



## **ELECTION DEBATES AND NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC PROCESS**

**YAGBOYAJU, Dhikrullah**

*Department of Political Science,  
University of Ibadan*

**And**

**SALAAM Abdussobur**

*Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies,  
University of Ibadan*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The study investigated the role of election debates and their impact on the Nigerian political culture, using the American experience as a comparison. The paper contended that election debates are very central to the American democratic culture and that because the Nigerian space has not promoted election debates, the anomalies and irregularities associated with elections in Nigeria, which have led to the global conclusion that Nigeria lacks credible elections, will not abate. Using Benoit's Functional Theory on election debates, the paper argued that election debates can promote political participation, impact on political behaviour and eventually enhance the credibility of Nigerian elections. The paper recommended the institutionalization of election debates as a major program on the election timetable while a Nigerian model of a properly legislated bipartisan organization, independently funded but domiciled under the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) be set up to manage election debates.*

**Keywords:** Election, Debates, Nigeria, America

### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the greatest challenges in the Nigerian democratic experience has been the absence of credible elections. The struggle for power in Nigeria is anarchic because of its centrality in determining "who gets what, when and how". Access to public resources by government officials at Federal and State levels, and its abuse, intensifies the competition for political power, which can be a cut-throat and do or die affair. The winner takes all Nigerian system exacerbates exclusion and inequality while ethnic, religious and regional identity is frequently manipulated for personal gains. Because of the desperation of the political class to hold on to power, elections in Nigeria since 1999 can be described as largely flawed, characterized by mass rigging, ballot box snatching, pre and post-election violence and thuggery, vote buying and fraud as well as voter apathy and ill informed choices. While the 1999 elections appeared to be relatively peaceful, most probably because they were supervised by a military regime which was not an interested party, subsequent exercises were mostly characterized by violence and malfeasance. It is perhaps in keeping with this observation, that Orji and Uzodi (2012), argued that transition elections are relatively more peaceful than consolidation elections. The Transition Monitoring Group (2003), condemned the 2003 elections in Nigeria, observing that "Presidential and Governorship elections in some states fell short of international and regional standards and did not reflect the wishes of the people". The Chief European Union observer to the 2007 elections, Max van den Berg, reported that the election had fallen short of basic international standards, while the Human Rights Watch (2007), described the 2007 elections as the "worst in Nigerian history as the polls marked a dramatic step backwards, even when measured against the dismal standard set by the 2003 elections". The 2011 elections appeared to be an improvement over the 2007 election but still characterized by vote rigging and fraud. The election also witnessed a gale of violent reactions from the Northern part of the country. The 2015 elections were equally contentious and with violent potentials but for the unprecedented



concession of defeat by the then incumbent President, which quickly doused the tensions.

The cornerstone of any democracy is the informed voter. The bane of the Nigerian electoral process has been the absence of informed voters who would be able to make viable choices between political parties and the candidates who represent them. This has been the reason for the various anomalies associated with the Nigerian democratic experience post 1999. The nature of the Nigerian electoral process is such that political parties exist without ideologies, candidates go into elections without manifestos or clear cut campaign programs, while voters go into elections without having ideas of which parties or candidates to vote for, based on their ideologies or manifestos as presented. The outcome thus, is the subjective parochialism of elections conducted with the major considerations being ethnicity, religion or other primordial sentiments. Political campaigns in Nigeria have never been avenues for real candidate-voter intercourse or engagement but platforms for voter inducement through the distribution of foodstuffs, provisions and household items, party sloganeering with no real messages being conveyed, chanting of political songs and occasional scuffles within party members or with opposing groups. As such, while campaigns have not really created platforms for genuine idea or issue based elections, election debates have also not been fully explored as a viable means of enhancing the democratic culture. Issue based campaigns and election debates, being windows for free and open discussions take place between candidates and with their electors and opportunities to sell ideas, have not been really promoted in Nigeria. The problem of credibility of elections in Nigeria through vote rigging, fraud, electoral violence and most especially voter apathy and poor political participation have not abated and rather increased because there has been poor attention to election debates as points of contact for candidates to address and interface with voters, selling their ideas and attempting to influence their political thinking. While examining the nature of Nigeria's democratic processes since 1999, we shall seek to answer the following questions- Of what effects are election debates on any election process? To what extent can election debates contribute to the vitality of Nigeria's democratic process? What lessons can be learnt from the experience of election debates in the United States of America on the Nigerian process? What model can be evolved from this to add value to the Nigerian democratic process?

### **Statement of the Problem**

Since 1999 when Nigeria resumed its democratic journey, there have been five general elections. Studies by (Orji and Uzodi (2012); Omotola (2010) ; Adesote and Abimbola (2014) have contended that beginning with the transition election in 1999, all have been fraught with great anomalies leading to poor credibility of the electoral process. Among the challenges identified have been the issues of poor political participation and voter apathy. These two challenges have been said to be brought about, not only because of ignorance of the electoral process but also ignorance of the choices available. If elections are a participatory process and voters make choices based on their knowledge and information of the political parties and candidates, then the need for election debates cannot be underscored. While more investments are being made by the electoral body (INEC), in fraud proof technology particularly with the introduction of card-readers in the elections, less is invested in voter education and enlightenment of choices of candidates. This discourse examines the place of election debates in promoting political participation and the credibility of elections. It is a comparative study on how election debates can help to strengthen the democratic process in Nigeria by investigating how debates are funded, managed and organized, in the face of the conflicting interests which elections are characterized with. It investigates the



independence and credibility of election debates and its outcomes on the credibility of elections in Nigeria, using the United States of America as a comparison and case-study. This is because of the latter's long established tradition of election debates and its acclaim as a bastion of modern democracy. The work relies on published works, newspaper articles, archival materials and the internet.

### **Literature Overview**

The role played by election debates in making political democracy more intelligible to voters in the United States, has been the subject of extensive literature, much of which has focused on the effectiveness of the debates (Kantz and Dayan, 1992) as disseminators of political information to mass audiences. One body of study has dwelt on voters' choice by trying to evaluate the extent to which voters preferences are determined by debates. The outcomes of the findings have been mixed. Williams (2015) argues that the format of US presidential debates have not evolved with the demographics, changes in voting patterns or shortened attention spans. Contrarily however, Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) and Holbert (2009) would argue that debates may not often convert partisans from one side to the other, they have strong effects on previously politically undecided people. These are what have been described as floating voters. (Katz and Feldman, 1962; Geer, 1980). The argument has been that debates may not alter the decisions of committed voters but may influence the outcomes of undecided, weak or conflicted voters. Chafee (1978) highlights four situations that voters can find debates useful- 1. When either one of the candidates is relatively unknown. 2. When voters are undecided or not sure of the candidates. 3. When the race is close. 4. When allegiances to political parties are weak. Holbrook (1996), Mc Kinney and Holbert (2001), Benoit et al (2003), however argue that the perception of voters is only further reinforced by their original predisposition before the debates, as their perception of candidates performance is already biased based on their pre-debate choices. The contention is that voters enter into the debates with perceptions of candidates' character and leadership qualities and the debates tend to reinforce rather than change images unless the viewers are undecided or not well informed about a candidate (Warner, 2011). Another line of argument promoted by Wald and Lupfer (1978), is that debates heighten the interests of voters not necessarily on the candidates but on the issues. This is what has been described as "civic lessons". This argument holds that debates tend to stimulate the thought processes of voters to want to probe further on the social problems, policies and ideas raised by the candidates to increase their political knowledge which could translate to political action (Mc Kinney and Rill, 2009; Mc Kinney, 2013). The Racine Group in its White Paper (2002) opined that debates have the ability to educate voters, affect normative attitudes, engage citizens in the campaign dialogue and influence votes and elections especially in tight races. There is however a consensus that election debates in the United States fulfil a valuable democratic function of enabling voters to evaluate potential leaders and their proposed policies, whether as aids to simplifying voters choices or incentive to becoming more aware, confident and engaged citizens (Moss and Coleman, 2016). Debates in the United States of America thus, are not only important in persuasion but in agenda setting. In a survey conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Centre in 2016, a preponderance of people interviewed, held that presidential debates were more helpful in helping them decide how to vote than news coverage of the campaign, political talk shows, campaign rallies, campaign adverts and watching already broadcast interviews with candidates (Holz et al, 2016). Kaid and others, cited in Mc Kinney (2013), argue that election debates are infact more helpful than political adverts in strengthening voters' political information efficacy. Mc Kinney (2013) contends that as one of the most information rich sources of campaign



information, debates offer sustained exposure to issue and candidate image information and reduces misinformation and grey areas that could arise through other sources of campaign.

Democracy is a system of government in which a country's political leaders are chosen by people in periodic elections. It implies the utilization of electoral processes to decide which citizens shall be entrusted with the task of governance and presupposes that citizens would have a say through an elective procedure that is universal, free and fair. It also presupposes that people have a choice between different candidates and parties who want to govern. The people are free to criticize and replace their leaders and representatives. Appadorai (2004), described democracy as "a system in which people directly and periodically exercise the government through electing their representatives. It is a process or arrangement in which the people of a country rule themselves through themselves". From the above, flows the ultimate power of the people as sovereign and the highest authority in a democracy from which all powers are derived. If the people are sovereign, their major strength lies in their participation. In participation, they must be knowledgeable about the issues, have a reasonable level of enlightenment that would empower them to monitor their leaders and representatives. Participation in this sense, involves voting in elections, debating public issues and being involved in political processes including protests. Political participation is one of the fundamental requirements of a democracy, while political awareness determines the extent to which people participate in the democratic process. There is a strong relationship and nexus between democracy, elections and political participation. Political participation requires awareness and the processes by which information is provided and the means by which it is provided, engages public interests and stimulates debates as opposed to apathy and alienation (Agu, 2015).

Elections remain a stabilizing factor in any democratic society. It is an important component of any transition process (Edet, 2015). Odusote and Abimbola (2014), note that elections have become an integral part of representative democracy that by and large prevail across the world. Every modern vision of representative democracy entails the notion of elections as the primary means of selection of political decision makers (Lindberg, 2003). While Robert and Edwards (1991), see elections as a method of selecting people to fill certain public offices through choices made by the electorate, Edet (2015) insists that it is impossible to talk about democracy without making implicit reference to elections. Similarly, it is impossible to make reference to elections without talking about choices. The opportunity to make choices and how choices come about, are through campaigns and political debates both at the level of the electorate and elected. Elections are the hallmark of any democratic process and the capacity to make unhindered choices, whether rational or sentimental, determines the measurement of democracy (Ojo, 2007). While it is argued that elections may not necessarily bring the most rational outcomes, the conduct of credible elections cannot be complete if there are no rational choices.

Goodwin- Gill (2006), identified ten broad criteria or markers for identifying credible elections. These are:

1. Electoral law and system
2. Constituency delimitation
3. Election management
4. Right to vote
5. Voter registration
6. Civic education and voter information
7. Candidates, political parties and political organizations
8. Electoral campaigns, including political meetings, media access and coverage



9. Balloting, monitoring and results
10. Complaints and dispute resolution

Flowing from the above, the case for increased political participation promoted by an enlightened and politically conscious citizenry in Nigeria cannot be underscored. The level and pattern of political participation of citizens, determine to a great extent, the success of the political system. It is apposite therefore, that the political stability and development of any political system is a function of the awareness and positive involvement in civic and political matters (Falade, 2014). Democracy demands from the common man, a certain level of ability and character, rational conduct and active participation in government (Appadorai, 2004).

## **A Theoretical Discourse**

### **Functional Theory**

One of the most used and tested theories on election debates, is the Functional Theory, which was propounded by William Benoit. Benoit (2007) identified five foundations on which the Functional theory is laid:

1. Voting is a comparative art
2. Candidates must differentiate themselves from their opponents
3. Political campaign messages give candidates the opportunity to differentiate themselves
4. Candidates establish preferability through acclaiming, attacking and defending
5. Campaign discourse occur solely in the areas of policy and character

The above basis of the theory, presupposes that voters take decisions on choice of candidates through comparative judgment. Citizens have no reason to prefer one candidate over another if the candidates are the same and offering the same choices. Therefore, candidates must bring to the table, different choices and options, which the voters shall then choose from. It is essential for candidates in contested campaigns to develop distinctions between themselves and their opponents. Once a candidate decides which distinction to stress to voters, he or she must convey the information to voters through campaign messages (Benoit, 2007). The Functional theory contends that candidates tend to persuade voters as to their desirability either in terms of their policy offers or their character. It however predicts that policy comments will be more frequent than character comments in election campaign discourse. The discourse takes the forms of the candidate first acclaiming or applauding his position by making known his positive characteristics and policy stand. He goes further to attack those of his opponent by exposing the weaknesses of the opponents' position and the undesirability of voters making his opponent a choice. Lastly, he defends any damage done to him by his opponent in the course of the discourse.

The Functional theory is well suited to simplifying the forms of campaign discourse and has proven to be an excellent analytical tool. It has an advantage of being applicable to all forms of campaign, either on television, radio, talk shows, web pages and election debates (Benoit, 2003). The theory has however been criticized for being best suited only for two party systems and difficult to apply to a multiparty system. It is also criticized for being too culturally limited as it takes cognizance mainly of the American political and communication cultures (Isotalus, 2011). The implication of this, as expressed by Isotalus, would mean that applying the theory in relation to the Nigerian political milieu may be difficult because the context and political communication cultures are different. This is however not correct, in the sense that the five foundations of the theory are universally applicable for a democracy to thrive and as earlier highlighted, the essence of elections, is to give voters the opportunity to make choices. The Functional theory



exposes the need for candidates to create opportunities for voters to have choices through their access to political campaigns and debates. This is against the background of the continuous clamour for issue based campaigns in the Nigerian political culture characterized by the lack of ideologies and clear cut policy goals of political parties and candidates, which the Functional theory seeks to promote.

### **The American Experience**

The first recorded political debate in the United States of America was in 1858 between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas for a Senatorial seat. The debate at that time focused on slavery and the desirability of the union of the United States. From all accounts, Abraham Lincoln lost the debate and subsequently the Senatorial seat.

After the 1858 debate, there were no properly recorded debates until 1948 when there was the debate between Thomas Dewey and Harold Stassen which centred on outlawing the Communist Party in the United States. The debate had a radio listenership of approximately eighty million. In 1956, between Adlai Stevenson and Estes Kefauver, the issue revolved round the United States foreign and domestic policy. Televised election debates in the United States of America actually began in 1960 between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy. For a population of about 180 million then, 66.4 million viewers watched the first televised presidential debate, making it one of the most watched broadcasts in television history (Phillips, 2016). The debate then, focused on the United States domestic and foreign policy. In 1976, the same issues revolved around the debate between Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, while the League of Women Voters sponsored the debates. In 1980 and 1984, the debates were similarly sponsored by the League of Women Voters between Ronald Reagan and John Anderson and Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale, on issues revolving around domestic policy, foreign policy, economy and defence. The 1988 debates witnessed the sparring between George Bush and Michael Dukakis and was watched by 65 million people. There was a sensation in 1992, when rather than two candidates, three debated- Bill Clinton, George Bush and Ross Perrot. 1996 witnessed Bill Clinton and Bob Dole, while in 2000, the debates had Al Gore and George. W. Bush. The year 2004 witnessed the crossing of swords between George Bush and John Kerry in Town hall styled debates witnessed by an approximated 62.4 million viewers. In 2008, John Mc. Cain and Barack Obama sparred in a hotly contested debate which included questions submitted online, on foreign policy and national security witnessed by 52.4 million viewers. Obama and Mitt Romney debated in 2012, while the issues raised in the 2016 debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton is still reverberating many months after.

Today, the United States presidential debate is described as the Superbowl of American democracy. After candidates are nominated by their political parties, the next big event is the election debates. In 2008, the debates featured the use of high technology via Facebook and YouTube, while in 2016, the debates were live-streamed and made available both on YouTube and Twitter. Following the loss of Richard Nixon in the presidential debate and the subsequent election, it was however not until 1976 before presidential debates became a regular feature of the electoral process in the United States.

A bipartisan organization, Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) controls presidential debates. The CPD was established and incorporated in 1987 as a permanent part of every general election, to ensure that debates provide the best possible information to voters. Its primary function is to sponsor and produce debates for the Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates and to undertake educational and research activities related to the debates ([www.cpd.org](http://www.cpd.org)). The eight elections conducted since 1987, have had the debates organized by the CPD. The CPD receives no funding



from government, political parties or candidates but from the communities that host the debates and corporate, foundation and private donors, whose donations have no influence on the activities of the Commission. Following the 1984 elections, the Harvard University Institute of Politics and the Georgetown University Centre for Strategic and International Studies undertook separate studies which found out that, debates among leading candidates should become an indispensable feature of the American election culture. Based on the findings, the two major political parties endorsed the creation of the CPD. The goal of the CPD, being that of affording voters, opportunity to sharpen their views in a focused debate format among leading Presidential and Vice- Presidential candidates. The debates have attracted between thirty to seventy million viewers and topics have covered domestic issues, foreign policy, defence and economy. The challenge however, is that through a surveyed polling process that picks only candidates who score a minimum of 15%, third parties are excluded from the debates. CPD will not include candidates' nominees unless they draw up to 15% of the votes in a slew of surveys (Fund, 2016). This has led to litigations from candidates who have felt excluded from the process.

Election debates in the United States have also been observed to influence elite behaviour. This is because if a candidate performs poorly at the debates, financial backers may pull away and not invest in the campaign. As a result, poor candidates may not go the whole hog of the elections, but back out from the race. With the pre-eminence which presidential debates take today, it would be political suicide for any leading aspirant to boycott the election debates on any grounds.

The aggregate of the roles of election debates in the United States of America could be summarized as follows:

1. Election debates have become a regular feature of the democratic process and as such, have become ingrained into the United States democratic culture.
2. Presidential debates are not an all comers affair but arranged only for leading candidates as identified through a polling selection criteria and process.
3. A bi-partisan organization, independently funded and not encumbered by political influences, organizes the debates.
4. The debates are well structured, including the use of ICT and online media to connect with a larger audience, including the youths
5. The debates are largely issue based and revolve round contemporary themes and national conversations.
6. The debates are well viewed by large audiences and this has greatly influenced voter participation in the election process.
7. Debates have become so crucial to the electoral process that abstention under any guise by a candidate could be highly inimical to his aspiration. As such candidates do well to prepare properly for the debates.

### **The Nigerian Situation**

Election debates have not been fully ingrained or found their way into the Nigerian democratic culture. While they cannot be said not to exist, the organization of debates have been haphazard and have not effectively impacted on elections as they should. The 1993 election debates between Chief M.K.O. Abiola and Alhaji Bashir Tofa, appear to be the closest to an ideal presidential debate as it gave a clear opportunity for comparison and merit between the candidates (Adibe, 2015).

Subsequent debates since 1999 have been conducted by the Nigeria Election Debate Group (NEDG), a coalition of broadcast organizations, civil society groups and professional bodies ([www.debatesinternational.org](http://www.debatesinternational.org)). While the group claims incorruptibility, there have been widespread allegations of shady deals and fraud even



among members of the group (Premium Times, March 22, 2015; [www.informationnigeria.com](http://www.informationnigeria.com), February 2015). This does not preclude other organizations organizing their own debates with attendant confusion and duplication of idea and activity (Vanguard, 2011). It is perhaps against the background of the confidence crisis, that a bill was presented to the National Assembly seeking the establishment of a special Commission solely to organize election debates in Nigeria (Odunsi, 2016). While the bill has been kicked against by stakeholders including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) on the basis of the superfluity and the burden of setting up a distinct bureaucracy on the national resources, arguments have also arisen as to the nature of funding and independence of such a Commission (Ogunwule, 2017). The consensus is however clear that, Nigeria needs a more credible and reliable, independent election debate organization.

Apart from the absence of a strong election debate institution, debates have been challenged by the lack of proper election time-tables. This has led to impromptu, hurried and not well organized debates. Given the contemporary Nigerian political behaviour, election debates are informed by bigotry and primordial sentiments as the debates are not issue based and tend to lean on ethnicity, religion and other sentiments (Akinola, 2012). A debate will only have impact where the voters see it as opportunity to evaluate policies, preparedness and demeanour of those who seek to govern them. There is also a wrong perception of election debates as an entertainment or opportunity for showmanship and not an opportunity for candidates to sell themselves to their employers (Adibe, 2015). Election debates are also challenged in a country where there is a high level of illiteracy, poor access to mass media, poor electricity supply and other challenges of access to the viewing of such debates (Olaiya, 2015). Going by the above, candidates have taken election debates for granted and are not keen on the platforms which election debates provide and this has been attested to by the culture of boycott of election debates by major candidates, who do not see the debates as having any effects on the process.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS ON A NIGERIAN MODEL AND CONCLUSION**

So far, we have been able to establish that election debates are an essential part of the culture of a proper democracy. It should therefore be considered a right of citizens to demand on getting major candidates to debate their vision for Nigeria. Such debate should be properly institutionalized and factored into the election timetables. While the American model throws up a well institutionalized political debate group which is not as much bedevilled by a confidence crisis, there is need to adopt a Nigerian model that would address the peculiarities of the socio-political milieu which Nigeria finds itself. A home grown model of a properly legislated election debate organization should be set up under the auspices of the political parties to give it a bipartisan outlook and remove the toga of bias, as all parties will be represented on the board of the group, while civil society groups and independent media organizations shall be co-opted. The debate organization shall however be supervised and warehoused in the Independent National Electoral Commission, which shall chairman the debate group. It flows that if the Commission is entrusted with the conduct of the elections proper, it is no less competent to handle all processes leading to it. It is also contended that if properly organized by an independent election debate group with the needed transparency, integrity and competence, the needed confidence for participation in the debates by candidates, would have been restored. With this, boycotts of debates by candidates would no longer exist. This Nigerian model of having political parties on the board of the election group would strengthen the parties, particularly the oppositions.



Election debates have the strength of ensuring that political parties throw up their best candidates and the resultant outcome is that internal democracy within the parties shall be promoted and subsequent weakening of the patronage system which the Nigerian political space aberratively promotes. Also, the emphasis shall move from violence to issue based elections. On the whole, with the institutionalization of election debates into the Nigerian political culture, the problems of political education and participation and the dilemma of a poor democratic culture would have been overcome.

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