



Normalization of Personalized Politics and its Impact on Voters' Behavior in Nigeria:

A Case Study of the Current Trends in Nigerian Elections

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Abstract

This study investigates the normalization of personalized politics in Nigeria and its impact on voter behavior, regionalism, and national unity, using Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, as a case study. Through semi-structured face to face interviews with 20 couples, both intra-ethnic (SEGC) and inter-ethnic (IEGC), the research explores the underlying factors contributing to this phenomenon. Participants were purposively selected and comprised a diverse mix of majority and minority ethnic groups from Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria. All participants were registered voters residing in Uyo, aged 29 to 80, and had been married for 5 to 50 years. Findings reveal that weak institutions and pervasive corruption are primary drivers of personalized politics, allowing money politics and godfatherism to heavily influence voter behavior. Furthermore, the study highlights how regional and ethnic marginalization, coupled with nepotism, exacerbates regional divides, weakening national cohesion. The persistence of personalized politics prioritizes regional over national interests, fostering a political landscape characterized by voter manipulation and a deficit in genuine democratic representation. The study underscores the deviation from the traditional Patron-Client Theory in Nigeria, where godfatherism dominates, leading to a fractured political system that challenges the country's unity and democratic development. The findings have significant implications for understanding the entrenchment of personalized politics in Nigeria and its detrimental effects on the nation's democratic processes and unity.

Keywords

Personalized politics, Voter behavior, Democracy, Godfatherism, Regionalism, National unity

INTRODUCTION

Countries around the globe possess distinctive political climate and cultural identity. However, the political identity of most countries either indigenous such as ancient Greece democracy or be inherited through colonial legacy. As such, the political culture of any given country invariably reflects the way and manner its citizens view politics and the political landscape of the country (Nebeife et al., 2021). This holds true to the current political climate in Nigeria particularly as the country moves away from political universalism to personalize politics.

Although one can argue that change is inevitable as societal culture and norms experience changes over time. As such, the political culture of any given society will change as time progresses. However, the expectation in terms of socio, economic and political development of any given entity is progressive and not regressive specifically changes that leads to greater participation and involvement of citizens in governance compared to marginalization (Mamonova, & Franquesa, 2020).

Conversely, the recurring change in the Nigerian political landscape is troubling as money politics and Godfatherism has enabled personalized politics. And this has led to detachment of citizens from the political process to only voting on Election Day without proper orientation on party ideology (Nwoko, 2019; Ufomba, 2020). Research studies

have shown that the dominant political party in the Nigerian political system determines political behaviors and citizens participation in politics (Obani, & Odalonu, 2019; Nkwede & Abssah 2019; Nebeife et al. 2021).

Evidently, the continuous marginalization of minority groups (Onwubiko, & Ugorji 2022), women (Iloka and Ojukwu 2021) and youths in Nigerian politics (Onyenachi, 2018; Akinyetun, 2021) showcases the current and existing political culture in the country. Specifically, the normalization of personalized politics in the country has scattered the shared sense of national unity and identity once common among Nigerians. Thus, the personalization of politics in Nigeria has created a do-or-die political system where voters can no longer participate freely in the democratic process (election) as the few elites in power continue to rule with no decorum.

Similarly, agitation for secessions by various regions and ethnicities, poverty, environmental degradation, insecurity, socio, and economic setbacks are commonly attributed to non-inclusiveness in the Nigerian polity (Utazi, 2021). Personalized politics has become prevalent to the extent that electoral laws are frequently violated and suspended at will, with a lack of judicial recourse for civil and constitutional violations, alongside instances of nepotism and the utilization of state security forces (military/police) to institutionalize personalized politics within the country political sphere (Onyia, 2020).

NIGERIA POLITICAL EVOLUTION

In the last two decades Nigeria experienced civil governance, and the socio-economic fortune of country seems to have improved during this period. However, the Nigerian democratic experience is far from smooth sailing as the introduction and normalization of personalized politics seriously threaten the unity and stability of democracy in the country. Accordingly, Wattenberg, 1991; Shin 2017; Ascension, 2022, asserts that candidate centered politics empowers a candidate to exert authority over party structure, electoral process and pursue individual goals at the expense of voters.

After independence in 1960, the first republic (1960-1966) in Nigeria practiced the parliamentary system of government modeled after the British colonialist. Evidently, the government during this period was fundamentally democratic with federal character in practice. Equally, power and resources control were decentralized, and regional autonyms were essential in ensuring equal representation in governance (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019).

After the military intervention in 1966 and subsequent return to civil rule in 1979, federalism and democracy by extension took a downward dive in the country. Thus, politicization and corporatism within and among the various ethnicities in the country diminished thereby opening the door for racial and religious disintegration. The collapse of the first republic opened the door to personalization of politics in which individual politicians accumulated so much power and became influential thereby negating the electorate, institutions, and the constitution (Davies, 2021).

Similarly, the multi-party democratic system led to the collapse of the first and second republics in Nigeria because party politics shaped the character of government (Apine & Balogun, 2021). Party politics became the arena for interest aggregation, articulation, recruitment of party members and potential candidates, networking as well as formulating political and policy programs (Yakubu, & Banali, 2019). Specifically, party politics especially in the fourth republic (1999 till date) is patterned along ethnic affiliation, regional and religious inclination and this has impacted voting patterns and behaviors of voters.

Consequently, the 2019 and 2023 elections significantly legitimized the practice of personalized politics in Nigeria evident in the neglect of existing political arrangements like federal character, power and resource sharing formula in the country (Hassan, & Ari 2023; Idris & Babura 2024). The effects of this are evident in the political behaviors exhibited by the youths, women and most particularly minority ethnicities within the country (Ibezim, 2019). Equally, the imposition of candidates on voters, voters' intimidation, violence, and ballot theft are the common forms of voter's suppression bought by personalization in the Nigerian political scene.

Consequently, the exercise of power within the party structure in Nigeria political setting is greatly impaired because the voice of those who do not align with party leadership and agenda gets booted out without any show of cause (Peters, 2016). This also affects the powers and the function of institutions of the state thereby upsetting the balance of power because a single individual controls everything. The resulting effect in this instance is reflected in voter's behavior and voting patterns as region and political zones within the country refrain from voting because they feel alienated (Ayeni, 2019).

Personalized Politics in Nigeria

Personalized politics as the dominance of individual personalities over institutions and policies is a significant feature of Nigeria's political scene in recent times. Normalization of personalized politics in Nigeria is perhaps a combination of historical legacy, socio-economic realities, cultural diversity, and institutional weaknesses.

From a historical perspective, the colonial history and subsequent independence in 1960 set the stage for personalized politics. During the colonial era, the British deployed indirect rule, which empowered local chiefs and traditional rulers to govern on their behalf and integrate them into the colonial administrative framework (Falola & Heaton, 2008). This system entrenched the power of individuals over institutions thus creating a political culture where authority was vested in personalities rather than formal structures (Princewill et al., 2020).

Similarly, upon gaining independence, Nigeria inherited a political system that was already skewed towards personalized rule. The colonial political legacy continually influenced political structures in Nigeria as charismatic leader's wielded significant power often overriding institutional norms (Nwodim & Adah, 2021). The immediate post-

independence period brought intense competition among regional leaders with each vying for control over resources and political influence. The first republic (1963-1966) was marked by political turbulence and a series of military coups, reflecting the deep-seated rivalries among powerful political figures (Arize, & James, 2023).

Notably, the military rule that followed further entrenched personalized politics with military leaders concentrated power within its rank and file thereby sidelining democratic institutions. This period witnessed the centralization of power and the personalization of authority, as military rulers such as Generals Yakubu Gowon, Olusegun Obasanjo, and Ibrahim Babangida became synonymous with Nigerian governance.

The transition to civilian rule in 1999 did not significantly alter the personalized nature of Nigerian politics. The Fourth Republic has been characterized by the dominance of strong political figures who wield significant influence over their parties and the political landscape (Oyetunbi & Akinrinde, 2021). Former military rulers, like Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari transitioned into civilian leadership roles, continuing the tradition of personalized politics.

The 2019 and 2023 elections normalized personalized politics in Nigeria. Both general elections in the country saw a rise in elitism and populist trends, where individual, religious, and regional sentiments were prioritized over the rule of law, the constitution, and state institutions. With personalized politics in place the mechanism of accountability is weakened and as such a single individual and his cronies dominate power and decision making at the expense of the electorate (Bolarinwa & Osuji 2022).

For instance, the internal party politics often involves buying delegates' votes, with the highest bidder becoming the party's flag bearer. This practice is widespread across all political parties and elective positions in Nigeria (Bassey et al., 2023). For example, Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) gave \$20,000 to each delegate to secure the party ticket (Adepegba, 2022), while Bola Tinubu of the All-Progressive Congress (APC) offered \$25,000 per delegate to become the party's presidential candidate.

Likewise, Nigeria's ethnic and regional diversity has also played a crucial role in the normalization of personalized politics. Political leaders in Nigeria often leverage ethnic and regional loyalties to garner support and position themselves as champions of their groups' interests (Moyosore, 2022; Nwaoburu, 2023). These dynamics foster a political environment where individual leaders are seen as protectors and benefactors, further entrenching their influence.

In addition, the persistent weakness of democratic institutions has facilitated the continuation of personalized politics. Electoral bodies, the judiciary, and law enforcement agencies often lack the independence and capacity to function effectively (Nwebo, & Ihejirika, 2022). This institutional weakness allows powerful individuals to manipulate political processes and maintain their dominance. Conversely, weak institutional frameworks fuel the trend of money politics as individual influence over political and party structure ultimately clouds the parties' identity and ideologies thus leading to the first research question why is personalized politics normalized in Nigeria?

Personalized Politics and Voter Behavior in Nigeria

Elections are a fundamental means of changing governments and electing leaders in a democratic setting. Obani & Odalonu (2019) assert that elections gauge the acceptability of leaders and governments by citizens. However, voter attitudes evolve over time and differ from country to country, primarily before, during, or after elections, depending on the socio-economic and political context of a nation. Although existing scholarships have identified various factors that influence voter attitudes, however excessive power, control, and influence exerted by individuals over political parties, structures, and electioneering processes results to personalization of politics.

This phenomenon impacts voter behavior either positively or negatively. However, in a multicultural society like Nigeria, politics is heavily characterized by elitism also known as political godfatherism (Moruf, 2021). As such, politicians and godfathers provide material benefits to individuals or groups in exchange for political support. Although it could be argued that a patron-client political setup is a mutual arrangement where influential or charismatic individuals use their wealth, authority and social status (patron) uses their influence to serve the people (client) in governance. However, political godfatherism in Nigerian context focuses more on forcing voters to accept the choices of the godfathers thereby robbing them of good governance (Enejoh, & Ekele, 2021). Godfatherism has become a prominent and influential feature of Nigerian politics, characterized by powerful individuals (godfathers) who use their resources and influence to control political outcomes and candidates (godsons). This system operates through various mechanisms and has significant implications in the Nigerian political landscape.

For instance, the prevalence of vote buying in Nigeria is facilitated by political godfathers who use their resources to buy votes thereby influencing voters to support their chosen candidates in exchange for money or goods (Uwa & Emeka, 2022). In addition, very often godfathers deploy intimidation and threats to coerce voters into supporting their candidates which ultimately affects voter choices and suppressing opposition (Turnbull, 2020).

The combination of godfatherism and clientelism has become prevalent in the Nigerian political culture and the practice creates a dependency where voters support candidates who can promise or provide immediate benefits like money, jobs, or other resources (Moruf, 2021). Consequently, political godfatherism is a deeply entrenched aspect of Nigerian politics which shapes the recruitment, sponsorship, and control of political candidates. While it provides resources and support to candidates, it also undermines democratic principles thereby fostering corruption, and stifles political competition (Demarest, 2022).

Subsequently, the media in Nigeria plays a significant role in shaping personalized politics by focusing on individual politicians rather than political parties, ideologies or platforms. Media coverage or media representation tends

to highlight the personalities, lifestyles, and private lives of politicians to enhance their personal appeal thereby overshadowing policy discussions (Ojebuyi & Ekenam, 2013). As such, the focus on personalities influences voter perceptions and preferences thereby making them more likely to vote based on a candidate's charisma or public image rather than their political stance (Fagbadebo, 2020; Fordjour, 2024)

Furthermore, personalized politics in Nigeria thrives on the social capital and networks established by political actors. Politicians leverage personal relationships and networks to mobilize support and resources to achieve their political goals. In the Nigerian context the attainment of political goals is in evidence in the prevalence of appointment and empowerment of political associates and family members and ethnic peers into position of authority to cement grip on power (Alumona & Okoli, 2021).

In many Nigerian communities, traditional leaders and wealthy people play significant role in mobilizing voters. These people often endorse candidates and use their influence to sway voter preferences (Brierley & Ofosu, 2023). In addition, personal relationships and networks become very crucial for campaign mobilization as politicians rely on their social networks to organize rallies, distribute campaign materials, engage and bribe voters at the grassroots level in Nigeria.

Thus, the prevalence of personalized politics in Nigeria has resulted in weakened political institutions and party systems, prioritization of personal or ethnic interests over national policies, compromised electoral integrity through vote buying and electoral violence (Nwobodo, 2024). Hence, the practice undermines the fairness and transparency of elections, affects public trust in the democratic process, and impacts development and public service delivery, instability and fragmentation within parties and the nation at large. This leads to the second research question: "How does personalized politics impact/influence voter behavior in Nigeria"?

Impact of Personalized Politics on Regional and Nationalization in Nigeria

In Nigeria, personalized politics often leverages ethnic and regional affiliations to gain support. This deepens ethnic divisions and exacerbates regional disparities, particularly ethnic mobilization as politicians frequently appeal to ethnic sentiments to secure votes (Nwaoburu, 2023). Particularly, during elections, candidates often play up ethnic superiority, tribal, racial, and religious prejudice and promises to protect and promote the interests of their ethnic groups thus leading to bloc voting based on ethnic identity (Muhammad, 2023).

While political systems like federalism, parliamentary, and unitary governments *inter alia*, are all aimed at addressing the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural conditions of societies that practice them, however democratic regimes are known for power delegation and inclusive decision-making. In contrast, personalized politics in Nigeria fosters arbitrary rule and leadership, which uses state institutions to violate citizens' constitutional rights and impose laws arbitrarily (Okafor, 2017).

The dynamics of personalized politics in Nigeria is evident in the persistent regional disparities and regional voting patterns where the Northern, Eastern, and Western regions often vote along ethnic lines (Abubakar, 2019). This has led to uneven development as political leaders prioritize their regions for development projects and resource allocation to secure loyalty and votes (Brigevich & Oritsejafor, 2022). This has been observed in the distribution of federal projects, and political appointments where regions that are home to influential politicians often receive more government investments, projects and appointments (Chiamogu & Chiamogu, 2019).

Evidently, President Muhammadu Buhari embarked on a tide of nepotism and Favoritism with respect to political and bureaucratic appointments (Nwoko, et al. 2022), while his successor Bola Ahmed Bola Tinubu continued the elitism leadership by and for a select few. This draconian system although common in many African states is the major reason for the widespread collapse of many African states including Nigeria (Okeke, 2020). Key features of personalized politics include Machiavellianism, nepotism, cronyism, sadism, and fatalism and failure to uphold the federal character principles in a multi-lingual, regional, tribal and religious society like Nigeria makes mockery of creation of federal system in the country (Onyia, 2020).

Political fragmentation and instability within the government and political parties at the state and national level has become a recurring event that enables the normalization of personalized politics in Nigeria (Jatula, 2019; Omojowo et al., 2024). Political loyalty in Nigeria often centers on individuals rather than party ideologies and this has led to frequent defections and factionalism within major parties. For instance, defection of influential figures such as present senate president Godswill Akpabio and former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, who has switched parties' multiple times, from People's Democratic Party (PDP) to the All-Progressives Congress (APC) exemplifies this trend. These back-and-forth defections often occur when powerful political figures are challenged or removed from power. To maintain their grip on power, they stir up ethnic sentiment leading to personalized politics.

Similarly, effective governance and public service delivery is significantly undermined as leaders prioritize personal or regional interests over national development. Equally, leaders engage in patronage, using public resources to reward loyalists thereby leading to corruption and inefficiency. For example, the administration of former President Muhammadu Buhari and currently Bola Ahmed Bola Tinubu's government are faced with elaborate corruption scandals, attributed to personalized political networks and patronage systems (Bolarinwa, & Osuji, 2022).

In addition, consistent policy implementation is significantly hindered with normalization of personalized politics. This is evident in the reverse or abandonment of policies and projects initiated by past administrations thereby disrupting development efforts. This is often promoted by regional loyalties that prioritize their region rather than national

unity thereby weakening the sense of a collective national identity. The prominence of regional groups like the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) in the North, Ohanaeze Ndigbo in the Southeast, and Afenifere in the Southwest illustrates how regional loyalties can overshadow national cohesion (Obiorah, & Okoye, 2020).

Consequently, the focus on regional interests has fueled secessionist movements. This is rightly so because the resurgence of groups like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) reflects discontent with perceived marginalization and uneven development, exacerbated by personalized regional politics (Henry, Obiora & David, 2020). Similarly, post-election violence following the 2011 presidential election and 2023 election result protest in Nigeria was partly fueled by the perception that the election was manipulated by powerful individuals from certain region of the country (Omotola, & Oyewole, 2023). Notably, the failure of the electoral body to adhere to its provisions regarding candidates' criminal records further hamper national integration in Nigeria (Idowu, 2022). Personalized politics poses significant challenges to national integration by reinforcing regional loyalties and weakening national identity and hence the third research question is "How does personalized politics impact regional and nationalization in Nigeria"?

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study deploys a qualitative research approach to understand influence of personalized politics voter behavior in Nigeria. The quantitative approach helps understand voters' experiences and voting behaviors with respect to their satisfaction with democracy and the sociopolitical situation in the country. Consequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from participants. This method allowed the researcher to gather subjective information on how personalized politics influence voting behavior and choices as well as their perception of political actors, institutions and the present political climate in the country. According to Roberts (2020) interview guide helped participants provide accurate information on the discussed issues. Although interview questions for this study were semi-structured, probes were also used to gain deeper understanding of participants' views. The interview protocol was designed to align with the study's objectives and the theoretical perspective of patron-client theory.

Sample/Participants

Using a semi-directive interview technique, interviews were conducted with couples, including intertribal couples residing in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. The main participants in the study were married couples married more than five years. This method combined structured elements of predefined questions with the flexibility to explore the couples' unique political perspectives and interactions in depth, particularly regarding personalized politics and their voting habits. The adoption of couple interviews aimed to gather rich and dynamic data, as the interaction between the two participants and reveal more about their shared experiences, perspectives, relationship dynamics, and nationalization. Uyo, the capital of Akwa Ibom State, was chosen as the study location due to its ethnic and cultural diversity. The presence and integration of multiple ethnic groups within Uyo make it a suitable location for this study. Participants in the study represent a diverse range of ethnic groups, including both majority and minority groups within the state of Akwa Ibom and the nation Nigeria as a whole. Participants were purposively selected and appropriately identified through brief interactions with the researcher and referrals from study participants. All participants were registered voters residing in Uyo, aged between 29 and 80 years old, and married for a minimum of 5 to maximum of 50 years. Couples number 1 to 8 were couples married from the same ethnic group and given the acronyms SEGC (Same Ethnic Group Couples) and couples from different ethnic/tribal group are given the acronyms IEGC (Inter-Ethnic Group Couples).

Table 1 Participant demographic information

| Group 1 Same Ethnic/Tribal Group Couples | | | | | | | | |
|--|-----|---------|--------------------|---------------|------------------|--------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| Participant ID | Age | Gender | Level of Education | Employment | Marital Duration | Ethnic Group | Residential Area in Uyo | Voting Status |
| Couple 1 | 40 | Husband | Bachelor's | Teacher | 10 years | Ibibio | Ikot Ekpene Road Uyo | Registered Voter |
| | 38 | Wife | Master's | Nurse | | | | |
| Couple 2 | 45 | Husband | High School | Trader | 15 years | Ibibio | Oron Road Uyo | Registered Voter |
| | 40 | Wife | Bachelor's | Banker | | | | |
| Couple 3 | 50 | Husband | Bachelor's | Civil Servant | 20 years | Annang | Abak Road Uyo | Registered Voter |
| | 48 | Wife | High School | Trader | | | | |
| Couple 4 | 29 | Husband | Bachelor's | Pharmacist | 5 years | Oron/Eket | Nwaniba Road Uyo | Registered Voter |
| | 30 | Wife | Bachelor's | Engineer | | | | |
| Couple 5 | 37 | Husband | High School | Driver | 5 years | | Barracks Road Uyo | Registered Voter |
| | 32 | Wife | High School | Tailor | | | | |
| Couple 6 | 65 | Husband | Bachelor's | Lawyer | 30 years | Ibibio | Ewet Housing Estate Uyo | Registered Voter |
| | 60 | Wife | Bachelor's | Teacher | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----------|----|---------|---------------|------------------------|----------|--------|-------------------|------------------|
| Couple 7 | 55 | Husband | MBA | Banker | 22 years | Annang | Udo Udoma Avenue | Registered Voter |
| | 44 | Wife | Bachelor's | Business Owner | | | Itam Junction | |
| Couple 8 | 80 | Husband | M.Sc. Nursing | Retired Police Officer | 50 years | Oron | Atan Offot Street | Registered Voter |
| | 78 | Female | Bachelor's | Seamstress | | | | |

Group 2 Inter-Ethnic/Tribal Couples

| Participant ID | Age | Gender | Level of Education | Employment | Marital Duration | Ethnic Group | Residential Area in Uyo | Voting status |
|----------------|-----|---------|--------------------|------------------|------------------|---------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| Couple 9 | 45 | Husband | High School | Trader | 15 years | Igbo/Idoma | Itam Junction | |
| | 40 | Wife | High School | Market Vendor | | | | |
| Couple 10 | 46 | Husband | PhD | Lecturer | 6 years | Yoruba/Ibibio | Abak Road Uto | Registered Voter |
| | 40 | Wife | M.Sc. | Civil Servant | | | | |
| Couple 11 | 44 | Husband | PhD | Consultant | | Ibibio/Igbo | Shelter Afrique Estate | Registered Voter |
| | 47 | Wife | PhD | Lecturer | 8 years | | | |
| Couple 12 | 48 | Husband | HND | Police Officer | 12 years | Hausa/Yoruba | Afaha Road Uyo | Registered Voter |
| | 43 | Wife | Bachelor's | Cashier | | | | |
| Couple 13 | 33 | Husband | M. Sc | Architect | 5 years | Ibibio/Yoruba | Aka Road | Registered Voter |
| | 30 | Wife | Bachelors | Fashion Designer | | | | |
| Couple 14 | 48 | Husband | Bachelor's | Military | 20 years | Igala/Edo | Asutan Street | Registered Voter |
| | 42 | Wife | Bachelor's | Trader | | | | |
| Couple 15 | 44 | Husband | Bachelor's | Pastor | 16 years | Edo/Yoruba | Itiam Eto" | Registered Voter |
| | 38 | Wife | Diploma | Tailor | | | | |
| Couple 16 | 32 | Husband | High School | Artisan | 7 years | Ibibio/Ijew | Osongama Estate | Registered Voter |
| | 31 | Wife | Bachelor's | Business Owner | | | | |
| Couple 17 | 50 | Husband | Bachelor's | Civil Servant | 18 years | Annang/Igbo | Shelter Afrique Estate | Registered Voter |
| | 51 | Wife | Bachelor's | Nurse | | | | |
| Couple 18 | 46 | Husband | High School | Driver | 14 years | Agbor/Ibibio | Ikot Ekpene Road | Registered Voter |
| | 40 | Wife | Bachelor's | Teacher | | | | |
| Couple 19 | 66 | Husband | M. Sc | Banker | 8 years | Oron/Igbo | Edet Akpan Avenue | Registered Voter |
| | 50 | Wife | Bachelor's | Business Owner | | | | |
| Couple 20 | 34 | Husband | Bachelor's | Engineer | 5 years | Yoruba/Oron | Mbiabong Housing Estate | Registered Voter |
| | 30 | Wife | | Teacher | | | | |

Interview Procedures

Interview guide helped in directing the interview process in a consistent manner to ensure emergence of relevant data. Interview guide ensured that informants stay within the confines of the subject and not stray off the context of discussion (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Interview questions were pilot tested by five couples to verify questions and maintain vocabulary uniformity in both the piloting phase and the main study. Interviews with participants in the study were conducted in participants chosen location and spots over a month period. Döringer (2021) describes individuals within a group who possess significant knowledge and experience related to the study phenomena as experts. Therefore, couples who are registered and active voters possess expert insights into the normalization of personalized politics in Nigeria, as well as its impact on voter behavior, regional dynamics, and national cohesion. A total of 20 couples participated in the study of eight inter-tribal and non-inter-tribal couples. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes with participants and were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim into a Word document. Participants voluntarily consented to take part in the study by completing and signing a consent form before the interviews (O'Sullivan et al., 2021).

Transcription and Coding

Before coding, transcribed audio interviews were sent to participants for member checking to ensure their views and opinions were accurately captured. The transcripts were then transferred to Atlas.ti 8 for coding and analysis. Verbatim transcription was crucial to capture word imitation and non-verbal aspects of the interaction. Involuntary verbal responses and non-verbal communication added context and clarity, reflecting key informants' intended statements. Thus, including expressions such as "ok," "ah," "mmh," "yeah," "um," "hmm," "uh," hesitations, speech cut-offs, interruptions, giggling, laughter, pauses, and emphasis was essential to convey the respondents' true meaning (Hill et al., 2022). Equally, participants' mannerisms and non-verbal cues during the interview were also observed and noted as this was an essential data source not captured in the audio, especially regarding informants' perception of personalized politics and nationalism before and after marriage. Participants' mannerisms also added depth to the findings of the study. Consequently, transcribed discussions were imported into Atlas.ti 8 software for coding and analysis.

Open coding was implemented through line-by-line assessment of word, sentences and paragraphs to identify their perception on normalization of personalized politics, it influences voter behaviors and its impact on regional and nationalization. Specific words and phrases describing participant's views were assigned salient descriptions as codes. Codes were descriptions of participant's statements and not merely interpretations of respondent's views and were formed from phrases and terms used by participants in the interview.

The first phase of coding involved reading each line and assigning phrases that best described the data. Six codes were assigned for research question one, ten for question two, and six for question three. The second phase involved merging codes and related phrases into categories by grouping similar codes together to avoid repeating or duplicating codes. For example, respondents explained that tribal, ethnic, and religious sentiments contribute to feelings of marginalization among certain groups in Nigeria.

These codes were grouped into one category because they shared similar meanings. Grouping similar and different codes into categories was geared at ensuring that codes and themes do not overlap. This process helped us identify the main themes that emerged from the data. Subsequently, themes were analyzed based on subjective interpretation of the data in line with constructivist views (William, 2024). Hence, thematic analysis of extracts from the data enabled in-depth understanding of respondents' experiences, especially how personalized politics influences their voting decisions and party preferences as the study's findings.

FINDINGS

The first research question explored why is personalized politics normalized in Nigeria? Two main themes emerged from the analysis of the data namely Weak Institutions and Corruption respectively. The obvious reason why personalized politics has been normalized in Nigeria is basically down to poor functioning of institutions to uphold laws and order. As such, participants in the study pointed out that failure of leaders particularly political office holders to act according to the tenets of the constitution and the inability of state agencies like the court system and the police to hold them accountable has led to impunity in the country. Thus, this has resulted in individual-centered politics.

Weak Institutions

All 20 participants in the study agreed that weak institutions lead to individual-centered politics by failing to provide equitable governance and accountability. This influences voter behavior as citizens increasingly rely on personal identities and affiliations to vote.

According to participant **SEGC#1**

Husband: *“Blame it on lack of strong institutions and of course the personal will of our leaders to do right and because there is no body to hold them accountable and so the system allows them to do what they like, like run for office as many times as they want and enriched themselves with money and coerce people to support their personal ambition”.*

Wife...Ahh.... *“When there is no control, the next step is to personalize everything, and this is now the norm in Nigerian politics”.*

This notion is equally supported by Inter-Ethnic/Tribal Couples as reflected in the opinion of **IEGC#10:**

Husband: *“failure in upholding justice and enforcing laws without prejudice has resulted in bad governance and this is why voters like myself rely on tribal and ethnic affiliations to gain access to resources and political power which is why I vote for someone that looks like me and it does affect the voting pattern in this country”.*

Wife: *“Identity centered politics is our colonial legacy what we inherited from our colonial master. The British created divisions among ethnic groups in this country because if you look into the history of this country, ethnic identity is tied to power and resource control and distribution and this has become part of our political culture. And so, when an ethnic group is constantly marginalized, the only way out is to form alliance and identity politics is born. This is exactly what has been going on especially the last two elections, where voters chose their kinsmen and affiliates over accountability”.*

Corruption

The next imperative theme with respect to why personalized politics is normalized in Nigeria is corruption. All 20 participants in the study alluded to corruption as the main reason why personalized politics is normalized in the country. According to participant **SEGC#6**:

Husband: *“Today in Nigeria to get anything done even as little as queuing to buy a bus ticket or get what is rightly yours like pension or arrears of your salary you have to bribe the payroll officer to get it...Ahhh...except you have your kinsmen in those places you cannot escape bribing to get your dues and there is nothing you can do about it, and so the rich bribe their way through while the common man is left without a voice in Nigeria today”.*

Wife... *“I agree with my husband, and you see currently whether you vote or not your opinion and vote does not count and so, people have learnt how to look after themselves if they must survive because identity politics has taken over and I have to confess that Nigerian voters today will only vote someone from their region because that is who they identify with”.*

Also, **IEGC#17** and inter-ethnic couple state thus:

Husband: *“Today in this country, corrupt and convicted politicians are glorified and hailed as heroes because our system is unable to deal with them appropriately especially the court and the police. Imagine paying the police to make report without which they will not attend to you or record your report or investigate your report.... frown face}...It has come to that point where you have to pay for justice”.*

Wife: *“Currently, resources distribution is based on personal connections, ethnicity, and political ties and this is forcing people to rely on tribal, ethnic and religious networks to access resources and so voters and politicians align only with those who can provide them with the most material benefits”.*

Money Politics

The second research questions explored how personalized politics impact voter behavior in Nigeria? Findings from the analysis of the data revealed two dominant themes namely money politics and godfatherism. All 20 participants in the study stated that money politics and by extension vote buying has become a common tactic used by politicians during elections in Nigeria. Voters are given cash, food, or other goods in exchange for their votes and a great number of Nigerian voters are inclined to accepting and selling their votes. This is because there is no mechanism in place that holds politicians accountable for electoral offence or bad governance. As such voters sell their votes because they see it as the only opportunity to get something back from the government. Money politics encompass activities where money is used to influence political processes. This includes vote buying by way of directly inducing voter with money, funding political campaigns, lobbying and intimidation. According to **SEGC#5**:

Wife: *“Times are hard, and it is very difficult and very hard to refuse the little money and gifts candidates distribute during campaign because that is all you will ever see from them because as soon as the election is over and they are elected that is it, you won't see or hear from them again and to make it worst whether you vote or not they will still be elected and if you don't collect the cash and gift someone else will collect it so just take what you can because you may not see that gift or money again even though it is small cash”.*

Husband: *“I think it is something that we voters expect now because campaign time is the only time you can receive anything from a politician before they are elected. Right now, a candidate without financial resources cannot run for office in this country even if he has good intention and skills because he will not be able to compete against wealthier opponents who can afford extensive campaigns, cash and gifts to voters”.*

Similarly, participants from the inter-ethnic marriage also affirm the notion that money politics propels personalized politics which in turn impact voter behavior in Nigeria. According to **IEGC#15**:

Husband: *“Our system makes voters prioritize money and leaders who offer personal and material benefits over morals and good governance. Today Nigerian voters and politicians use money and sentiments to entice voters because governance is monetized at the expense of basic services and needs like food water, electricity, and security.*

Wife: *“Gone are the days when it was common to see our elected representative like scheduling appointments, meetings and town hall talks and hold them accountable. It is not the same anymore as soon as election is over everything ends; you can't see them again till the next election and because they spend a lot of money campaigning and buying votes, they end up recouping money spent while in office and so politics has become a business only for the rich.*

Godfatherism

Another significant theme regarding how personalized politics impact voters is Godfatherism. This can also be described as a patronage system where godfathers or patrons provide financial support, resources, and opportunities for their protégés (godsons) in exchange for loyalty and support. Participants in the study stated that Godfathers exert significant control and influence on political processes, decisions, and individuals to sway elections their way, secure political

appointments, and maintain a network of loyal followers. This practice has become prevalent in Nigerian politics, where godfathers use their power and resources to choose and anoint candidates for public office. Failure to identify and cooperate with a political godfather often results in losing elections, positions or political careers. According to **SEGC#7**:

Husband: *“Today you cannot get party nomination or successfully campaign and run for public office without the approval and blessings of Godfather. I cannot remember the last time we had someone fresh run for governor in this state. All governors apart from the first governor after civil rule came back in 1999 were anointed and selected by the incumbent and that is the status quo in Nigerian politics”*

Wife: *Within the party only the leader like the chairman of the party and his trusted men make decisions, you may be a member of the executive committee of the party, but if you don't align with the choice of the chairman you are out, like who made the decision to have a Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket in Nigeria? Who did they consult? ... of course, the godfathers and you have them in every state.*

Similarly, inter-ethnic couples also affirmed the influence of godfathers and elites in leading voters to support candidates they anoint or chose. The action and activities of political godfathers influence voters and shapes electoral outcomes. Nigerian voters often succumb to elites' politics not because they trust their political acumen or resources they command, rather they succumb to godfatherism and elitism to avoid retribution According to **IEGC#19**:

Husband: *“When one person has control over selection of delegates and candidates, voters like us have no choice, and Nigeria is gradually turning into a one-party state. If you are not anointed or chosen by the godfather, you cannot run for office and opposition party are either suppressed or intimidated with violence and extralegal means. In places they cannot buy voters they turn to rigging and if it does not work, they use the courts to overturn results imagine someone who was never nominated by the party and did not contest for the position in the election but suddenly is declared the winner by the court.... [Teeth grinding]*

Wife: *“It is loyalty over competence, like in some areas where they are losing elections they switch to manual ballot counting, while in some places they use machine so... inconsistency and lack of independence of the national election commission gives godfathers the chance to use their influence to rig elections and manipulate results to favor their protégés and this is leading cause of unending corruption and ineffective governance we are facing in this country because the systems sideline merit, fair competition and public welfare while prioritizing the interests of influential figures instead”.*

In Nigerian distribution of cash, material gifts, food stuff and phone card to voters to induce them vote impacts voter's choice. Thus, godfathers epitomize personalized politics in that influential individuals use their positions to manipulate and impose candidate on voters who are left with no choice. This practice has become very visible and common in the Nigerian political scene particularly the last two general elections.

Marginalization

The third research question explores how personalized politics impact regional and nationalization in Nigeria? Two main themes namely marginalization and nepotism emerged from the analysis of the data. All the respondents in the study opined that marginalization induce regional politics which in turn hinders nationalization efforts and promotes personalized politics in Nigeria. Participants argued that agitation for inclusion in national politics, economic and political exclusions, religious and cultural divides in the country is the core reason behind regional disintegration and poor spirit of nationalism in Nigeria. As such, the feeling of exclusion from National politics hinders nationalization as marginalized groups prioritize regional interests and personalized political agendas over national unity. Evidently, lack of equitable resource distribution and genuine efforts on the part of politicians to bridge ethnic and regional divides prompt voters to focus on individual-centered politics to secure their immediate interests and identify with representatives they feel directly addresses their specific needs and concerns. Hence the feeling of marginalization stems from a lack of trust in system and belief that personalized politics will yield more tangible benefits According to **SEGC#3**:

Husband: *“We have a constitution, and we operate a federal system with federal character across geopolitical zones and state constituencies, but we still have imbalance in political appointment rather appointments are ethnic and religious based and use to reward loyalist and affiliates. Even locally, I mean like in the state level within the state we still have marginalized people and inequality like in the composition of the state civil service where certain ethnic groups are employed more, appointed as commissioners, directors and leaders of government ministries, board and parastatals. There is no respect for due process anymore, no regards for party constitution or respect for revenue and resource sharing formula as entranced in the constitution and key stakeholders like traditional rulers, party leaders, and community leaders are not consulted anymore to ensure broad base support for appointments. So, when one person is in charge of everything, it encourages dominance and it becomes hard to achieve unity in a country as polarized as Nigeria”.*

Wife: *We all know the Nigeria we live in today is very divided because we come from different culture, religion, and ethnic groups and the demographic arrangement of Nigeria is such that we have a concentration of Muslim in the north*

and the Christian in the south and from early age we are though and told things like religion and so our politicians take advantage of this during elections because most people prefer to vote for candidates from their own faith and region regardless if they're qualified or competent and the deep sense of sentiment is why we face disunity in this country and mistrust for each other”.

Also, **IEGC#14** also stated thus:

Husband: “Fight between herdsmen and farmers will never end, but the current clashes between Muslim Fulani herdsmen from the north and farmers in the Middle Belt and Southern regions of the country have worsened regional and religious tensions in the country. When farmers crops, houses, lives and means of survival is destroyed by grazing herds it is normal and nothing happens, but when farmers defend themselves against herders it becomes a national issue. Even in our own land we don't feel safe and when the government is constantly unable to solve ethnic and religious tension like this, regional resistance will arise and if you add religious and cultural divides like this without solution or at least prevention national unity cannot be achieved”

Wife: “When the same set of people control power for a very long-time unity cannot be achieved. Remember the October 2020 End-SARS youth protesting police brutality and instead of protecting lives, the army killed more innocent youth protesting and till today no one has been persecuted. So you tell me how they can be unity when the voice of the masses is not heard, no accountability and youths are not involved in the grand scheme of things in the country. Okey considers this how many youths are elected members of the Nigerian national assembly? I bet you none so where is the future if the youths are not involved in governance?”

Nepotism

The next theme on how personalize politics impact regional and nationalization in Nigeria was nepotism. Respondents in the study stated that Nepotism induces regional politics, fosters a sense of exclusion among regions, and hinders nationalization efforts as well as promoting personalized politics in the country. Particularly, exclusion of some regions in the governance in terms of appointment and award of developmental contracts prompts the marginalized groups to prioritize regional interests and personalized political agendas over national unity. As such, lack of adherence to equitable policies, transparency in appointments, and efforts to bridge regional divides hinders nationalization efforts in Nigeria. According **SEGC#4**

Husband: “Appointing relatives and friends to positions commissioners' directors and board members is a common practice now and as an indigene of Oron Nation, we are underrepresented and left out in key government positions despite being one of the major ethnic groups in this state and even the very few appointments and positions we have been through personal connections and they pelage loyalty to the governor over the people”

Wife: “Any where there is favoritism unity is absent. Now let's talk about appointing your own daughter to head anti-corruption commission or appointing your own brother as the deputy governor of the state or concentrating political power within a single family to build a political dynasty or appointing people from your region, constituency or ethnic group into positions they are not qualified just so that you maintain a strong grip on power is personalizing governance and it will surely bring division as what we have right now in this state”.

Similarly, **IEGC#11** and inter ethnic group couple also stated thus below:

Husband: “I think the federal character clause in our constitution was to ensure equal representation of different regions in government appointment and developmental projects, but that is not the case. Currently all the top officers and position of security agencies in this country is held by people from the North and the irony is that north is still ridden with army bandits and Islamic terrorist like Boko Haram but we have more security forces like the army in the South which is relatively peaceful than the North and off course with this type of bias, lack of trust in the national security regional resentment is inevitable which is why regional loyalty is preferred over nationalism”

Wife: “Personalism and democracy cannot worth together because Personalism give leaders power and control and deepen divides and makes national unity impossible”

DISCUSSION

The study explores normalization of personalized politics in Nigeria and its influence on voter behavior in view of the recent general elections in the country. As to why personalized politics is normalized in Nigeria. The finding identified corruption and institutional weaknesses as primary factors contributing to its entrenched presence in the Nigerian political landscape. Additionally, the influence of money politics and godfatherism emerged as significant in shaping and impacting voter behavior. Participants in the study highlighted that political godfathers wield substantial influence, often supplanting the electoral process by selecting candidates and leveraging financial resources to sway voters. Their influence is so overwhelming in that they also control the courts to interpret laws in their favor including electoral tribunals. Furthermore, personalized politics fosters regionalism and undermines national cohesion through practices such as marginalization and nepotism. Accordingly Yahaya and Abba (2021) found that godfatherism has negatively impacted

on the socio-economic and political structure and development of Nigeria by confining power in the hands of the few elites at the expense of the masses (electorates). Participants in the study also observed that political appointments are driven by favoritism, religious affiliations, and ethnic considerations and this perpetuates regional disparities by prioritizing regional interests over national unity. Notably, participating husbands in the study perceive prejudice more than the women (wives) and couples from minority ethnic groups also perceive marginalization compared to those from majority groups. Also regional sentiment and agitation for secession is very strong among participants from the south east region of the country. Consequently, the prevalence of personalized politics in Nigeria reflects a broader challenge to national integration and effective governance.

Implication of the Study

The practical implication of this study underscores the urgent need for institutional reforms in Nigeria's political landscape. As such strengthening anti-corruption agencies and measures to enhance institutional capabilities for law enforcement is crucial to mitigate the normalization of personalized politics. This is because the trend of vote buying and voters intimidation intensifies during elections and mainly deployed by politicians to secure support and votes. Although most voters do not necessarily vote politicians who indulge them with money, rather voters are inclined to accepting money before voting because that is all they will ever receive or get from governance. This practice undermines democracy and promotes corruption as well as fostering a transactional political culture where loyalty is bought rather than earned through performance or policies. As such, addressing money politics and godfatherism through legal and regulatory frameworks can help restore voter trust and foster a more transparent electoral process. Nwagwu et al. (2022) found that vote-buying cripples electoral processes and undermines the efforts of electoral umpire to conduct free and fair elections.

Theoretically, on the premise of Patron-Client Theory political relationships based on patronage enables personalized politics. Thus, how patron's political leaders (political godfathers) in Nigerian exchange resources and obtain loyalty and support from clients (voters), reinforcing a cycle of dependency and skewed power dynamics. As such, voters are unable to freely choose because godfathers dominate the political scene and appoint their sons and affiliates to run for office without the consent or consultation with constituents. While political godfatherism has become prevalent in the Nigerian political landscape as wealthy, powerful and influential individuals are increasingly selecting candidates and controlling political office holders and dictating political decisions using their resources and networks to ensure their protégés win elections. This practice eliminates opposition and stiffens genuine political competition and reforms. Scholars such as Igbini & Okolie (2020) noted that political godfathers in present-day Nigeria operate like mafias displaying violent scheming and aggressive politicking and using any means necessary to achieve their ends. Thus, from a patron-client standpoint, the study reveals that personalized politics in Nigeria sustains itself through patron-client relationships which influence voter behavior and hindering national unity efforts. While the prevalence of godfathers cut across almost all spheres of the Nigerian society. However, in the political landscape of Nigeria godfatherism ushers in a person centered political culture which hinders the development of a merit-based political system and leaves a legacy of bad governance. Hence, there is need to address these dynamics through structural reforms to pave way for a more inclusive and accountable political system in the country.

Limitations

Participation in the study was limited to mainly registered and active voters' resident in Uyo the Akwa Ibom State capital. The choice of Uyo as the location of study was due to its metropolitan nature and availability of participants from all regions of the country. Findings from the study add to the body of knowledge and x-rays voter's behavior and political participation in a polarized society like Nigeria. The practicality of patron-client relationship in a political context cannot be generalized because of cultural and contextual peculiarities. Wherefore, Lawal et al., (2024) noted that socioeconomic factors like poverty and unemployment along with distrust in politics and flawed election systems greatly influence vote trading in Nigeria. As a result of this, in societies like Nigeria where voter suppression and intimidation is very common and patron-client political relationship deprives voters the opportunity to choose a candidate of their choice as well as participate in a free and fair election. It reinforces nepotism, corruption and leads to inefficiencies and inequality as well as perpetuates dependency on powerful individuals (godfathers) rather than institutional governance. In comparison to developed societies patron-client political relationship offers stability and predictability in governance and policy-making as well as promotes transparency and accountability in public administration (Kungu, 2020). Consequently, given that the study deployed an inductive qualitative approach and as such findings of the study cannot be generalized to broader population due to the number of participants involved in the study. Further study can be expanded to cover a large pool of participants across the Nigerian federation in order to have a general view of the personalized politics and its impact on voters' behavior in Nigeria. Currently there is no effective mechanism or law in place that allows recall elections in Nigeria.

Oraegbunam & Onah (2023) noted that voters can remove legislators from office for misconduct or failure to meet expected outcomes. Despite the 1999 Constitution allowing for recall, Nigeria has never successfully recalled a legislator. This raises doubts about whether the constitution effectively protects voters' power to recall incompetent legislators. Consequently, Nigerian politicians often feel immune to removal by voters, as they align with elites and godfathers who manipulate the system in their favor.

CONCLUSION

The study explores normalization of personalized politics and its impact on voters' behavior in Nigeria. The study reveals that corruption and weak institutions that fail to enforce and uphold the laws are primary reasons personalized politics dominates the Nigerian political landscape. The influence of money politics and godfatherism further entrenches personalized politics, leading voters to make decisions based on ethnic, religious, and regional affiliations. Evidently, political, ethnic, and regional marginalization manifest in various forms in Nigeria. Key political and military appointments often favor certain regions over others, despite their industrial and economic contributions. Uneven development policies exacerbate this issue. Religious and cultural divides, such as the conflicts between Muslim herdsmen and Christian farmers in the Middle Belt and Southern regions of the country further deepen these divisions. Secession and regional agitations, exemplified by the rise of IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra) and other separatist groups, highlight these tensions. Economic marginalization, particularly in the Niger Delta region, has led to the rise of militancy as a response to perceived injustices. These factors have fueled regional politics that prioritize local over national interests, enabling local leaders to exploit these sentiments for personalized political agendas.

Consequently, marginalization and nepotism are inherent in personalized politics, and it prioritizes regional unity over national unity. Although the Patron-Client Theory suggests that politicians should deliver the dividends of democracy to their constituents in exchange for political support. However, this theory falls short in Nigeria, where godfatherism a mafia like political system prevails. The deviation from the traditional Patron-Client setup explains why personalized politics has become normalized in Nigeria. Consequently, the Nigerian political landscape in recent time is marked by voter manipulation and a lack of genuine democratic representation which poses significant challenges to the country's unity and democratic development.

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