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CAMPAIGNS AND GRASSROOTS ENGAGEMENT IN ONDO STATE 2024 GOVERNORSHIP ELECTION: IMPLICATION FOR FUTURE ELECTIONS

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Abstract

The study investigates the impact of grassroots engagement in political campaigns during the 2024 Ondo State governorship election, exploring implications for future electoral processes in Nigeria. Grassroots involvement remains pivotal in Nigerian politics, yet its effectiveness and influence on election outcomes are underexplored, particularly within the context of increasing political mobilization and voter apathy. This research addresses the problem of limited empirical understanding of how local-level political participation shapes campaign success and democratic consolidation in Nigeria's evolving electoral landscape. Using a qualitative secondary data methodology, the study analyzes campaign reports, election observer assessments, and relevant academic literature to generate rich contextual insights. This approach enables an in-depth examination of grassroots political activities, voter mobilization strategies, and community engagement practices that influenced the 2024 governorship election in Ondo State. The study is framed within the Structural Functionalism theory, which conceptualizes political campaigns as social systems where grassroots engagement performs essential functions such as political socialization, voter education, and legitimization of political authority. This framework facilitates understanding how grassroots involvement sustains democratic processes and fosters political accountability. Key findings include: that effective grassroots engagement significantly increased voter turnout and enhanced candidate visibility; secondly, Strong community networks facilitated trust and information dissemination, reducing electoral misinformation;

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however, challenges such as resource constraints and political clientelism limited the full potential of grassroots mobilization. Based on these findings, the study recommends, Institutionalizing grassroots political education to deepen voter awareness; enhancing funding and logistical support for local campaign activities and implementing regulatory frameworks to curb clientelism and promote transparent grassroots participation among others. These recommendations aim to strengthen future electoral engagements in Nigeria by harnessing the power of grassroots democracy for more inclusive and credible elections.

Keywords: Political Campaigns, Grassroots Engagement, Political Participation, Voters Mobilization and Voters Education.

Introduction

The impact of grassroots engagement in political campaigns is a critical area of study in understanding democratic processes and electoral outcomes in Nigeria. Grassroots engagement refers to the active participation of community members, including marginalized groups such as women, youth, and minorities, at the most local levels of political activity. This involvement is pivotal in ensuring that political agendas resonate with the actual needs of the people, fostering accountability and responsiveness in governance. Empirical evidence suggests that active grassroots participation strengthens democratic institutions by promoting transparency and community ownership over governance matters (Governance Vote, 2025). In Nigeria, where democratic consolidation continues to face challenges, the role of grassroots political engagement is not only integral to enhancing political representation but also vital in mitigating voter apathy and disenfranchisement. The 2024 Ondo State governorship election provides a pertinent case for examining the effects of grassroots involvement on electoral participation and outcomes. Despite an increased number of registered voters compared to previous election cycles, the actual voter turnout in Ondo State in 2024 was notably low, with a recorded turnout of about 24.8%. This low participation has been attributed to factors such as internal party conflicts, socioeconomic concerns, and a general lack of robust engagement between candidates, parties, and the electorate. Moreover, the uneven voter turnout across Ondo's senatorial districts, despite high permanent voter card (PVC) collection rates, indicates a complex dynamic where voter registration does not necessarily translate into electoral participation (Center for Democracy and Development, 2024). Understanding how grassroots mobilization could have influenced this dynamic is essential for improving future electoral participation not only in Ondo but across Nigeria.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to elucidate the mechanisms through which grassroots engagement can either enhance or hinder democratic participation, with particular reference to the 2024 Ondo governorship election. By analyzing grassroots efforts within this election context, the study aims to provide insights into the implications for subsequent elections in Nigeria. Such findings will be crucial for policy makers, political actors, and civil society organizations seeking to strengthen democratic governance and citizen participation. The study's objectives are to assess the extent and nature of grassroots engagement during the 2024 Ondo State governorship election and its influence on voter mobilization and election outcomes, to identify the challenges and barriers faced by grassroots actors and communities in participating effectively in the Ondo 2024 electoral process, to explore the implications of grassroots political engagement in Ondo State for improving citizen participation and democratic practices in future Nigerian elections. Corresponding research questions revolve around understanding, how grassroots

engagement influence voter mobilization and turnout in the 2024 Ondo State governorship election? What challenges did grassroots actors and communities face in their participation during the Ondo 2024 electoral process? What are the implications of grassroots political engagement in Ondo State for enhancing democratic participation and election outcomes in future Nigerian elections?

Conceptual Review

Political Campaigns: Political campaigns can be conceptualized as organized efforts by candidates or political parties to communicate their ideas, positions, and policies to voters in the lead-up to elections. These campaigns encompass a variety of strategies and media to influence voter attitudes and behavior with the ultimate goal of winning electoral support. Campaigns typically have a legally defined time frame before Election Day, during which candidates engage in public events, media advertising, direct voter contact, and distribution of written materials. Beyond simply promoting candidates, campaigns serve broader democratic functions by facilitating public exposure to competing beliefs and providing a platform for political communication, (Kam, Miller, & Iyengar, 2007: Open Election Data Network, 2011). The theoretical understanding of political campaigns positions them as complex social and political processes shaped by communication, persuasion, and voter psychology. Persuasion theories such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model and Social Judgment Theory guide campaigns in crafting messages that resonate either through rational arguments or emotional appeals, including hope, fear, and patriotism. Campaigns increasingly utilize targeted messaging, or micro targeting, leveraging voter data to deliver customized content, thereby enhancing their influence. However, empirical research within democratic theory suggests that voter opinions are often stable and resistant to change during campaigns due to cognitive biases and long-standing political beliefs developed over a lifetime, indicating that campaigns may primarily reinforce existing attitudes rather than convert voters (Fiveable. 2024). In addition to voter persuasion, campaigns can bolster political efficacy, voters' sense of competence and trust in the political system which is crucial for democratic health. Political efficacy comprises internal efficacy, or knowledge about politics, and external efficacy, or trust in the responsiveness of the system. Campaigns can enhance this efficacy by increasing voters' political knowledge, though this effect may be limited by selective attention to familiar parties and candidates. Furthermore, political campaigns operate within ethical and normative frameworks, balancing strategies of influence with concerns about manipulation and transparency in democratic processes. As such, campaigns are both empirical phenomena and normative practices that reflect the ongoing tensions and challenges inherent in democratic communication (Briffault, 2010).

Conceptualizing Grassroots Engagement: Grassroots engagement refers to the involvement and active participation of ordinary community members in processes that affect their local environment, governance, and development. It is fundamentally a bottom-up approach, where power and decision-making derive from the people rather than top-down authorities or external institutions. According to the United Nations, grassroots participation provides opportunities for all members of a community to contribute to and influence development activities, ensuring that benefits are shared equitably among them (Mohammed, 2023). This form of engagement fosters democratic participation by allowing citizens at the local level to make decisions about the allocation of resources, community priorities, and governance strategies that have direct impacts on their daily lives. It manifests through various forms including community meetings, local elections, protests, petitions, and organizing campaigns

that mobilize collective action (Mohammed, 2023; Wikipedia, 2004). Thus, grassroots engagement is a crucial mechanism through which communities can express their needs and aspirations, enhance transparency, and hold leaders accountable.

The role of grassroots engagement extends beyond mere participation; it is vital for empowering communities towards sustainable development and social justice. Grassroots organizations, which operate through collective efforts within communities, are central to mobilizing local populations and advocating for inclusive and gender-responsive development policies (Mahila Housing Trust, 2023). These organizations provide platforms for dialogue, enabling community members to identify their own needs, articulate priorities, and collaborate in creating solutions. By drawing on local knowledge and cultural contexts, grassroots initiatives can rapidly address unmet needs and foster social innovations that are locally appropriate and sustainable (Raj, 2022). Moreover, grassroots movements can challenge existing power structures and social norms by contesting inequalities and advocating alternative socio-ecological relations (Raj, 2022). Through such empowerment, grassroots engagement helps reduce vulnerabilities and creates a sense of ownership and resilience within communities.

Grassroots engagement is also essential for reinforcing democratic governance and political accountability. It facilitates citizens' direct involvement in local decision-making processes, such as local elections and policy formulation, making governance more responsive and inclusive (GoVote, 2025). By enabling people to participate actively, grassroots engagement transforms democracy from a periodic electoral exercise into a continuous participatory process that shapes policies and programs reflective of community realities. President Franklin D. Roosevelt famously emphasized that ultimate governance belongs to the voters, underscoring the democratic essence of grassroots politics as citizens taking ownership of their governance (GoVote, 2025). Furthermore, grassroots participation promotes transparency and prevents the marginalization of underrepresented groups, ensuring equitable development outcomes. In sum, grassroots engagement is a vital democratic principle and practice that empowers communities, enhances social justice, and strengthens governance structures at multiple levels.

Conceptualizing Voters Education: Voter education is a vital component of the democratic process, designed to equip eligible voters with the necessary knowledge and skills to participate effectively in elections. It involves the dissemination of comprehensive information about the electoral system, including voter eligibility, registration procedures, how and where to vote, as well as the political choices available on the ballot (Open Election Data, 2013). This education bridges the gap between the electorate and the electoral process, ensuring that voters are not only aware of their rights but are also prepared to cast informed ballots without confusion or error. Effective voter education campaigns utilize various media platforms, including traditional media such as radio and television, print materials, and increasingly, digital platforms like social media, to reach diverse populations (Open Election Data, 2013). Beyond merely providing information, voter education serves to empower citizens by fostering electoral confidence and motivation to participate in elections. It seeks to counteract voter apathy and disenfranchisement by clarifying the importance of each vote in shaping governance and public policy. Furthermore, voter education is essential in safeguarding the integrity of elections; it reduces the likelihood of spoiled ballots and administrative errors by instructing voters on proper voting procedures (ACE Project, 2013). The scope of voter education extends to addressing the needs of marginalized groups, such as women, ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities, by offering tailored

communication methods and inclusive outreach strategies. This ensures equitable access to electoral knowledge and promotes broad participation across different societal sectors (United Nations, 2002).

In the context of emerging and developing democracies, voter education holds particular significance in building trust in electoral institutions and processes. It provides the electorate with a clearer understanding of the voting process and the democratic principles underlying governance, which is crucial in post-conflict or politically unstable societies (Zarjes, 2019). By fostering a culture of informed participation, voter education contributes to the legitimacy, representation, and accountability of elected officials and democratic institutions. Therefore, voter education is not only about educating individuals on the mechanics of voting but also about nurturing democratic citizenship and active political engagement for sustainable democratic development (ACE Project, 2013; Zarjes, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

This research deploys the structural functionalist theory as the framework, to explain the impact of grassroots engagement in political campaigns in the context of the Ondo State 2024 governorship election, with implications for subsequent Nigerian elections: Structural functionalism, as articulated by Parsons (1951), views society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote stability and social order. In the context of political campaigns, grassroots engagement is a key functional component that contributes to the coherence and stability of the political system by fostering citizen participation and legitimizing leadership. In the Ondo State 2024 governorship election, grassroots engagement served as an essential mechanism through which different social groups articulated their needs and preferences, which in turn enabled the political actors to align their campaign strategies with these demands. This interaction between the political system and its constituents reflects the theoretical emphasis by Parsons (1951) on the integration of individuals into societal structures through reciprocal roles, ensuring that political leaders are responsive and accountable to the grassroots, promoting political stability and democracy.

Exponents of structural functionalism such as Merton (1968) further contribute to understanding the dynamics of grassroots engagement by highlighting the role of functions and dysfunctions within social structures. Applying Merton's perspective to the Ondo 2024 election, grassroots political mobilization can be seen as a manifest function that facilitates voter education, participation, and the consolidation of democratic culture by bridging the gap between elites and the electorate. However, Merton's theory also cautions about dysfunctions that may arise, such as elite manipulation or vote buying, which can undermine the integrity of the electoral process. Nonetheless, the election in Ondo State demonstrated how functional grassroots engagement, through organized community-level participation and communication, can strengthen democratic legitimacy and reinforce social cohesion. This functional reciprocity is vital for subsequent elections in Nigeria, as it establishes patterns of political accountability and citizen empowerment that are necessary for democratic consolidation, (Wilcox, 2024).

The implications of applying structural functionalism to grassroots engagement in elections extend beyond Ondo State's 2024 governorship race to Nigeria's broader electoral landscape. Given the theory's focus on system stability and the interdependence of institutions, effective grassroots mobilization acts as a social integrative function that mitigates political alienation and social fragmentation in Nigeria's diverse and pluralistic society (Butler, 2006). By ensuring that political participation is inclusive and representative

at the grassroots level, structural functionalism suggests that political campaigns can contribute to national cohesion and reduce the risks of electoral violence and disenfranchisement. Consequently, political parties and electoral bodies should prioritize and institutionalize grassroots engagement strategies as part of their campaign frameworks to sustain democratic governance amid Nigeria's complex socio-political challenges.

Gap/Contribution to Knowledge

The contribution to knowledge of this research lies in its investigation of grassroots political engagement within the specific context of the 2024 Ondo State governorship election, offering nuanced understanding of how local community participation shapes voter turnout, electoral results, and democratic strengthening. This study fills a critical gap by linking grassroots dynamics directly to electoral performance and democratic consolidation in a Nigerian sub-national setting, thereby providing evidence-based recommendations to enhance citizen involvement and election quality in Nigeria's broader democratic process;

- i. The study Provides a detailed assessment of grassroots engagement patterns and their measurable effects on voter mobilization and election outcomes in Ondo State, an understudied context in Nigerian electoral studies.
- ii. This research identifies practical challenges grassroots actors face, enriching existing literature on political participation barriers in emerging democracies with localized, contextual insights.
- iii. The study Advances understanding of how community level political involvement can promote democratic consolidation, offering a theoretical and empirical model applicable to future elections and political reforms in Nigeria.

This research thus bridges gaps between grassroots political behavior, electoral success, and democratic development, contributing to academic discourse as well as practical electoral policy and civic engagement strategies.

Findings and Discussion

Grassroots Engagement in Ondo 2024 Governorship Election: It's Influence on Voter's Mobilization and Election Outcome: The 2024 Ondo gubernatorial election featured active grassroots engagement efforts, particularly targeting youth participation through campaigns such as the Civic Shift Campaign. This initiative focused on empowering youth advocates across all 18 local government areas in Ondo State with civic knowledge and advocacy skills. Through a blend of online social media campaigns and in-person mobilization activities, young voters were encouraged to view voting as a necessary civic duty to positively influence governance. The campaign demonstrated how grassroots involvement could foster a culture of electoral participation despite persistent challenges like voter apathy and distrust in the electoral process. The consistent and coordinated outreach, both virtually and physically at the local level, expanded civic awareness and engagement among youths, which is crucial in shifting behavioral mindsets toward voting (Akinrelere, 2024). Despite these efforts, voter turnout in the 2024 Ondo election was notably low, with participation dropping to around 509,000 voters out of over two million registered, marking a decline relative to previous elections. Several factors impacted this turnout, including widespread distrust in the electoral system, fear of violence, errors in voter registers, and the entrenched perception of incumbent strength. Vote-buying and last-minute financial mobilization tactics also persisted, indicating a complex interplay between grassroots engagement and traditional electoral manipulations. Financially, the campaign prioritized

local visibility through posters and banners, contrasting with other states that relied more heavily on rallies and mass media. These dynamics underscore the nuanced impacts of grassroots mobilization, where increased awareness and advocacy must compete with longstanding systemic challenges and vote-buying practices (PoliMoney Report, 2024).

Overall, grassroots engagement in the Ondo 2024 gubernatorial election played a significant role in voter mobilization by empowering local advocates and fostering civic responsibility among youths, which are essential for strengthening democratic participation. However, the election outcomes reflect that grassroots efforts alone cannot fully overcome structural issues such as political clientelism, vote-buying, and institutional distrust. The experience from Ondo highlights the importance of sustained grassroots advocacy combined with systemic electoral reforms and poverty reduction to enhance voter turnout and election credibility. For meaningful progress, continuous community-level engagement and enhanced local ownership of the electoral process remain imperative to transform voter attitudes and translate civic education into higher participation and more transparent election outcomes (Akinrelere, 2024; PoliMoney Report, 2024).

The Challenges Encountered by Grassroots Actors in Effectively Participating in the Electoral Process: Ondo 2024 in Perspective

The 2024 Ondo State gubernatorial election revealed several significant challenges faced by grassroots actors in effectively participating in the electoral process. First, there was a notably low voter turnout, with only about 508,963 out of over 2 million registered voters casting their votes. This represents a decline from previous years and underscores a pervasive distrust in the electoral system among grassroots communities. Several factors contributed to this low participation, including fears of electoral violence, prevalent in past elections, and widespread skepticism regarding the fairness of the process. Many grassroots voters also expressed a belief that defeating an incumbent governor was nearly impossible due to the incumbent's strong access to state resources and federal backing, which discouraged political engagement and voter turnout (Akinrelere, 2024; Ready To Lead Africa, 2024). Second, vote-buying was rampant during the Ondo 2024 election, posing a severe challenge to genuine grassroots participation. Poverty and economic hardship made many voters vulnerable to inducements, with political parties and agents offering cash amounts ranging from ₦5,000 to ₦10,000 in exchange for votes. This practice undermined the integrity of the electoral process and shifted the focus of many grassroots actors from principled political participation to immediate financial gain. The incidence of vote-buying was widely condemned by electoral observers and civic groups, highlighting a deep-rooted challenge in mobilizing genuine democratic engagement among grassroots voters (Akinrelere, 2024; Yiaga Africa, 2024).

Lastly, logistical and administrative challenges such as inaccuracies in the voters' register significantly impeded grassroots participation. Many registered voters faced difficulties due to obsolete voter lists containing deceased individuals or people who had relocated. This problem was compounded by restrictions that prevented voters from casting ballots outside their designated registration areas, further disenfranchising grassroots actors who often experience mobility constraints. This administrative defect diminished voters' confidence in the electoral process and emphasized the critical need for continuous voter registration and updates to electoral rolls to reflect the dynamic population realities at the grassroots level (Akinrelere, 2024). In sum, the challenges of low turnout, vote-buying, and flawed voter registration collectively illustrate the complex barriers grassroots actors face in engaging effectively in Ondo State's electoral process.

Grassroots Political Engagement and Improved Democratic Practices: Implications for Future Elections in Nigeria

Grassroots political engagement in Nigeria remains limited, characterized by low citizen participation at the local government level, which undermines the foundational goals of democratic governance. Studies reveal that despite the establishment of local governments to foster political education and socialization, factors such as inadequate access to information on government programs, lack of trust in political office holders, and limited government responsiveness to civil society hinder robust involvement (Bakare, 2019). For instance, in Osun State, surveys indicate that community members often feel alienated, with only marginal platforms like town hall meetings or public forums providing superficial engagement, frequently marred by political bias and poor accessibility (Bakare, 2019). Similarly, empirical research in Bayelsa State's Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government Area confirms low participation rates, attributing this to insufficient political mobilization and awareness, which perpetuates elite dominance and weakens grassroots democracy (University of Nigeria Journal of Political Economy, 2016).

Enhanced grassroots engagement promises significant improvements in democratic practices by promoting accountability, transparency, and inclusivity in Nigeria's electoral processes. Active citizen involvement at the community level, through strategies like door-to-door canvassing, town halls, and youth-led advocacy, has proven effective in countering electoral violence and boosting voter turnout, as evidenced by campaigns during the 2007 elections that facilitated collective action against intimidation (Vicente & Collier, 2015). Recent initiatives, such as those by the Consolidated APC Grassroots Movement (CAGrAM) and youth forums supported by organizations like KDI, emphasize nationwide strategies for voter education and reform advocacy ahead of 2027, addressing issues like voter apathy and misinformation (Kimpact Development Initiative, 2024). These efforts align with findings that grassroots mobilization strengthens local accountability, reduces corruption perceptions, and fosters civic responsibility, particularly when integrated with electoral reforms prioritizing local government autonomy (Yiaga Africa, 2024).

For future elections, particularly the 2027 polls, bolstering grassroots engagement could transform Nigeria's democracy by ensuring more credible, inclusive outcomes and mitigating risks of violence or apathy. Groups like the Grassroots Mobilization Initiative (GMI) and Grassroots Movement for Tinubu (GMT) are already charting paths through house-to-house sensitization and voter registration drives, signaling a shift toward bottom-up influence on electoral results (The Guardian Nigeria, 2026; The Nation Newspaper, 2025). Scholarly analyses suggest that sustained participation enhances democratic consolidation by institutionalizing voter education, decentralizing power, and neutralizing anti-democratic actors, potentially leading to higher turnout and policy responsiveness (Bakare, 2019). However, realizing this requires urgent reforms, including constitutional amendments for devolved powers and mandatory public consultations, to overcome barriers like federal interference and low awareness, paving the way for resilient electoral practices (Kimpact Development Initiative, 2024).

Conclusion

The study of grassroots engagement in the Ondo State 2024 governorship election reveals a significant impact on the electoral outcome and offers valuable implications for future elections in Nigeria. The victory of Lucky Aiyedatiwa of the All Progressives Congress (APC) with 366,781 votes against his closest rival from the People's Democratic Party (PDP)

demonstrates the effectiveness of extensive grassroots mobilization and voter education. Despite a relatively low voter turnout, the distribution of votes across all 18 local government areas, with APC dominance in key regions, indicates that engaging voters at the community level can build broad-based support crucial for electoral success. The relatively low percentage of rejected votes also underscores the importance of voter education in minimizing electoral errors. This election exemplifies how strong grassroots campaigns foster political participation, strengthen party loyalty, and can decisively influence election outcomes by securing voter confidence and turnout in Nigeria's democratic process. For subsequent elections, the Ondo case highlights the necessity for political parties to invest in sustained grassroots networks and voter sensitization to enhance electoral competitiveness and democratic consolidation across Nigeria. Enhanced grassroots engagement promotes inclusivity, strengthens the accountability of political actors, and potentially reduces electoral violence by establishing peaceful, well-organized participation mechanisms at the local level.

Recommendations

Based on the study on the impact of grassroots engagement in political campaigns in the Ondo State 2024 governorship election, four key recommendations for subsequent elections in Nigeria are:

- i. **Enhance Voter Education and Political Awareness at the Grassroots Level:** This is to address issues of voter apathy and low turnout, there should be stronger, sustained voter education programs at the grassroots. This would improve voter understanding of the electoral process, reduce rejected votes, and encourage informed participation in elections.
- ii. **Promote Inclusive Participation, Especially of Marginalized Groups:** Efforts must be made to facilitate and monitor inclusive participation by marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities, youth, and women at the grassroots level. This ensures elections represent the diversity of the electorate and strengthens democratic legitimacy.
- iii. **Strengthen Grassroots Party Engagement and Candidate Interaction:** Political parties should actively engage with grassroots communities early in the campaign process to build trust, address local concerns, and motivate higher voter turnout. This also mitigates the effect of voter disenchantment seen in Ondo where internal party conflicts reduced competitiveness and participation.
- iv. **Improve Election Integrity Monitoring and Mitigation of Electoral Malpractices:** Grassroots engagement should include robust mechanisms for detecting and reducing vote buying, intimidation, and other electoral malpractices, which undermine the credibility of elections. Civil society and media collaborations at the grassroots can help foster transparency and accountability.

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