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# Perception of hate speech in the 2023 presidential political campaigns on voter behaviour in Nigeria

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The 2023 general elections in Nigeria were characterised by a surge in hate speech, particularly across digital platforms, significantly shaping the political landscape and influencing voter behaviour. The study highlights how ethno-religious and politically motivated hate speech deepened societal divisions, fostered misinformation, and contributed to voter apathy and fear-driven electoral choices. On social media platforms, individuals and organisations believe that freedom of speech entitles them to speak their minds without any restrictions whatsoever. During elections, this freedom of expression plays out without any hindrance, pervading social media platforms with hate speech rhetoric, misinformation, and disinformation. This study examines how voters' exposure to political hate speech during the 2023 presidential election campaigns, as disseminated through traditional media, social platforms, and campaign rhetoric, shaped the attitude of voters, their trust in the ability of the candidates to deliver, and their level of electoral participation. Using the Functional Theory of Campaign Discourse, the study analyses the system through which inflammatory language divides public opinion, reinforces divisions in political party groups (among supporters), and destroys the confidence voters have in the Nigerian electoral processes. Based on the pragmatic approach of research design, survey method, and content analysis of hate speech in the 2023 presidential election campaigns will be adopted, and results show pervasive use of hate speech by the political class and how this results in low voter turnout.

## KEYWORDS

electoral trust, hate speech, Nigeria, political communication, social identity, voter behaviour

## Introduction

There is a recurring pattern of using hate speech by politicians in Nigeria. A careful look at all major political elections in the history of the country reveals clear evidence where politicians, party members, and supporters openly say unwarranted things about their opponents. Most times, these negative statements are targeted towards tribes, religious adherents, and people from other regions (Usman, 2024). This deep-rooted bigotry among Nigerians not only marks Nigerians along ethnic and religious quates, but it also manifests in the political landscape, as politicians and their supporters often cross the line of decency and overlook ethical considerations by using inflammatory words, expressions and name-calling towards opposition members who are from another tribe (Aondover, 2024).

Ethnic and religious divisions clearly play out during elections, with top politicians playing the tribal card and apportioning blame to other tribes who are in the opposition (Ugbodaga,

2023; Adesote and Abimbola, 2014; Iruonagbe et al., 2013). Most times, the three dominant tribes, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo people openly castigate themselves over political matters. What should be a contest of ideology usually becomes a contest of dominance and superiority among tribes, religion and gender (Alugbin, 2025). Since independence, and even before 1960, there has been no national election in Nigeria in which the people experienced non-provocative electioneering by politicians (Aondover et al., 2025).

Every national election is marked by hate speech against tribes and religious adherents. As seen in many cases, the elites and ruling class who are supposedly educated and informed are usually the first to exploit hate speech by deliberately spreading false information, direct insults, innuendos, and condemnation of members of the opposition groups during the election period (Ndubuisi et al., 2025; Iruke, 2024). At every opportunity, these political elites engage in several forms of hate speech to peddle tribal bigotry. It appears they believe that the best way to rally support for themselves or their chosen candidates is to make opposition candidates look terrible, despicable, and incompetent, especially when the candidates are from other tribes, religions, or gender. For instance, in the wake of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, a first-class monarch, Oba Akiolu Rilwan, the Oba of Lagos, openly threatened to kill and dump the bodies presumably of Igbo people domiciled in Lagos, in the Lagoon if his preferred candidate does not receive votes from the Igbo quarters (Olapoju, 2015).

In the 2023 presidential election, a prominent member of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Bayo Onanuga, on his social media handle @aonanuga1956, warned the Igbos to stay off Lagos politics because he feels Lagos is Yoruba land and the Igbos must either support the Yoruba's political choice of candidates or stay away on election day. This man went on to become President Bola Tinubu's special adviser immediately after the election (Sahara Reporters, 2024). Another popular scenario was when President Bola Tinubu, a former Governor of Lagos State and presidential candidate in the 2023 election who won the general election, lost Lagos votes to Peter Obi, an Igbo man from Anambra State. This partial loss to an Igbo man in Yoruba sparked a crisis as some hoodlums went on a rampage, destroying the shops of Igbo traders in the Akere market and other parts of Lagos. Over 200 shops were burnt by the political hoodlums (Richard, 2023). Some have come to tag the recent anti-Igbo sentiment in Lagos as Igbophobia, a term that means the unkind treatment meted out on Igbo people due to their ethnicity, religion and success (Unagbu, 2023).

In the northern region, front-line presidential candidate, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, who was the 2023 flagbearer of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), tried to exploit the tribal and religious cards by telling a group of fellow Northerners that they do not need an Igbo or Yoruba as President, but someone from the north. This came while his fellow Northerner (a Fulani), Muhammadu Buhari, was wrapping up a second term as President of the country. Atiku made the statement out of what many considered as 'desperation', to gain support from his northern listeners on Saturday, October 15, 2022 (Yusuf, 2022; Akpan, 2022; Inyang, 2022). Atiku Abubakar, who was a former Vice-President of Nigeria during the Obasanjo administration between 1999 and 2007, is expected to be an elder statesman and a patriotic Nigerian, but lust and thirst for power override his sense of unity. In what was seen as a reaction to his tribal sentiment, a chieftain of the APC, Felix Morka, described Atiku's statement as "repulsive and

desperate". Ironically, another prominent APC figure cited earlier also threatened other tribes over the 2023 election (Oladeji, 2022).

Some believe that the political class quickly resorts to playing the tribal and religious cards, as most Nigerians primarily owe allegiance first to their tribe or religion before the country (Salau, 2023). This mindset and sentiment have been reflected in the past and continue to permeate political activities in Nigeria. Records have shown how various tribal leaders traded words through the media, in a desperate effort to criticise their opponents. Notable was the case of Obafemi Awolowo of the Action Group (AG), who was then the Western Premier, against Nnamdi Azikiwe of the National Congress for Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), who was Premier of the Eastern region. In 1948, through their newspapers, the West Africa Pilot and Daily Service, these two nationalists traded inciting words that threatened peace between the Igbos and the Yorubas. According to Adekoya (2019), the political feud fueled by hate speech between Azikiwe and Awolowo became congruent with ethnic group interests in Lagos.

Adekoya narrated how this ethnic rivalry initiated by two political rivals climaxed to the imminent threat of ethnic showdown, as Igbo and Yoruba residents in Lagos began buying cutlasses in September 1948. Over 70 years later, this unhealthy political rivalry keeps replaying among Nigerian political groups with similar ethnolinguistic bigotry sentiments that have consistently deepened the division among the multi-ethnic society. The 2023 general election became critical as the social media effect added to the use of traditional media to spread hate speech. As reported in Premium Times, the 2023 presidential election presented conflicting developments. It was noted that the election witnessed an increase in voters showing interest. However, it marked the first time voters were low. Of the over 90 million eligible voters, only 25 million voters took part in the election, marking a decline in voter participation in the presidential election since the beginning of the Fourth Republic in 1999 (Msughter, 2022).

Analysis revealed how only 27% of eligible voters participated in the 2023 presidential election (Suleiman, 2023). According to the source, the high number of youths who participated in the election engaged in political discussion on online platforms, a platform which enabled hate speech to spread quickly and vastly (Shuaiabu, 2023). Ethnic profiling, ethnic slurs, and insults spread on social media, as young Nigerians took sides, while conservative politicians openly criticised other tribes. Alugbin (2025) noted that the real weapon of political warfare in 2023 was language, and it was carefully coded, strategically targeted, and viciously amplified online.

In what Shuaiabu (2023) described as a toxic campaign, Nigerians were majorly divided along ethnic lines since the three dominant presidential candidates, Peter Obi, Atiku Abubakar, and Bola Tinubu, came from the three dominant tribes: Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba. This created the perfect ground for hate speech. Reports from international groups like the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR) and Global Rights narrated how the election was characterised by ethnic profiling, hate speech, fake news, and violence (Usman, 2024). Details of the report accounted for how many regions in the east, north and west of Nigeria engaged in various forms of bigotry like deliberately sponsoring fake news to scare women, religious adherents, and non-indigenous, leading to political apathy during the 2023 election (Msughter, 2025).

Religious leaders, candidates and some mischief makers criticised presidential candidates who were not of their religious faith. For example, an unidentified Muslim cleric in Kano was caught in a video

urging his listeners to vote only for Muslim presidential candidates (Msughter, 2023). According to the cleric, it is better to vote for a corrupt Muslim candidate than for a good infidel, as the only time Nigerians experienced peace was the time Muslims ruled the country. He asserted that this is so because the Muslim candidates rule by the Islamic codes. President Bola Tinubu himself was involved in the religious sentiment during his electioneering activities. When he visited Anambra State, Bola Tinubu likened his opponent, Peter Obi, to the biblical Peter, Jesus's disciple who denied Jesus, while Jesus was being persecuted (Opejobi, 2023). In a Punch newspaper report on April 6, 2023, Fredrick Nwajaju stated that he would not mind inviting the proscribed IPOB insurgents (Indigenous People of Biafra) to Lagos for the protection of Igbo people during the 2023 presidential elections (Chima, 2023).

In the aftermath of the 2023 presidential election, some events revealed deeply rooted religious sentiments among some members of the Nigerian political class. Former governor of Kaduna State and one-time minister of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Mallam Nasir El-Rufai, openly bragged about how a Muslim-Muslim ticket won the presidential election, and there is nothing the Christians can do about it. According to the former governor, repeating this pattern would normalize it in the Nigerian political structure, where Muslim-Muslim presidential candidates would win presidential elections for a long time (Babangida, 2023). El-Rufai is known for fiercely threatening people with death as he infamously said on live television in 2019 that international electoral observers who interfered with the 2019 presidential election "will go back in body bags" (Akeregha et al., 2019). There is some evidence that Nigerian elites, the ruling and political class, are largely known for using hate speech the most, and the 2023 presidential election shows how this use of hate language breeds distrust, fuels ethno-religious division, and undermines national stability.

## Problem statement

While the use of hate speech by the Nigerian political class has been a recurring situation, it is expected that, as the country advances, this negative development will stop. However, records discoursed herein show that the situation has not improved over the years (Salau, 2023; Iruke, 2024). A pattern of verbal attack of political opponents based on their ethnic ties emerged in the 2011 presidential election, and many ethnic-related crises began to unfold thereafter.

Many studies conducted between then and now have revealed how the political class fuels ethnic crisis through hate speech. Being the most recent presidential election in the country, the 2023 election experienced similar negative trends of hate speech during the presidential election. This study is therefore conceived with the aim of comparing the extent to which Nigerian politicians used hate speech to their advantage and to the detriment of the people. Specifically, it attempts to examine how ethno-religious and politically motivated hate speech shaped voters' attitudes in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

## Research questions

- 1 Are there perceptible forms of hate speech reported by Nigerian media in the 2023 presidential campaigns?

- 2 Are voters influenced by media hate speech during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria?
- 3 Did ethno-religious and politically motivated hate speech contribute to voter apathy in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria?
- 4 Were voters' choices in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria influenced by ethno-religious and politically motivated hate speech?

## Perspectives on hate speech

In an attempt to operationalise hate speech, Bahador (2020) first examined the two words that make up the term hate speech, hate and speech. Describing hate speech as a human emotion that is triggered or increased through exposure to particular types of information. He argued that hate usually manifests in the form of hostility and sometimes a desire to harm particular targets, while speech is a form of communication across discourse mediums, such as spoken words, images, texts, gestures, or videos. The combination of these words into a phrase has caused harm in modern society. Therefore, hate speech is beyond mere insults as it has the effect of dehumanising, discriminating against and inciting violence. As noted by the United Nations, hateful rhetoric precedes violence and affects crimes (United Nations, 2019a). A tentative definition of hate speech by the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech United Nations (2019b) says hate speech is a communication that attacks or discriminates against individuals or groups based on identity factors like religion, ethnicity, or gender. In a 2019 document signed by United Nations Secretary General, under the aegis of United Nations Strategy and plan of Action on Hate Speech, further defines hate speech as any kind of communication in speech, writing, or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender, or other identity factor. These kinds of language are usually used for many harmful reasons, such as deliberate attempts to polarise, divide, antagonise, and terrify a population or the members of specifically targeted groups (UNESCO, 2023, p. 17; Mojaye and Aondover, 2022).

Kukah (2015) clarified that hate speech can be any form of speech, gesture or conduct, writing or display, and usually marks incitement, violence, or prejudices against an individual or a group. Adding that hate speech often leads to discrimination, harassment, and violence and precedes serious criminal acts. Terms like misinformation (a false information shared without the intent to cause harm), disinformation (a false information shared with the intent to cause harm), and malinformation (a true information shared with the intent to cause harm) are grouped a hate speech as they all cause damage to people or groups used against (Wardle, 2024). Though Wardle attempted to draw a clear line between hate speech, misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation in her recent study, her findings reveal that most categories cut across all the terms, and they usually have one outcome: causing harm. Hate speech contains two categories that usually result in negative connotation whenever uttered: epithet and slur. An epithet is a smear or descriptive word or phrase used to damage someone's reputation. Claire (2020) wrote that an epithet is a type of nickname and is a way of strengthening or displaying the strength of certain traits of a person. Similarly, yet in a different sort, a slur is a form of

hate speech used to derogate, disparage, and demean people. Like every other form of hate speech, a slur causes harm to people, especially due to their status or group of membership (Popa-Wyatt and Ginzburg, 2025).

Popa-Wyatt and Ginzburg (2025) asserted that a slur has the capacity to derogate and dehumanise target group members. According to Rinner (2023), slurs can be used to create or reinforce negative attitudes towards a target group or individual. In her 2019 study, Diaz-Legaspe (2019) grouped slurs into words that merely offend but are not considered offensive, and words that can be thought of as offensive. They are pejorative expressions and words that become offensive when used about people about their race, tribe, gender or physical appearance. Though hate speech precedes the internet, in this digital age, hate speech is spread faster than any other media. Prompting the UNDP and UNICEF (2023) to openly acknowledge that hatred spread on social media and instant messenger undermines the social cohesion of citizens and creates the ground for conflict and tension. Since its inception, the internet culture has always been associated with antisocial activities, and it is used to spread hate and extremism (Thomas, 2011; Delgado and Stefancic, 2014; Tareen et al., 2020). In addition to the antisocial usage of hate speech online, it is also used as a political tool to gain an advantage over some groups/candidates (Kentmen-Cin, 2025). What made social media a fertile ground for spreading hate speech is the nature of its design, which uses algorithms to generate similar content to users. In the end, it usually results in the term scholars call homophily (Dioum, 2025). It is believed that the advent of AI-generated images and content is designed to intentionally disinform people (Dioum, 2025).

Though freedom of speech is one of the features of Western democracy, any communication that could cause harm to other people is considered hate speech, and it is largely criminalised. Studies by Owens-Ibie and Aondover (2024) have shown a correlation between hate speech and hate crimes, as people have been seen yelling racial slurs while attacking their victims (Vergani et al., 2024, p. 4). Evidence has revealed that people or a group of people targeted with hate speech often suffer one form of violence or oppression (Curtis, 2025). While explaining the elements of hate speech, the UNHCR (2025) asserted that some form of disinformation and propaganda may incite violence, hostility, discrimination and war crimes. There is the case of careless comments which triggered violence against organisation and certain groups. The 2002 Miss World beauty pageantry comment by a Nigerian reporter led to a 3-day bloodbath.

Following the sentiment by Muslim extremists who criticised the proposed 2002 world beauty contest in Nigeria, *ThisDay* newspaper reporter Isioma Danial in her article suggested that the Prophet Mohammed might have married one of the beauty pageants, this comment sparked violence as a group of Muslim youth went on rampage in Kaduna by burning the newspaper office and 100 lives were lost with 521 people injured (Yale Global Online, 2002; Yale Global Online, 2002; Omipidan, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2003). On many occasions, there have been cases of brutal violence committed against people largely fueled by tribal, religious and racial slurs. Common examples include the 1994 Rwanda genocide against the Tutsi tribe. Records show that the long animosity between the Hutu majority and the Tutsi minority culminated in bloody genocide between April and July 1994. Though there were issues between these two tribes for over three decades, the hatred incited against the minority Tutsi was amplified through propaganda sustained by the

mass media. They were called vermin, cockroaches, and other dehumanising words. Within months, April–July 1994, over eight hundred thousand people were massacred (BBC, 2011). In the words of Nikuze (2014), the Rwanda genocide “was the result of long-established discrimination, divisionism, and an ideology of hatred that encouraged the Hutu people to consider the Tutsi as invasive foreigners.”

This devastating kind of communication usually comes in the form of text, picture or oral presentation, such as speeches, text, news, reports, animations, songs, memes, blogs, and drawings (Aondover et al., 2022). People use hate speech during conventional and non-conventional communication to misinform and disinform others through mass media, social media, and other communication platforms (UNESCO, 2023, p. 18). As used in this article, hate speech includes misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, slurs, and careless statements that have or may cause devastating effects on people. From all indications, hate speech causes mass violence, encourages extremism, undermines democracy, reproduces racism, and such practice must be curtailed (Hirblinger, 2024).

## Hate speech and political activities in the 2023 presidential election

The pervasive use of hate speech during Nigeria’s national elections attained unprecedented heights in the 2023 general elections, as the youths not only got actively involved but also extensively perpetuated and spread hate speech through social media platforms (Ejiga and Ode, 2024; Ubong, 2024; Suleiman, 2023; Ezedikachi and Ogunsanya, 2025). This trend did not just start during the last general elections. A good example was a vitriolic television documentary broadcast by the African Independent Television (AIT), which was televised to portray Muhammadu Buhari as an evil candidate with sinister intentions against Nigerian Christians (Adelakun, 2017). Muhammadu Buhari, who was the presidential candidate of the All People’s Party Congress (APC) in the 2015 election, had ruled the country as a military head of state between 1983 and 1985, where he received public condemnation for what was considered his draconian policies.

Again, Buhari had publicly called on Muslims to vote for their fellow Muslim, with the belief that the higher Nigerian Muslim population is sufficient to win the presidential election. He was even seen by many as a Boko Haram sympathiser. On the other hand, the AIT is owned by Chief Raymond Dokpesi, a chieftain of the PDP. Therefore, the 2015 documentary on Muhammadu Buhari was seen as a calculated attempt to damage Buhari’s reputation and incite Nigerians against him.

Another common example was an ominous comment made by former Governor of Ekiti State—Peter Ayodele Fayose, who, during the 2015 presidential election, made a provocative statement that had the potential to incite northern Nigerians in an act of carnage against other tribes and religious stock of the opposition party. Fayose was reported to say publicly that Muhammadu Buhari would die in office if elected President. He reminded Nigerians how past Presidents from the northern region had died, given that former rulers—General Murtala Mohammed and President Umaru Musa Yar’adua, both of northern descent, died in office. Fayose’s statement was in reference to Buhari’s fragile health condition during the election period. However,

Muhammadu Buhari himself had made divisive statements capable of inciting violence against others in the country. After he lost the 2011 presidential election to President Goodluck Jonathan, Buhari threatened that if he lost in the next election, which was going to be in 2015, blood would flow. In his own statement, "...by the grace of God, the dog and the baboons would all be soaked in blood" (Nwokoro and Ogba, 2019).

As earlier stated, the 2023 presidential election presented another opportunity for the spread of hate speech by the Nigerian political class. Abdulazzez et al. (2023), p. 241 wrote that the 2023 electioneering activities were marred by hate speech, as biases based on tribe, religion, culture, history, and morality took centre stage instead of arguments on development issues in the country. Opposition party members accused Peter Gregory Obi of the Labour Party of being a sympathiser of the proscribed IPOB insurgents. The PDP presidential candidate, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, was also accused of being a Cameroonian who was only interested in serving the interests of his Cameroonian cohorts.

The APC presidential candidate, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, was not exempt, with accusations of him being a drug user, a one-time drug trafficker in the USA, a past bisexual, and a criminal wanted by the FBI. These accusations by political figures lead to the breakdown of law and order at various points in time and places. There was a report of about 109 election-related deaths during electoral activities leading to the 2023 elections. Invariably, the crux of the election campaign was not based on economic discourse, ideologies or progressive options; instead, the killing emanated from party loyalists who harped on the long-existing ethnic and religious feud in the country.

While describing the violence during the presidential elections, Alike (2023) documented how contemporary political leaders promote unhealthy ethno-religious sentiments across the country just to advance their personal political ambitions. Abdulazzez et al. (2023) noted that the 2023 election exposed how the political class deliberately mislead the electorate with ethno-religious triviality to criticise rival candidates and their supporters, while attention is shifted away from issues affecting the electorate.

## Review of empirical studies

The impact of hate speech in the political setting has been a subject of discussion among scholars, and many inquiries have been launched from different fields, such as communication, media, political communication, and language studies. Some of the related empirical studies regarding hate speech and political elections in Nigeria are hereby reviewed.

A 2021 study titled 'Hate speech and ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria: implications for political stability' by Onah et al. (2021) examined the damage ethno-religious hate speeches caused in the Nigerian polity in recent decades. The study cited many conflicts that were incited by hate speeches made by individuals, organisational representatives, political, tribal, and religious groups in Nigeria. Using qualitative content analysis, some published hate speeches made during and after the 2015 presidential elections were presented and analysed. The study highlighted causes of hate speeches in Nigeria, which include marginalisation, religious fanaticism, the quest for power, and lack of social injustice. It noted that hate speech has consistently fuelled mistrust among Nigerians and led to several

conflicts. As a result, the situation remains critical as many regional terrorist groups like Boko Haram, Niger Delta militants, and now Eastern region rebel groups are all making Nigeria volatile. The study suggested that efforts towards promoting a detribalised Nigeria where inclusive governance is improved.

Okolie and Okoedion (2020) study entitled 'Ethno-religious hate speeches and political violence in Nigeria's fourth republic,' contend that political campaign strategy, loaded with hate speech, is responsible for recorded political violence in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. To prove their assertion, they adopted a descriptive method of data collection, where they surveyed 600 electorates in the south-south zone of Nigeria. They found a significant relationship between ethno-religious hate speech and political violence in Nigeria's fourth republic. It was recommended that politicians should focus their campaign towards the exploration of critical national issues.

In another similar study by Robert et al. (2023), in what they titled "Hate speech, a source of long-standing religious and ethnic intolerance, among the sub-Saharan African peoples: the case of Nigeria", they traced the longstanding effect of intergroup communication and relations to hate speech. They point to how hate speech fuels linguistic, religious, and ethnic intolerance among Nigerians. Using qualitative content and thematic analyses, data were drawn from online and print materials. A descriptive survey was also conducted, where the views of Nigerians were gathered on the topic. Analysis of the data reveals that hate speeches targeted at other ethnic, religious and linguistic groups not only cause intolerance among people but also lead to different phases of conflict in Nigeria, allowing the spread of divisive language in the polity.

Queen (2021) reacted to the hate speech policies enacted by the Buhari government in 2020. She argued that the hate speech policies enacted by the Nigerian government pose a threat to freedom of speech. Underpinned by the social responsibility theory, the study adopted a qualitative approach using content analysis to review the previous related literature. Findings revealed that Nigeria's political class (top politicians) use hate speech more than the commoners and that the Buhari administration's hate speech law conflicts with some fundamental human rights of freedom of expression in the country. Like previous studies on hate speech, the study indicated that hate speech is a catalyst for disintegration among the different religious and tribal groups in Nigeria. The study recommended a review of Nigeria's hate speech law, so as to remove the clauses that cause/lead to rights violations.

Rasaq et al. (2017), in their study entitled 'Media, politics, and hate speech: A critical discourse analysis,' highlighted how hate speech in successive democratic dispensations is on the increase. They believe this negative development is deepening the divisive and fragile bond among Nigerians. The study was hinged on the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, where there was a barrage of hate speeches by the political class. Using discourse analysis, comments by Nigerian politicians as reported in the newspapers were analysed. Evidence showed that during the 2015 elections, Nigerian politicians engaged in careless use of words by spitting hate language during electioneering to stimulate violence among ethnic and political groups. In the recommendations made by the team, they urged the Nigerian media to always scrutinise political messages to prevent being complicit in the spread of hate speech.

In a recent study by Kekere-Ekun (2025), it was argued that verbal forms of aggression have been used in Nigeria's politics since the

country's independence in 1960. The study entitled 'The speech as a form of aggression in Nigerian politics: A speech act and P. Crafting analysis,' focused on previous Nigerian election campaigns with the aim of identifying recurring patterns of the use of verbal aggressive speeches by politicians in the country. Using a descriptive survey and complemented with content analysis of published hate speeches in Nigerian newspapers, the collated data were subjected to speech act and p-crafting analysis. The findings reveal that from 2011 to 2015, ethnic and religious intolerance contributed to the increase in election violence in Nigeria. It noted that despite ethical and legal frameworks guarding against hate speech in Nigeria, political campaigns in Nigeria have been marred by defamation, condemnation and disrespectful utterances against opposition political parties and candidates. The study recommended enlightenment programmes by the government and civil societies about the dangers of divisive hate speech. This current study attempts to examine how the use of hate speech by Nigerian politicians influenced voters' behaviour in the recent 2023 presidential election.

## Theoretical underpinning: functional theory of campaign discourse

One of the theories that specifically addresses political campaigns is the functional theory of political campaign discourse. The theory provides a political analysis, enabling media scholars and linguists to understand the frame of argument in political debate, and it proposes the impact the message would have on the target audience. Propounded by Willian Benoit in 1999, the functional theory of political campaign posits that during electoral campaigns, political candidates perform three major functions: acclaim, attack, or defence (Gyasi and Sarfo-Kantankah, 2022). The theory has been applied to study presidential elections in South America, Europe, Asia and Africa.

The core principles of the theory state that (i) voting is a comparative act where candidates must be seen as a preferable choice, (ii) a candidate must be distinguished from opponents to be considered preferable, (iii) campaign messages are means through which a candidate can be distinguished, (iv) campaign discourse creates preference ability through three functions—acclaim, attack and defence, and (v) candidates set themselves apart from opponents by emphasising differences in character (image) and policy (issues). In practice, candidates may choose to acclaim or attack on character, policy, or both.

According to Benoit (2007), acclaim (self-praise), attack (downgrading opponents), and defence (counterattack) form the campaign discourse of every political debate. It is common to see politicians blaming the incumbent or rival for the problems the electorate is facing. In addition, they usually seize the opportunity to outline their personal strengths and defend their name from previous attacks from the opposition. Dudek and Partacz (2007) pointed out that the aim of every political debate is to gain support from the electorate and to ditch the opposition candidate or rival. They argued that a voter must first perceive a political candidate as better than other options before they would vote for that candidate. This discussion emanates from what the political candidates say during the electioneering campaign. While variables like personality and issues are important in political debate, how the politician presents himself

and argues his point is often critical to gaining support from the electorate.

The bottom line is that campaign messages can and do have effects on voters (Henson and Benoit, 2010). There are other variables that make the campaign message more potent and effective: these are context (how issues are presented), medium (television, social media, advertising), and information source (who is saying what) (Benoit, 2007). As observed, during major political debates or discourses, the challengers attack more than incumbents (Benoit and Sheaffer, 2006). Additionally, it was observed that whenever the acclaim framing is used, it is usually by the incumbent, and it is followed by a lesser attack on the challenger. Again, the attacker, who is usually the challenger, tends to overstate minor or trivial issues with great fervour, while the incumbent would focus on promoting his achievements (Benoit, 2007). These variables discussed are evidently used by Nigerian politicians during major elections. There are examples of this during presidential elections in Nigeria; the first was during the 2015 election when Muhammadu Buhari was the challenger, as he fiercely criticised the then incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan. As discussed earlier, the challengers are usually critical of the incumbents in Nigeria, and they even attempt to use inappropriate words to attack the incumbents. The Buhari and Tinubu attack on Goodluck Jonathan were so fierce and derogatory, but after the two began ruling, they began to talk lightly and defend their government actions.

## Methodology

For this exploratory study, we used two instruments, qualitative content analysis and a survey, to ascertain the extent to which hate speech influenced voters' behaviour in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. Descriptive content analysis and a survey were adopted for their relevance in conducting a sensitive field study, and to help establish a holistic view (Banawa, 2025; The Fullstory Team, 2024).

To gather operational data through qualitative means to answer RQ One by conveniently selecting newspaper (traditional, online, and social media posts) stories about the 2023 presidential candidates in Nigeria, the selected articles from the newspapers and posts are subjected to a simple thematic analysis. Paragraphs and leads that amount to hate speech are therefore highlighted, while counter-statements/reports that reveal how a previous media comment is false/inaccurate are also highlighted.

The qualitative content analysis was coded through similar words that can be grouped under epithet or slur. The content selected is subjected to a search for damaging words used against presidential candidates, supporters, tribesmen, and religious affiliations. Therefore, words like betrayal, liar/liars, baboons, goats, cockroaches, and other words/phrases with negative connotations are coded into themes. The choice of epithet to use to generate codes and themes is informed by the submission by scholars that the epithet is a powerful rhetorical tool that conveys meaning more efficiently than longer, argumentative methods (Nordquist, 2023; Augustyn, 2025). For the themes, slurs, like disparaging remarks about people's race, tribe, religion, and sex, form the codes, while the themes of ethnic/tribal slur, (tribal pejorative), religious slur (religious pejorative), gender slur (gender pejorative), and careless statement are sorted for analysis of selected likely hate speeches made in the Nigerian media during the 2023 presidential election.

The media platforms from which these reports/comments are taken from are also briefly reviewed because most of their owners are affiliated with some presidential candidates and political parties. In addition to this, a survey was carried out among Lagos residents. The choice of Lagos is due to its high population density, media presence and operational headquarters of business, religious and political groups in the country (Cartwright, 2024; Discover Lagos.ng, 2024). Due to limited resources to carry out and execute a national-based study, the survey is restricted to Lagos. Lagos is the commercial hub and the most populous city in the country. Though figures vary, the population of Lagos as of the time of the study in 2023 was estimated to be 16,536, 000 (Macrotrends, 2025), and 7,060,195 were registered during the 2023 election period (Oguntola and Isuwa, 2023). Due to electoral violence and other reasons, only 1,335,729 people voted in the 2023 presidential election in Lagos, which amounts to 19% of the people in the city-state of Lagos (Yusuf, 2023). Therefore, this survey was carried out based on 19% of the politically active Lagos residents. Online calculators SurveyMonkey and SPSS were used with parameters of 95% confidence level, 5% margin of error and a population of 1,335,729 amount to 385 sample size. Using a convenient and accidental sampling (non-probability methods), a 10-item questionnaire was prepared and shared through Google Forms with residents of Lagos, and the results as of the time of data collation are presented herein.

## Qualitative data table

Table 1 shows examples of hate speech and divisive phrases documented during the 2023 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria, sourced from newspaper reports and social media platforms such as X (previously Twitter) and Facebook. The table organizes each expression by speaker, media source, and type of slur, such as ethnic, tribal, religious, and ethno-religious pejoratives, to show how inflammatory rhetoric was used by political players, supporters, and opinion leaders across many platforms. As shown in Table 1, these phrases illustrate the widespread use of identity-based terminology in campaign discourse, emphasizing the importance of conventional and digital media in amplifying hate speech throughout the election.

RQ1: Are there perceptible forms of hate speech reported by Nigerian media in the 2023 Presidential campaigns?

This question, asked in the first part of this study, was clearly answered by the various comments, posts and coverage of the main actors of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. Of the three dominant presidential candidates in the 2023 election, two of them did not hesitate to device stereotypical messages by using ethnic pejorative slurs against their opponents. One of them, Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the APC, openly likened his opponent, Peter Obi, to the biblical Peter who denied Jesus at a critical moment. A religious sentiment (a clear epithet) which goes beyond insult, it touches on the perceived political nature of the Igbo people, who refused to form a political alliance with the Yoruba during the First Republic electioneering.

In the 1959 Federal elections in Nigeria, Nnamdi Azikiwe formed a usual coalition with Ahmadu Bello. This left Obafemi Awolowo out of the power structure of the country (Akinola, n.d.; Omokri, 2025).

Some Yoruba ethnic loyalists still see Azikiwe's coalition with the Hausas as an act of betrayal. Tinubu's comment about Obi shows how this long ethnic rivalry is still smouldering among the Nigerian political class.

The second presidential candidate, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar of the PDP, also traded in this part of peddling hate speech. He exploited the long ethno-religious debate among Nigerian ethnic groups before and after the country's independence. It was recorded in 1959 when the three dominant candidates, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Alhaji Ahmadu Bello and Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe, who represented the three dominant tribes (Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo), campaigned and negotiated along religious and tribal identities. One of such critical moments was when Nnamdi Azikwe said Nigerians should forget about their unity as one nation, but Ahmadu Bello sharply corrected him (Iyanda, 2023). As recorded, transcripts of the conversations read: Azikiwe 'Let us forget our differences,' Bello 'No, let us understand our differences. I am a Muslim and a Northerner. You are a Christian and an Easterner. By understanding our differences, we can build unity in our country.' The 2022 comment by Atiku Abubakar, in similarity to Ahmadu Bello's comment, shows that the same ethno-religious sentiment still runs in the Nigerian polity.

The 2023 comment by Nasir El-Rufai, who is an APC chieftain, reveals how deeply rooted the issue of ethno-religious division runs among Nigerians. The responses by Frederick Nwajagu and Tom Steve, respectively, echo the long-held belief of the Igbo people that they have always been a target for marginalisation, and their sense of being on alert to defend themselves against other tribes.

## Quantitative data

The following information was gathered from the online survey, and the collated results are presented in simple frequency tables, which are grouped under the research question they address.

The majority of the respondents attested that they noticed forms of hate speech in the media during the 2023 presidential election. This affirmed the various sources cited earlier, especially about the pervasive nature of hate speech in the Nigerian media.

RQ2: Are voters influenced by media hate speech during the 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria?

The response could be seen from the responses of those who took the survey. As seen in Table 2 above, a very high percentage of the respondents noticed some forms of hate speech in the media during the 2023 presidential election. What that means is that the situation has gone beyond normal political rivalry. It has degenerated into a critical situation in which the electorate perceived the share of bigotry thrown at each other in the media. Suleiman (2023), quoted earlier, noted that this election witnessed widespread use of media for peddling hate speech by the Nigerian political class and here, the respondents noticed (see Table 3).

From their personal experience, most of the respondents (73.2%) noticed how ethno-religious and politically motivated hate speech discouraged voters from participating in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. It shows the grave consequences of promoting hate among a multi-ethnic people.

TABLE 1 Hate speech comments.

S/No.	Hate Speech/Divisive comment	Speaker	Source	Remark
1.	"I'm not afraid of anybody, and I do not worry. The man who left here, he calls himself Peter Obi. We read in the Bible that before the cock crows three times, he will deny Jesus Christ."	Bola Tinubu	Daily Post, February 1, 2023	Religious slur (religious pejorative)
2.	"IPOB, we will invite them. They have no job. All of the IPOB will protect all of our shops. And we have to pay them. We have to mobilise for that. We have to do that. We must have our security so that they will stop attacking us at midnight, in the morning, and in the afternoon.  "When they discover that we have our security before they will come, they will know that we have our men there. I am not saying a single word to be hidden. I am not hiding my words, let my words go viral. Igbo must get their right and get a stand in Lagos State."	Fredrick Nwajagu	Punch, April 6, 2023	Tribal slur (ethnic pejorative)
3.	An Igbo man legitimately won 2023 presidential election but a Yoruba man conspired with INEC/cabals and robbed him of his victory that the majority of Nigerians willingly gave to him. I hope when we shall be writing history tomorrow, nobody will argue this. Who did Igbos offend?	Tom Steve	Twitter, now X, March 12, 2023	Tribal slur (ethnic pejorative)
4.	"What the average Northerner needs is somebody who's from the north and also understands that part of the country and has been able to build bridges across the country.  "This is what the Northerner needs, it does not need a Yoruba or Igbo candidate, I stand before you as a Pan-Nigerian of northern origin."	Atiku Abubakar	Daily Post, October 15, 2022	Ethno-religious slur (religious pejorative)
5.	"What we are able to achieve in Kaduna, we have now achieved it on the national level. There is no liar that can say he will do politics of Christianity and win the election. Peter Obi tried it but this is where he is now."	Nasir El-Rufai	Premium Times, June 18, 2023	Religious slur (religious pejorative)
6.	"If you reject the indirect presidential ambitions of Shettima, and support the presidential ambitions of Atiku, you are still supporting the fulanizations agendas of the jihadist."	Segun Adeogoyemi	Facebook post, July 11, 2022	Religious slur (religious pejorative)
7.	We do not need any lessons from this over-rated and Igbocentric new age diva (Chimamanda Adichie).  Neither do we need to respond to her self-serving, self-seeking, jaundiced, subjective, partial, primitive, tribal observations and implausible ethno-religious sentiments.	Femi Fani-Kayode (APC chieftain)	Facebook post, April 8, 2023	Ethnic slur (ethnic pejorative and sexist epithet)
8.	"It's better I release all the confidential information that will break Nigeria than Peter Obi to lose under my watch, it's not a threat, it a Promise."	Christopher Ezeilo (Peter Obi Supporter)	Facebook post, January 10, 2023	Ethnic slur (ethnic pejorative)
9.	The Ibo, this time led by one Peter Obi, a shady and manipulative trader who was fuelled, strengthened and emboldened by his relative success and gains during the presidential election in the state two weeks earlier, tried to forcefully take over Lagos in the 2023 Governorship election	Femi Fani-Kayode (an APC chieftain)	The Herald, March 20, 2023	Ethnic slur (ethnic pejorative)
10.	"Let 2023 be the last time of Igbo interference in Lagos politics. Let there be no repeat in 2027. Lagos is like Anambra, Imo, any Nigerian state. It is not No Man's Land, not Federal Capital Territory. It is Yoruba land. Mind your business."	Bayo Onanuga (President Tinubu's spokesperson)	The Herald, March 19, 2023.	Ethnic (tribal) slur (ethnic pejorative)

Source: Authors' computation, 2025.

TABLE 2 Did you notice any form of hate speech in the media during the 2023 presidential election?

Variable	Frequency percentage
Yes, I did	87.3%
No, I did not	12.7%
Total	100%

Many Nigerians feared there would be violence during the 2023 presidential election. This might be caused by the pre-election activities that led to violence, where over 109 people lost their lives (Alike, 2023). Other reasons responsible for voter apathy during the election include lack of trust in the electoral process, bad leadership, and unkept promises.

Most of the respondents (46.5%) attested that the hate speech fed to people made a lot of voters choose candidates from their ethnic group, while others voted along religious sentiment, fueled by the propagandist move of the political class.

Some of the negative outcomes of the campaign laced with hate speech did not go unnoticed by the electorate, as they noticed the division it caused. This made people lose trust in the electoral process and, in turn, affected the rate of voter turnout in the election (February, 2023).

RQ3: Did ethno-religious and politically motivated hate speech contribute to voter apathy in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria?

TABLE 3 Respondent's perception of the contribution of ethno-religious and politically motivated hate speech to voter apathy in the 2023 election.

Variable	Frequency percentage
Affected voter apathy	73.2%
Did not affect voter apathy	7%
Unsure	19.7%
Total	100%

As seen in Table 4, most of the respondents (73.2%) noticed how ethno-religious and politically motivated hate speech discouraged voters from participating in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. It shows the grave consequences of promoting hate among a multi-ethnic people. A significant number of people expressed a general disinterest in the political process and a belief that politicians are self-serving. Another implication is that many believed their votes would not count due to perceived rigging, manipulation, and a lack of confidence in INEC's integrity and impartiality (see Tables 5, 6).

Coupled with the past experiences with irresponsible leadership, unfulfilled political promises, and the fear of repeating bad governance contributed to non-participation, the situation was exacerbated as hate speech, ethno-religious propaganda, and misinformation were seen as factors that diverted voters' attention and inspired violence. Consequently, most of the respondents voted along ethnic lines (46.4%), while others voted based on religious sentiments.

TABLE 4 Biggest reason people did not vote in 2023.

Lack of trust in the electoral process	Many believed their votes would not count due to perceived rigging, manipulation, and a lack of confidence in INEC's integrity and impartiality.
Apathy and lack of interest	A significant number of people expressed a general disinterest in the political process and a belief that politicians are self-serving.
Fear of violence	Concerns about safety issues at polling units and election-related violence deterred voters.
Bad leadership and unkept promises	Past experiences with irresponsible leadership, unfulfilled political promises, and the fear of repeating bad governance contributed to non-participation.
Hate speech and misinformation	Hate speech, ethno-religious propaganda, and misinformation were seen as factors that diverted voters' attention and inspired violence.

TABLE 5 How hate speech influenced voting behaviour during the 2023 Elections.

Variable	Frequency percentage
Made voters choose candidates from their ethnic group	46.5%
Made voters choose candidates from their religious group	16.9%
Made voters avoid certain candidate altogether	18.3%
Had no real influence on choice	15.5%
Others	0%
Total	100%

TABLE 6 Personal reflection on how hate speech shaped the 2023 presidential election.

Variable	Response
Division and bias	Hate speech led to significant division among voters, causing them to vote along ethnic and religious lines and be biased towards certain candidates. It created bad blood and turned friends and families against each other.
Negative influence on voter behaviour	It negatively influenced voter choices, making people believe untrue things about candidates, and discouraging some from voting due to fear of attack or insecurity. It also reduced voter confidence and contributed to political apathy.
Electoral process concerns	Hate speech was seen as a political tool that ridiculed the electoral process, making it difficult for voters to analyse candidates fairly. It also created fear that the winner was predetermined, irrespective of voter actions.
Impact on candidates	It caused some candidates to appear as "saints" while others were painted negatively and influenced the "election of non-deserving and least qualified candidates."
Reduced turnout and trust	It seriously affected voter turnout and damaged public trust in the democratic process, fostering a toxic and discouraging atmosphere.

It was largely believed (77.5%) that politically motivated hate speech influenced how Nigerians voted in the 2023 presidential election.

Over 60% of the respondents did not vote in the 2023 presidential election. This, from their previous responses, indicates a connection

TABLE 7 Perception of politically motivated hate speech's influence on how people voted in 2023.

Variable	Frequency percentage
Influenced	77.5%
Did not influence	9.9%
Unsure	12.7%
Total	100%

TABLE 8 Voting in the 2023 election.

Variable	Frequency percentage
Voted	39.4%
Did not vote	60.6%
Total	100%

to the fear, apathy, and mistrust fueled by the barrage of hate speech unleashed by the political class during electioneering.

RQ4: Were voters' choices in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria influenced by ethnoreligious and politically motivated hate speech?

Results from Tables 7, 8 revealed how hate speech influenced their choice of candidate in the 2023 presidential election. First, the people are aware that this open bigotry caused voter apathy and that the messages were of great concern to many members of the electorate. Additionally, over 60% of the respondents refused to participate in the 2023 presidential election. This proves the findings of Abdulazzez et al. (2023), who noted that the 2023 election exposed how the political class deliberately mislead the electorate with ethno-religious triviality to criticise rival candidates and their supporters, while attention is shifted away from issues affecting the electorate.

## Conclusion

Studies have shown that most Nigerian politicians use hate speech as a tactic to have an advantage over their political opponents, and political hate speech often revolves around ethnic and religious sentiments (Waya et al., 2019; Sabo et al., 2019). Electoral violence in the recent national elections is linked to ethno-religious intolerance, fueled by hate speech (Usman and Badiru, 2019). Although the Nigerian government under President Muhammadu Buhari made an effort to curtail the spread of hate speech by enacting anti-hate speech laws, the 2023 presidential election witnessed a widespread violation of the anti-hate speech laws.

Results also revealed how all political parties in Nigeria engage in the cheap habit of using hate speech as a campaign tool (Waya et al., 2019; Okeke et al., 2024). Politicians and their supporter's device ethnic stereotypes to frame opposition candidates, all in an effort to garner support from religious and ethnic groups. The Nigerian voters, therefore, were urged to react towards salacious comments rather than think about the main issues such as poverty, inflation, underdevelopment, and wasteful governance. For the voters, it became a test of ethnic and religious loyalty (Kay, 2025). From all indications, hate is the core political strategy for politicians during elections, as social media is used to further amplify the bigotry published in the traditional media.

## Recommendations

With the information gathered on the impact of hate speech during the recent 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. The following recommendations become necessary:

- 1 It has been proven that legislation on hate speech infringement is not enough in Nigeria. As discussed earlier, the President, who championed anti-hate speech laws in 2022, has on several occasions, engaged in making vitriolous statements, and his party chieftains still use hate speech against opposition members. Therefore, informed advice from scholars has proposed the re-imaging of political engagement in Nigeria. That is, government officials, Non-Governmental Organisations, and concerned groups should put in place public fora to educate the masses about the dangers of listening to and amplifying hate speech.
- 2 Governments, political, and sociocultural group representatives should be trained and retrained on the mechanics of handling political communication, especially on how to react appropriately to hate speech meted out against their groups.
- 3 Concerned parties like Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), government agencies, religious groups, cultural groups, and the media must take the issue of hate speech in Nigeria very seriously and treat it as an ominous threat that needs a multidimensional approach. It fuelled a full-scale war in 1967–1970, and the recent pervasive practice of spreading hate speech can lead to a similar occurrence. Therefore, concerned groups mentioned must educate, enlighten, and sanction their members over the issue of hate speech.
- 4 Considering the feat that the political elites are the ones who carry out ethnic and religious attack during elections and most of them have a stake in the proliferated mass media in the country, civil right groups, should take up the responsibility of calling out and prosecuting politicians who engage in any form of hate speech by calling for them to be nullified from participating in elections. Also, the civil rights and other groups must push for politicians to be prosecuted if their allies engage in any form of spreading hate speech before, during, and after major elections in the country. This is to discourage politicians from harbouring unscrupulous supporters who engage in bigotry.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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## Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

EA: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. IA: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. RA: Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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