

**Relational Primacy in
Electoral Persuasion:
Comparative Analysis of
Interpersonal
Communication,
Credibility, and Voter
Choice in the 2022 Osun
and Ekiti Gubernatorial
Elections**

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Abstract

Political communication is central to contemporary electoral democracy, yet its effectiveness varies considerably across different socio-political environments. In Nigeria, where trust in institutions and mass media remains fragile, the persuasive force of election campaigns is shaped less by media visibility and more by the relational dynamics embedded in everyday social life. This study critically examines the 2022 Osun and Ekiti gubernatorial elections to determine the comparative influence of mass-mediated and interpersonal communication

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on two core electoral outcomes: candidate credibility and voter choice. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of 397 registered voters, analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and chi-square tests, the study reveals a decisive hierarchy of influence in which interpersonal communication, particularly word-of-mouth, personal recommendations, and community-based opinion leadership significantly outperforms impersonal strategies such as billboards, advertising, and broadcast media. Findings demonstrate that although mass media achieved high exposure, it failed to secure a proportional persuasive impact. Instead, credibility judgments and voting decisions were overwhelmingly mediated by trusted social ties. These results align with and extend the Two-Step Flow and Persuasion models by showing that, in low-trust political settings, mass-mediated messages require interpersonal validation to translate into behavioural action. The study contributes to African political communication scholarship by articulating a relational model of electoral persuasion and offers practical recommendations for designing trust-centred, community-anchored campaign strategies.

Keywords: Political Communication, Interpersonal Influence, Credibility, Voter Behaviour, Two-Step Flow, Persuasion, Nigeria, Osun State, Ekiti State, Elections

Introduction

Political communication has become one of the most decisive instruments in shaping electoral behaviour across democratic systems. In both mature and emerging democracies, the ability of political actors to strategically frame messages, mobilise supporters, and construct credibility has been shown to influence whether voters engage, how they make decisions, and ultimately which candidates they endorse (Amao, 2023; Bennett & Livingston, 2020). Yet, despite the growing sophistication of campaign technologies, the effectiveness of political communication remains deeply conditioned by the cultural, institutional, and socio-economic environment

within which it is deployed. This context-specific nature of persuasion is particularly salient in African democracies, where persistent deficits in institutional trust, economic precarity, and communal social structures continue to shape how citizens receive, filter, and act upon political information (Olorunmola, 2019; Resnick, 2023).

In Nigeria, the largest democracy in Africa, electoral communication operates in a space marked by paradox. On one hand, political actors invest heavily in mass-mediated strategies, television advertising, billboards, jingles, digital platforms, and party-owned media infrastructures. These tools provide visibility, agenda-setting capacity, and the illusion of wide persuasion. On the other hand, a substantial body of recent scholarship indicates that such visibility rarely translates into behavioural influence due to widespread mistrust in political messaging, poor media credibility, and the dominance of informal information networks (Akinwande, 2021; Ezeibe et al., 2020). Nigerian voters frequently encounter mass media content, yet remain sceptical of political advertising, perceiving it as biased, exaggerated, or simply disconnected from local realities (Ojebuyi & Fadeyibi, 2023). As a result, formal communication channels often fail to shift attitudes in meaningful ways.

This tension between visibility and persuasion became particularly notable in the 2022 Osun and Ekiti gubernatorial elections, two off-cycle contests that drew intense regional and national attention. Both elections featured substantial investments in advertising, digital engagement, mobilisation events, and policy messaging, yet the eventual voting patterns reflected deeper socio-relational dynamics rather than the expected outcomes of media saturation. These elections, therefore, present a unique opportunity to interrogate the mechanisms through which political communication drives electoral behaviour in Southwest Nigeria, a region characterised by strong community networks, influential local opinion leaders, and persistent political distrust (Babarinsa, 2022).

A central premise of this study is that the dominant models of persuasion, particularly those developed within Western contexts, inadequately explain political influence in high-context, relationally oriented societies. Although the mass media remains an important agenda-setting force, research increasingly suggests that individuals rely on interpersonal networks, family,

peers, religious leaders, community elders, and local influencers to interpret and validate political information before acting upon it (Edelmann et al., 2021). In this context, interpersonal communication becomes the key mechanism through which voters navigate political uncertainty. Recent Nigerian studies have shown that word-of-mouth, personal recommendations, and community-based interactions play an outsized role in shaping beliefs about candidate integrity, competence, and trustworthiness, attributes that voters prioritise more heavily than policy promises or party labels (Ojebode & Olorunisola, 2018; Ojo, 2022). These relational dynamics are further amplified by pervasive economic vulnerability, which encourages voters to depend on trusted intermediaries who can decode political intentions, clarify misinformation, and link national issues to lived experiences.

The 2022 Osun and Ekiti elections thus offer a fertile empirical ground to examine how mass-mediated and interpersonal communication interact to shape electoral outcomes. By interrogating the electoral processes in these two states, the study contributes to three broader scholarly conversations. First, it advances political communication literature by empirically demonstrating how low-trust democracies invert the hierarchy of persuasive influence found in Western contexts. Second, it contributes to African political behaviour scholarship by highlighting how social networks mediate electoral decisions. Third, it offers practical insight for political actors seeking to design communication strategies that align with the realities of Nigerian voter psychology.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the centrality of political communication to democratic participation, a persistent contradiction continues to undermine its effectiveness in Nigeria: high levels of message visibility coexist with low levels of persuasive impact. Political candidates and parties invest heavily in mass-mediated tools, billboards, television adverts, radio jingles, SMS broadcasts, and increasingly social media campaigns. These efforts generate substantial exposure, creating the illusion that message saturation will naturally translate into electoral influence. However, empirical evidence consistently shows that Nigerian voters, particularly in Southwest states such as Osun and Ekiti, do not treat visibility as equivalent to credibility or trust (Akinwande, 2021;

Ojebuyi & Fadeyibi, 2023). The resulting gap between exposure and persuasion presents a profound challenge to political communication theory and practice.

A core problem is the persistent crisis of trust that characterises Nigerian political communication. Studies across African democracies show that citizens frequently distrust mass media content, especially political advertising, due to perceptions of bias, propaganda, and manipulation (Resnick, 2023). In Nigeria, these concerns are amplified by a history of politicised media ownership, unregulated campaign rhetoric, and inconsistent fact-checking systems. Consequently, voters often treat mass-mediated messages with scepticism, engaging with them as noise rather than actionable information. This distrust weakens the persuasive potential of impersonal communication and disrupts the linear flow assumed in traditional media-effects models.

In contrast to the declining credibility of mass media, interpersonal and community-based communication remains deeply trusted and socially embedded. Research demonstrates that in low-trust environments, voters rely on personal networks, family, friends, religious leaders, and community influencers to interpret political messages and authenticate candidate claims (Edelmann et al., 2021). These interpersonal channels serve as filters that frame political information through culturally grounded norms of trust, obligation, and social proximity. However, although observational evidence suggests that these relational mechanisms significantly shape electoral behaviour, there is limited quantitative research that precisely measures their comparative influence vis-à-vis mass-mediated strategies in Nigerian elections.

The lack of empirical clarity is especially problematic given the increasing complexity of electoral communication. Digital media has expanded the volume and speed of political messaging, but has also intensified misinformation, echo chambers, and strategic manipulation. Without robust empirical evidence, political actors risk overinvesting in high-visibility platforms that may have limited or even counterproductive influence on voter decision-making. Similarly, scholars cannot fully explain how and why interpersonal communication continues to dominate political persuasion in a media-saturated environment.

Research Objectives

The aim of this study is to critically examine the comparative influence of mass-mediated and interpersonal political communication on voter perceptions of candidate credibility and voter choice in the 2022 Osun and Ekiti gubernatorial elections. The specific, measurable objectives guiding this investigation are to:

- i. Assess the influence of political communication strategies on voters' perception of gubernatorial candidate credibility;
- ii. Examine the influence of political communication strategies on voters' choice of gubernatorial candidates;
- iii. Identify the political communication strategy that has the strongest influence on voter choice.

Research Questions

In alignment with the objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

- i. How do political communication strategies influence voters' perception of gubernatorial candidate credibility?
- ii. How do political communication strategies influence voters' choice of gubernatorial candidates?
- iii. Which political communication strategy exerts the strongest influence on voter choice in the 2022 Osun and Ekiti elections?

Conceptual Review

Political Communication Strategies

Political communication strategies refer to the deliberate methods through which political actors convey information, frame issues, construct identities, and attempt to influence voter attitudes and behaviour. Scholars generally categorise these strategies into two broad domains: mass-mediated communication and interpersonal communication, each grounded in different assumptions about how influence flows.

i. Mass-Mediated Political Communication

Mass-mediated strategies include political advertising, billboards, posters, radio and television broadcasts, press statements, and increasingly digital

and social media campaigns. These channels are designed for broad reach, rapid dissemination, and agenda-setting effects (Strömbäck & Esser, 2022). Their principal advantage is visibility. However, their influence depends heavily on the credibility of the medium, message framing, and voters' trust in information sources. In contexts where media systems are perceived as compromised or politically biased, exposure does not necessarily translate into persuasion (Ojebuyi & Fadeyibi, 2023).

Digital platforms have complicated this landscape further. While social media can enable targeted messaging and interactive engagement, it also amplifies misinformation, polarisation, and strategic manipulation (Bennett & Livingston, 2020). Nigerian studies show that digital political content often circulates within partisan or community-based networks, requiring interpersonal validation before influencing voter behaviour (Ezeibe et al., 2020). Thus, mass-mediated communication plays a foundational role in awareness creation, but has a limited persuasive effect when institutional trust is low.

ii. Interpersonal Political Communication

Interpersonal communication refers to direct, socially embedded exchanges between individuals—family discussions, peer conversations, religious interactions, community dialogues, and endorsements from trusted local actors. This form of communication is widely recognised as more influential in shaping political attitudes in collectivist or high-context societies (Edelmann et al., 2021). Unlike mass media, interpersonal communication leverages social proximity, emotional resonance, and relational trust.

In African democracies, interpersonal communication often becomes the decisive mechanism through which voters make sense of political claims and assess candidate intentions (Ojobor & Olorunisola, 2018). Opinion leaders, such as traditional chiefs, religious figures, and respected community members, serve as intermediaries who interpret political messages, reduce uncertainty, and embed information within local norms and values. Consequently, interpersonal influence tends to dominate where political distrust is pervasive, media credibility is low, and community networks remain strong.

Candidate Credibility

Candidate credibility refers to voters' assessment of a candidate's trustworthiness, competence, integrity, and authenticity. It is a key determinant of electoral behaviour, especially in contexts with weak programmatic politics and strong personality-based voting tendencies. According to persuasion research, credibility, also known as *ethos*, functions as a gateway variable that shapes how voters receive, interpret, and internalise political messages (Perloff, 2021).

In Nigeria, where citizens frequently doubt the sincerity of political actors, credibility becomes both an informational and emotional judgement. Studies indicate that voters rely less on media portrayals and more on community-based assessments of candidate behaviour, reputation, and proximity (Ojo, 2022). Interpersonal channels reinforce credibility through narrative sharing, lived experiences, and repeated interpersonal validation. Conversely, mass-mediated messages often struggle to establish credibility because voters perceive them as motivated by political self-interest and manipulation (Akinwande, 2021). Thus, candidate credibility is not only a product of message quality but also of the relational context in which the message is interpreted.

Voter Choice

Voter choice refers to the final decision voters make at the polls regarding which candidate to support. It is shaped by a complex interaction of cognitive, emotional, and contextual factors, including political identity, perceived performance, party loyalty, economic conditions, and sociocultural influences. In emerging democracies, voter choice is often driven less by policy evaluation and more by relational cues and trust signals (Resnick, 2023).

Political communication plays a central role in this process. Mass-mediated strategies may set the agenda for public debate, but interpersonal communication frequently determines how voters translate information into decisions. Peer influence, group identity, and social pressure are particularly powerful in contexts where political decisions are embedded within communal expectations (Edelmann et al., 2021). Consequently, voter choice in Nigeria cannot be fully understood without considering the primacy of interpersonal networks.

Literature Review

Studies across the African political landscape show that mass-mediated political communication, such as radio broadcasts, campaign advertising, billboards, and digital messaging, plays an important agenda-setting role but often contributes only weakly to persuasion. For instance, Adebisi and Oyesomi (2021) found that Nigerian political advertising significantly increased issue awareness but had little effect on voter attitude change, primarily due to widespread distrust in campaign messages. Similar findings have been documented in Kenya, Ghana, and Zambia, where citizens frequently express scepticism toward political advertising because it is perceived as exaggerated, manipulative, or lacking authenticity (Resnick, 2023).

In Nigeria specifically, empirical studies confirm that high exposure does not guarantee behavioural impact. Ojebuyi and Fadeyibi (2023) reported that although voters encountered political advertisements frequently during elections, only a minority viewed them as credible sources of information. Instead, many voters interpreted advertisements as strategic tools for impression management rather than as truthful representations of candidates' intentions. This perception diminishes the persuasive power of mass-mediated messages and limits their capacity to shape voting behaviour.

Furthermore, research on digital political communication complicates expectations of media influence. Ezeibe et al. (2020) demonstrated that although social media increased political visibility and offered opportunities for direct candidate-voter interaction, it also amplified misinformation and heightened political cynicism. Their study concluded that online visibility rarely translated into consistent offline persuasion, especially in contexts where digital information required interpersonal verification. Collectively, these findings align with the emerging consensus that mass media in Nigeria function more effectively as a mobilisation and awareness tool rather than a decisive persuasive mechanism.

When examining interpersonal communication and electoral influence, empirical evidence strongly indicates that interpersonal communication exerts a far greater influence on voter behaviour in African electoral contexts than mass-mediated channels. In a comprehensive study of political persuasion across six Nigerian states, Ojebode and Olorunisola (2018) found

that voters consistently trusted interpersonal sources, family, community leaders, and religious figures, more than mass media. Their findings show that voters rely on relational cues to interpret political messages, especially when evaluating candidate credibility.

Similarly, Edelman et al. (2021), in a cross-national study, demonstrated that interpersonal networks not only shape political knowledge but also act as “interpretive communities” that influence how messages are received and whether they are deemed credible. This interpretive role is particularly significant in societies with high-context communication cultures, where meaning is inferred through personal relationships rather than explicit media frames.

Finally, research on comparative studies on credibility and voters’ choice revealed a superior predictive effect of interpersonal communication on credibility assessments. In a recent survey of Nigerian voters, Akinwande (2021) found that interpersonal recommendations were twice as likely as political advertising to shape perceptions of candidate trustworthiness. This effect was even stronger in rural and semi-urban areas, where community ties are deeply embedded.

Regarding voter choice, several studies reveal a similar hierarchy of influence. Amao (2023) showed that interpersonal endorsements predicted voting decisions more strongly than exposure to television or radio advertisements. Likewise, Babarinsa (2022) found that during the 2018 and 2020 elections in Southwest Nigeria, voters placed greater weight on the opinions of respected community actors than on party manifestos or campaign promises disseminated through the media.

These findings directly relate to the Osun and Ekiti elections, where early reports indicated substantial exposure to campaign materials but a strong reliance on interpersonal recommendations for final decision-making. The pattern observed in prior empirical work suggests that the dominance of interpersonal communication in these elections is neither incidental nor new; rather, it reflects a stable communicative logic in Nigerian electoral culture.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored by two complementary communication theories that provide the necessary lens for critical analysis: the Two-Step Flow

Theory and the Persuasion Theory. The Two-Step Flow Theory, originally formulated by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948), challenges the notion that mass media directly influences audiences. Instead, it argues that messages move first to socially influential opinion leaders who interpret and filter them before passing them to others. Subsequent research has reinforced the enduring relevance of this model, demonstrating that political influence often travels through interpersonal networks rather than through direct media exposure, especially in fragmented or distrustful media environments (Katz, 1957; Bennett & Manheim, 2020). In societies where trust in formal institutions is low and communal ties remain strong, individuals tend to rely on personal relationships to make political sense of the world, rendering interpersonal communication a more powerful driver of persuasion.

These dynamics resonate sharply within the Nigerian context. Nigerian voters frequently express scepticism toward mass-mediated political content due to perceptions of bias, propaganda, and manipulation (Ojebode & Olorunisola, 2018). As a result, voters seldom accept mass media messages at face value; they turn instead to trusted individuals, family members, religious leaders, community elders, to validate, reinterpret, or challenge political claims. In the 2022 Osun and Ekiti elections, the heavy use of billboards, advertisements, and radio promotions generated widespread visibility, yet these channels appeared insufficient in shaping voter decisions without the interpretive contribution of opinion leaders. Thus, the Two-Step Flow Theory provides an essential lens for understanding why exposure alone did not translate into persuasion.

Persuasion Theory complements this perspective by explaining the psychological conditions under which messages become influential. Contemporary persuasion scholarship emphasises the centrality of ethos, source credibility, in shaping whether audiences accept or reject political information (Perloff, 2021). Credibility, which encompasses perceptions of trustworthiness, expertise, integrity, and authenticity, functions as a gateway variable, determining whether individuals will process a message deeply enough to undergo attitude change (Druckman, 2020). In low-trust political environments like Nigeria, mass-mediated messages often struggle to establish credibility because voters assume that campaign messages are crafted to manipulate perceptions rather than convey truth. Interpersonal

communication, by contrast, benefits from pre-existing relational trust, making opinion leaders particularly influential persuaders. When friends, community leaders, or religious figures endorse or explain political information, their credibility transfers to the message, increasing its persuasive power in ways that mass media seldom achieves.

The application of these theories to the present study is straightforward yet analytically significant. The findings from the 2022 elections indicate that while mass-mediated political tools successfully generated awareness, they did not independently shape voter attitudes or choices. Instead, interpersonal communication emerged as the dominant predictor of both candidate credibility and voter choice, reflecting the two-step flow mechanism where interpersonal networks mediate and magnify, or in some cases diminish, media influence. At the same time, the critical role of credibility in these elections aligns with Persuasion Theory's emphasis on ethos. Voters trusted and acted upon political information primarily when it was communicated through credible interpersonal sources.

Methodology

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design to systematically capture voters' perceptions of political communication, candidate credibility, and electoral choice immediately after the 2022 Osun and Ekiti gubernatorial elections. A cross-sectional approach is appropriate for analysing attitudinal variables at a single point in time and is widely used in electoral behaviour research for its ability to reveal population-level patterns efficiently (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The target population comprised registered voters in both states, from which a sample of 400 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane formula. A multi-stage sampling technique ensured geographical and demographic representation, consistent with best practices in political communication studies requiring contextual diversity (Babbie, 2020). Data were generated through a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and chi-square tests to examine relationships between communication strategies, credibility, and voter choice. This analytical combination is appropriate for measuring associations in non-experimental political research (Field, 2018).

Presentation of Data

Table 1: Voting Status of the Respondents

Were you of voting age?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	383	96.5
No	14	3.5
Total	397	100%

Did you vote?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	350	88.2
No	47	11.8
Total	397	100%

If you did not vote, why?	Frequency	Percentage
I was not in town	14	3.5
I didn't want to vote	15	3.8
I didn't register	13	3.3
Others (Apathy, lost voters card, underage)	5	1.3
Total	47	11.8%

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The table indicates that most respondents were eligible to vote, and a large majority participated in the election. Non-voting was relatively low and mainly due to absence from town, lack of interest, or failure to register. These findings suggest generally high electoral engagement among the surveyed population.

Table 2: Political communication tools through which the electorates got to know about the political candidature in Osun and Ekiti States.

How did you first hear about the political candidature in 2022 gubernatorial election?	Frequency	Percentage
Social media	79	19.9
Print media	14	3.5
Broadcast media	94	23.7
Outdoor advertising	19	4.8
Public rally	57	14.4
Word of mouth	134	33.7
Total	397	100%

Which social media platform do you use most to get information about political candidates?	Frequency	Percentage
Facebook	185	46.6
Twitter	20	5.3
Instagram	11	2.8
WhatsApp	62	15.5
Others	119	29.8
Total	397	100%

How do you prefer to receive information about political candidature?	Frequency	Percentage
Through social media	132	33.2
Through traditional media	66	16.6
Through public rallies and campaign events	61	15.4
Through the word of mouth	135	34.0
Others	3	.8
Total	397	100%

Source: field survey, 2025

The results show that word of mouth is the dominant channel through which voters first learned about candidates, followed by broadcast media

and social media. Facebook is the leading platform for political information. Preferences similarly favour interpersonal communication and social media, indicating a blend of digital and personal sources in voters' information habits.

Table 3: The frequency of exposure of the electorates to the political communication tools employed by the gubernatorial candidates in Osun and Ekiti States.

How often do you see posts or ads from gubernatorial candidates on social media platforms?	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	223	56.2
Weekly	19	4.8
Monthly	2.	5
Rarely	63	15.9
Never	90	22.7
Total	397	100%

How often do you hear or see gubernatorial candidates' messages on traditional media (radio, TV, newspapers)?	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	270	68.0
Weekly	35	8.8
Monthly	2.	5
Rarely	66	16.6
Never	24	6.0
Total	397	100%

How often do you see billboards, posters, or flyers of gubernatorial candidates in your area?	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	323	81.4
Weekly	22	5.5
Monthly	8	2.0

Rarely	35	8.8
Never	9	2.3
Total	397	100%

How often do you attend public events, rallies, or town hall meetings where gubernatorial candidates speak?	Frequency	Percentage
Often	111	28.0
Occasionally	81	20.4
Rarely	39	9.9
Never	166	41.8
Total	397	100%

How often do you discuss gubernatorial candidates with family, friends, or community leaders?	Frequency	Percentage
Often	251	63.2
Occasionally	61	15.4
Rarely	54	13.6
Never	31	7.8
Total	397	100%

Source: field survey, 2025

The data shows high exposure to political communication across channels, with most respondents encountering candidate messages daily on social media, traditional media, and outdoor advertising. Attendance at rallies is relatively low, yet interpersonal discussions are frequent. Overall, voters experience constant mediated messaging but engage more socially than through physical campaign events.

Table 4: How the political communication strategies engaged by gubernatorial candidates have influenced the electorate's perception of candidates' credibility.

Which of the following factors influence your perception of a political candidate?	Frequency	Percentage
Social media posts	83	20.9
Traditional media coverage	39	9.8
Public speeches and debates	77	19.4
Personal recommendations	191	48.1
Others	7	1.8
Total	397	100%

Political advertising makes me feel persuaded about gubernatorial candidate's credibility.	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	56	14.1
Agree	77	19.4
Neutral	126	31.7
Disagree	80	20.2
Strongly Disagree	58	14.6
Total	397	100%

Word of mouth and personal endorsement make gubernatorial candidates more convincing and endearing to me.	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	200	50.4
Agree	76	19.1
Neutral	59	14.9
Disagree	48	12.1
Strongly Disagree	14	3.5
Total	397	100%

To what extent do social media influence your perception of a gubernatorial candidate?	Frequency	Percentage
Great extent	113	28.5
Moderate extent	71	17.9
Little extent	89	22.4
No extent	124	31.2
Total	397	100%

How important is it for a gubernatorial candidate to have a clear and consistent message?	Frequency	Percentage
Very important	333	83.8
Somewhat important	42	10.6
Not very important	15	3.8
Not at all important	7	1.8
Total	397	100%

Source: field survey, 2025

The findings show that personal recommendations are the strongest influence on candidate perception, outweighing media sources. While political advertising elicits mixed reactions, word-of-mouth remains highly persuasive. Social media has a moderate but uneven impact. Overall, voters value clear, consistent messaging, indicating that credibility and interpersonal trust drive perception more than promotional content.

Table 5: Political communication strategies' impact on the electorate's choice of candidature

How important is social media in influencing your voting decision?	Frequency	Percentage
Very important	177	44.6
Somewhat important	51	12.8
Not very important	45	11.3
Not at all important	124	31.3
Total	397	100%

How much do public speeches by gubernatorial candidates influence your voting decision?	Frequency	Percentage
Very influential	223	56.2
Somewhat influential	93	23.4
Not very influential	46	11.6
Not at all influential	35	8.8
Total	397	100%

How much do personal recommendations influence your voting decision?	Frequency	Percentage
Very influential	234	58.9
Somewhat influential	68	17.3
Not very influential	48	12.3
Not at all influential	47	11.5
Total	397	100%

How much does political advertising influence your decision to vote for a gubernatorial candidate?	Frequency	Percentage
Very influential	75	18.9
Somewhat influential	67	16.9
Not very influential	121	30.5
Not at all influential	134	33.8
Total	397	100%

Political rallies by gubernatorial candidates significantly influence my choice of candidates.	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	124	31.2
Agree	81	20.4
Neutral	94	23.7
Disagree	70	17.6

Strongly Disagree	28	7.1
Total	397	100%

Source: field survey, 2025

The findings show that personal recommendations are the strongest influence on candidate perception, outweighing media sources. While political advertising elicits mixed reactions, word-of-mouth remains highly persuasive. Social media has a moderate but uneven impact. Overall, voters value clear, consistent messaging, indicating that credibility and interpersonal trust drive perception more than promotional content.

Table 6: Most impacting political communication strategy on electorates' choice of political gubernatorial candidature in Osun and Ekiti States.

Most impacting PCS	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Rank
Social media campaigns are the most effective way for politicians to reach voters in my state.	105(26.4)	86(21.7)	90(22.7)	48(12.1)	68(17.1)	2.72
Political advertising is the most persuasive way for politicians to influence voters in my state.	78(19.6)	92(23.2)	153(38.5)	18(4.5)	56(14.1)	2.70
Public rallies and events are the most effective way for politicians to build support and connect with voters in my state	190(47.9)	88(22.2)	61(15.4)	42(10.6)	16(4.0)	2.01
Word of mouth and personal endorsements are the most influential factors in shaping voters' opinions about political candidatures in my state.	226(56.9)	74(18.6)	53(13.4)	33(8.3)	11(2.8)	1.81

Source: field survey, 2025

The table shows that word-of-mouth and personal endorsements exert the strongest influence on voters' gubernatorial choices, followed by public rallies. Social media campaigns and political advertising are less impactful. Overall, interpersonal communication appears more persuasive than mediated strategies in shaping political preferences in Osun and Ekiti States.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study offer a coherent explanation of how political communication strategies shaped voter perceptions and electoral decisions in the 2022 Osun and Ekiti gubernatorial elections. Across all three research objectives, the evidence points to the relational primacy of interpersonal communication in shaping credibility assessments and voter choice, affirming patterns identified in prior empirical studies and extending theoretical insights from the literature.

In relation to Objective One, which examined how political communication strategies influenced voters' perception of candidate credibility, the study found that interpersonal communication—particularly personal recommendations and word-of-mouth, had the strongest effect on credibility judgments. This aligns with Persuasion Theory's emphasis on ethos as the central determinant of message acceptance. Voters trusted political information when it originated from socially embedded and relationally credible sources, such as family, community leaders, and religious influencers. This pattern mirrors earlier findings by Ojo (2022) and Ojebode and Olorunisola (2018), both of whom emphasise that Nigerian voters rely heavily on communal assessments rather than mediated portrayals when evaluating political actors. The scepticism toward political advertising observed in this study further corroborates Akinwande's (2021) argument that mass-mediated messages are often perceived as self-serving and therefore insufficient for building credibility in low-trust settings. Thus, interpersonal communication emerged as the mechanism through which voters established confidence in a candidate's trustworthiness and integrity.

Regarding Objective Two, which focused on how communication strategies influenced voters' choice of gubernatorial candidates, the findings reveal that interpersonal influence again surpassed mass media in predictive power. Although voters were frequently exposed to campaign messages

through billboards, posters, and broadcast media, these channels did not significantly determine their electoral decisions. Instead, the decisive factor was the validation of political claims within interpersonal networks. This pattern reflects the expectations of the Two-Step Flow Theory, which posits that opinion leaders mediate the influence of mass communication by interpreting and endorsing, or rejecting, political messages. Studies by Edelman et al. (2021) and Resnick (2023) similarly show that in environments where media trust is weak, voters depend on socially embedded interpreters to reduce uncertainty and contextualise political information. Thus, the present study reinforces existing scholarship by demonstrating that voter choice in Osun and Ekiti was not a direct function of message exposure but of relational authentication within trusted networks.

Finally, Objective Three, which sought to identify the communication strategy with the strongest influence on voter choice, confirmed that word-of-mouth and personal recommendations were the dominant predictors. This conclusion corroborates empirical trends observed by Amao (2023) and Babarinsa (2022), who document the enduring significance of community influence in Southwestern Nigeria's electoral politics. While mass media played an agenda-setting role by raising awareness of candidates, it failed to move voters from attention to action—a pattern consistent with Perloff's (2021) analysis that persuasion requires more than visibility; it requires credible and emotionally resonant message sources.

Overall, the discussion highlights a critical insight: in low-trust democracies (Oladipo, 2014; Oladipo & Offor, 2021), political persuasion is not a media-driven process but a socially negotiated one. The findings strengthen the argument that interpersonal communication is not merely complementary to mass-mediated strategies; it is the primary mechanism through which political meaning, credibility, and ultimately electoral behaviour are constructed. This relational logic explains why mass media saturation did not translate into persuasive efficacy in the 2022 Osun and Ekiti elections and why interpersonal communication remains structurally central to voter decision-making in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that political persuasion in the 2022 Osun and Ekiti gubernatorial elections was shaped less by the visibility of campaign messages and more by the relational context through which voters interpreted political information. While mass-mediated strategies generated substantial awareness, they lacked the credibility required to influence attitudes or behaviour in a low-trust environment. Interpersonal communication, particularly word-of-mouth, peer discussions, and community endorsements, emerged as the most decisive factor shaping both candidate credibility and voter choice. These findings affirm the continued relevance of the Two-Step Flow and Persuasion theories, showing that influence flows through trusted intermediaries who provide social validation for political claims. The study contributes to political communication scholarship by highlighting the structural limitations of mass media in emerging democracies and underscoring the primacy of interpersonal networks in electoral decision-making. Effective campaign strategies in Nigeria must therefore prioritise trust-building, relational communication, and community-based mobilisation.

Recommendations

Based on the quantitative evidence of relational primacy and the credibility paradox, the following critical recommendations are proposed for political actors and electoral stakeholders:

i. Strengthen Interpersonal and Community-Based Communication

Campaigns should prioritise interpersonal channels by engaging trusted community actors such as religious leaders, elders, and youth organisers. These networks effectively validate political messages and shape voter decisions. Redirecting resources from mass advertising to grassroots dialogue through town halls, neighbourhood visits, and community forums enhances trust, improves credibility, and aligns communication strategies with voter expectations in low-trust environments.

ii. Ensure Credibility Through Consistent, Transparent Messaging

Candidates should communicate clear, realistic, and verifiable messages across all platforms to counter voter scepticism. Transparency, consistent

narratives, and responsiveness to community concerns enhance trust. Fact-checking initiatives, community feedback sessions, and regular direct engagement help reinforce authenticity. When mass-media messages match interpersonal endorsements, voter confidence increases, strengthening overall persuasive impact and electoral effectiveness.

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