results declared by INEC on 20 March 2023 showed the following:

- Sheriff Oborevwori (PDP): 360,234 votes (63.6%)
- Ovie Omo-Agege (APC): 240,229 votes (35.8%)

Oborevwori secured victory in 21 of the 25 LGAs, surpassing the constitutional requirement of obtaining at least 25% of votes in two-thirds of LGAs (Opone & Ikuni, 2024). The figures reaffirmed the PDP's dominance while also revealing the APC's growing foothold in Delta Central, especially in Udu, Ughelli North, and Uvwie LGAs. The 2023 election also represented

a critical test for INEC's Bi-Modal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), designed to improve transparency in voter accreditation and result transmission. Studies indicate that while BVAS enhanced procedural credibility, communication lapses and uneven voter education created information gaps that partly contributed to voter apathy and confusion at polling centres (Ilaya et al., 2023; Kassem, 2024).

Security concerns were comparatively mild, though pockets of violence and intimidation were recorded in parts of Warri and Isoko. These incidents, according to analyses by conflict-monitoring groups, were largely linked to cult rivalries and localised political disputes rather than large-scale electoral violence (Ezikeudu et al., 2025). This relative calmness distinguished the Delta election from the more volatile contests in states such as Rivers and Kano.

Following the declaration of results, the APC lodged petitions at the Delta State Governorship Election Tribunal, alleging irregularities in vote collation and BVAS transmission. The legal process spanning the tribunal, Court of Appeal, and Supreme Court, culminated in January 2024, with the Supreme Court affirming Sheriff Oborevwori's victory, thus validating the integrity of the election outcome (Ogunbanjo, 2024).

The Delta governorship election thus reinforced a pattern evident in Nigeria's subnational politics where incumbency advantage, clientelist networks, and godfatherism continue to shape electoral outcomes (Ejoha et al., 2024). Despite the emergence of new political movements and technological innovations, the 2023 cycle revealed that elite influence and party structure remain central determinants of power consolidation in Delta State.

Affective Politics and Voter Decision-Making in Elections

In recent years, the concept of affective politics has gained increasing prominence in the literature on elections and voter behaviour. While traditional models of voting emphasise rational choice and issue-

based decision-making, the affective politics perspective draws attention to how emotions, moods and affective attachments shape voter decision-making processes in fundamental ways (Boler and Davis, 2020). Indeed, political choices are seldom purely the result of cold calculation; rather they are embedded in emotional landscapes where fear, hope, anger or belonging play central roles. As scholars like Boler and Davis (2020) argue, digital media and emotional economies amplify these affective dynamics, making them ever more salient in contemporary elections.

To begin with, one must recognise that affective politics refers not simply to the presence of emotion in politics but to a guided, often strategic deployment of affect by actors (political parties, media, campaigns) and the circulation of emotional dispositions through networks of communication and identity. In other words, voters are not only rational evaluators of policy but also emotional subjects who respond to cues of trust, threat, solidarity or outrage. Homolar & Löffmann (2021) emphasise how populist actors exploit narratives of humiliation, resentment or exclusion emotional registers that deeply influence voter attachments and decisions. Thus, affective politics creates a terrain in which voters do not just choose a candidate but align with an emotional orientation, a sense of belonging or grievance.

Moreover, the role of affect in voter decision-making can be mapped across several interlinked functions. First, affect helps to direct attention and perception. When voters experience heightened emotional arousal say anger because of corruption scandals or fear because of insecurity they become more attuned to particular messages, frames or slogans that resonate with that affective state. Empirical work on “hot politics” shows that even unconscious physiological responses to political rhetoric (such as higher skin conductance or facial muscle activity) predict subsequent opinion change (Bakker, Schumacher & Rooduijn, 2021). In short, voters in an emotionally charged state process information differently they may rely on

heuristics, shortcuts and non-deliberative responses. Hence affect not only colours perception but also constrains the capacity for reflective evaluation.

Secondly, affect matters for preference formation and loyalty. Voters develop affective ties not only to parties or candidates, but also to political identities, symbols and rituals. These affective attachments serve as anchors in decision-making voters may stick with a party not because of alignment on every policy but because they feel the party “represents” them, “cares” for them, or shares their sense of cultural belonging. Chouliaraki (2021) explores how narratives of vulnerability or victimhood are mobilised in contemporary politics; when voters feel that their sense of identity or security is under threat, they may gravitate emotionally to candidates who promise recognition of that vulnerability. Thus the emotional bond can act as a shorthand for stability, recognition and representation.

Empirical Review

Bakker, Schumacher & Rooduijn (2021), in their study titled “Hot Politics? Affective Responses to Political Rhetoric”, examined how emotional appeals in political speeches shape citizens' political perceptions and behaviours. The main objective of their research was to explore how affective cues in political communication trigger emotional responses that, in turn, influence voters' attitudes toward candidates and parties. The study was anchored on the Affective Intelligence Theory, which suggests that emotions such as enthusiasm, anger and fear drive how people process political information. The authors adopted a quantitative experimental design, using survey experiments conducted across several Western European countries. Participants were exposed to different political messages framed with emotional tones to assess how they reacted. Their findings revealed that emotional rhetoric significantly heightened political engagement and polarisation; specifically, messages evoking anger and enthusiasm were more likely to increase partisan loyalty and voter turnout, whereas fear-based rhetoric tended to promote cautious information seeking

and reduce blind support. The researchers concluded that emotions are not irrational forces but essential mechanisms that shape political judgement. They recommended that politicians and media practitioners should employ emotional communication responsibly, as excessive emotional manipulation can undermine democratic deliberation. Relating to the current study, this study shares similarities in its emphasis on the emotional dimensions of political behaviour. However, it differs in context and scope while Bakker and colleagues focused on European democracies and experimental designs, the current study applies similar affective frameworks within Nigeria's local electoral setting, highlighting how emotional politics influenced voters' perceptions of gubernatorial candidates.

In their 2025 study titled “Urban Imaginaries in the Affective Politics of Becoming a New Town in Romania”, Soaita and Popescu explored the affective and emotional dimensions of urban transformation and political identity within Romania's newly emerging towns. The objective of the study was to understand how feelings of belonging, nostalgia, and aspiration intertwine with local political discourses surrounding urban modernisation. The study was guided by the Affective Politics Framework, which focuses on how collective emotions shape political subjectivities and spaces. Employing a qualitative ethnographic methodology, the authors gathered data through interviews, field observations, and participatory mapping in Romanian towns undergoing rapid infrastructural and political change. Their findings indicated that affective narratives particularly pride, frustration and anticipation played a crucial role in shaping residents' perceptions of governance and participation in urban projects. The study concluded that political engagement in urban spaces cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the emotional attachments people form to their environments. Consequently, they recommended that policymakers integrate emotional and cultural narratives into urban development strategies to foster inclusion and trust. This research relates to the present

study on affective politics and voter perception by highlighting the centrality of emotional experience in shaping political identity. However, whereas Soaita and Popescu focused on urban governance and local transformation, the current study situates affective dynamics within electoral politics, specifically examining how emotional appeals influenced voter perception during the Delta State election.

Keegan (2021), in the work “Critical Affective Civic Literacy: A Framework for Attending to Political Emotion in the Social Studies Classroom”, sought to examine the role of emotional awareness in civic and political education. The study's main objective was to develop a pedagogical framework that enables students to understand and critically engage with the emotional aspects of politics. The study was based on Critical Civic Literacy Theory integrated with Affective Intelligence Theory, emphasising that emotions are an integral part of civic reasoning rather than obstacles to rational thought. Keegan utilised a qualitative case study approach, analysing classroom interactions, educational materials, and student reflections across several American schools. The findings revealed that acknowledging emotions in political discussions enhanced empathy, tolerance and democratic participation among students. Keegan concluded that emotional literacy should be a central component of civic education, as it prepares individuals to interpret political emotions constructively rather than react impulsively. Recommendations included incorporating emotional reflection activities into civic curricula and encouraging educators to frame emotions as legitimate political tools. This study connects to the current research on affective politics and voter perception by emphasising the importance of understanding emotions in political contexts. However, while Keegan's study is situated in educational settings, the current study applies similar affective insights to real-world voter decision-making and candidate evaluation in the 2023 Delta State election.

Theoretical Framework

Emotional Contagion Theory

Emotional Contagion Theory explores how emotions are transferred between individuals or groups, often unconsciously, shaping collective moods and behaviours. The roots of the theory can be traced to early social psychology, particularly the work of Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson in the 1990s, who described emotional contagion as a process through which people automatically mimic and synchronise expressions, vocal tones, postures, and emotions with those around them. Yet, in the twenty-first century, the theory has been expanded and redefined through the lens of digital media, mass communication, and political mobilisation. According to Boler & Davis (2020), emotional contagion now operates not only face-to-face but also across screens, networks, and timelines, where affective cues emojis, hashtags, images, and tone circulate at immense speed, shaping how publics feel about issues before they even think about them.

The central tenet of Emotional Contagion Theory is that emotion is socially contagious. When people are exposed to emotional displays, whether joy, anger, or fear, they often internalise and reproduce them, generating an affective alignment within groups. This process can occur at individual, interpersonal, or mass levels. Chouliaraki (2021) argues that emotional contagion is particularly visible in humanitarian and political communication, where images of suffering or outrage invite audiences not just to understand but to *feel* a certain way. Digital technologies intensify this phenomenon: social media posts designed to elicit anger or empathy spread faster, gain more engagement, and influence opinion more strongly. In political contexts, this means that campaigns, protests, and even misinformation can be powered by affective resonance rather than rational persuasion. Applied to this study, Emotional Contagion Theory reminds us that emotion is not a private affair; it is a shared social force that moves through networks, shaping not only what we feel but who we become together.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design using in-depth interviews as the sole method of data collection. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study seeks to understand how affective politics influenced voter perception during the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election. The population of the study comprised registered voters in Delta State who were exposed to the election campaigns and political messages during the 2023 governorship election. According to INEC's final voter register, Delta State had 3,221,697 registered voters for the 18 March 2023 governorship election. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who possessed relevant knowledge and experience of the election process. The sample size for the study was determined using the Taro Yamane (1967) formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

where n represents the sample size, N represents the population size, and e represents the level of precision. Using a 10% margin of error:

$$n = \frac{3,221,697}{1 + 3,221,697(0.10)^2}$$

The sample size was therefore to 100 respondents. The participants were interviewed across the three senatorial districts of Delta State. The participants included representatives of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC), youth leaders, women leaders, community leaders, traditional rulers, civil society representatives, media observers, political campaign actors, and politically active citizens. Participants were selected from Oshimili South and Ndokwa East in Delta North; Ethiope East and Ughelli North in Delta Central; and Warri South and Isoko North in Delta South. The selection was based on their direct involvement in, knowledge of, or exposure to the 2023 gubernatorial election campaigns and voting process.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide containing open-ended questions designed to explore participants' views on emotional political appeals, voter perception, and the influence of campaign messages on electoral behaviour. The interview guide was validated by experts in Mass Communication and Political Science to ensure that the questions were clear, relevant, and aligned with the objectives of the study. A pilot interview was conducted with two individuals outside the final sample, and necessary corrections were made before the main study. The interviews were conducted by the researcher through face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations, and online platforms where necessary. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. With participants' consent, discussions were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes to capture important observations. To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned codes instead of their real names. The data obtained from the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis. The transcripts were read repeatedly, coded, and grouped into themes reflecting emotional appeals such as hope, trust, fear, and anger, as well as their influence on voter perception and electoral decision-making. The themes generated were presented and discussed in line with the objectives of the study as recommended by Asemah and Nwaoboli (2024).

Data Presentation

What are the affective appeals used by selected political party candidates during the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election?

The responses from participants revealed that the major candidates employed several emotional appeals during the election campaigns. The most frequently mentioned affective appeals were hope, trust, fear, anger, loyalty, pride, and the desire for change. Participants explained that the PDP candidate, Sheriff Oborevwori, consistently projected messages of continuity, stability, peace, and development. These messages were designed to evoke hope and trust among voters by assuring them that ongoing projects

and government programmes would continue. On the other hand, the APC candidate, Ovie Omo-Agege, focused on change, reform, and dissatisfaction with the existing administration. His campaign messages often appealed to feelings of frustration and anger towards perceived shortcomings of the PDP government. Participants also noted that party supporters frequently used messages that promoted loyalty, ethnic pride, and emotional attachment to political leaders.

A participant from Delta North (P4) stated: “The PDP campaign was built around continuity. They kept telling people that development would continue if Oborevworì won. That created hope and trust among many voters.”

Another participant from Delta Central (P11) explained: “The APC campaign focused on change. They reminded people about unemployment and poor infrastructure. Many supporters became angry with the government and wanted something different.”

A media observer (P22) noted: “Most campaign messages were emotional rather than policy-based. Candidates wanted people to feel connected to them emotionally.”

Similarly, a youth leader (P15) remarked: “Social media was filled with messages that encouraged loyalty to candidates. Many young people supported candidates because of emotional attachment rather than detailed policies.”

From these responses, it is evident that hope, trust, fear, anger, loyalty, pride, and change-oriented messages were the major affective appeals employed by political candidates during the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election.

To what extent did affective politics influence voters' perception of selected political party candidates during the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election?

The findings indicate that affective politics had a significant influence on voter perception. Most participants acknowledged that emotions played an important role in shaping how they viewed the candidates. Many respondents explained that campaign messages influenced their judgments about the credibility, competence, trustworthiness, and leadership qualities of the candidates. Emotional narratives surrounding continuity, development, change, fairness, and political inclusion strongly affected how voters evaluated the contestants.

A participant from Delta South (P19) stated: “Many people judged the candidates based on how they felt about them. Some trusted Oborevwo because they believed he would continue existing projects.”

Another participant (P8) explained: “The court cases and political disputes created sympathy for some candidates and anger against others. Those emotions affected public opinion.”

A community leader (P17) observed: “People were discussing feelings more than policies. They talked about who they trusted, who disappointed them, and who represented their interests.”

A civil society representative (P24) added: “Social media increased emotional reactions. Videos and campaign messages made people either like or dislike candidates before considering their programmes.”

Another participant (P27) noted: “Fear of losing development projects and hope for economic improvement influenced how people saw the candidates.” These responses suggest that affective politics substantially influenced voter perception by shaping candidate image, trustworthiness, credibility, and overall public evaluation during the election.

What role did party loyalty play in reinforcing the effect of affective politics on voters' perception of selected political party candidates during the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election?

Participants generally agreed that party loyalty strengthened the influence of affective politics on voter perception. Many respondents explained that long-standing attachment to political parties made voters more receptive to emotional campaign messages. Party loyalists often interpreted campaign information in ways that favoured their preferred candidates while dismissing opposing viewpoints. Emotional attachment to parties therefore reinforced feelings of trust, pride, loyalty, and commitment among supporters.

A PDP supporter (P6) stated: “Many PDP supporters did not need much convincing. They already trusted the party and accepted the campaign messages easily.”

An APC representative (P10) explained: “Party loyalty influenced how people reacted to campaign messages. Supporters believed positive messages about their candidate and ignored criticism.”

A traditional ruler (P21) remarked: “Political loyalty runs deep in some communities. People support candidates because they identify with the party emotionally.”

A youth leader (P14) noted: “Social media groups created strong emotional communities. Supporters encouraged each other and defended their candidates aggressively.” Another participant (P25) added: “Even when people knew the weaknesses of their candidates, loyalty made them continue supporting them.”

From the responses, it is clear that party loyalty reinforced affective politics by strengthening emotional attachment to political parties and candidates, thereby influencing voter perception and electoral decision-making.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that affective politics played a significant role in shaping voter perception during the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election. The study found that candidates employed various emotional appeals including hope, trust, fear, anger, loyalty, pride, and messages of continuity or change to attract voter support. These findings support the position of Marcus, Neuman and Mackuen (2000), who argue that emotions such as enthusiasm, fear, and anger significantly influence how citizens evaluate political candidates and make electoral decisions. The findings also agree with Agbaje (2020), who maintains that affective politics involves the deliberate use of emotional appeals to mobilise voter support and shape political behaviour.

The study further found that affective politics strongly influenced voter perception of the candidates. Many participants admitted that emotional reactions shaped their views of candidate credibility, trustworthiness, leadership ability, and suitability for office. This finding supports the arguments of Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz and Hutchings (2011), who contend that emotional attachments often become stronger predictors of political behaviour than rational evaluation of policy issues. The finding also aligns with Bakker, Schumacher and Rooduijn (2021), whose study demonstrated that emotional political communication significantly affects political engagement, perception, and support for candidates.

The study additionally revealed that party loyalty reinforced the effect of affective politics on voter perception. Strong emotional attachment to political parties made voters more likely to accept campaign messages from their preferred candidates while rejecting opposing viewpoints. This finding supports Huddy, Mason and Aaroe (2015), who argue that partisan emotions and affective attachments frequently shape political judgments independently of policy considerations. The finding is equally consistent

with Emotional Contagion Theory as advanced by Boler and Davis (2020) and Chouliaraki (2021), which explains that emotions spread through social interactions, media networks, and political communication, creating collective emotional responses that influence political attitudes and behaviour.

Conclusion

This study concludes that affective politics significantly influenced voter perception during the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election. Political candidates relied heavily on emotional appeals such as hope, trust, fear, anger, loyalty, pride, and messages of continuity or change to shape public opinion and mobilise electoral support. The study further concludes that these emotional appeals influenced how voters perceived candidate credibility, competence, and trustworthiness. In addition, party loyalty strengthened the impact of affective politics by reinforcing emotional attachment to candidates and political parties. Overall, the findings demonstrate that emotions remain a powerful factor in electoral decision-making and political behaviour in Delta State.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Political parties should promote issue-based campaigns that focus more on policies and programmes rather than excessive emotional manipulation of voters.
2. Media organisations should ensure balanced political reporting and avoid amplifying emotionally charged messages capable of misleading voters.
3. Government agencies and electoral bodies should develop voter enlightenment programmes that help citizens critically evaluate campaign messages beyond emotional appeals and party loyalty.

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