Grassroots Community Mobilization Strategies and Voter Preferences in Nigerian General Elections

[1]**Felix Tabi Okorn** & [2]**Bassey Ekpenyong Anam**
[1]*Department of History and International Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar*
[2]*Institute of Public Policy & Administration, University of Calabar, Calabar*

Abstract

The study was set to assess the impact of grassroots community mobilization strategies on voter preferences in the 2015 general election in Uyo local government. The four political wards in Uyo local government area were purposively selected and used for the study. To guide the study, the setting in which the study was carried out was given and the research processes were carefully stated. The research problem was clearly defined, the objective stated and specific research questions developed to guide the researcher in the investigation. Community mobilization strategies do not significantly impact voter preferences in the 2015 general election in Uyo local government area. Relevant literature and theoretical issues were carefully examined. To achieve the objective of the study, a questionnaire schedule was constructed and administered to 160 respondents in the identified political wards. In the end, 150 of the distributed questionnaires were properly filled and returned. This was the number used in the analysis of data. After administering the instrument, the data were analyzed using frequency distribution and the Chi-square test of independence. The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 degrees of freedom. Results obtained showed that community mobilization strategies significantly impacted voter preferences in the 2015 general election in Uyo local government area. These findings, however, provided a framework for policy implication and recommendation, one of which is the need to increase the level of community sensitization and mobilization in other to enhance effective political participation in the Uyo local government area, and the State as well as the nation at large.

Keywords: *Grassroots, Community mobilization, Voters Preferences, Elections*

Corresponding Author: Felix Tabi Okorn

Background to the Study

A political campaign is an organized effort that seeks to influence the decision-making process within a specific group (Uya, 2004). He maintained that, in democracies, political campaigns often refer to electoral campaigns, wherein representatives are chosen or referendums are decided. In modern politics, the most high-profile political campaigns are focused on candidates for head of state or head of government, often a president or prime minister. Thompson (2005) advocated the use of effective community mobilization in political campaigns. Dalton (1984) and Mughan (1995) maintained that community outreach and mobilization can encompass a range of interventions and approaches, including community meetings; training or sensitization sessions with traditional authorities, community or religious leaders; street theatre, and other cultural activities and marches and demonstrations.

Among other things, community mobilization is a useful strategy that entails the "process of purposely designing and implementing political campaigns" (Uya, 2004), with violence. Knowledge about the party, policy agenda, candidates, and programmes is important in convincing citizens and influencing their choice during voting in elections (Singhal, 2004). Other innovative campaign approaches that can be effective in reaching diverse audiences include games, electronic technologies (mobile phones and computers), street theatre, art, music, and cultural activities.

The focus of this study is to examine the impact of grassroots community mobilization strategies on voter's preferences. Issues discussed are limited to community mobilization and its impact on voter's preferences. This study will be of immense benefit to different groups of people including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), leaders of political parties, politicians, citizens, and researchers. INEC will find this study enriching. It will create awareness of various political campaigns in the country and their impact on organizing the electoral process in the country. Leaders of political parties and politicians will find the literature and findings enriching in understanding the strategies for effective and violence-free campaigns in the country. Also, the study will help citizens understand their rights and choices in the electoral process.

Statement of Problem

Given the wide interest in governance, political campaigns are moving from the usual exhilarating, rewarding, and fun experience to violence. It has been very disappointing and sad that our politicians are not displaying the kind of maturity expected of them. Unfortunately, they are trivializing politics. It is very worrisome that rallies are being turned into avenues to launch vitriolic personal attacks, and also mouths of ill-will towards opponents. The 2015 political campaigns and elections in the Uyo local government area, Akwa Ibom State, were characterized by violence, casualties, and death. The experience in another part of the country was equally intense and it created apathy among voters and citizens.

To address the problems stated above specific research questions are raised to guide the study. These are:

i. In what ways does community mobilization impact voter's choice in the 2015 general election in Uyo local government area?

ii. What are the challenges and strategies for effective political campaigns for subsequent elections in Nigeria?

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of the study is to assess the impact of grassroots community mobilization strategies on voter preferences in the 2015 General Elections in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State.

Research Hypothesis

Community mobilization strategies do not significantly impact voter's preferences in the 2015 general election in Uyo local government area.

Literature Review

There is extant literature on political campaigns. Some scholars examine it in terms of periods; that is pre-modern, modern, and postmodern, while others examine it in terms of forms and strategies. The pre-modern, also known as the traditional campaign was largely based on community mobilization. This involved personal networks of volunteers and face-to-face candidate-voter communications for local, municipal, state-level, and federal elected offices. As a process, Okoro (2000) maintained that campaigns often dispatch volunteers into local communities to meet with voters and persuade people to support the candidate. The volunteers are also responsible for identifying supporters, recruiting them as volunteers, or registering them to vote if they are not already registered. The identification of supporters will be useful later as campaigns remind voters to cast their votes (Vancil and Pendell 1987). Late into the process, campaigns will also intensify their grassroots campaigns, coordinating their volunteers in a full-court effort to win votes.

According to Uya (2004), there are three types of political campaigns namely,

1. The first is the campaign that does not have a persuasive message to deliver to voters and does not have a clear idea of which voters it wants to persuade. This type of campaign lacks direction from the beginning and the situation will only get worse.

2. Second, is the campaign that has a concise, persuasive message and a clear idea of which voters it can persuade but lacks a reasonable plan of what to do between now and Election Day to persuade these voters. This type of campaign wastes time, money, and people as it wanders toward Election Day. It is often distracted by the day's events, by things the opponent's campaign does, or by things the press says, spending more time reacting to outside factors than promoting its agenda.

3. Finally, the third kind of campaign has a clear message, a clear idea of its voters, and a plan to get to Election Day but it fails to follow through on the plan, not doing the hard work day after day to get elected. This is a lazy campaign that makes excuses as to why it cannot do what it knows must be done and, in the end,, makes excuses as to why it lost. The winning political campaign is most often the one that takes the time to target voters develop a persuasive message and follow through on a reasonable plan to contact those voters directly.

Community Mobilization and Voters Preference in Elections

Loge (1989) maintained that pre-modern campaigning originated in 19th-century democracies with the expansion of the franchise, and continued in recognizable form in most post-industrial societies until at least the 1950s, when the advent of televised campaigns and the publication of regular opinion polls started to transform the process. In general elections, the pre-modern era was characterized by a campaign organization with the party leader at the apex, surrounded by a few close political advisers, running a relatively short, ad hoc national campaign (Kolbert, 1992). The base was a loose organizational network of party volunteers dispersed in local areas. The party organization was predominately locally oriented, involving politicians, party workers, and citizens in direct, face-to-face contact through activities like town hall hosting, canvassing, and branch party meetings (Keyton, 1989).

Kelley (1990) explained that, in mass-branch party organizations, members provided unpaid labor, helping the local candidate, advised by the constituency party agent. Pre-modern campaigns relied heavily upon the partisan press as the main source of mediated information, either directly owned and subsidized by party organs, or independently owned and managed but providing sympathetic partisan spin through editorial columns and political commentary. Newspapers were indirectly supplemented in the 1920s by radio and movies, important sources of news in the interwar period, and these media started to nationalize the campaign even before the age of television (Marion, 1990).

The classic theories of voting behavior stressed the stability of the electorate during this era, anchored by social and party loyalties. Lipset and Rokkan emphasized that European parties were based on stable sectoral cleavages in the electorate, with the divisions of class, religion, and region providing the solid bedrock of electoral support. The earliest studies of campaign communications in America, by Lazarsfeld (1944) and colleagues emphasized that the primary impact of elections was to reinforce partisan supporters, rather than to produce new converts. Classic accounts of American electoral behavior, by Key (1964), and Campbell et al. (1960), argued that voters were guided by partisan identification, representing an enduring loyalty or 'standing decision' influencing voting decisions over successive contests. If voters were largely stable, the main function of party organization was to energize and mobilize their traditional base of electoral support.

Marion (1990) further asserts that, today direct forms of campaigning have often been supplemented, rather than replaced. The traditional campaign, built on personal networks of volunteers and face-to-face candidate-voter communications, continues to be common when mobilizing voters in no-frills contests for local, municipal, and state-level elected office, for minor parties without generous financial resources, as well as in countries like Britain and Canada where mass-branch party organizations maintain networks of active party members (Marion, 1990). Electoral systems with multimember seats where politicians compete with others within the same party often emphasize the importance of local campaigning to maintain support.

Garner (1990) disclosed that long-term trends in the proportion of Americans engaged in campaign activism show no consistent and substantial decline across most dimensions (other than the display of buttons and bumper stickers). There has been no fall in the proportion contacted by the major U.S. parties, either face-to-face or, more commonly today, by telephone; if anything, recent indicators point towards more contacting activity: Pew post-election surveys suggest that about 38% of Americans were contacted over the phone during the 2000 campaign by candidates, parties or other groups urging them to vote in a particular way, including 53% of all voters in the key battleground states (Garner, 1990). Nevertheless, technological changes, notably the rise of television and opinion polls, mean that in post-industrial societies direct forms of campaigning often become ancillary to mediated channels of party-voter communication (Marion, 1990).

Nse (2015) acknowledged that in recent years, there has been increased recognition that community-based initiatives to prevent violence against women are key to reducing overall levels of violence in a society. Implementing laws and providing haven and services for survivors of violence, while vitally important, do not address the underlying causes of violence against women and girls, which have a lot more to do with changing the way that men and women interact in their communities, and how they view issues such as balancing power between men and women.

He added that, while several groups have developed innovative ways of mobilizing communities to address prevailing norms and behaviours around violence and gender, evidence around the effectiveness of strategies used by these programmes remains sparse (Nse, 2015). Uya (2004) had earlier stated that few groups have the resources or capacity to carry out effective monitoring and evaluation of their programmes, and there are not many validated models for measuring social change. For him, it is a way of involvement, which has a significant impact on their choice of leaders during the electoral process.

In enhancing political campaigns, community mobilization is a function of three processes that are subtle, difficult to define and measure, and interrelated in complex ways. Nevertheless, understanding these component processes and their role in community mobilization is important to ensure that mobilization efforts are optimally effective. Uya (2004) maintained that the processes that contribute to effective community mobilization are:
  (1) Heightened sense of community
  (2) Enhanced mobilization capacity, and
  (3) Increased readiness for focused action.

Each of these processes is necessary for effective mobilization. They might be viewed as occurring sequentially. For example, before a community has developed a strong sense of unity, it might be difficult for mobilization capacity to be developed or for focused action to occur. The processes are interactive, however. Political parties must therefore see measures to ensure that the community is duly mobilized, informed, and influenced to choose their representatives during elections. The absence of these will breed violence and disenfranchisement.

Effective community mobilization is a form of community empowerment and it enhances community development. Empowerment is a physical, psychological, and spiritual process in which individuals actively define their problem(s) and plans for change, and ultimately accept responsibility for the results therein. This process, although rooted in an individual's behaviors and beliefs, engages other individuals, groups, organizations, and communities in the plans and actions of change.

The ultimate goal of the community development approach is, in Reininger's terms, collective empowerment — the process by which individuals, small groups, organizations, and segments of the community operate in concert to improve the quality of life for themselves and their overall community. Other cornerstones of the community development approach are active engagement and mobilization of increasing numbers and segments of the community, along with increasing cooperation and support of key community leaders (Chavis and Florin updated; Wandersman 1981). This combination of high levels of community participation and the involvement of key leaders provides communities with broad-based support and the authority to generate meaningful change. Community members are most capable of recognizing their problems, identifying potential solutions, and implementing those solutions, while key community leaders are essential sources of influence and resources and can greatly enhance a community's ability to develop and implement its vision (Bracht and Kingsbury 1990).

Theoretical Framework
Technological determinism theory, on the other hand, was formulated by Marshal McLuhan (1964). The basic premise of the technological determinism theory is that the media are extensions of the human body; it holds that the media not only alter their environment but the very message they convey. The media bring new perceptual habits while their technologies create new environments. The theory states that technology, especially the new media, decisively shapes how individuals think, feel, and act and how societies organize themselves and operate.

The relevance of the theory to the study cannot be overemphasized. Since the new media can be used to shape people 's behaviour, it goes to say that political parties in Nigeria can use the new media to influence the populace concerning their political activities. The rise of new media has increased communication between people all over the world. It has allowed people to express themselves through blogs, websites, pictures, and other user-generated media. As a result of the evolution of new media technologies, globalization occurs. New media radically breaks the connection between physical place and social place, making physical location much less significant for our social relationships. According to Carry (2010), the media today are more diffused and chaotic than ever. The result, according to Cary (2010), is a new paradigm in political communications.

Methodology
The research design used in this study is the survey design. The design supports the use of large and small populations. This is done by selecting and studying samples chosen from the

population to discover the relative incidence, distribution, and interrelationship among variables. The study area is the Uyo local government area of Akwa Ibom State, which lies between latitude 5.05 North and Longitude 80 East. This is within the equatorial rainforest belt, which is a tropical zone and home to vegetation of green foliage of trees, shrubs, and oil palm trees. The total population of the area is 309,573; Males 153,113, Females, 156,460 (Source: 2006 National Census).

The sample of the study is made up of 160 respondents systematically selected from the political wards in the Uyo local government area. The sampling procedure used in this study was the multi-stage approach. First and foremost, a purposive sampling procedure was adopted to select the 4 clans in the Uyo local government area. The selection of these clans is the interest of the researcher based on the observation of the phenomenon under study.

Data for the study are obtained from both primary and secondary sources. The primary source consisted of first-hand information obtained from respondents in the process of field work. In this study, the questionnaire and interview formed the primary sources. The secondary source of data consisted of reviews of the work of other scholars especially information on the major variables of the study, internet materials, journals, and library materials.

The main instrument used for data collection is the questionnaire designed by the researcher. It is a 10-item questionnaire entitled "*Assessing the Impact of Grassroots Community Mobilization Strategies on Voter Preferences in the 2015 General Election in Uyo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State.*" Data collected were properly checked to make sure all items were responded to. Thereafter, they were edited, coded, and analyzed using appropriate statistical methods. Used were frequency distribution tables, cross-tabulations, percentages, and Chi-square ($X2$) test of significance. The test of significance is best on the .05 level.

Test of hypothesis
The hypothesis was tested using the chi –square test of independence and the summary of findings were given. The hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance.

Hypothesis: Community mobilization strategies does not significantly impact on voter's preference in the 2015 general election in Uyo local government area.

Table 1: Chi-square (X^2) response distribution to assess the impact of community mobilization strategies on voter's preferences in the 2015 general election in Uyo local government area

Variables	Responses				
	SA	A	D	SD	TOTAL
Community mobilization strategies	38 (37.4)	20 (22.2)	28 (25)	18 (19.4)	104
Voter's preference in the 2015 general election	16 (16.6)	12 (9.8)	8 (11)	10 (8.6)	46

Calculated X^2 - 212.5, Table value of Chi- 7.82, Level of significance .05 DF. - 3

Response in Table 1 showed that community mobilization strategies had a significant impact on voter preference in the 2015 general election in Uyo local government area. Table 1 exhibits these characteristics; the computed value of X2 stood at 212.5, while its tabulated value at 0.05 level of significance and 1 degree of freedom is 7.82. Since the calculated value of X2 is greater than the critical table value at 0.05, we ignore the null hypothesis that community mobilization strategies do not significantly impact voter's preference in the 2015 general election in Uyo local government area and accept the alternate which states that community mobilization strategies significantly impact on voter's preference in the 2015 general election in Uyo local government area.

Conclusion
The findings of this study provide us with some evidence to reach some specific conclusions. These are that community mobilization strategies significantly impacts on voter preferences in the 2015 general election in Uyo local government area. Political parties must therefore see measures to ensure that the community is duly mobilized, informed, and influenced to choose their representatives during elections. The absence of these will breed violence and disenfranchisement.

Recommendations
Recommendations made and their successful implementation could go a long way in ensuring an effective political process in the country.
1. Through the Ministry of Information and Orientation, the government should increase the level of sensitization on the need for citizens to exercise their civic responsibilities. This should be done through various means; village meetings, radio broadcasts, posters, billboards, etc.
2. Civil societies and other social group political and non-political groups should also support the process by encouraging the mobilization of citizens for the electoral process.

References

Dalton, R. J., Scott, C. F. & Paul, B. Eds. (1984). *Electoral change in advanced industrial Democracies,* Princeton: Princeton University Press; Franklin, Mark. 1992. *Electoral Change.* Ann rbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Garner, J. (1990). *Television news and presidential campaigns: The Legitimization of televised political advertising,* Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the International Communication Association. [ED 323 146]

Marion, J. (1990). Thirty seconds or thirty minutes: What viewers learn from spot advertisements and candidate debates, *Journal of Communication 40*(3), 120-33. [EJ 414 667]

Kelley, C. E. (1990). *Bad Men 'speaking' well: A case study of political campaign ethics,* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association. [ED 324 261]

Key, V. O. (1964). *Public opinion and American democr*acy. NY: Knopf

Keyton, J. (1989). *Political values and political judgments: Analysis of responses to the 1988 presidential debates,* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Speech Communication Association. [ED 305 696]

Kolbert, E. (1992). *As political campaigns turn negative, the press is given a negative rating,* The New York Times, May 1.

Loge, P. (1989). *Candidates of race and political poll results,* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association. [ED 305 697]

Mughan, A. (1995). Television and presidentialism: Australian and US legislative elections Compared, *Political Communication.* 12(3), 327-342.

Vancil, D. L. & Pendell, S. D. (1987). the myth of viewer-listener disagreement in the first Kennedy-Nixon debate, *Central States Speech Journal 38*(1), 16-27. [EJ 368 620]