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ELECTORAL COMPETITION, RELIGIOUS MOBILISATION, AND MUSLIM VOTING BEHAVIOUR IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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Abstract: This study examines how electoral competition influences religious mobilisation and Muslim voting behaviour in Northern Nigeria. Instead of viewing religion as a static cultural determinant, the study advances a process-oriented framework that contextualises religious politics within competitive electoral context. Employing qualitative process tracing and documentary analysis of electoral campaigns, media discourse and secondary sources, the study reconstructs the causal mechanisms linking electoral uncertainty, elite strategy and voter interpretation. The result shows that intensified electoral competition compels political elite to mobilise Islamic symbols, clerical authority, and moral narratives as strategic resources to consolidate their support. However, religious mobilisation does not always produce automatic voter compliance. Muslim voters view religious signals as moral shortcuts that affect how they see a candidate's credibility and how well they represent their community as well as how they think about patronage, ethnicity and party affiliation. By applying rational choice institutionalism with identity-based mobilisation theory, the study demonstrates that religion's political influence is contingent on electoral incentives and institutional weakness instead of cultural determinism.

Keywords: Electoral competition, religious mobilisation, Muslim voting behaviour, Identity Politics, Northern Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Religion has long been acknowledged as a significant influencer in global political dynamics, especially in societies where religious identities converge with political institutions, electoral competition, and civic engagement. In electoral politics, religious affiliation can function as a source of individual identity and as an organising principle for collective political action and voting behaviour (Heath, Verniers & Kumar, 2015). In the Nigerian context, religion, especially Islam and Christianity, serves as a socio-political cleavage, which actors strategically utilise in competing for elections, and has a direct impact on democratic representation, political accountability, and social cohesion. Scholars understand Nigerian elections as deeply intertwined with complex religious and ethnic dimensions that influence the choice of the electorate (Onapajo, 2018; Sampson, 2014).

Northern Nigeria is a region that is characterised by a predominantly Muslim majority population and based on competitive multi-party electoral environment, presents a

significant case for examining the interplay between electoral competition and religious mobilisation. Scholars often study electoral competition in terms of party rivalry and competing institutions, however its relationship with identity mobilisation has received less attention in empirical political science studies on African democracies. Yet, in a situation like that of Northern Nigeria, where religious leaders possess social and civic influence, electoral actors usually adopt religious appeals as a strategic tool to mobilise constituencies, consolidate support and strengthen party identification (Kendhammer, 2019).

Recent elections in Nigeria provide evidence of this dynamic at play. For example, evidence from the 2023 presidential and sub-national elections shows that candidate selection strategies of the so-called "Muslim-Muslim ticket" (which sparked much controversy) and the religious rhetoric of elites and religious leaders shaped campaign and mobilisation strategies, raising further concerns about the instrumentalisation of religion in democratic politics. Such instrumentalisation of religion within democracy in the context of Nigeria also confirms the broader literature on multi-religious societies whereby religious identities are exploited for votes by electoral contenders, especially in areas of intense electoral competition with low policy differentiation across competing candidates.

The significance of religion in voting varies according to circumstances and individual evaluations. Research from Nigeria shows that, along with candidate competence and performance, religious affiliation is an important factor in voter choice. However, some studies show small differences at the regional level or provide little evidence of the direct role of religion in shaping electoral outcomes (Kumo et al., 2025; Okunnu, 2025). These contradictory studies underscore the necessity of investigating the mechanisms through which religious mobilisation affects voter behaviour in Northern Nigeria and other predominantly Muslim settings. They also show how important it is to conduct more in-depth analysis of the underlying mechanisms and build a framework that explains how electoral competition, religious mobilisation, and voter choice are all connected.

Therefore, this research investigates the following questions: How does electoral competition incentivise religious mobilisation strategies by political actors in Northern Nigeria? To what extent do these strategies influence Muslim voting behaviour, and what are the underlying mechanisms connecting religious identity and electoral choices? Answering these questions will help Nigerian studies and studies that compare religion and politics in Muslim-majority democracies.

The central argument of this study is that intense competition in elections encourages political elites to utilise religious mobilisation, which encourages Muslim voters to prioritise religious identity over policy or other performance considerations. In such situations where elections are highly contested, religious mobilisation is an economically efficient strategy for demonstrating intergroup ties and increasing group participation. Under these circumstances, voters seek religious signals to guide their choices when information about

candidate performance or policies is unavailable, or when such information is overshadowed by salient identity considerations.

Empirically, this research draws on election result, survey and qualitative data to look into how religious mobilisation has worked in recent elections in Northern Nigeria, showing the patterns and consequences of these dynamics for democratic quality and political representation. By placing the analysis within the context of broader theories of identity politics and political mobilisation, the research enhances academic comprehension of the interplay between religion and electoral competition in shaping electoral outcomes in Muslim-majority societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Electoral competition is one major characteristic of democratic politics and one of the primary motivations of political mobilisation in all forms of politics. Classical theory of democracy presupposes that political actors are motivated to win electoral campaigns by differentiating policies and being programmatically accountable to voters (Downs, 1957). But the comparative political research has also become more able to show that this assumption is not evenly distributed, especially in those democracies that are poorly institutionalised in terms of political parties, where there are weak ideological divisions and a low level of voter information. Electoral competition in these settings is likely to generate alternative mobilisation forms based on identity, patronage, and symbolic politics as opposed to policy-based appeal (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Chandra, 2004).

This trend has been highly seen in emerging democracies of Africa and Southeast Asia. Election research in Indonesia indicates that competitive elections often go hand in hand with poor programmatic competition between parties, prompting elites to use identity signals, religious symbols, and informal links to recruit voters (Pepinsky et al., 2018). On the same note, increased electoral competition in most African democracies has not pushed identity-based mobilisation to the periphery but has rather heralded it with increased intensity as political actors pursue dependable and socially rooted sources of electoral support (Basedau et al., 2011; Posner, 2005).

Electoral uncertainty is a very important aspect of this process. Schedler (2013) highlights that competitive politics is always characterised by uncertainty and it forces elites to take measures that minimise the electoral risk. This role is performed by identity-based appeals such as religious mobilisation, which stabilise voter expectations, reduce mobilisation costs, and make the process of electoral choice easier. Comparative evidence from Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia indicates that identity appeals tend to gain greater salience in competitive circumstances, especially in situations where institutional constraints reject the utility of programmatic politics (Wilkinson, 2004; Pepinsky et al., 2018).

Competitive elections coexist with clientelism and other forms of informal politics in most of the developing democracies. Instead of undermining them, electoral competition may

strengthen them in political systems that do not have well-established party organisations and ideological unity (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). There are significant similarities between Indonesia and Nigeria in this respect: both are democracies of large size, which are religiously diverse, where the political elections are competitive, but where the institutionalisation of parties is uneven. Such situations often lead political elites to resort to religious actors and organisations in order to offset ineffective mobilisation capacity based on party grounds.

Religion is especially significant in this literature. Religion is understood to be a complex political phenomenon: a manifestation of social identity, a source of moral authority, and a communication and mobilisation network (Wald et al., 2005). Religious affiliation in information asymmetry electoral settings usually acts as a heuristic, allowing voters to evaluate the credibility and reliability of a candidate without having specific policy expertise. Studies of Muslim majority societies point to the fact that religious identity does not directly translate into religious voting; instead, its political relevance is subject to institutional design, elite political strategies, and religious authority organisation (Kalyvas, 1996; Pepinsky et al., 2018).

The comparative analyses of Indonesia show that the Islamic identity rests on indirect effects on voting that Islamic identity affects voting by moral signaling, elite framing, and clerical endorsement instead of the explicit promotion of religious parties or platforms (Pepinsky et al., 2018). These results are consistent with other studies in Muslim majority settings, and indicate that religion is commonly used as an interpretive system and not necessarily a policy manual of how to act politically. Heath et al. (2015) also indicate that even in officially secular political structures, voters and candidates can be co-religious and that their co-religiosity can be very important in affecting the outcome of elections, a factor that highlights the significance of identity-based trust in democratic politics.

Nigeria provides a powerful comparative study to extrapolate these findings. Though secular in the constitution, religion is still entrenched in the political rhetoric, candidates contesting in the political arena, and citizens mobilising to vote. Islamic institutions and clerical networks are influential in the social and political life of Northern Nigeria where Muslims are the major population. Political communication and mobilisation occur in mosques, Islamic schools and clerical associations especially during the election seasons. Election candidates often aim to gain support of clerics and model their campaigns as protectors of Islamic values or interests of the Muslims (Kendhammer, 2016).

The empirical evidence of religion and voting in Nigeria is not consistent. Whereas other studies have found religion to be a powerful predictor of electoral preference, other researchers also highlight that patronage, regionalism and candidate competence remain critical (Bratton et al., 2012). There are similar debates in the context of Indonesian scholarship, where researchers are divided on the degree to which Islamic identity affects voting behaviour where pragmatically and materially significant factors are at play. These

similarities point to a common analytical problem: how and when religious identity comes to play a determinant role in competitive electoral circumstances.

Based on these comparative observations, this study theorises the interaction of electoral competition, religious mobilisation, and the voting pattern of Muslims as a causal process driven by institutional incentives and interpretive processes. Based on rational choice institutionalism, political elites can be viewed as rational actors who choose mobilisation strategies to maximise electoral payoffs under prevailing institutional constraints (Downs, 1957; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). Religious mobilisation becomes particularly important in competitive contexts, because it provides access to dense social networks, morally legitimised authority structures, and emotionally appealing stories.

Identity-based mobilisation theory explains the political significance of religious cues at the voter level. Religious identity serves as a prominent and socially ingrained foundation for political alignment, especially when voters encounter informational limitations and insufficient programmatic alternatives (Chandra, 2004). Accordingly, increased electoral competition is expected to intensify elite dependence on religious mobilisation, influencing Muslim voting behaviour through identity-based heuristics rather than explicit ideological guidance.

Although the identity-based mobilisation has been investigated in both African and Southeast Asian democracies, there is a lack of comparative discourse between the two regions. Indonesia presents an especially topical comparative reference point to grasp the issue of religious mobilisation in the conditions of competitive elections. Similar to Nigeria, Indonesia is a religiously diverse society, with majority of the population Muslim, constitutionally secular institutions and competitive electoral politics and a history of weak institutionalisation of the party. Indonesian electoral politics research has shown that electoral rivalry has not abolished but transformed religious mobilisation into indirect and strategic content, like moral framing, symbolic gestures, and clerical endorsement instead of religious party dominance (Pepinsky et al., 2018).

Indonesian data indicates that religion serves not so much as a programmatic ideology but rather as a resource to be used flexibly based on certain institutional incentives. The political elites often use Islamic groups, pesantren groups and reputable clerics to introduce moral plausibility and social embeddedness especially in hotly contested elections. This trend is akin to a trend in Northern Nigeria, whereby clerical power and Islamic networks also play a similar role of mediating between political elites and electorate. In both instances, religious mobilisation substitutes the poor party-based mobilisation capacity and poor ideological distinction between competing candidates.

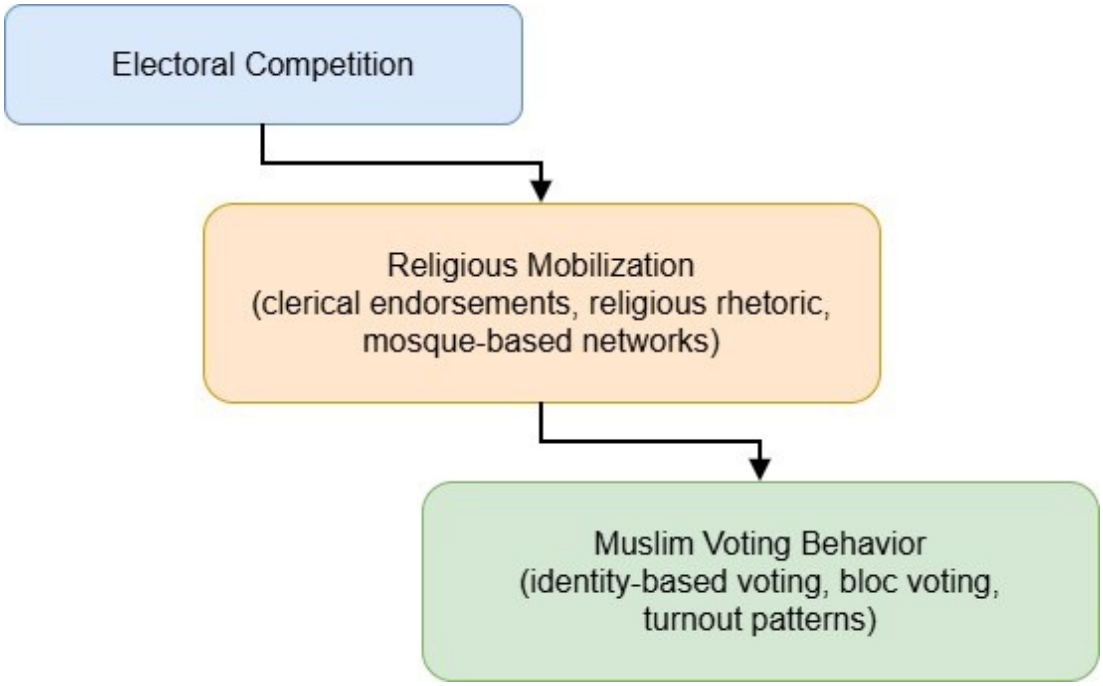
Notably, comparative scholarship warns that religious mobilisation should not be viewed as an indicator of voter irrationality or cultural determinism. Instead, it is common to have identity-based appeals, which arise as a rational reaction to institutional constraints. Rational

choice institutionalist views highlight the fact that elites choose mobilisation schemes by estimating electoral returns to action under certain structural circumstances (Downs, 1957; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). In situations where party brands are feeble, and policy platforms obfuscated, religion offers a mobilizational shortcut of low cost, high returns based on socially legitimate structures of authority.

Identity-based mobilisation theory also helps to explain why religious cues are still politically relevant at the voter level. Religion identities provide cognitively effective shortcuts which assist voters to navigate the complicated electoral setting marked by incomplete and uncertain information (Chandra, 2004; Popkin, 1991). This does not mean that people blindly vote along religious lines; instead, they use the religious cues as a measure of reliability, moral conformity and communal reflection. There is both Indonesian and Nigerian evidence to indicate that voters tend to consider religious information as well as material factors, patronage requirements, and competence in the candidate.

By providing Northern Nigeria with a wider comparative context, the current paper fills a critical gap in the literature, which is how both the conditions of electoral competition precondition the dependence of elites on religious mobilisation as well as voter sensitivity to religious signals in Muslim-majority states. This method goes beyond descriptive explanations of religion in politics and goes forward to provide a mechanism-based explanation with the ability to transfer analytically to other parts of the world, including the Southeast Asian region.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Linking Electoral Competition, Religious Mobilisation and Muslim Voting Behaviour.



This figure demonstrates the theoretical model for analysis in this study. It conceptualises electoral competition as the independent variable that creates strategic incentives for political elites that operate in a competitive electoral environment. Under conditions of close contests, fragmented party systems and weak programmatic differentiation, elites increasingly appeal to religious mobilisation as an intervening mechanism. Religious mobilisation includes clerical endorsements, religious framing of candidates and opponents, and using mosque-based and Islamic associational networks for political communication.

The framework further shows how religious mobilisation influences Muslim voting behaviour through reinforcement of identity-based cues, moral authority, and heuristics based on trust, and how they affect vote choice and turnout behaviour, as well as bloc voting behaviour. The strength of this path of causality is conditioned by the context, i.e., the level of clerical authority, the level of institutionalisation of parties, the information environment to which voters have access, and the existence of clientelist and patronage networks. Together, these elements account for variation in the extent to which electoral competition is translated into religiously inspired voting behaviour in Muslim majority regions like Northern Nigeria.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method to investigate the relationship between electoral competition, religious mobilisation, and Muslim voting behaviour in Northern Nigeria. A qualitative design is suitable as the study aims to elucidate processes, meanings, and causal mechanisms rather than to evaluate statistical relationships. The interplay among electoral incentives, religious authority, and voter behaviour is embedded in discourse, symbolism, and contextual interpretation, which are best captured through qualitative analysis.

The research is grounded in rational choice institutionalism and identity-based mobilisation theory. Political elites are seen as strategic players who use social resources, like religion, to get the most votes in competitive elections. Muslim voters are perceived as interpretive agents who assess religious indicators as indicators of moral integrity, communal unity, and political reliability. The analysis investigates whether empirical evidence from Northern Nigeria substantiates the proposed causal relationship connecting electoral competition to religious mobilisation and voting behaviour.

Northern Nigeria is chosen as single-case study with internal variation, which has strong analytics leverage. The region is predominantly Muslim and it operates under the competitive multiparty system in Nigeria. Since the transition to civilian rule in 1999, electoral contests in Northern Nigeria have been unequal in terms of competitiveness from state to state and election cycle to election cycle. This variation enables the study to see how varying electoral uncertainty influences elite mobilisation strategies while controlling for the relatively constant institutional and cultural contexts. The goal of the case study is not statistical representativeness but rather analytical generalisation that adds to wider debates on religion and electoral politics in Muslim-majority societies.

The study relies on qualitative data from publicly available sources. These include party manifestos, campaign speeches, political advertisements, public statements by political elites and pronouncements by influential Islamic clerics during election periods. These materials represent direct evidence of the framing and mobilisation of religion in electoral competition. The analysis is also based on information from the national and regional media and election coverage to trace patterns of religious rhetoric, clerical endorsement, and the interactions between political actors and religious institutions. In addition, relevant secondary literature, including studies based on interviews and historical analyses and ethnographic descriptions is used to add depth to the context and to triangulate interpretations.

Analytically, the research employs process-tracing logic to identify the causal mechanisms between electoral competition and religious mobilisation and subsequent voter responses. The analysis continues by analysing competitive electoral contexts, identifying corresponding patterns of religious appeals by political elites, and assessing their interpretations by Muslim voters. An interpretive discourse analysis is applied to political and religious texts in order to uncover dominant frames, symbols, and narratives as used during election campaigns; with a special focus on the use of religion to legitimate candidates and define political boundaries.

Conceptual consistency is preserved throughout the analysis. Electoral competition is understood as the perceived level and uncertainty of electoral competition; religious mobilisation refers to the strategic use of religious authority, symbolism and networks for political purposes, and Muslim voting behaviour is conceptualised as the interpretive and behavioural responses of voters to religiously framed political appeals.

Table 1. Analytical Concepts, Indicators and Qualitative Sources

Analytical Role	Concept	Conceptual Definition	Qualitative Indicators	Data Sources
Core Analytical Condition	Electoral Competition	The degree of electoral uncertainty and competitiveness that conditions elite strategic calculations and triggers causal mechanisms	Close electoral margins referenced in campaign discourse Elite narratives emphasizing electoral risk or urgency Media portrayals of competitive races	INEC election reports; campaign speeches; media coverage
Causal Mechanism	Religious Mobilisation	A hypothesized causal process whereby political elites activate Islamic symbols, authorities, and organisational networks to translate electoral competition into voter support	Religious framing in campaign speeches and advertisements Public endorsements by Islamic clerics Joint appearances of politicians and religious leaders	Campaign materials; sermons; media reports
Outcome of	Muslim Voting	The observable interpretive and	Voter narratives reported in media and secondary	Media interviews;

Interest	Behaviour	behavioural responses of Muslim voters to religiously framed political appeals during electoral contests	studies Emphasis on religious credentials of candidates Appeals to religious solidarity during voting periods	secondary qualitative studies
Conditioning Factor	Clerical Authority	The extent of moral legitimacy and social authority exercised by Islamic clerics that conditions the effectiveness of religious mobilisation	Frequency and prominence of clerical interventions in politics Public trust narratives surrounding clerics Centrality of religious institutions in local political life	Sermons; religious publications; secondary literature
Contextual Condition	Party Institutionalisation	The degree of organisational strength and programmatic coherence of political parties that shapes the broader context in which the causal mechanism operates	Consistency of party messaging across elections Reliance on personalistic versus ideological appeals Local party presence described in media	Party documents; media analysis
Alternative Explanations	Ethnicity, Patronage, Regionalism	Non-religious factors potentially shaping voting behaviour	References to ethnic identity in campaigns Distribution of material inducements Regional loyalty narratives	Media reports; secondary literature

Source: Author's conceptualisation, adapted to qualitative study, 2026

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results by tracing the process of electoral competition and its impact on religious mobilisation and vice versa according to how Muslim voters in the Northern part of Nigeria respond to electoral contest. Reconstruction in tracing causal sequences between competitive electoral environments and elite strategies and voter response is done by process tracing, which is consistent with qualitative methods of causal explanation in political science (George & Bennett, 2005).

The first stage of the causal process is related to the increased electoral competition. Multiple election cycles suggest that Northern Nigerian political elites often present elections as being very uncertain and consequential, especially when the incumbency advantage is weak and parties are disaggregated. Speeches at campaigns and media accounts frequently focus on the danger of loss in elections and the necessity of mobilisation of collective action, in particular, in close gubernatorial and presidential campaigns. This trend is consistent with the scholarly literature that proposes that the uncertainty of elections adds to the motivation of elites to

pursue other mobilisation sources other than programmatic appeals (Schedler, 2013; Wilkinson, 2004).

The second step shows how religious mobilisation can be used as a strategy in a competitive setting. As the electoral uncertainty grows, politicians are turning more and more to Islamic symbols, morality, and clerical power. The campaign rhetoric usually talks about the candidates' religious credentials, moral leadership, and protecting Muslim interests. The interactions between politicians and Islamic clerics are also more open to the public. These patterns can be elucidated as identity-based mobilisation, wherein socially pertinent identities are leveraged to garner support in a competitive milieu (Horowitz, 1985; Brubaker, 2015).

Process tracing identifies the different processes that drive religious mobilisation. First, there are clerical endorsements, which show that a candidate is morally trustworthy and let them take over clerical credibility when political trust is low. Second, mosques and Islamic associations serve as organisational and communication networks, particularly when the parties lack strong institutional frameworks, aligning with existing literature on religion and electoral politics in Africa (Villalón, 2015). Thirdly, religious framing simplifies electoral decision-making by providing voters with moral shortcuts rooted in social identity, which have been posited to induce cognitive shortcuts in the voting process (Popkin, 1991).

The third stage deals with how Muslims vote. Qualitative evidence from media reports and secondary studies suggests that voters often perceive religious cues as signs of trustworthiness, communal loyalty, and moral suitability for public office. In public discussions, people often say that candidates' ties to respected clerics and their perceived commitment to Islamic values are reasons to support them politically. Nonetheless, voters do not consistently adhere to clerical directives; instead, religious appeals influence the interpretive framework within which electoral decisions are rendered, fortifying collective identities and bloc voting behaviors (Basedau, Gobien, & Prediger, 2018).

The effectiveness of religious mobilisation is determined by the context, especially the clerical authority and institutionalisation of parties. Religious endorsements are more politically effective where high moral legitimacy is commanded by clerics. On the other hand, religious power is weakened when there is a fragmented religious authority that weakens the persuasive nature of the religious appeals. In the same manner, the reliance on religious framing is enhanced by weak party institutionalisation and reduced by strong party structures that can offer alternative cues that can weaken the power of religion (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995).

Other forms of explanation like ethnicity, patronage, and regional loyalty can also be seen in Northern Nigerian politics. Process tracing, however, implies that these factors are not fully explanatory of observed patterns of mobilisation. Ethnic appeals have a tendency to cross with religious identity and patronage is often conceived of as moral or religious to increase

legitimacy (Lewis & Bratton, 2000). Religion is therefore not an alternative explanation but rather a reinforcing mechanism when there is electoral competition.

Overall, the results underpin the guiding theory that electoral competition triggers religious mobilisation and as a result, it influences the distribution of the Muslim votes based on the interpretive and relational processes. Religious appeals are best seen as being strategic responses to competitive electoral incentives, and not as being fixed statements of ideology. This explanatory process formation is part of the wider discussions of religion and democracy because it establishes the way that religious politics form out of institutional and strategic settings instead of cultural inclination alone.

The process-tracing method reveals the same chain of causation for the phenomena of electoral competition, religious mobilisation, and voting behaviour of Muslims in Northern Nigeria. The case of Northern Nigeria starts with the lack of assurance with regards to the outcome of the elections, in particular closely contested elections with very little victorious advantage and little to no incumbency advantage. In such scenarios, political players fear the negative repercussions of losing and therefore settle for rapid support mobilisation initiatives.

The first observable implication of this process is the more or less consistent and predictable way political elites engage in the mobilisation of the religious. Politicians, during elections, focus more of their attention on the Islamic institutions and religious elites, such as the clerics, and the religious associations (which are believed to be the constituents or affiliated members of the clerics or the religious elites). This engagement, which is often sponsored by the politicians, is believed to take elections as religious and political events where politicians' participation is considered a religious and political obligation. Religion, in this case, is expected to be more of a political spectacle or symbolic in the sense that politicians are expected to demonstrate their faith in God publicly in order to win the support of the religious elites and the faith institutions that are believed to be in the religious circle and the Islamic faith. The pattern is similar to the comparative studies in other Muslim majority countries in which during competition of elections, the practice/ utilisation of religion appears to be more instrumental for the politicians (Pepinsky et al., 2018).

The second stage processes involves the mediation of clerics. Religious leaders mediate between their followers and the political contest and characterise the elections as a moral and community question. While clerics do not typically provide direct instructions to vote one way or the other, the moral leadership, social justice, or advocacy of Muslim interest instructions that some address provide insight into their preferences. The power of clerics is not in the political arena, but in the social political arena, and their embeddedness gives them political power in the local religious structures that influence their constituency.

The last stage looks into the responses of the voters. The Muslim electorate does not follow the clerics' instructions, but interprets the religious messages as a means to judge candidates with

the limited information they have. Voters have told researchers in interviews that they have considered access to patronage, a candidate's ability or competence, and other factors like ethnicity and region. In the absence of any other signals, religious messages serve as a vote of confidence. This supports the theory of mobilisation based on identity which seeks to explain the case when identity messages simplify vote choices without taking away from the voters' autonomy.

Most significantly, the evidence from process tracing shows the limits of religious mobilisation. In the constituencies that have fragmented clerical authority and/ or where the party structures have greater mobilizational potential, the influence of religious cues is noticeably less. Similarly, in the contexts of lower-level electoral competition or pre-determined outcome scenarios, elites religiously mobilise less (if at all). These differences illustrate the contentious aspects of religious politics and reiterate the point that electoral competition is an important enabling condition, but not an explanatory one.

Overall, the findings show that religious mobilisation in Northern Nigeria is driven by a structured mechanism that is a function of the electoral conditions and institutional constraints. The analysis has traced this mechanism in detailed steps, enabling it to go beyond correlation and explaining the conditions that make religion politically important in Muslim majority electoral contexts that are competitive.

This study aimed to elucidate the impact of electoral competition on religious mobilisation and the subsequent effects of such mobilisation on Muslim voting behaviour in Northern Nigeria. The findings indicate that religious politics in this context are not incidental or solely ideological; rather, they are best comprehended as a strategic and contingent responses to competitive electoral incentives. This discussion contextualises the empirical findings within extensive theoretical and comparative discourses on religion and electoral politics by amalgamating process-tracing evidence with rational choice institutionalism and identity-based mobilisation theory.

From the standpoint of rational choice institutionalism, the findings strongly support the hypothesis that political elites act strategically in contexts of electoral uncertainty. As theorised, intensified competition amplifies the perceived costs of electoral defeat, motivating elites to allocate resources that can provide dependable and comparatively low-cost electoral backing. Religion, especially Islam in Northern Nigeria, serves as a resource by providing extensive networks, moral authority, and established frameworks of trust. This finding supports institutionalist theories that political behaviour is influenced more by incentives created within institutional frameworks, such as electoral systems and party competition, than by stable preferences.

Notably, the research results help to narrow the rational choice explanations by demonstrating the fact that religious mobilisation is not a fallback but a contingent strategy. Political actors do not consistently use religious appeals in all electoral situations; instead,

they escalate religious mobilisation when they think there is high competition and other possible mobilising strategies like programmatic parties are weak. This subtlety is a response to a familiar criticism of rational choice frameworks, which is the fact that, according to them, culture and meaning are underestimated. Religion in this context is specifically useful as it is culturally significant and the elites can transform the symbolic power into political gain.

The research also contributes to the identity-based mobilisation theory because it shows how religious identity is mobilised and politicised using elite tactics instead of being a fixed predilection of voter participation. The findings indicate that Muslim voters cannot and do not just vote as Muslims automatically and homogenously. Rather, religious identity is politically consequential when interpreted using interpretive practices in which voters evaluate religious information, clerical information and moral plots relative to the electoral decision. This is in line with constructivist explanations of identity, which hold that identities are politically dynamic and not behavioural deterministic.

At the same time, the findings make solid constructivist assertions difficult when they demonstrate that religious appeals are not always equally effective. Religious mobilisation is influenced by religious authority structure and the general political environment. In societies where the power of clerics is centralised and accepted socially, religious approvals have more electoral power. In contrast, it is fragmented or contested religious authority that undermines mobilisation ability of religious appeals. Such conditionality reminds us of the significance of institutional and organisational issues in determining the working of identity-driven mobilisation.

One of the important contributions of this study is that it explains Muslim voting behaviour as an interpretive and not a directive one. Although clerics and religious leaders are significant in the process of influencing political discourse, the outcome is that voters do not necessarily adhere to the guidance of the clerics. Rather, religious messages serve as moral and cognitive shortcuts which aid the voters to overcome uncertainty in competitive elections. This observation conforms to larger theories of voter behaviour that focus on heuristics and shortcuts of information, especially where the information about a policy is scanty and party platforms are weak.

This interpretative conceptualisation of voting behaviour cuts across simplistic accounts showing that religious voters are easily manipulated or politically passive. The Northern Nigeria Muslim voters proactively consider the religious appeals, in addition to other factors, such as reputation among candidates, patronage requirements, and interests of the community. Religion is in turn mediated by the fact that it is a filter through which political information works out, but not necessarily a decisive determiner of the electoral choice. This observation adds to a more sophisticated interpretation of the role of religion in democratic politics.

The discussion of alternative explanations also contributes to the theoretical contribution to the study. Ethnicity, patronage and regionalism are still part and parcel of the Nigerian electoral politics, but the results indicate that they tend to get confused with religious mobilisation than exist independently of religious mobilisation. Ethnic appeals often cross-over to the religious identity with patronage practices often being described as being moral or religious to increase legitimacy. This underpins the claims that in most African democracies, political mobilisation is multi layered and thus religion plays the role of legitimising frame that strengthens, but does not supersede other political logics.

Comparatively, the findings align with research on religion and electoral politics in other Muslim-majority and religiously diverse societies. Similar patterns of strategic religious mobilisation have been noted in countries like Senegal, Indonesia, and Turkey, where political competition motivates elites to utilise religious networks and symbols without a firm commitment to religious governance. By placing Northern Nigeria within this extensive comparative framework, the study contests exceptionalist views that characterise religious politics in Nigeria as solely influenced by extremism or cultural inflexibility.

At the same vein, the Nigerian case shows significant contextual particularities. A political environment where religion is especially useful as a mobilisation tool is created by weak party institutionalisation, intense competition in elections, and strong religious authority structures. This indicates that religious mobilisation is likely to be most significant in democratic systems marked by institutional fragility and elevated uncertainty, a hypothesis that warrants examination in forthcoming comparative studies.

The findings also draw the consequences of the democracy and secularism discussions in the Muslim majority societies. The study demonstrates that religion may be a strategic input in the processes of democracy, contrary to perceiving religious mobilisation as one that is irreconcilable with democracy. This does not however mean that religious mobilisation is a normatively benign affair. Religious identity as a means to structure political competition may strengthen social divisions and enhance polarisation especially when elections are rewarding of polarising speech. The research, therefore, fits into the current debate on the dubious position of religion in democratic consolidation.

From a methodological perspective, the study illustrates that process tracing and qualitative analysis is useful in disaggregating difficult-to-quantify causal relationships. The analysis goes beyond correlation to explanation by following the competitive, mobilisation and voter response sequences. This strategy is in direct response to the calls in comparative politics to conduct more mechanism-focused studies of identity and electoral behaviour.

Finally, the study adds to the body of knowledge about Nigerian politics by providing a sound explanation of how religion can be used to get people to act, without falling into the traps of cultural determinism or instrumental reductionism. Religion is not seen as an unchanging force in society or as just a tool for getting votes. Instead, it is examined as a socially embedded

resource whose political significance arises from the interplay among institutions, actors, and voter interpretations.

The results of this research enhance broader discussions regarding religion and electoral politics by illustrating that religious mobilisation ought to be perceived as a strategic and contingent political practice, rather than a static cultural determinant of voter behaviour. The process-tracing analysis demonstrates that electoral competition functions as a central conditioning factor that influences the timing and manner of religious appeals, as well as their interpretation by Muslim voters. This insight contests deterministic interpretations that ascribe political behaviour in Muslim-majority societies chiefly to religious doctrine or cultural predisposition.

The findings substantiate rational choice institutionalist theories positing that political elites act strategically within institutional limitations. In Northern Nigeria, weak party institutionalisation, limited ideological differentiation, and high electoral uncertainty encourage elites to use religious mobilisation as a low-cost and socially acceptable way to get people to vote. Religious symbols, clerical endorsements, and moral narratives furnish elites with access to extensive social networks and credible authority figures, thus offsetting the deficiencies of weak party organisations. This strategic logic resembles trends seen in other Muslim-majority democracies, especially Indonesia, where electoral competition similarly fosters indirect religious mobilisation via clerical networks and symbolic gestures rather than explicit religious party platforms (Pepinsky et al., 2018).

At the voter level, the results show how important interpretive mechanisms are for understanding how people vote based on religion. Muslim voters in Northern Nigeria do not react automatically to religious cues; rather, they perceive these cues as heuristics indicating candidate credibility, moral integrity, and communal representation. This corroborates identity-based mobilisation theory, which posits that social identities gain political significance when they assist voters in navigating intricate electoral decisions amidst constrained information (Chandra, 2004; Popkin, 1991). In this context, religious identity serves as a cognitive heuristic rather than a doctrinal electoral guide.

The comparative implications of these findings go beyond the Nigerian situation. Similar dynamics have been observed in Indonesia, where Islamic identity affects voter behaviour mainly through informal mechanisms such as clerical endorsement, moral framing, and symbolic alignment, rather than through rigid ideological voting (Pepinsky et al., 2018). In both scenarios, religion functions as a malleable political asset utilised by elites in competitive environments, indicating that the political significance of religion is more effectively elucidated by institutional incentives than by theological substance. This comparative viewpoint shows JSP-UGM's focus on cross-regional analytical discourse and shows the significance of African cases in Southeast Asian political discussions.

More generally, the research is a contribution to the literature on democratic competition in weakly institutionalised party systems. It demonstrates that electoral competition is no longer inevitably resulting in programmatic politics or issue-based voting, rather it can be exacerbated by institutional conditions that encourage such strategies. This has significant normative consequences, which implies that the reinforcement of party institutions and programmatic differentiation could be more effective in containing identity politics than efforts to shut down religious expression in politics.

Finally, the results open up the prospect of future studies examining differentiation within the Muslim-majority localities in greater depth. The effectiveness of religious mobilisation might be contingent according to differences in clerical authority structures, party organisation and state-religion relations. This research gives a model of comparative inquiry by focusing on mechanisms but not on outcomes that can be applied to other instances in Africa and Southeast Asia.

Limitations

The research is not free of limitations. Its use of qualitative information and a one-regional example limit generalisability assertions.

CONCLUSION

This article analysed the correlation among electoral competition, religious mobilisation, and Muslim voting behaviour in Northern Nigeria. The study utilised a qualitative, process-tracing methodology to elucidate the mechanisms and reasons through which religion attains political significance in competitive electoral contexts, rather than presuming its influence as static or culturally predetermined. The results indicate that religious mobilisation in Northern Nigeria is optimally comprehended as a strategic and contextually influenced reaction to electoral incentives, facilitated by institutional frailty and interpretative voter behaviour.

The discussion indicates that increased political competition generates high incentives in the mobilisation of religion by the political elites as a causal instrument for forming support. Religious power, symbolism, and networks provide easy and reliable avenues of political mobilisation in the situations where there is a lack of clear electoral results and political parties are loosely institutionalised. Religion is therefore the strategic resource that helps the elites in minimising the uncertainty of electoral processes, increase the moral legitimacy, and convey the political messages to the Muslim voters in an effective manner.

Similarly, the study proves that the voting patterns of Muslims are not mechanically predetermined through religious appeals. Instead of taking the directions of the clerical authority blindly, voters understand religious indicators as moral and social signals that assist them in making complicated political decisions. Religious mobilisation defines the interpretive context in which voting is based and strengthens the collective identity and

shapes views of credibility of the candidates without necessarily replacing other factors including patronage, ethnicity and regional loyalty. The observation contradicts the reductionist explanations that depict religious voters as passive or easily controllable.

The research also helps to advance arguments in the field of comparative politics and political sociology by combining rational choice institutionalism and theory of mobilisation based on identity. It demonstrates that religious identity is politically consequential because of the activism of elites acting in a given institutional framework. By focusing on the causal processes instead of the correlations, the article promotes the process-based view of religious politics that cuts across the instrumental and constructivist schools of thought. The results have further highlighted the significance of institutional factors especially electoral competition and party weakness in influencing the political role of religion.

Beyond the Nigerian case, the study provides analytically transferable insights for understanding religion and electoral politics in other Muslim-majority and religiously significant contexts. It posits that religious mobilisation is most probable in contexts characterised by intense democratic competition, fragile party systems, and enduring socially influential religious authority structures. These conditions are not exclusive to Northern Nigeria, rendering the study pertinent to extensive comparative analyses concerning democracy, identity, and political mobilisation.

The research is not free of limitations. Its use of qualitative information and a one-regional example limit generalisability assertions. Further studies may improve these results by adding either comparative case studies across regions or countries or using a combination of qualitative analysis and survey-based methods to further investigate voter decoding of religious cues. Additional focus on the intra-Muslim diversity, such as generational and socio-economic differentiation would also enhance insight into religious voting.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that the role of religion in electoral politics is neither accidental nor immutable, Northern Nigeria case shows that religious mobilisation emerges from the interaction of competitive electoral incentives, voter interpretation and institutional failure. Knowing this dynamic is important for understanding the political consequences of religion in a democratic setting and for moving beyond simplistic narratives that conflate religious politics with democratic failure.

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