



## Religion and Political Choice: Evidence from Oyo Federal Constituency in Nigeria's 2023 General Elections

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### Abstract

*This study investigates the interplay between religious affiliations and voting behavior in Oyo Federal Constituency during Nigeria's 2023 general elections, within a socio-political context where ~50% of Nigerians are Muslim and 40% Christian, profoundly influencing choices via colonial favoritism, post-independence party-faith alignments, and the APC's Muslim-Muslim ticket (Tinubu-Shettima), which unified Northern Muslims but alienated Southern Christians. In Oyo, candidates secured religious endorsements from mosques and churches for mobilization, entrenching faith in electoral strategies. Despite this dominance, gaps remain in dissecting religion's sway over voter decisions often eclipsing socio-economics, merit, and policy amid politicians' faith exploitation, leaders' party loyalty influence, and underexplored interfaith dialogue for curbing polarization and violence, raising questions on electoral inclusivity and governance cohesion. The study probes four research questions: faith's electoral impact; leaders'/institutions' roles; sociolect-economic-faith intersections; and dialogue's potential. A quantitative descriptive survey used structured questionnaires on 160 voters, purposively selected to reflect Oyo's religious diversity and 2023 perspectives. Findings indicate 62.5% report religion shaping decisions, 57.5% prefer co-religionists, 63.1% prioritize faith amid hardship, 68.1% see exploitation; yet 76.3% support interfaith talks against violence, 73.1% leader collaborations for issue-voting, though 62.5% note partisanship. Insights advocate dialogue and civic education for depolarization and others were recommended.*

**Keywords:** Religious Affiliation, Voting Behavior, Political Choice, Interfaith Dialogue

## Introduction

The relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria is a complex and multifaceted issue that significantly influences the nation's socio-political landscape. With approximately 50% of the population identifying as Muslim and 40% as Christian, religious affiliations play a critical role in shaping political choices and party loyalty across the country (Pew Research Center, 2018). This dynamic is particularly pronounced in regions like Oyo Federal Constituency, where religious identity intersects with ethnic and cultural factors, profoundly affecting voter behavior. Historically, the intertwining of religion and politics in Nigeria can be traced back to colonial times when British policies favored certain religious groups over others, setting a precedent for future conflicts (Falola & Heaton, 2008). The post-independence era has seen various political parties align themselves with specific religious communities, leading to a landscape where electoral choices are frequently influenced by faith-based considerations. This phenomenon has resulted in a political environment where candidates often appeal to religious sentiments to mobilize support, further entrenching the connection between faith and political allegiance (Nnoli, 2016). The 2023 Nigerian general elections illustrated the profound impact of religious affiliations on political choices. The All Progressives Congress' (APC) decision to field a Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket (Bola Tinubu and Kashim Shettima) broke with the longstanding tradition of religious balancing in national tickets, sparking intense nationwide debates about religious representation and exclusion (Ogbu, 2023). This controversial move successfully consolidated Northern Muslim votes

but alienated many Christian voters, particularly in the Middle Belt and Southern regions (Paden, 2023).

In Oyo Federal Constituency, this trend was evident as candidates sought endorsements from prominent religious figures, which significantly influenced voter preferences. The role of religious institutions extends beyond mere endorsement; they also serve as platforms for political mobilization and community engagement. Churches and mosques often organize events that encourage civic participation among their members, reinforcing party loyalty through shared beliefs and values (Ibrahim, 2021). Despite the significant influence of religious identity on political choices, there remains a gap in understanding how these affiliations specifically shape voter behavior in diverse constituencies like Oyo. The alignment of political parties with specific religious groups has created a landscape where electoral choices are often driven by faith-based considerations rather than policy issues or candidate qualifications (Salahu, 2023). This phenomenon raises questions about the extent to which religious identity influences voters' decisions, potentially overshadowing critical socio-economic factors. The lack of comprehensive studies focusing on how religious affiliations impact political choices in Oyo Federal Constituency limits our understanding of the broader implications for governance and social cohesion in Nigeria. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending broader electoral patterns in Nigeria, especially given the historical context of political turmoil often exacerbated by religious tensions (Adeleke, 2020).

This research seeks to address these gaps by investigating the ways in

which religious identities shape electoral behavior, the influence of religious leaders on party loyalty, and the potential for inter-religious dialogue to foster greater political inclusivity.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

To enhance understanding of this study's theoretical underpinnings and analytical approach, the following conceptual clarifications are provided:

#### **Religious Affiliation**

Religious affiliation refers to an individual's formal or informal identification with a particular faith tradition, denomination, or religious community. In the Nigerian context, this encompasses primarily Christianity (including Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal, and other Protestant denominations), Islam (Sunni and Shi'a traditions), and African Traditional Religion. Beyond mere self-identification, religious affiliation encompasses participation in worship activities, adherence to faith-based values, and membership in religious communities that shape social identity and worldview (Taylor, 1994; Ekanem, 2023). Recent studies confirm its pivotal role in 2023 elections, where 83% of voters reported religious affiliations influencing preferences, often favoring co-religionists due to shared values and representation expectations. This study operationalizes religious affiliation through self-reported identification and frequency of worship attendance, recognizing it as a multidimensional construct encompassing belief, belonging, and behavioral dimensions.

#### **Voting Behavior**

Voting behavior refers to the patterns, preferences, and decision-making processes that individuals employ when selecting candidates or parties in electoral contexts. This encompasses not only the final ballot choice but also pre-electoral attitudes, candidate evaluation criteria, susceptibility to campaign messaging, and post-electoral loyalty patterns (Putnam, 2000; Ajayi & Oyesomi, 2016). In multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies like Nigeria, voting behavior is influenced by intersecting identities including ethnicity, religion, class, and regional affiliation, with empirical data from 2023 showing significant correlations ( $r=.719$  for religious identity;  $r=.783$  for ethnicity) in Lagos gubernatorial races. The 2023 presidential election further highlighted religion's dominance, as ethno-religious sentiments fragmented electorates and reinforced bloc voting. This study focuses specifically on how religious identity shapes voter preferences in Oyo Federal Constituency, examining both direct influences (such as preferring co-religionist candidates) and indirect influences (such as religious leaders' endorsements affecting party loyalty).

#### **Political Choice**

Political choice encompasses the deliberative and non-deliberative processes through which voters arrive at electoral decisions, including candidate selection, party preference, and issue prioritization. Unlike voting behavior (which focuses on observable patterns), political choice emphasizes the cognitive, affective, and social mechanisms underlying electoral decisions. In religiously plural societies like Nigeria, political choice involves navigating competing

loyalties between religious identity and economic interests, between communal expectations and individual preferences, between faith-based solidarity and cross-cutting coalitions (Lewis, 2022; Ekanem, 2023). 2023 election data shows religion often overrides economic calculus, with voters prioritizing faith alignment amid elite-orchestrated divisions. This study investigates these dynamics in Oyo, assessing religion's primacy over competence or policy.

### **Interfaith Dialogue**

Interfaith dialogue refers to structured and informal communication, cooperation, and relationship-building between members of different religious traditions aimed at promoting mutual understanding, reducing prejudice, and fostering peaceful coexistence. In electoral contexts, interfaith dialogue serves as a conflict mitigation strategy, creating spaces where religious communities can negotiate shared political values, establish norms against violence, and develop cross-faith coalitions around common interests (Sulaiman & Adediran, 2022; Nwachukwu, 2024). Post-2023 analyses emphasize its necessity to counter supremacy contests and political violence fueled by religious bigotry, as seen in Kaduna's same-faith ticket disputes. This study assesses community receptivity to interfaith initiatives as a depolarization mechanism in Oyo, measuring both attitudinal support and behavioral willingness to participate in Christian-Muslim peace efforts during elections.

### **Political Polarization**

Political polarization describes the divergence of political attitudes and preferences toward ideological extremes, resulting in reduced common

ground, increased inter-group hostility, and weakened capacity for compromise and coalition-building. Religious polarization a subset of this phenomenon occurs when religious identities become rigidly aligned with political positions, creating mutually exclusive voting blocs that perceive electoral competition as zero-sum contests between faith communities (Harnischfeger, 2003; Ekanem, 2023). In Nigeria's 2023 elections, the Muslim-Muslim ticket exemplified polarizing moves that deepened religious fault lines, fragmenting electorates and intensifying interfaith tensions (SSRN, 2024). This study examines polarization through indicators such as unwillingness to vote across religious lines, drawing on 2023 patterns where religion trumped reason.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study examines the complex relationship between religious affiliations and political choices in Oyo Federal Constituency during the 2023 general elections. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the influence of religious affiliations on electoral behavior in Oyo Federal Constituency during the 2023 elections.
2. To analyze the role of religious leaders and institutions in shaping party loyalty among constituents.
3. To explore the interaction between socio-economic factors and religious identities in influencing political choices.
4. To assess the potential for inter-religious dialogue to promote political inclusivity and reduce polarization among voters.

These objectives were operationalized through four research questions:

**RQ1:** How do religious affiliations influence voter behavior in Oyo Federal Constituency during elections?

**RQ2:** What role do religious leaders and institutions play in shaping party loyalty among voters in Oyo Federal Constituency?

**RQ3:** In what ways do socio-economic factors intersect with religious identities to influence political choices in Oyo Federal Constituency?

**RQ4:** How can inter-religious dialogue contribute to reducing political polarization and fostering inclusive governance in Oyo Federal Constituency?

## Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative descriptive survey design to investigate the interplay between religious affiliations and voter behavior in Oyo Federal Constituency during the 2023 general elections. This approach facilitated the collection of numerical data via structured questionnaires, enabling analysis through percentages to uncover patterns across religious groups (Muslims, Christians, traditional believers). The design's strength lies in its efficiency for large-scale pattern identification, aligning with similar electoral studies in Nigeria (e.g., Oni & Afolabi, 2022).

The target population comprised all registered voters per INEC's 2023 register-adults aged 18+ across constituency wards ensuring inclusivity of urban/rural and multi-faith demographics. A sample of 160 was drawn purposively to represent major religions and conveniently from congregations, balancing accessibility with diversity. Instruments included validated questionnaires with 4-point Likert scales (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), closed-ended items, and demographics; pilot-tested on 20 non-sample voters and expert-reviewed for content validity.

Reliability stemmed from unambiguous wording, uniform formats, and standardized administration, while analysis employed simple percentages, frequency tables, cross-tabulations (e.g., religion vs. party preference), and worship attendance breakdowns. This parsimonious method suits descriptive goals, though future expansions could incorporate inferential stats like chi-square for deeper inference.

**Results of the Study**

**Research Question One: How do religious affiliations influence voter behavior in Oyo Federal Constituency during elections?**

**Table1: How did religious affiliations influence voter behavior in Oyo Federal Constituency during elections?**

S/N	Question	Strongly Agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Disagree (D)	Strongly Disagree (SD)
1	I prefer candidates who share my religious background	30 (18.75%)	62 (38.75%)	33 (20.62%)	35 (21.88%)
2	I would vote for a competent candidate even if they belong to another religion	20 (12.50%)	40 (25.00%)	50 (31.25%)	50 (31.25%)
3	My place of worship shapes my political views	35 (21.88%)	55 (34.38%)	40 (25.00%)	30 (18.75%)

Table 1 demonstrates the pronounced influence of religious affiliations on voter behavior in Oyo Federal Constituency, as 57.5% (SA + A) prefer candidates sharing their religious background (S/N 1), prioritizing faith identity over other factors, while a majority 62.5% (D + SD) resist voting for competent candidates from different religions (S/N 2), revealing rigid sectarian boundaries that limit cross-faith

support. Additionally, 56.3% affirm their place of worship shapes political views (S/N 3), positioning religious institutions as pivotal in molding electoral preferences. Collectively, these findings affirm religion's central role in driving voter choices, with limited openness to competence transcending faith lines, consistent with identity politics in Nigeria's multi-religious contexts.

**Research Question Two: What role do religious leaders and institutions play in shaping party loyalty among voters?**

Table 2: What role did religious leaders and institutions play in shaping party loyalty among voters?

S/N	Question	Strongly Agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Disagree (D)	Strongly Disagree (SD)
1	Religious leaders in my community openly support specific political parties	40 (25.00%)	60 (37.50%)	30 (18.75%)	30 (18.75%)
2	I trust political advice from my religious leaders	30 (18.75%)	50 (31.25%)	40 (25.00%)	40 (25.00%)
3	My religious community expects members to vote for certain parties	35 (21.88%)	55 (34.38%)	40 (25.00%)	30 (18.75%)

Table 2 underscores the significant role of religious leaders and institutions in fostering party loyalty in Oyo Federal Constituency, with 62.5% (SA + A) observing overt support for specific parties by leaders (S/N 1), trust in their political advice evenly split at 50%

(S/N 2), and 56.3% perceiving community expectations to vote along partisan lines (S/N 3). These patterns highlight religious authority as a conduit for political mobilization, blending spiritual guidance with electoral influence and contributing to faith-based voting blocs.

**Research Question Three: In what ways do socio-economic factors intersect with religious identities to influence political choices?**

Table 3: In what ways do socio-economic factors intersect with religious identities to influence political choices?

S/N	Question	Strongly Agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Disagree (D)	Strongly Disagree (SD)
1	Economic hardship makes me prioritize competent leadership over religious affiliation	36 (22.50%)	33 (20.63%)	46 (28.75%)	45 (28.13%)
2	Even with financial struggles, I would still vote based on religious identity	54 (33.75%)	47 (29.38%)	33 (20.63%)	26 (16.25%)

3	Politicians use religious sentiments to distract from poor economic policies	66 (41.25%)	43 (26.88%)	27 (16.88%)	24 (15.00%)
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Table 3 reveals the primacy of religious identity over socio-economic pressures in Oyo Federal Constituency voters' choices, as only 43.1% prioritize competence amid hardship (S/N 1), while a strong 63.1% persist with faith-based voting despite

financial struggles (S/N 2), and a overwhelming 68.1% perceive politicians exploiting religion to evade economic accountability (S/N 3). This intersection shows religion trumping material concerns, enabling elite manipulation in resource-scarce contexts.

**Research Question Four: How can inter-religious dialogue contribute to reducing political polarization and fostering inclusive governance?**

**Table 4:** How can inter-religious dialogue contribute to reducing political polarization and fostering inclusive governance?

S/N	Question	Strongly Agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Disagree (D)	Strongly Disagree (SD)
1	Inter-faith dialogues can reduce election violence in Oyo	65 (40.63%)	57 (35.63%)	25 (15.63%)	13 (8.13%)
2	Religious leaders should collaborate to promote issue-based voting	63 (39.38%)	54 (33.75%)	27 (16.88%)	16 (10.00%)
3	I would participate in Christian-Muslim peace initiatives for fair elections	58 (36.25%)	49 (30.63%)	28 (17.50%)	25 (15.63%)

Table 4 indicates widespread endorsement in Oyo Federal Constituency for inter-religious dialogue as a tool against polarization, with 76.3% supporting its role in curbing election violence (S/N 1), 73.1% advocating leader collaboration for issue-based voting (S/N 2), and

66.9% willing to join Christian-Muslim peace efforts (S/N 3). These high positive responses (minimal D + SD <33%) signal strong potential for faith-based initiatives to promote inclusive governance amid religious tensions.

**Discussion of Findings**

The survey data across Tables 1–4 provide compelling evidence on the multifaceted role of religious affiliations in shaping voter behavior in Oyo Federal Constituency during the 2023 elections (N=160). Table 1 confirms religion's dominance, with 57.5% preferring co-religionist candidates and only 37.5% open to cross-faith competence, while places of worship mold views for 56.3% patterns echoing primordial identity politics in Nigeria's polarized federation. Table 2 extends this to institutional influence, as 62.5% note leaders' partisan endorsements and 56.3% feel community voting pressures, though trust splits evenly at 50%, suggesting selective deference that funnels loyalty toward parties. Socio-economic intersections in Table 3 reveal religion's resilience: despite hardships, 63.1% prioritize faith over competence (43.1% reverse), and 68.1% spot politicians' diversionary tactics, indicating elite capture of religious sentiments amid economic distress. Optimism emerges in Table 4, with 66.9–76.3% backing interfaith dialogues, leader collaborations, and personal peace involvement to counter violence and polarization. Overall, findings align with theories of ethnic/religious voting (e.g., Horowitz's divided societies) while highlighting reform pathways, though limitations like self-reported biases and Oyo-specificity warrant caution; future mixed-methods studies could triangulate with qualitative interviews.

## Conclusion

In Oyo Federal Constituency, religious affiliations emerge as a dominant, resilient force in voter behavior driving candidate preferences (57.5%), institutional loyalties (56–62.5%), and trumping economic imperatives (63.1% faith persistence) yet with clear

pathways for mitigation via inter-religious mechanisms endorsed by 67–76% of respondents. This affirms religion's impact on Nigeria's electoral ecology, per federalism's centrifugal pressures, but spotlights transformative potential: shifting from polarizing identity to unifying dialogue could foster inclusive governance, reducing violence and enhancing democratic quality in multi-faith polities.

## Recommendations

To mitigate religious partisanship and enhance electoral integrity in Oyo State, the following evidence-based strategies emerge from survey data on voter behavior, leadership endorsements, and interfaith dynamics (Tables 1–4). These actionable measures target key challenges like partisan endorsements, cross-faith resistance, and economic distractions, promoting neutral, competence-driven voting.

- The Oyo State Government and INEC should institutionalize interfaith dialogue platforms by establishing statutory pre-electoral forums, such as quarterly Christian-Muslim summits funded via development partners like USAID. Leveraging 76.3% support (Table 4, S/N 1), these platforms would mediate conflicts, monitor hate speech, and co-draft peace charters, with evaluation through violence incidence metrics.
- Through partnerships with NIREC and CAN/PF, capacity-building for religious leaders should include mandatory training on neutral civic education, such as 2-day workshops reaching 500

leaders. This targets the 62.5% partisan endorsements (Table 2, S/N 1) to promote issue-based endorsements, measured by post-training surveys and shifts in voting patterns.

- Anti-manipulation civic campaigns should deploy multimedia drives via radio, SMS, and community theaters, highlighting 68.1% awareness of economic distractions (Table 3, S/N 3). Partnering with NOA, these campaigns would teach vote-tracing and competence evaluation, aiming to elevate the 43.1% prioritizing leadership over faith (Table 3, S/N 1).
- INEC should introduce regulatory incentives for cross-religious candidacy, including guidelines favoring diverse slates with bonus airtime and certification perks. Addressing 62.5% cross-faith resistance (Table 1, S/N 2), enforcement would occur via monitoring and sanctions, with pilots in 2027 off-cycles to test efficacy.

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