

Personal Data and the Influence Industry in Nigerian Elections

Data-Driven Campaigning by Formal and Informal Actors

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1 Introduction

In Nigeria's 2015 election, Cambridge Analytica (CA) spread targeted disinformation to suppress opposition votes and allegedly released sensitive medical and financial information about then-opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari. In 2018, the Nigerian government formed a committee to investigate, amongst others, CA's 2015 activities and promised criminal prosecutions if necessary.¹ However, two years on, there has been no update from the government committee. Furthermore, beyond a flurry of articles in 2018 that largely regurgitated what international media outlets posted, Nigeria's media houses have largely left CA's activities and the government committees promised investigations uncovered.²

The lack of attention given to the CA scandal is worrying. If we assume that their notoriety derives in part from how egregious some of their tactics were, it is likely that other actors with morally questionable but less scandalous techniques are operating under the radar in Nigeria. It is therefore urgent that we have an overview of the use of data in Nigerian elections, as a first step to increasing awareness and activism. This report is an attempt to fill this gap.

Using the framing introduced in Tactical Tech's publication, "Personal Data, Political Persuasion",³ this report combines interviews with various actors in the political influence industry and secondary evidence from journalistic sources to map the data-driven campaign techniques used in Nigeria. This mapping focuses on the 2015 and 2019 presidential elections but incorporates examples from earlier and lower-level elections as needed⁴. The report then addresses a puzzle that the first section unearths: why does it seem that the formal political consulting industry in Nigeria is so small? To answer this, the report looks at the different actors in the influence industry, focusing on the kinds of political actors that hire them, the kinds of elections they tend to be involved in, and the techniques that they use in serving their clients.

In short, the report finds that the use data-driven campaigning in Nigerian elections is growing in prominence. Generally, political actors use data and digital technologies to fundraise, test for the resonance of campaign messages, target messages to specific geographic locations, and send out bulk SMS, audio, and WhatsApp messages. In conditions of high poverty and state capture⁵, political parties and candidates concentrate on trying to sway votes using fiduciary and other kinds of inducements. Party agents that conduct such vote-buying transactions are increasingly using mobile technology to facilitate those transactions at points where analogue arrangements are deficient. Finally, there is more focus on voter preference at the Presidential level. Here, the sheer number of potential voters, a growing number of which are not embedded in networks of political control, creates incentives for more conventional modern campaigning techniques to be used.

2 Methodology

To generate the data on data-driven campaigning, we conducted semi-structured interviews in person, on the phone or via email with 20 actors in the political influence industry. All respondents from political consulting firms did not want to be identified. We found initial contacts on the International Association of Political Consultants website. Since the political influence industry is

¹"Nigeria to Investigate Allegations of Cambridge Analytica Involvement in Elections." France 24. Last modified April 2, 2018. <https://www.france24.com/en/20180402-nigeria-cambridge-analytica-elections-investigation>.

²Tully, Melissa. "How the Nigerian and Kenyan Media Handled Cambridge Analytica." The Conversation. Last modified January 9, 2020. <https://theconversation.com/how-the-nigerian-and-kenyan-media-handled-cambridge-analytica-128473>.

³Tactical Tech, *Personal Data: Political Persuasion. Inside the Influence Industry. How it works*, (2019), <https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/inside-the-influence-industry>.

⁴Such as governorship and local government council elections.

⁵Several of the country's most important political institutions are "captive" – that is, they are democratic by nomenclature but not operationally.

opaque, we asked our interviewees to recommend other people we should speak to, a technique known as snowball sampling. While qualitative methods typically do not aim to generate representative samples, our snowballing technique quickly revealed that the number of firms conducting data-driven campaigning in Nigeria is small. We are therefore confident that our responses are a fair indication of what is going on in the Nigerian political influence industry.

We also conducted a desk review of news articles and reports to add context to themes we got from the interviews. The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) has carried out significant research into the use of disinformation in elections. We leveraged contacts and prior research conducted, especially a CDD report on the use of WhatsApp in the 2019 Nigerian elections. To further ground this study in the Nigerian realpolitik we reviewed literatures on vote buying and election campaigning.

Finally, examples from various 2015 and 2019 elections were used to illustrate points where appropriate. Most cases presented here involve the two main parties, the All Progressive's Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP). This emerged organically from our research and was not part of the research design.

3 Political Context

The British created Nigeria in 1914 through an amalgamation of three separate regional entities: a Hausa/Fulani North, Yoruba South West, and Igbo South East. A national project to unify the regions never quite emerged during colonisation. Rather, regionalism endured and shaped both Nigeria's colonial experience and post-independence development. The colonial policy of indirect rule led to varied levels of administrative control and cultural assimilation between regions. Having little common ground, political elites, party leadership and loyalties in the regions developed separately until the 1950s, when the independence movement picked up steam. Consequently, the regions had different expectations for how much power the British should yield. The first major political parties were constructed along this cleavage.

Colonial regionalism enabled party monopolisation of resources, which in turn birthed money politics. Within their respective regions, political parties set themselves up as arbiters of power and resources, having emerged before functional state institutions. Thus, citizens came to associate parties, not the state, with the provision of services. State institutions were co-opted into this dynamic when they did emerge; they served as de facto party agencies. Invariably, parties favoured partisans in their distribution.⁶

Elites spearheaded political party formation to facilitate their clamour for independence. They kept the struggle amongst themselves; parties typically did not seek to co-opt the masses. However, post-independence the prize became victory at the polls, introducing the need for a more populist appeal. To adapt, elites relied on local networks of intermediaries. These intermediaries included traditional authorities like chiefs and Emirs, and modern groupings like students' unions and professional associations. They created partisan bases by establishing personalised political relationships.⁷ They were also responsible for day to day campaign implementation, from door-to-door visits to negotiating clientelist arrangements. The fact that parties were responsible for provision enabled them to demand votes in return for resources. The power asymmetry and tight locus of control also made threats of violence credible. Campaign irregularities thus emerged organically as dominant

⁶ A national project's emphasis on centralising resources may have reduced the relevance of any one party's access to resources. Presumably, the emphasis on national institutions would have also meant national institutions developing faster than they did. This might have mitigated citizens associating parties with provision.

⁷ These intermediaries ranged from traditional leaders such as emirs and chiefs, to modern societies like student unions. While elites presumably preferred national appeal, their networks of control were largely regional.

techniques.⁸ Repeated military coups up till the late 1990s consolidated these local networks of control as authoritarian rule relegated political participation to localities.⁹

Prior to the return to democracy in 1999, Nigeria experienced successive authoritarian and oppressive regimes that had no regard for citizen participation, values, rule of law, or practices that enabled individuals or group non-state actors to get involved in nation-building and national development. Since the country's return to democracy in 1999, there have been six successive electoral cycles. The elections between 1999 and 2019 were held with varying amounts of electoral integrity, but this period represents the longest unbroken run of democracy since the country's independence.

4 Legal Context

The legal framework for the conduct of the elections in Nigeria comprises of the 1999 Constitution (as amended);¹⁰ the Electoral Act 2010 as amended;¹¹ the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) (Amendment) Act 1998; Nigeria Broadcasting Commission Act, Cyber Crimes Act and Guidelines issued by INEC.¹² The Constitution takes precedence in that, any provision in any Act or Regulation that is contrary to its provision(s) is null, void and of no effect, to the extent of such inconsistency.¹³ INEC is the main administrative and election management body that is mandated to supervise the conduct of elections.

In Nigeria, political parties disburse finances for the conduct of their electoral campaigns. They also accept donations from organisations and private individuals. The Electoral Act regulates campaign financing. Political parties are meant to make their expenditures and funds open to scrutiny by INEC, who can then forward the details to the National Assembly. The campaign spending of the presidential and governorship candidates are limited to N1,000,000,000.00 (~\$2.6 million) and N200,000,000 (~\$526,000), respectively.¹⁴ Infringement of the spending limits attracts a maximum fine of N1,000,000 (~\$2630) and one-year imprisonment, N800,000 (~\$2100) and nine months in prison for the presidential and governorship races respectively.¹⁵ The law also criminalises vote-buying and vote-selling. Receivers and givers of money in return for votes are liable on conviction to a fine of N100,000 (~\$262) or 12 months imprisonment or both. But compliance with this legal provision remains challenged by a widespread lack of enforcement.

There are two major problems with political financing in the Nigerian political system. One is the definition of expenditure. The law disregards "any expenditure incurred before the notification of the date fixed for the election concerning services rendered or material supplied before such".¹⁶ This narrow definition of election expenditure often serves as a legal loophole that can allow potential candidates to spend considerable amounts of money before the official start of the campaign period. These provisions are also often breached during election campaigns, with political office aspirants resorting to third party spending.¹⁷ Examples of such vehicles from the 2015 vote, were the Neighbour

⁸ According to survey-based estimates, almost one out of five Nigerians is personally exposed to vote buying and almost one in ten experiences threats of electoral violence (Bratton, 2008).

⁹ Diane Zovighian, "Clientelism and Party Politics: Evidence from Nigeria," (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2018).

¹⁰ Hereinafter to be referred to as the Constitution

¹¹ Hereinafter to be referred to as the Electoral Act

¹² Other bodies of law regulating the elections include the criminal and penal code, Nigeria Broadcasting Code, case laws etc

¹³ See Section 1(3) of the 1999 constitution as amended

¹⁴ See section 91(2-3) of the act. The expenses incurred by candidates for the senatorial seat are pegged down to N40,000,000, N20, 000,000 for the House of Representatives, N10,000,000 for Chairmanship and 1000,000 for Councillorship election.

¹⁵ See sections 91(10 (a))ba) respectively

¹⁶ Section (92(1) of the act.

to Neighbour for Transformation Campaign utilised by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Buhari Media Support Group utilised by the All Progressives Congress (APC).¹⁸

Considering Nigeria's size, it is practically impossible for political candidates and their parties to physically campaign everywhere they have potential voters, as such media plays a vital role in elections. The Electoral Act provides that campaigns by political parties shall only commence 90 days before polling day and end 24 hours before voting starts. A violation of this law attracts a penalty of a fine up to N500,000 (\$1,300).¹⁹ The statute goes on to provide for equal access to media time subject to the payment of a tariff and dictates that state media should not be monopolised to the detriment of contending parties by incumbents.²⁰ Campaigns or broadcasts based on religious or sectional sentiments may be subject to criminal prosecution.

Increasingly, politicians use traditional and new media to conduct expensive and divisive campaigns. Television advertisements are a popular feature of political campaigns in Nigeria at all levels but are also the most expensive.²¹ Rallies are televised live; political parties also buy airtime slots to share their messages and to push propaganda against their opponents. The Nigerian National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) is legally mandated to sanction any breach of the provisions identified through INEC's monitoring or complaints received on content or conduct of a broadcast.²² For instance, during the 2019 elections the NBC sanctioned 45 media groups for, amongst others, breaches of the rules on hate speech and inflammatory broadcasts.²³ The NBC Act prohibits "all partisan political broadcasts, campaigns, jingles, announcements and party symbols on air 24 hours before polling"; and the declaration of votes unless as announced by the electoral management body.²⁴ However, partisan ownership of the media coupled with the zero-sum nature of Nigerian politics has made noncompliance with media broadcast rules commonplace.

Social media remains outside of this regulation. Similarly, there is no accountability framework for social media companies with regards to elections in Nigeria. However, the Cybercrimes Act of 2015 does criminalise sharing false news: "any person who knowingly or intentionally sends a message or other matter using computer systems or network that he knows to be false, to cause annoyance, inconvenience danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, ill will or needless anxiety to another or causes such a message to be sent: commits an offence under this Act and shall be liable on conviction to a fine of not more than N7,000,000 or imprisonment for a term of not more than three years; or to both such fine and imprisonment".²⁵

To offer some level of protection to Nigerians data online, in 2019 the 'Nigeria Data Protection Regulations' 2019 (NDPR) were introduced. This seeks to regulate information technology in Nigeria. A breach of the NDPR attracts a fine of between N200,000 (\$555) and N500,000 (\$1,367), an imprisonment of three years or both. The Nigerian Communication Commission also has in place a "do

¹⁷ Idayat Hassan (2017) An Appraisal of the Legal Framework for the Conduct of Elections in 2015 general Elections in Nigeria, Issues and Challenges, Centre for Democracy and Development

¹⁸ The Transformation Ambassadors of Nigeria, masquerading as a non-government organization, organized rallies, bought airtime on television and radio and gave gifts ahead of the 2015 presidential elections. The BMC was present in all 774 local government areas of Nigeria. A peculiarity to these structures is the claim that they are voluntary and funded by personal monies.

¹⁹ Section 99 (2) of the act as amended

²⁰ See section 100 of the act

²¹ One hour airtime during the elections cost an average of N5,000,000, almost \$15,000 and political parties besides advert cost.

²² 12. Section 14 of the NBC Act

²³ NBC Sanctions 45 Stations, Cautions BBNaija Against 'Unwholesome Contents' <https://www.channelstv.com/2019/09/26/nbc-sanctions-30-stations-cautions-bbnaija-against-unwholesome-contents/#.XvkuLWpnZo0.twitter>

²⁴ See Section 5 of the NBC Act

²⁵ Government of Nigeria. 2015. "[Cybercrimes Act, Section 24\(1\)\(b\)](#)".

not disturb"²⁶ policy which gives subscribers the opportunity to choose what messages to receive from networks. This policy restricts how digital campaigning per organisations as subscribers have the freedom to opt in or stop unsolicited messages. Regardless, political disinformation campaigns aimed at garnering votes, dividing voters, and suppressing opponents' participation are increasingly being utilised in Nigerian elections.

Since the return to democracy, electoral violence has remained a constant feature of Nigeria's politics. This is largely fueled by the amount of money and power associated with elective office. Nigerian elections have witnessed several incidents of ballot boxes snatching, arson, killing and destruction of election materials. A combination of Section 227 of the Constitution (as amended) and sections of the Electoral Act prescribe punishment for the contravention of electoral offences.²⁷ However, the adequacy of the provisions to fight electoral violence remains in question. Sentences are disproportionately light and the trial of election offences in regular court renders the prosecution highly ineffective, as INEC – who is responsible for leading any prosecutions – is hampered by the small size of its legal department. The partisanship and inefficiency of the security agencies that oversee the conduct of elections further complicates this issue. In every election since 1999, there have been instances where the security forces have taken an active part in vote-rigging, voter intimidation or disruption at polling stations.

5 How Has Personal Data Featured over Nigeria's Political Campaign History?

The 1993 general election is the first election that the literature associates with market research informing campaign strategy. Then-presidential aspirant MKO Abiola's movements "Hope 93" and "Farewell to Poverty" were grounded in an evidence-backed knowledge of what the citizenry wanted.²⁸ However, how exactly the Abiola campaign obtained an understanding of citizens' needs is unclear. But the 1993 campaign does not appear to have seen a shift in election campaigning in Nigeria. In fact, the literature decries a recent reliance on electoral prophetism, or "religious leaders' pronouncements of who will win or lose without recourse to a systematic and scientific method of data collection and analysis."²⁹

Why would politicians prefer prophecies to polls? For most of Nigeria's history, there have been easier ways to predict voting patterns and craft a campaign message than using citizens' personal data. Political control of mass media, ethnicity, campaign irregularities and religious affiliation are some of the factors can better predict voting patterns in different Nigerian elections. For example, voting patterns in the 1979 general elections followed the pattern of mass media coverage: the National Party of Nigeria had the widest coverage and won the election, the Unity Party of Nigeria received the second largest media coverage and the second-largest vote, and the Nigerian People's Party received the third largest media coverage and the third-largest vote. At that time, media houses were highly partisan, as many owners doubled as politicians or were politically active.³⁰ In 2007, an election

²⁶ "NCC Enforces 2442 "Do Not Disturb" Shortcode - The Communicator Online." Nigerian Communications Commission. Last modified 2016. https://www.ncc.gov.ng/thecommunicator/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1363:ncc-enforces-2442-qdo-not-disturbq-shortcode&catid=25&Itemid=179.

²⁷ Section 94: Conduct of political rallies and processions; Section 95: Prohibition of certain conducts etc. of political campaigns; Section 96: Prohibition of use of force or violence at political campaigns; Section 119: Disorderly behaviour at political meetings; Section 128: Disorderly conduct at Election Day; Section 129 "Offences on Election Day; and Section 131: Threatening Conducts amongst others.

²⁸ John Amifor, "Political Advertising Design in Nigeria, 1960-2007." *International Journal of Arts and Humanities* 4, no. 2 (April 2015), 149-163. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v4i2.11>.

²⁹ Afamefume P. Ikem., Confidence N. Ogbonna, and Olusola Ogunnubi. "Pentecostalism, Electoral Prophetism and National Security Challenges in Nigeria." *African Security* 13, no. 1(2020), 28-53.

marked by widespread rigging, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) campaign "did not rely so much on advertising...but relied on the ability to manipulate the election."³¹

However, changes to the electoral environment in the last decade have made it more difficult to rely on these vote-prediction heuristics. In 2013, five parties merged to form the All Progressives Congress (APC) to present a viable challenge to the dominant PDP. Its success in the 2015 polls, when its candidate ousted the incumbent in Nigeria's only electoral turnover so far, has created a two-party system. Furthermore, INEC's introduction of technology into voter accreditation has helped to "eliminate the dual problems of impersonation and multiple voting—previously rampant rigging tactics."³² These changes are gradually increasing the salience of policy preferences in shaping electoral outcomes among certain segments of voters.

6 Techniques in Use

Our findings suggest modern data-driven campaign techniques are used in Nigeria to fundraise, test for the resonance of campaign messages and target messages to specific geographic locations. Most activity is in sending out mass SMS, audio, and WhatsApp messages, and in polling to generate voter data. Few attempts are made to link the resulting data or insights to campaign intelligence or influence. For example, the studied political parties do not use mobile campaign apps to engage with ideas and concerns from their constituencies, even when that is the stated purpose of the app. We did not find any instances of some of the techniques listed in "Political Persuasion: Personal Data", for example, political parties seeking to influence search results or targeting TV ads to specific households.

These are the campaign techniques we found to be in use in Nigeria:

6.1 A/B Testing

A/B testing or split testing is used in situations where an advertiser wants to compare the effectiveness of variants of a feature of an advertisement. It involves splitting the target audience into groups and exposing each segment to one variant of the advert. Gavaar, a digital marketing agency³³ that creates websites and has run social media campaigns for political parties, uses A/B testing as a backend procedure. This means that Gavaar does not propose A/B testing as a service to candidates but that Gavaar may test variants of a website or social media post without letting a candidate know, and the link between website variants, traffic and turnout or actual votes is not explored.³⁴

6.2 Campaign Apps

Mobile apps have become handy for political parties to deliver messages and interact with voters and supporters. For the just concluded 2019 general elections, APC created two official apps that share the same privacy policy and collect the same data. Its party member app, APC Mobile, collects the date of birth, email address, phone number, and INEC voters' number from those who sign up. It facilitates registering as an APC member, getting APC related news and events, donating, and paying

³⁰ Rahman O Olayiwola, "Political Communications: Press and Politics in Nigeria's Second Republic." *Africa Media Review* 5, no. 2 (1991), 31-45. <http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals>.

³¹ John Amifor, "Political Advertising Design in Nigeria, 1960-2007."

³² Yomi Kazeem, "It's become much harder to rig elections in Nigeria thanks to technology." *Quartz Africa*, February 11, 2019. <https://qz.com/africa/1553505/nigeria-election-rigging-inec-card-readers-and-pvc-protect-polls/>.

³³ Gavaar, "Leading Digital Marketing Agency in Lagos Nigeria," accessed April 12, 2020, <https://www.gavaar.com/>.

³⁴ Michael Abisuga [CEO, Gavaar], Phone Interview, February 20, 2020.

member dues. It has been downloaded more than 5,000 times.³⁵ It also has an app for APC agents, which they can use to register new party members. It has been downloaded more than 500 times.³⁶ According to the privacy policy, both apps do not use cookies for tracking purposes.³⁷

The PDP campaign app, also created for the 2019 elections, is a communication platform that enables party members to post messages and interact with other party members. The app's description asserts that "the intention of the app is to connect the people to the party leaders...[the] party also hopes to get constructive and valuable feedback...".³⁸ But activity on the app is basically non-existent; there are no party leaders present³⁹ and the link to the privacy policy is currently broken. The app developer is confident that the PDP party does not use any personal identifiable data collected on the app.⁴⁰

One of our respondents, a political communications consultant, informed us that he used Nation Builder to manage a client's presidential campaign in 2019. NationBuilder is a one-stop campaign management software; it can handle fundraising, communication, and community engagement. Specifically, the consultant used it to target potential voters based on voter data from INEC and conducted A/B testing on emails and newsletters.⁴¹ Organize for Nigeria, the campaign of Social Democratic Party aspirant Donald Duke, used ActBlue, a fundraising platform, to fundraise for his campaign.⁴² One of ActBlue's features is constant A/B testing of contribution forms to maximize fundraised revenues.⁴³

6.3 Digital Listening

Some political campaigns monitor interactions on social media platforms to enhance their own campaigns. Our respondents tended to be opaque in this area, so it is likely that activity is greater in scope and frequency than suggested in this section. Largely, activity here involves political consultants monitoring interactions online to gauge the public mood and to test the resonance of their messages, and platforms for conveying those messages.

According to a political consultant, his firm uses online data and social media spaces to test the resonance of messages. They also use them to test for the popularity of traditional media outlets, for example, if a candidate goes on a radio programme and the discussion does not gain traction on social media, they know to look to a different radio station moving forward. The firm also uses the information it gleans from digital listening to try to shape online discourse.⁴⁴

Another of our respondents claimed to have employed an undisclosed digital listening software for perception management during the 2019 presidential campaign. The software can be primed to crawl social media spaces for phrases and hashtags. It identifies instances where said key phrases have arisen, and assigns a score based on whether the sentiment of the text was positive or negative, and

³⁵ All Progressives Congress, "APC Member - Apps on Google Play," Google Play, last modified September 12, 2018, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.apc.registration.selfservice.apc.apcselfservice&hl=en>.

³⁶ All Progressives Congress, "APC Agent - Apps on Google Play," Google Play, last modified September 7, 2018, https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.apc.registration.apc.apc_reg.

³⁷ All Progressives Congress, *APC Mobile Privacy Policy*, (2018), https://apcapp.softalliance.com/files/APC_Mobile_Privacy_Policy.pdf.

³⁸ SwiftStar Technology, "PDP - Apps on Google Play," Google Play, last modified February 7, 2020, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=swiftstartechnology.com.pdp&hl=en>.

³⁹ We downloaded and used the app. A few months after our conversation with the app's developer, the app was deleted.

⁴⁰ SwiftStar Technology, Email Interview, March 22, 2020.

⁴¹ Political Communications Consultant, Phone Interview, April 16, 2020.

⁴² "Organize For Nigeria," ActBlue, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://secure.actblue.com/entity/fundraisers/66633>.

⁴³ "ActBlue - About," ActBlue, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://secure.actblue.com/about>.

⁴⁴ Political Consultant C, Phone Interview, March 12, 2020.

the number of followers the mentioning account has. This informed his strategy of identifying negative trends and then “crowding them out with posts by his own army of influencers”.⁴⁵

6.4 Geotargeting

Messaging and adverts are targeted in Nigeria to focus on specific geopolitical locations. A clear example of geotargeting, and one of the first instances, was in the 2015 general elections where Cambridge Analytica was hired to support the then-incumbent Goodluck Jonathan’s re-election bid. It used a particularly graphic video which suggested that Muhammadu Buhari’s Muslim orientation would lead him to impose sharia law in Nigeria and that this would manifest in violence. A former CA contractor called the video “voter suppression of the most crude and basic kind,” noting that the video was targeted at “Buhari voters in Buhari regions” to deter them from turning out.⁴⁶ “Buhari voters” ostensibly refers to those with intent to vote for Buhari; “Buhari regions” is more difficult to decipher. It most likely refers to states in northern Nigeria, where Buhari enjoys wide support.

In the 2019 presidential elections, a video titled “Church of Christ is in Danger”, suggested that Buhari would impose sharia law if reelected. It made similar claims against the governor of Kaduna State, who had introduced a law on religious regulation. The video also warned that popular Pentecostal pastors who were critics of Buhari will be targeted if reelected for a second term. This video appears targeted at Christians, who tend to live in the South and Middle-Belt region of Nigeria. It may have also aimed to suppress votes and divide the electorate in North Central Nigeria through both its Christians and ethnic minorities (ethnicities besides Hausa and Fulani).⁴⁷

A political communications consultant used geofencing for a gubernatorial campaign in Rivers State. During the campaigning period it became apparent that some ethnic groups felt like one group had dominated political office. Understanding that ethnic groups on either side of this cleavage would have differing concerns, he used an undisclosed digital tool to vary data collection and messaging based on the dominant ethnic groups in different areas of the state.⁴⁸

6.5 Voter Files

The INEC voter register is the most accessible voter file. One of our interviewees⁴⁹ suggested that most firms offering data services build off it. The INEC register had 84 million registered voters in 2019⁵⁰ this interviewee and NOI Polls⁵¹ claim to have the same amount of data on citizens. Alternative Adverts, a digital advertising firm, claims to have a mobile phone number database of more than 80 million voters.⁵² However, consultants raised concerns that the voter file is sometimes unreliable, with some of its entries outdated.

One of the political consultants we spoke to noted that his firm either buys or ‘mines’ from ‘publicly accessible’ databases voter data. The firm offers bespoke data collection for candidates which

⁴⁵ Political Communications Consultant, Phone Interview. Based on his comments, he may have been using Keyhole (<https://keyhole.co/>) or Meltwater (<https://www.meltwater.com>).

⁴⁶ Carole Cadwalladr, “Cambridge Analytica’s ruthless bid to sway the vote in Nigeria.”

⁴⁷ CDD, “CDD FACT CHECK: Is FG Mulling an Agency to Monitor Churches?,” The Cable, last modified January 31, 2019, <https://www.thecable.ng/cdd-fact-check-is-the-nigerian-government-planning-to-set-up-an-agency-to-monitor-churches>.

⁴⁸ Political Communications Consultant, Phone Interview, April 16, 2020.

⁴⁹ Our respondent did not want this point attributed to them.

⁵⁰ Premium Times, “2019 Elections: INEC List of Registered Voters in 36 States, FCT,” February 12, 2019, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/features-and-interviews/312054-for-the-record-2019-elections-inec-list-of-registered-voters-in-36-states-fct.html>.

⁵¹ Oluwafemi Taiwo [Team Lead, Market Media and Research, NOI Polls], Personal Interview, February 18, 2020.

⁵² Alternative Adverts, “Phone number and Email Address databasses in Nigeria,” accessed April 24, 2020, <https://alternativeadverts.com/phone-number-and-email-address-databasses-in-nigeria.html>.

usually means some new data is collected with each client. The consultant described Nigeria's data protection as 'porous', making it relatively easy to get data one should not ordinarily have access to. He claimed that his firm mined 2015 presidential election voting patterns down to the polling unit, including each voter's first name, last name, phone number, occupation and chosen candidate. From the data, the firm gleaned the most active voting demographics grouped by occupation. When he was hired in 2019 to capture swing votes, he focused on winning over the top three most active demographics from 2015.⁵³

For clients who can afford it, the consultant's firm intermittently conducts perception audits to track dominant narratives as they evolve over the election cycle. The data collection depends on whether his firm is working for the incumbent or incumbent's chosen successor versus the opposition. If his client is an incumbent, data collection would focus on gathering perceptions of what the person has done during their tenure, and how the positives and negatives of the tenure cascade across ethnicity or geography. From these he postulates the likely talking points that will shape the election. For example, the incumbent could have done well on infrastructure, but the narrative that could be shaping the election is "equity", or rotating leadership between ethnic groups. In a campaign he managed in Rivers State, the initial conversation was whether leadership should come from an upland or riverine area. When candidates all emerged from riverine areas, the conversation shifted to the legitimacy of different riverine areas. His task then became devising metrics for judging the legitimacy of a given riverine area. He noted that ethnicity, geography, and incumbency are often strong determinants of a client's chances of electoral success. After mapping narratives, he tries to establish the most influential voices in the conversation. At each point, he adjusts the campaign message to reflect the realities the data brings to light. This process is typically done offline. The perception audit is done online less than half the time.⁵⁴

Other evidence indirectly indicates voter file creation. Nextier Advisory, a public sector advisory firm,⁵⁵ put out a call for a political consultant in 2016. Through surveys and polls, the consultant was to, amongst others, collect qualitative and quantitative data on the "hopes and aspirations" and quality of life of citizens in a South Eastern state. These data points would provide insights to inform narratives for the campaign.⁵⁶ Ahead of the 2019 elections, CMC Connect, a communications group, launched a political product called "political market research", which included citizen perception audits and opinion polls.⁵⁷ Chain Reactions Nigeria, a public relations and communications firm and Edelman affiliate, noted that it provided polling services that were associated with its client ousting the incumbent in the 2018 Ekiti State governorship elections.⁵⁸ Datavision Limited, an ICT company, launched "PollBook" in 2018 which promised to create a database comparable to the INEC electoral register; with entries on age, gender, religion, political affiliation, occupation and location at different levels of granularity and to reconcile this data with poll responses.⁵⁹

Foreign firms have also been involved in generating voter files. Political consulting firm AKPD Message and Media (AKPD) worked for APC during the 2015 presidential election. It conducted surveys

⁵³ Political Consultant B, Personal Interview, March 5, 2020.

⁵⁴ Political Communications Consultant, Phone Interview.

⁵⁵ Nextier Advisory, "About Us," last modified January 16, 2016, <https://www.nextieradvisory.com/about-us/>.

⁵⁶ NG Careers, "Political Consultant," ERecruiter Nigeria, last modified August 15, 2016, <https://www.erecnigeria.com/political-consultant/>.

⁵⁷ Oluwatoyin Babayagbon, "CMC Connect launches 'political projects' ahead of 2019 elections," *The Cable NG*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.thecable.ng/cmc-connect-launches-two-political-products-ahead-of-2019-elections>.

⁵⁸ Modupe Gbadeyanka, "Election 2019: Chain Reactions Begins Political Campaign Management Services," *Business Post*, September 3, 2018, <https://businesspost.ng/general/election-2019-chain-reactions-begins-political-campaign-management-services/>.

⁵⁹ Mfon Eyoma [CEO Datavision], "Benefits of polling to elections in Nigeria," *The Sun*, August 2, 2018, <https://www.sunnewsonline.com/benefits-polling-elections-nigeria/>.

and polls which were used to identify the most contentious regions and inform the campaign message of “change”.⁶⁰ 87 Nigerian Facebook users used Cambridge Analytica’s “thisisyourdigitallife” app, affecting an estimated total of 271,469 Nigerians.⁶¹ To what extent this data was used to inform Cambridge’s work for PDP is unclear; the former head of Cambridge Analytica noted that they preferred face to face canvassing to collect data in Nigeria when interviewed in 2017.⁶²

6.6 Psychometric Profiling

Our research did not uncover instances of psychometric profiling in the strict sense of using personality traits to predict voting preferences. However, one of the political consultants we spoke to conducted what he referred to as “psychographics”, or polling for perception. He was contracted to deliver votes in states where his client, a 2019 presidential frontrunner, was unpopular. He said he spent money on undisclosed software that enabled him to segment the voter base in these states into opposition loyalists, swing voters and client loyalists. The psychological element of this segmentation involved finding out why his client was unpopular with certain voters and then tailoring messages to those voters in attempt to convince them otherwise.⁶³

6.7 Robocalls and Mobile Texting

Robocalls, bulk SMSs and voice SMSs are relatively popular in Nigeria. Alternative Adverts⁶⁴ and Adhang,⁶⁵ two digital advertising agencies, noted that these were services they found easiest to sell to political candidates. Fastweb, another digital advertising agency, noted that robocalls are even more popular than SMS, since they are harder to ignore.⁶⁶ Former President Goodluck Jonathan is reckoned to have pioneered the use of robocalls and SMSs as a key technique for a presidential campaign.⁶⁷ In 2011 he launched his campaign by sending an SMS which read “From Jonathan: We are on the road to rebuild our nation. Stand with me. Stand for transformation,” to millions of Nigerians.⁶⁸ Jonathan’s 2015 campaign also used voice SMS to broadcast campaign messaging to eligible voters. This case offers rare insight into the amounts of money that go into data-driven campaigning in Nigeria. In June 2015, Silon Concepts, who had been contracted to do the voice SMS work, took the Director-General and Director of Finance of PDP’s Presidential Campaign to court for refusing to pay the N70 million (about \$180,000) balance of the N100 million (about \$260,000) that had been agreed.⁶⁹

⁶⁰ Adam Kredo, “David Axelrod’s Political Consulting Firm Far More Involved in Nigeria Election than Previously Disclosed,” *Free Beacon*, February 9, 2015, <https://freebeacon.com/issues/david-axelrods-political-consulting-firm-far-more-involved-in-nigeria-election-than-previously-disclosed/>.

⁶¹ Guardian Editorial, “On Cambridge Analytica,” *Guardian Newspaper*, April 16, 2018, <https://guardian.ng/opinion/on-cambridge-analytica/>.

⁶² Mike Butcher, “Cambridge Analytica CEO talks to TechCrunch about Trump, Hillary and the future,” *TechCrunch*, November 6, 2017, <https://techcrunch.com/2017/11/06/cambridge-analytica-ceo-talks-to-techcrunch-about-trump-hillary-and-the-future/>.

⁶³ Political Consultant B, Personal Interview.

⁶⁴ Emmanuel Nwafor [MD, Alternative Adverts], Phone Interview, February 20, 2020.

⁶⁵ Christian Okoye [CEO, Adhang], Phone Interview, February 17, 2020.

⁶⁶ Chinedu David [CEO, Fastweb], Phone Interview, February 14, 2020.

⁶⁷ Political Consultant A, Phone Interview, February 13, 2020.

⁶⁸ PM News Headlines, “Jonathan Begins SMS Campaign,” PM News, September 14, 2010, <https://www.pmnewsnigeria.com/2010/09/14/jonathan-begins-sms-campaign/>.

⁶⁹ “Abuja Court Set To Begin Hearing In Case Against PDP Over Campaign Debt,” *Sahara Reporters*, June 22, 2015, <http://saharareporters.com/2015/06/22/abuja-court-set-begin-hearing-case-against-pdp-over-campaign-debt>.

Personalization

Instead of a standard SMS text message or 'spray and pray' email marketing campaign, voice broadcasting campaigns can be scripted to provide a personalized message that can peak an immediate interest by the recipient.

Consistency Voice Broadcasting Campaigns

When connecting with a large number of clients and prospects can be difficult to provide the same level of consistency when making voice calls manually. Launching a voice broadcasting campaign creates a 100% consistent and uniform message for your entire target audience to hear.

Cost Effective

Voice broadcasting campaigns are relatively inexpensive, and allows you to deploy a message through a medium not as widely used as other marketing channels. Voice broadcasts merit almost immediate attention, especially when transmitted to cellular phone numbers.

Interactivity

Interactive voice broadcasting campaigns allow recipients to listen to the voice message and use the phone's keypad to interact with the system. Businesses can use this to send out phone surveys, confirm appointments and even direct the caller to another menu or the appropriate extension.

For more information call us on price call 07014039333, 08140806869 or click [Voice SMS service](#) to contact us

We take the lead as the best voice SMS service provider in Nigeria and other providers follow!

We have long list of clients but listed below are few of our happy clients



Image 1: A screenshot from the "Services: Robocalls" page of AdHang's website.⁷⁰ AdHang can personalize robocalls, and lists APC and PDP as two of its clients.

WhatsApp is also used by some of the political consultants we spoke to in order to communicate with voters. Rather than using broadcast messages, one firm uses an undisclosed software to send WhatsApp messages that appear to have been sent on an individual basis. The firm also creates WhatsApp and Facebook groups to push specific agendas. They designate the leader, whom they feed with content, and try to "create a system to ensure that everything that is happening is coordinated and consistent".⁷¹

6.8 Third-party Tracking

In its simplest form, third-party web tracking involves a tracker, which could be a website or other digital entity, recording a web user's visit to a website other than its own. Different third-party trackers can combine data to generate a significant subset of a user's browsing history. This data enables targeting advertisements according to the person's interests.⁷² The one instance of third-party tracking we found comes from the political communications consultant. When he worked for a 2015 presidential campaign, he recalls working with people from David Axelrod's firm who tracked

⁷⁰ Adhang. "Voice SMS Service in Nigeria." Adhang. Accessed July 1, 2020. <https://alternativeadverts.com/voice-sms-in-nigeria.html>.

⁷¹ Political Consultant B, Personal Interview.

⁷² Princiya, "Web Tracking: What You Should Know About Your Privacy Online," FreeCodeCamp.org, last modified April 5, 2018, <https://www.freecodecamp.org/news/what-you-should-know-about-web-tracking-and-how-it-affects-your-online-privacy-42935355525/>.

Nigerian voters' user journeys online via tracking cookies.⁷³ The consultant was not forthcoming on how this ultimately influenced campaign strategy.

7 The Political Influence Industry in Nigeria

Nigeria's political campaign industry is small. Our snowball strategy, in which we ask interviewees to recommend other consultants, pointed us back to the same actors. Most respondents mentioned StateCraft, a "full-service governance consulting firm with expertise in elections...strategic government relations and communication" as a key player.⁷⁴ StateCraft is popular for winning many high profile campaigns, such as Goodluck Jonathan's 2011 campaign, Muhammadu Buhari's 2015 campaign, and Nana Akufo-Addo's 2016 campaign in Ghana.⁷⁵

Why are there such a low number of political consulting firms? Trying to answer this question is an approach to answering a broader question—are there other forms of data-driven campaigning in Nigeria? And who else is involved in providing campaign services in Nigeria? In systematically reviewing the types of actors, we uncovered a different kind of political consultant—informal campaign strategists. These are individuals or groups that operate without professional or formal status and often work indirectly with campaigns. They employ an 'alternative' set of digital and data-driven techniques, which emerge organically from the Nigerian political structure.

7.1 Political Consulting Firms

According to political consultants we interviewed, the primary way to land clients is through referrals. This suggests that only those who expect their personal connections to sustain a regular influx of clients will set up a firm. Rather than a large network of political aspirants, it seems more feasible to have a number of well-connected referees. However, this strategy comes with its own risks. According to a political communications consultant, "if the string of people referring you is no longer in power, it can shut off your own access to power too."⁷⁶

This need for connections provides a high barrier to entry. It implies that those who set up firms are exceptionally well-resourced and connected. One of the political consultants we spoke to said he was trained by David Axelrod at the University of Chicago.⁷⁷ Adebola Williams, founder of StateCraft, is co-owner of a larger communications firm, Red Media Africa. Red Media Africa also owns a popular youth-focused online newspaper, YNaija.⁷⁸

Nigeria's influence industry may be oligopolistic, that is dominated by a few firms, because of these high barriers to entry. However, it does not seem like the firms we spoke to are running most of the campaigns in Nigeria. The firms that discussed numbers with us each ran a total of less 30 campaigns between 2015 and 2019. This is not close to a majority of the campaigns in a country that elects 109 Senators and 360 House of Representatives members every election cycle, along with 36 governors, deputy governors and a president. But firms are not failing to land more clients for lack of trying. Some firms pitch to previously unknown clients, but chances of success are low. According to a political consultant,

⁷³ Political Communications Consultant, Phone Interview.

⁷⁴ StateCraft, "StateCraft Inc - Africa's Leading Governance Communication Firm," accessed April 24, 2020, <https://statecraftinc.com/>.

⁷⁵ Katy Scott, "The Nigerian media mogul who helped three presidents get elected," *CNN*, October 23, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/11/africa/adebola-williams-african-presidents-victory/index.html>.

⁷⁶ Political Communications Consultant, Phone Interview.

⁷⁷ Political Consultant B, Personal Interview.

⁷⁸ Katy Scott, "The Nigerian media mogul who helped three presidents get elected."

“We’ve sent out tons of proposals. I’ve stopped sending. I was in a meeting with someone who was running for second term as a governor. He [asked], ‘do you understand the politics of Gombe?’ I [said], ‘no, but I understand the principles, and if I sit down for a week or two, I’ll understand the politics and I will use the principles to get you victory.’”⁷⁹

It seems as though these consultancy firms’ work is mainly for high-level government offices—offices overseeing large geographic units, like the presidency. StateCraft’s involvements in presidential campaigns have been detailed above. Similarly, another political consultant said he tends to work predominantly on presidential campaigns in Nigeria and across the West Africa region.⁸⁰ According to a political communications consultant, most of his clients are technocrats who want to get into politics; they usually come in at the senatorial and gubernatorial levels.⁸¹ None of the firms we spoke to indicated being involved in local government elections.

7.2 Digital Advertising and Marketing Agencies

Beyond political consultants there are other actors delivering campaign services. Advertising and market research agencies have honed data-driven persuasion skills in the private sector and experience in countries like the UK and US suggest these skills are transferable to political campaigns.⁸² Since these firms have private sector clients, they do not face the same existential threat that political consulting firms do. However, interviews with various advertising and marketing research agencies suggest that demand for services from political actors is low and, for moral and other reasons, some agencies are not willing to supply partisan services.

GeoPoll, a market research agency, noted that they have not been approached by political parties, although they are “engaged by [commercial] clients to track the [Nigerian] population’s consumption habits of media (TV and radio) that...would be of value to political campaigns as they design their outreach strategies...”. GeoPoll also claims that this service runs on a subscription model and is therefore cost effective.⁸³

However, GeoPoll also noted that they typically do not participate in partisan research. This is a theme that appeared across interviews with market research agencies. Firms like Random Dynamic Resources⁸⁴ and IntelBridge,⁸⁵ and the president of the Nigeria Marketing Research Association (NIMRA),⁸⁶ noted that conducting research for political clients was morally beneath them. The president of NIMRA – which has 345 members – stated that, to his knowledge, organisations under his umbrella did not engage in such research.⁸⁷

Digital advertising firms were more open to taking on political clients, but those who did noted that potential clients would often balk at the price of services. A respondent who worked at Fastweb detailed how they had pitched a service to a political party that would integrate rural communities on one online platform but that it was rejected due to the proposed cost. Fastweb also noted that political candidates would scoff at the notion of ‘Search Engine Optimization’—increasing the visibility and traffic to their websites—because they believed it would not get them votes.⁸⁸

⁷⁹ Political Consultant B, Personal Interview.

⁸⁰ Political Consultant B, Personal Interview.

⁸¹ Political Communications Consultant, Phone Interview.

⁸² Tactical Tech, *Personal Data: Political Persuasion. Inside the Influence Industry. How it works*, (2019), <https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/inside-the-influence-industry>.

⁸³ GeoPoll, Email Interview, February 13, 2020.

⁸⁴ Random Dynamic Resources, Phone Interview, February 13, 2020.

⁸⁵ IntelBridge, Phone Interview, February 20, 2020.

⁸⁶ NIMRA, Phone Interview, February 13, 2020.

⁸⁷ “About Us,” NIMRA, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.nimra.ng/about-nimra/>.

⁸⁸ Chinedu David [CEO, Fastweb], Phone Interview, February 14, 2020.

In an interview with a staff from Adhang, they claimed to be the only digital advertising firm really operating in the political influence industry. Although it is tempting to write the statement off as a marketing gimmick, it was the only firm we spoke to whose website had a dedicated page for handling political campaigns.⁸⁹

The interviews also suggested the formal political influence industry is small. When prodded for any other agencies we could talk to, Adhang⁹⁰ and Random Dynamic Resources⁹¹ said they only knew StateCraft. Silon Concepts, the firm that took some members of the 2015 Goodluck Jonathan campaign to court,⁹² appears to be no longer operational. The only other digital advertising firm we found that played a significant role in elections was INK Business Design. INK Business Design initially handled just the digital campaign for presidential candidate Atiku Abubakar's 2019 bid. However, a satisfactory digital campaign led it to become "the central strategy hub of the Atiku campaign."⁹³ We were unable to reach staff members from INK Business Design. We are thus unable to provide more details on their involvement in the Atiku campaign.

7.3 Foreign Firms

Another set of actors in the Nigerian influence industry is foreign firms. Cambridge Analytica was hired to provide support to the 2015 Goodluck Jonathan campaign by an external actor. The former President was reportedly unaware of CAs involvement.⁹⁴ The firm at the helm of the Jonathan campaign was the now-defunct Bell Pottinger,⁹⁵ who helped Jonathan win in 2011.⁹⁶

Other less public foreign involvements are filed with the U.S. Department of Justice. For example, in December 2014, Ambassador Gilbert R. Chagoury hired Corallo Media Strategies to run a media relations campaign for former President Goodluck Jonathan.⁹⁷ In January 2015, the Federal Government hired CMGRP UK, London affiliate to Weber Shandwick. CMGRP's task was to create a website to promote Nigeria's transformation agenda, a plan to modernise the country.⁹⁸ CMGRP's connection to the campaign is not explicit. However, being hired to promote President Goodluck Jonathan's plan right before the election suggests some level of involvement.

But foreign firms charge a hefty fee for their services. This probably explains their involvement being skewed towards high-level campaigns. Ambassador Chagoury paid Corallo Media Strategies \$900,000.⁹⁹ The Federal Government paid CMGRP \$617,000.¹⁰⁰ PDP paid Ballard Partners about \$1 million to lobby the U.S. government to "[maintain] political and security conditions free of intimidation and interference in order to ensure the success and fairness of Nigeria's 2019

⁸⁹ AdHang, "Political Online Campaign Agency | Election Consultant in Nigeria | Advertising Firm," last modified April 4, 2020, <https://www.adhang.com/online-political-campaign-agency/>.

⁹⁰ Christian Okoye [CEO, Adhang], Phone Interview.

⁹¹ Random Dynamic Resources, Phone Interview, February 13, 2020.

⁹² "Abuja Court Set To Begin Hearing In Case Against PDP Over Campaign Debt," *Sahara Reporters*, June 22, 2015, <http://saharareporters.com/2015/06/22/abuja-court-set-begin-hearing-case-against-pdp-over-campaign-debt>.

⁹³ Frank Eleanya, "Atiku's Better Nigeria Campaign: A case for strategic brand communications," *Business Day*, April 17, 2019, <https://businessday.ng/brands-advertising/article/atikus-better-nigeria-campaign-a-case-for-strategic-brand-communications/>.

⁹⁴ Carole Cadwalladr, "Cambridge Analytica's ruthless bid to sway the vote in Nigeria".

⁹⁵ Nicholas Ibekwe, "PR firm that handled Jonathan's failed re-election campaign banned in South Africa," *Premium Times*, September 6, 2017, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/more-news/242583-pr-firm-handled-jonathans-failed-re-election-campaign-banned-south-africa.html>.

⁹⁶ Patrick Smith, "Lobbying in Africa: Nightmare on K street," *The Africa Report*, November 28, 2014, <https://www.theafricareport.com/3674/lobbying-in-africa-nightmare-on-k-street/>.

⁹⁷ US Department of Justice, *6272-Exhibit-AB-20150116-1*, (2018).

⁹⁸ US Department of Justice, *3911-Exhibit-AB-20150116-21*, (2015).

⁹⁹ US Department of Justice, *6272-Exhibit-AB-20150116-1*.

¹⁰⁰ US Department of Justice, *3911-Exhibit-AB-20150116-21*.

presidential election.¹⁰¹ According to someone at Alternative Adverts, foreign firms prefer to work with a local partner, since there are likely to be cultural and language barriers to their understanding of the Nigerian context.¹⁰² This, and the fact that they focus on presidential campaigns, dampens their competition with local firms, although some Nigerian communications and public relations professionals would rather they were not involved at all.¹⁰³

With respect to data-driven campaigning, foreign firms' competitive advantage is their capacity to implement complex techniques. In 2015, when a presidential campaign wanted to map Nigerian voters' online user journeys, they allegedly brought in people from David Axlerod's firm to provide insights on the techniques to use.¹⁰⁴

7.4 Informal Campaign Strategists

"Informal" campaign strategists are the final set of actors our research uncovered. These individuals or groups are, according to one of our respondents, defined by a lack of professionalism.¹⁰⁵ They are not professional political consultants, and do not own or operate in political consulting or other relevant firms. For example, the Buhari New Media Centre (BNMC) is not an official APC structure but provided campaign support across the country during the 2019 presidential elections. The head office was staffed by voluntary workers operating on an ad-hoc basis. The PDP also had an unofficial group indirectly linked to the presidential campaign: the Atikulated Youth Force (AYF).¹⁰⁶ Informal strategists form the biggest segment of the Nigerian influence industry.¹⁰⁷

Why do these informal strategists exist? One reason is the predominance of informal economic activity. A dominant informal economy means informal arrangements are normal. The informal economy in Nigeria is certainly dominant—it accounts for about 65% of the Nigerian economy.¹⁰⁸ The major reasons for the predominance of the informal economy are structural: difficult registration processes, limited access to capital, low education levels and poor infrastructure, to name a few.¹⁰⁹ Citizens may also avoid formalising to bypass higher taxes and regulation. Thus, providing campaign services on an informal basis is consistent with Nigeria's economic structure. Little to no regulation and taxes suggest that these individual strategists can charge at a lower price point than firms.

Another reason informal strategists exist is that patronage is pervasive in Nigerian politics. A norm of exchanging government jobs for votes also means it is normal to expect to be rewarded with a government position should one's client win.¹¹⁰ For those for whom supporting campaigns is an exit strategy, there is little incentive to establish a firm. Finally, a long history of policy-agnostic campaigning means that the formal campaign sector in Nigeria is relatively young.

Informal strategists' lack of professionalism means that both informal consultants and clients discount the contribution of the consultant. According to one political consultant, "[informal

¹⁰¹ US Department of Justice, *6415-Exhibit-AB-20180925-13*, (2018).

¹⁰² Emmanuel Nwafor [MD, Alternative Adverts], Phone Interview, February 20, 2020.

¹⁰³ Thisday Newspaper, "Communications Experts Kick as PDP, APC Patronise Foreign Firms," *Ripples Nigeria*, November 14, 2018, <https://www.ripplesnigeria.com/communications-experts-kick-as-pdp-apc-patronise-foreign-firms/>.

¹⁰⁴ Political Communications Consultant, Phone Interview.

¹⁰⁵ Political Consultant D, Phone Interview, April 23, 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Nic Cheeseman, Idayat Hassan, and Jamie Hitchen, *WhatsApp and Nigeria's 2019 Elections: Mobilizing the People, Protecting the Vote*, (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2019), <https://www.cddwestafrica.org/nigeria-2019-election/>.

¹⁰⁷ Political Consultant D, Phone Interview.

¹⁰⁸ Business A.M., "Nigeria's informal economy accounts for 65% of GDP – IMF," August 8, 2017, <https://www.businessamlive.com/nigerias-informal-economy-accounts-65-gdp-imf/>.

¹⁰⁹ "Nigeria's Shadow Economy – Economic Confidential," *Economic Confidential*, last modified January 10, 2018, <https://economicconfidential.com/2018/01/nigerias-shadow-economy/>.

¹¹⁰ Political Consultant D, Phone Interview.

consultants] carry out a lot of political positioning [and] consulting for [political aspirants] without even knowing. Because they are also not professional and there are no formal trainings for some of them, they achieve less; so, they are appreciated less."¹¹¹

Regardless of perceptions of their effectiveness, informal strategists can be found at all levels of elections. However, their influence relative to other actors in the industry is likely to be greatest at lower level elections, such as local government elections. Here the demand for more sophisticated, data-driven campaigning is low. The nature of politics at this level means there are relatively simple ways to persuade people to vote in one's favour.

Nigerian local politics is marked by state capture and clientelism. State capture (defined below) fuels clientelism, the exchange of public resources for political support. Poverty mediates clientelism—if people are poor, they are more willing to trade political acquiescence for material support. State capture and clientelism are problems at all levels in Nigeria, however, higher electoral offices invariably capture geographic units where urbanisation and economic development are found. These factors increase the number of people who are not embedded in political networks of dependency, people whose policy preferences need to be appealed to.¹¹²

When firms are referred to or pitch to candidates in this context, it is difficult to justify the costs of conventional data-driven campaigning, because candidates and their patrons, or 'godfathers', are confident of their control of the political structure.¹¹³

The next section goes into more detail about the unique techniques that informal campaign strategists use, and how data and digital play a role in these techniques.

8 “Data-driven” Campaign Irregularities

Informal campaign strategists highlight an alternative set of data-driven campaign techniques because they are the most grounded in local contexts of state capture and clientelism. Our research suggests that state capture changes the relationship between data, digital and votes. In this context, digital techniques and personal data come in to facilitate campaign irregularities. This happens especially where the physical processes undergirding irregularities are deficient for some reason.

How does state capture alter the relationship between data, digital and votes? To explain this, we start with the conventional situation. Conventionally, data-driven campaign technologies add value by allowing campaign messages to be targeted with greater granularity, speed and at a larger scale.¹¹⁴ According to this logic, a given data point is useful because it either directly or indirectly provides information about a citizen's policy preferences. Knowledge of policy preferences informs campaign strategies and ultimately wins votes.

With state capture however, citizens' policy preferences are less salient. State capture describes a situation where individuals, known as patrons, own and selectively distribute state resources. During elections, these patrons use their resources to alter vote results (rigging) or illegally sway voter preferences (vote buying and voter intimidation). In contexts of state capture, both candidates and the electorate understand that programmatic phases of campaigning (for example, rallies) are simply for display.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Political Consultant D, Phone Interview.

¹¹² Diane Zovighian, "Clientelism and Party Politics: Evidence from Nigeria," (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2018).

¹¹³ Political Communications Consultant, Phone Interview.

¹¹⁴ Tactical Tech, *Personal Data: Political Persuasion. Inside the Influence Industry. How it works.*

¹¹⁵ Michael Bratton, "Vote buying and violence in Nigerian election campaigns," *Electoral Studies* 27, no. 4 (2008): 621-632, doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2008.04.013.

Rigging involves, amongst others, "adding ballots marked by persons who are not voting legally, interference with [ballot] boxes, exclusion of valid ballots by counting officials, denying marginalised voters the right to vote, falsification of results sheet or deliberate fraud in tabulating results."¹¹⁶ Rigging bypasses voter persuasion entirely in favour of directly manipulating election results. In the Nigerian experience, many electoral victories have come from 'out-rigging' the competition.¹¹⁷ Since rigging bypasses persuasion, it is out of the scope of this study.

Vote buying and voter intimidation both seek to induce compliance in voters. Vote-buying aims at producing instrumental compliance, that is, causing voters ('vote sellers') to change or not change their voting behaviour in return for material goods or services. Voter intimidation seeks coercive compliance, where voters change or do not change voting behaviour because of a fear of retribution.¹¹⁸ These voting transactions occur in three phases: negotiating the transaction terms, monitoring voting compliance, and pay-out. The phases do not necessarily have to occur in the listed order; for example, vote buyers may transfer material items before monitoring voting compliance.

Vote buying and voter intimidation operate through networks. Evidence suggests that in Nigeria, these networks target partisans – as opposed to swing or opposition voters – with clientelistic transfers, and that these partisans belong to "social structures that parties can mobilise to gather information on voters' behaviour."¹¹⁹ Strategists work with influential figures within these networks, such as traditional, association, religious and union leaders.¹²⁰ For example, campaign strategists in Nigeria dole out sizeable amounts to party agents and influencers to facilitate vote-buying.¹²¹ The strategists are generally flexible with how agents implement irregularities;¹²² this means that the decision to use digital and data driven irregularities is typically made by the party agent.

In the section introducing informal campaign strategists, we noted that a higher level of poverty means voters are more susceptible to vote-buying and voter intimidation. But high levels of poverty might suggest that access to digital technologies is low. However, there is a strong appetite for mobile technologies. Mobile phone penetration in Nigeria went from 53% in 2015 to 84% in 2018,¹²³ which suggests that mobile-driven campaign irregularities are viable, if not prevalent.

Our findings suggest that data and digital technologies come in to facilitate at different phases of vote-buying transactions where analogue arrangements are deficient. We did not find concrete evidence of data-driven voter intimidation. While conversations we had with voters suggests some political thugs may send text messages as part of their bullying strategies, we were not able to corroborate with either articles online or key informant interviews.

¹¹⁶ ACE Project, "How to Prevent Vote Rigging," ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, last modified February 3, 2015, <https://aceproject.org/electoral-advice/archive/questions/replies/544779600>.

¹¹⁷ Emma Ezejideaku and Esther Ugwu, "The Rhetoric & Propaganda of Political Campaigns in Nigeria," *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria* 10 (2007): 9-26, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Rhetoric-%26-Propaganda-of-Political-Campaigns-In-Ezejideaku-Ugwu/aaeed5978175768c26b75852df2e6cb11189a69b>.

¹¹⁸ Frederic C. Schaffer and Andreas Schedler, *What is Vote Buying? The Limits of the Market Model* (2005), <https://gsdrc.org/document-library/what-is-vote-buying/>.

¹¹⁹ Diane Zovighian, "Clientelism and Party Politics: Evidence from Nigeria".

¹²⁰ Diane Zovighian, "Clientelism and Party Politics: Evidence from Nigeria".

¹²¹ See for example Wole Ige, "#OsunDecides: Police arrest, parade 3 alleged vote-buyers, REC confirm 2," *Nigerian Tribune*, September 23, 2018, <https://tribuneonlineng.com/osundecides-police-arrest-parade-3-alleged-vote-buyers-rec-confirm-2/>. Here the amount was N720,000 (about \$1850).

¹²² Nic Cheesman, Idayat Hassan, and Jamie Hitchon, *WhatsApp and Nigeria's 2019 Elections: Mobilizing the People, Protecting the Vote*, (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2019), <https://www.cddwestafrica.org/nigeria-2019-election/>.

¹²³ Adeyemi Adepotun, *The Guardian*, March 16, 2018, <https://guardian.ng/business-services/nigerias-mobile-phone-penetration-hits-84-per-cent/>.

The following subsections on Targeting, Monitoring and Pay-out show how data and digital facilitate at different points of the vote-buying transaction.

8.1 Targeting

When party agents decide to negotiate vote-buying transactions before the elections, they seem to prefer negotiating face to face. This is consistent with the notion of personal relationships and social networks underpinning vote-buying transactions. For example, the day before the 2019 governorship elections in Akwa Ibom, a party agent invited voters to his home for an overnight gig. They ate and drank until the day of the elections. From there they moved to the polling units.¹²⁴ They may consult voter files to aid their targeting of potential vote sellers, ostensibly where the personal network is not strong enough to identify vote sellers. According to a resident of Ekiti state, during the 2018 Ekiti governorship elections,

“Politicians started distributing money to influence voters to cast their votes for their candidates in the election. We were already asleep...when they came and knocked on our gate and handed envelopes to three persons whose names were on their lists...They gave three persons, but I was not given because I didn’t register as a voter in the area. I think they used the voter register unit-by-unit to identify those they had given money to. They would have given me if my name [sic] was on their register. Those who were given envelopes opened them and discovered that there was N4,000 (\$10.50) inside each [sic] envelopes.”¹²⁵

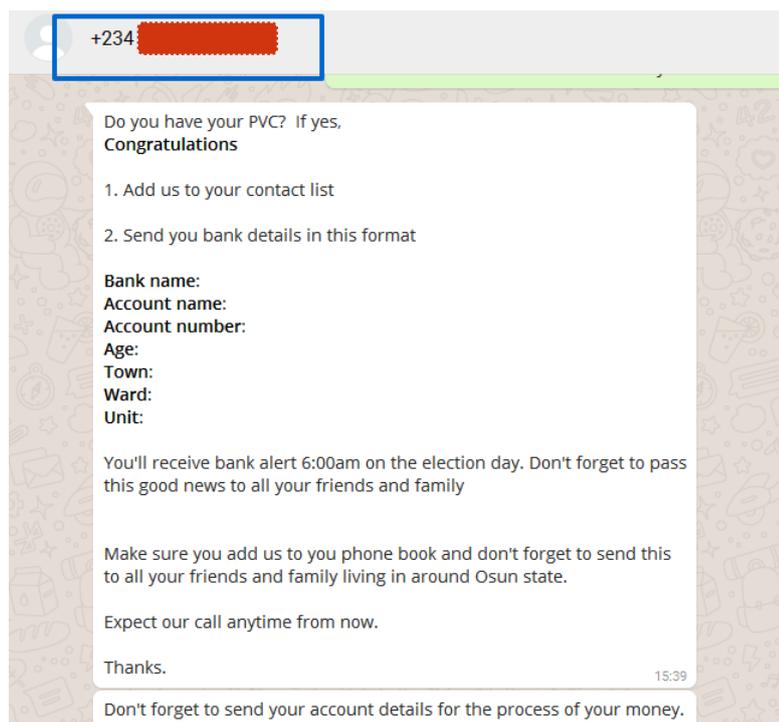


Image 2: A screenshot of the WhatsApp vote buying scheme used in the Osun State 2018 elections.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Nseobong Okon-Ekong, "Nigerians Should Ask Why the Elections Tribunal Refused my Petition," *This Day*, May 16, 2019, <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2019/05/16/nigerians-should-ask-why-the-elections-tribunal-refused-my-petition/>.

¹²⁵ Femi Makinde, Kamarudeen Ogundele, and Tunde Ajaja, "Ekiti election: Parties engage in pre-election day vote buying," *Punch*, July 14, 2018, <https://punchng.com/parties-engage-in-pre-election-day-vote-buying-2/>.

¹²⁶ InfomediaNG. "Osun 2018: Politicians Take Vote Buying to WhatsApp." InfomediaNG. Last modified November 12, 2019. <https://infomediang.com/2018/09/22/vote-buying-whatsapp-group-osun/>.

Another method used is setting up a payment platform and letting people self-select. In the 2018 Osun gubernatorial elections, in addition to paying party members identified via the voter's register, party agents set up an online link that would direct people to their WhatsApp contact. This WhatsApp contact would ask screening questions to determine if the person had valid voter identification and was an indigene of Osun State. After satisfactorily answering the questions, the voter would then be asked for account details, age, and location details (town, ward and unit) in order to claim the electronic transfer of N10,000 (about \$26). The transfers were promised for 6am on election day. Furthermore, voters were urged to share the "good news" with friends and family in the state.¹²⁷

8.2 Monitoring

Monitoring is an important aspect of the transaction, aimed at ensuring value is actually being exchanged. Some transactions go without monitoring; these are known as "as agreed" transactions,¹²⁸ and rely on good faith. This arrangement does not always work out. For example, during the 2019 local government elections in Abuja, a voter reported collecting N500 (\$1.28) from an APC agent but went ahead to vote for PDP. In his own words, "I don't know if it's by force to vote for APC."¹²⁹ To hedge against this risk, agents ask to see voter identification before doling out cash¹³⁰ and/or request that sellers somehow show them their thumb-printed ballot papers,¹³¹ known as "see and buy".¹³² However, see and buy is not always possible unless one has the support of either the security agents or election officials.

Electronic monitoring, or 'snap and send', is increasingly being used to hedge against the risk of voters collecting money and voting against party agents' wishes. It also gets around the difficulty of physically monitoring votes. It involves voters taking their mobile phones into the polling booths and taking a picture of their thumb printed ballot paper as evidence of voting in line with agent's wishes. They then send the picture, usually via WhatsApp, to the party agent.¹³³ It is not fool-proof, voters recycle ballot paper pictures since a party agent cannot differentiate one fingerprint from another. However, the method was reportedly widely used in the 2018 Ekiti governorship elections.¹³⁴ We did not find any evidence of this being used in the 2019 presidential election. However, this does not mean it did not happen—actors here would want to keep this activity hidden.

8.3 Pay-out

Electronic buying occurs in two main ways. At the polling units, brokers may take down phone numbers and bank account details of sellers and agree to transfer funds later.¹³⁵ This is an ad-hoc

¹²⁷ Olufemi Atoyebi et al., "Politicians woo voters with N10,000 on WhatsApp as Osun elects new governor today," *Punch*, September 22, 2018, <https://punchng.com/osun-2018-politicians-devise-new-tactics-of-vote-buying-woo-pvc-holders-on-whatsapp/>.

¹²⁸ Yakubu Mohammed, "Vote buying and all that," *The Guardian*, July 25, 2018, <https://guardian.ng/opinion/vote-buying-and-all-that/>.

¹²⁹ Queen E. Iroanusi, "PDP agent' in vote-buying in Abuja," *Premium Times*, March 9, 2019,

<https://www.premiumpages.com/regional/north-central/318890-pdp-agent-in-vote-buying-in-abuja.html>.

¹³⁰ Queen E. Iroanusi, "PDP agent' in vote-buying in Abuja."

¹³¹ Kunle Sanni, "2019: INEC considers ban of smart phones at polling units," *Premium Times*, September 14, 2018,

<https://www.premiumpages.com/news/top-news/283755-2019-inec-considers-ban-of-smart-phones-at-polling-units.html>.

¹³² Yakubu Mohammed, "Vote buying and all that."

¹³³ Kunle Sanni, "2019: INEC considers ban of smart phones at polling units."

¹³⁴ Kunle Sanni, "2019: INEC considers ban of smart phones at polling units."

¹³⁵ Kingsely Obiejesi, "Massive voter apathy, vote buying characterise elections across Nigeria," *International Centre for Investigative Journalism*, March 9, 2019, <https://www.icirnigeria.org/massive-voter-apaty-vote-buying-characterise-elections-across-nigeria/>.

means of setting up the transfer. The alternative is a pre-agreed arrangement. This involves collecting names, phone numbers, bank account details and transferring prior to elections.¹³⁶

Agents presumably use the first arrangement to cast a sheen of plausible deniability over their activities at the polling unit. For example, during the 2019 local government election in Abuja, party agents who collected people's details at polling units suggested they were registering new party members rather than buying votes.¹³⁷ The pre-arranged transfer seeks to avoid such visible actions at polling units. INEC has consistently tried to increase the difficulty of distributing cash at polling units. Ahead of the Ekiti 2018 governorship election, INEC announced that it would not allow vehicles to go near polling units, as politicians have been known to large amounts of cash in the boots.¹³⁸ E-transfers do at least reduce this very visible style of vote-buying effort.

But one deterrent to the use of electronic transfers is that they leave a digital trail. INEC, the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and Nigerian Financial Intelligence Unit (NFIU) monitor bank accounts around election time to exploit this.¹³⁹ However, it is unclear whether this traceability is a disadvantage relative to physical buying. The money for physical vote-buying may be withdrawn from banks with the transactions similarly flagged by enforcement agencies.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, small transfers, like the abovementioned N500 (\$1.28) transfer, will ostensibly occur at high frequencies, even on election day. How does one decide whether a transfer is worth further investigation? A specialist at NFIU said that they only investigate amounts higher than a certain threshold; this threshold is much higher than N500 or N1,000.¹⁴¹

9 Data-driven Campaigning versus Data-Driven Irregularities

Political consulting firms and foreign firms are also involved in campaign irregularities. When they do engage in irregularities, their role seems to be providing strategic direction, rather than implementing on the frontline. One political consultant directed his subordinates to provide small chops (finger foods) to voters during a campaign. He had studied the demographics and realized that most voters were poor. He thus decided to send a "[campaign] message to their stomachs."¹⁴² While working for the Umaru Yar'Adua campaign in 2007, Alexander Nix, former CEO of Cambridge Analytica, persuaded his client to "tell everyone in Nigeria that [the party was] planning on stealing the election...to inoculate them."¹⁴³ By "stealing", Nix meant rig the elections. According to Nix, "when the Jimmy Carter Center – who was monitoring the election – announced that the election was not 'free and fair', everyone was like... 'Yeah, we know that.' As opposed to going 'WHAT?!' and getting really angry!"¹⁴⁴

In many cases political aspirants and/or their sponsors are confident of their control of political structures. Firms that get involved in these kinds of campaigns may struggle to use the conventional set of data-driven techniques. According to a political communications consultant,

¹³⁶ Kunle Sanni, "2019: INEC considers ban of smart phones at polling units."

¹³⁷ Kingsley Obiejesi, "Massive voter apathy, vote buying characterise elections across Nigeria."

¹³⁸ "Vote buying and vote selling," *The Nation*, April 13, 2018, <https://thenationonlineng.net/vote-buying-and-vote-selling/>.

¹³⁹ Henry Umoru, "Buhari, 62 other presidential candidates to contest 2019 polls," *Vanguard*, September 16, 2018, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/09/buhari-62-other-presidential-candidates-to-contest-2019-polls/>.

¹⁴⁰ Olakunle Maruf, "Sokoto re-run: EFCC warns against vote buying," *Nigerian Tribune*, January 24, 2020, <https://tribuneonlineng.com/sokoto-re-run-efcc-warns-against-vote-buying/>.

¹⁴¹ Nigerian Financial Intelligence Unit Staff, Phone Interview, February 7, 2020.

¹⁴² Political Consultant B, Personal Interview.

¹⁴³ Paul Hilder, "They were planning on stealing the election': Explosive new tapes reveal Cambridge Analytica CEO's boasts of voter suppression, manipulation and bribery," *Open Democracy*, January 28, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/they-were-planning-on-stealing-election-explosive-new-tapes-reveal-cambridg/>.

¹⁴⁴ Paul Hilder, "They were planning on stealing the election".

"We ran a campaign for a candidate who was being bankrolled by the incumbent in Kwara state. We did a perception audit but needed funding. The incumbent refused to release the money. We later found out that the incumbent was confident of the ownership of the political structure, although our data was telling us some things need to have happened. He was confident until the last moment. He eventually released the funds, but it was too late, and it became a free-for-all, who [sic] can buy the most votes."¹⁴⁵

But just as formal actors can become embroiled in more unconventional strategies for winning so too can informal campaign strategists who also use more data-driven techniques. The BNMC used WhatsApp as a means of spreading propaganda and fake news during the 2019 presidential elections. They would set up and join large WhatsApp groups to spread messages that attacked the opposition and supported their candidate.¹⁴⁶ The campaign of APC candidate Pastor Eze Iyamu in the 2020 Edo governorship elections also ran a comprehensive social media campaign with a team of 300 social media handlers divided into various sub-committees. The strategy focused most engagement on Facebook, then Nairaland (a popular Nigerian online forum), and finally Twitter.¹⁴⁷

Looking forward, if Nigeria's appetite for mobile technologies continues to rise, the scope for applying both conventional data-driven campaign techniques and data-driven irregularities will increase. What this will look like is unclear, but they may combine to form an expanded toolkit that strategists can select from depending on the context. Or, as has been suggested in political science literature,¹⁴⁸ legitimate campaigns may render vote-buying unsuccessful. The mechanism here is that legitimate campaigns can change voter's voting preferences and make it difficult for party agents to identify viable targets. In Nigeria, agents like to target partisans. However, a legitimate campaign could change a partisan to an opposition voter depending on the issues.

Furthermore, as Nigeria develops and more Nigerians are lifted out of poverty, they will be less susceptible to vote buying and other irregularities. Presumably, this will increase demand for personal data and techniques that use data to sway voter preferences. We may then see informal and formal campaigns merge, allowing political consultants to collect more granular data and target messages more precisely. As the leverage poverty provides erodes, political actors may also intensify identity politics—as Cambridge Analytica's video on sharia law and Buhari shows, the digital realm is fair game for such politics.

In thinking about mitigating the negative potential outcomes, there are at least two seemingly perennial causes for concern. One is that regulation tends to lag activity. With Nigeria's legal framework for data protection still nascent, lawmakers need to intensify efforts to close this gap. Another is the difficulty with enforcing the laws; places like the European Union have more robust data protection regulation but still struggle to implement effectively.

A more immediate challenge is making it harder for political actors to buy votes and carry out other irregularities. Here, the onboarding of activity to mobile and online spaces provides an opportunity for systematic tracking. This opportunity will only be taken if INEC and anti-corruption agencies vastly increase their ability to engage with digital activity and data. This recommendation does not ignore the fact that conventional data-driven techniques are not inherently legitimate. However, although some of these conventional techniques have been applied in morally questionable ways, they are

¹⁴⁵ Political Communications Consultant, Phone Interview.

¹⁴⁶ Nic Cheesman, Idayat Hassan, and Jamie Hitchen, *WhatsApp and Nigeria's 2019 Elections: Mobilizing the People, Protecting the Vote*.

¹⁴⁷ Political Consultant E, Personal Interview, July 31, 2020.

¹⁴⁸ Kenneth F. Greene, "Why Vote Buying Fails: Campaign Effects and the Elusive Swing Voter," *Working Paper*(2017), <https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbnxrZW5uZXRoZmdyZWVuZXxneD>

likely the lesser evil compared to irregularities, techniques that weaponize poverty and reinforce oppression.

10 Conclusion

Personal data is becoming increasingly important in Nigerian political campaigning. Generally, political parties use data and digital techniques to fundraise, test for the resonance of campaign messages, target messages to specific geographic locations, and send out bulk SMS, audio, and WhatsApp messages. However, through informal campaign actors, political parties and candidates also try to sway votes using fiduciary and other kinds of inducements. They do this in conditions of poverty and state capture. In this situation, data facilitates at points where physically transacting is undesirable, for example, where electoral officials are present. These data-driven irregularities reflect Nigeria's system of patronage politics and result in low demand for the services of campaign firms and digital advertising companies. The dynamics are slightly different for presidential elections. Here, the sheer number of potential voters, a growing number of which are not embedded in networks of political control, creates incentives for more data-driven campaigning techniques to be used.