Asian Journal of
Islamic Studies and Da'wah

e-ISSN : 3025-4493
p-ISSN : 3025-5252

Index : Harvard, Boston, Sydney University, Dimensions, Lens, Scilit, Semantic, Google, etc

https://doi.org/10.58578/AJISD.v4i2.9323

Influence of Religion in Politics: A Comparative Analysis of 2023 Nigerian and 2024 American Presidential Elections

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Article Info:

Submitted:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
Jan 30, 2025	Feb 27, 2026	Mar 11, 2026	Mar 16, 2026

Abstract

Religion continues to play a significant role in contemporary democratic politics, particularly in religiously plural societies where electoral behavior is often shaped by faith-based identities and appeals. This study examined the influence of religion in the 2023 Nigerian and 2024 United States presidential elections, with particular attention to how selected candidates deployed what this study terms "religio-political strategies" during their campaigns to attract electoral support. Using a qualitative research approach, the study drew on both primary and secondary sources of data, including observation, books, journal articles, newspapers, magazines, previous project materials, and internet documentary reports relevant to the elections under review. The findings indicate that religion remained an influential factor in both electoral contexts, as candidates such as Peter Obi and Bola Ahmed Tinubu in Nigeria and Donald Trump in the United States employed religiously inflected campaign strategies to appeal to the electorate. These strategies generated substantial support for their presidential bids, and some of the candidates who adopted them secured electoral victory. The study concludes that religion continues to shape modern political processes and remains highly relevant to electoral mobilization in democratic societies. It contributes to the growing discourse on religion and politics by demonstrating how religio-political strategies can

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influence voter alignment and election outcomes in pluralistic states, while implying the need for more critical engagement with the intersection of faith and democratic participation, particularly in Nigeria.

Keywords: Comparative Politics; Nigerian Presidential Election; Religion and Politics; Religio-Political Strategies; United States Presidential Election

Introduction

Religion and politics are as old as man. Both are interwoven because, man is both a religious and a political being. Religion precisely the Christian religion through reformation birthed modern democracy. Religion has been an indispensable phenomenon in Nigeria and America. Religion has become an important factor in political discourse. The influence of religion is not only limited to politics but its power influences virtually all other facets of human life. Nwaozuru (2020) opines that human can hardly do without politics as well as religion in everyday life because man is both a religious and political being. Thus, Afolabi (2015) states that since we make use of each of them in our daily activities, we tend to politicise religion and religionise politics. Thus, Nigerian and American politics is characterized chiefly by politicisation of religion and religionisation of politics. This was witnessed in 2023 Nigerian and 2024 American presidential elections.

Nigeria and USA, are two democratic states where there is religious pluralism and this influences their political activities especially during general elections. Umeanolue (2020) observes that the phenomenon of religious politics in Nigerian is an obvious one, in political aspects such as style of governance, policy formulations and the electoral process in Nigeria, religion has been a strong determining factor. Umeanolue's viewpoint is correct as the influence of religion on politics was witnessed in the 2023 Nigerian and 2024 American presidential elections. Among the presidential candidates in Nigeria especially Peter Obi and Bola Ahmed Tinubu, there was high engagement in religious activities participated by both of them.

Peter Obi visited notable Churches in Nigeria and was present in most renowned Christian programmes like crusades, gospel concerts, including the annual Experience anchored by House on the Rock Church in 2022. Also, he made several visits to Northern states of Nigeria to acquaint himself with the Moslem brothers, all to show himself as one

who upholds right to freedom of religion and association. Moreover, Tinubu who is a Moslem, made references to Scriptural passages in his various campaign speeches. Mosadioluwa (2022) recalled that Tinubu told the story of how Pastor Enoch Adeboye of Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) during the priestly ordination of his wife Oluremi Tinubu rechristened him Abraham. Just to show his friendliness towards the Christian faith, as a way to solicit for the vote of Nigerian Christians.

Coming to USA, religion reshapes contemporary American politics. Braunstein (2024) confirms that, for the past several decades, Americans' partisan loyalties have been deeply shaped by their racial and religious identities, with white Christians disproportionately voting Republican and everyone else disproportionately voting Democrat. From the viewpoint of Braunstein, religion has influenced election outcomes in America. In agreement to this line of thought, Chitwood (2024) documents that, in the 2016 race, Evangelical voters contributed, in part, to Republican nominee Donald Trump's victory. During 2024 election campaign, Donald Trump formerly a Presbyterian but now a non-denominational Christian claimed that he has fought for Christians more than any other American president in the history of America. Based on this notion, he called on Christians to get up and vote for him. Trump's pragmatic appropriation of various religious strategies paved way for him to get back to the Whitehouse which he left in 2020.

Concept of Religion

There is no scholarly consensus over what precisely constitutes a religion, many scholars have defined religion from different perspectives. Umeanwe (2020) elucidates that religion refers to man's expression of his acknowledgement of the divine or a system of belief and practices relating to the sacred and uniting its adherents in communities. Ezeonwuka (2018) explain religion as a cultural system of designated behaviors, practices, world views, texts, sanctified places, prophesies, ethics or organizations that claims to relate humanity to supernatural, transcendental or spiritual elements. This is because religion originates in a culture that is more often than not determined by an ethnic group that is defined by a dominant political party/body (Obiefuna and Uzoigwe, 2012). Emoghene and Okolie (2020) opine that there is no doubt that religion can be seen in this light when it has been turned into an ideological tool or else, why did Karl Marx see it as the in religion the interaction is not only religious in nature but also a function of humans who are fundamentally religious and political being.

Concept of Politics

There is no common definition for politics due to its multifaceted nature. What politics means to an African may be different from what it means to a Westerner. Nwaozuru (2020) traced the etymology of the word politics stating that, the term politics originated from two Greek words polis meaning city and techne meaning art, skill or governing a city. However Afolabi (2015) defines politics as the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live. As such, it is an essentially social activity, inextricably linked on the one hand to the existence of diversity and conflict, and on the other, to a willingness to co-operate and act collectively. Indeed, politics is a social activity that involves members of the society especially qualified adult citizens. Hornby (2020) views politics as matters concerned with acquiring or exercising power, within a group or an organization. From Hornby's viewpoint, political power is not by hereditary but acquired which could be by various means such as through election, as witnessed in 2023 in Nigeria and 2024 in USA. Politics as a means of acquiring power is the current trend in Nigeria's and American 's political sector through election.

In its wider extension, Ushe (2014) opines that the term politics applies to different forms of organization and direction of human interest at various levels of the society, including the family, village, Church and university with some purpose in view. Ushe's viewpoint agrees to the ideology that man is a political being and man displays his political nature in any environment he finds himself (Nwaozuru, 2020), not devoid of his religious beliefs. Sigo cited by Ushe (2014) enunciates that the term politics simply refers to the science or art of influencing or guiding government policy, including areas of religion, economy and socio-political responsibility of the state or nation to adjust or order relationship between individuals and groups in a political community. The above conception of politics indicates that politics controls various other activities in human society through an established government vested with power and authority to regulate the affairs of people living in the society. Hence, politics and leadership are inseparable. Thus, Okolo, Nwokedi and Nwaozuru (2024) state that leadership is an integral aspect of every human society, leadership is seen in all levels of relationships, ranging from family to community to organization and so forth. It is the life wire of every organization, no organization could function properly without any form of leadership structure. Without leadership, there will be no headway.

On the origin and development of politics, Nwaozuru (2020) traces that politics started from Ancient Near East where political power was held by powerful Kings through conquest especially from Mesopotamia the cradle of civilisation. In Ancient Near East various cities like Mesopotamia, Egypt, Assyria, Israel, Babylon et cetera had their various kings; the kings worked hand in glove with prophets, priests and other religious functionaries in their various temples, cults and shrines to ensure that laws governing the society and other decisions were in tandem with the will of nation's gods and goddesses. Sometimes, it is those in religious order that anoint kings and can also announce their rejection (dethronement) by the divine. Just like the case of prophet Samuel and King Saul. It was during the Greceo-Roman period that politics and political administration was harnessed to a better and more structured system of government. As Alexander conquered the Persians, he allowed Greek thought and philosophy to influence politics hence, the development of democracy. However, it was Reformation that birthed modern democracy. The British colonised Nigeria and USA as well introduced modern politics in both countries. Nigeria and USA are currently practicing presidential system of government and uphold the tenets of democracy and rule of law.

Concept of Election

Free and fair election is the hallmark of democracy. Nigeria and USA as democratic states participate in periodic elections. This was witnessed in 2023 and 2024 respectively. It could be said that many people have misunderstood the scope of the meaning of election to mean only the totality of what happens during election day. However, according to Aniekwe and Kushie (2011):

Elections are a complex set of activities with different variables that feed on one another. The word elections encompasses all the events that happened during the days, weeks, months and even years before election day including the campaign period. It includes not only the totality of what took place during the election period, but also all the post-election events (p. 42).

Atanda, Oluwashina and Bakare (2018) enunciate that elections involve a democratic process of choosing who governs a particular group, society or state. Election also means activities before, during and after voting. These activities include planning, voter registration, constituency delimitation, arrangement of the polling stations, polling procedure, vote counting and finally announcement of results. In Nigeria, the body in

charge of election is Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) while in USA, it is Federal Election Commission (FEC). Election into the various political positions in both nations are held once in four years. In Nigeria, multiple parties contest during general elections while in USA, only two parties (Democrat and Republican) contest during general elections. In 2023 and 2024, general elections were held in Nigeria and USA with Tinubu of All Progressive Congress (APC) and Trump of Republican party winning the presidential polls.

A Survey of Religion and Politics in Nigeria and American

Religion has been an indispensable phenomenon in Nigeria and America. Religion has become an important factor in political discourse. Nigeria and America as pluralistic societies are dominated by Abrahamic religions: like Christianity and Islam. These religions and their ideologies allow for interaction between religion and politics. However, Islam and Christian perspectives of politics will be discussed here.

In Christianity, Nmah (2012) affirms that Christian responsibility extends from personal to the realm of politics. Afolabi (2015) opines that Jesus Christ did not discourage political participation for the faithful. Apata cited by Adelekan (2020) states that Jesus was a political activist and Messianic revolutionist who like the zealots of his time, wanted freedom for Israel. In the words of Obijole (2012), the Scripture in Romans 13:1-7 instructs Christians not only to abide on civil obedience, and payment of tax, dues, and revenue to state coffers; they also have a duty to exercise their political rights to vote and be voted for, of speaking out against wrongdoing by those in power, as well as holding leaders accountable for their actions. The Church will not support or obey any government whose laws contradict God's commands on the other hand, Adelekan (2020) affirms that the Church is always in support of any political system of the state which allows the Church to freely perform its spiritual purpose. Nwaozuru (2020) further states that Apostle Paul in Romans 13 recognizes that political leaders are chosen by God, some of the medieval popes were also involved in politics. It was Reformation which swept across Western Europe that birthed modern democracy.

Moreover, it was the Christian missionaries that trained indigenous converts like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Herbert Macaulay among others who later championed the course for the independence of Nigeria and it was realized in October 1st

1960. In USA, mission schools taught subjects like history, government through which Americans who attended mission school like Thomas Jefferson, George Washington etcetera read books of John Locke that spurred them to fight for American independence which materialized on 4th July 1776. In agreement to this line of thought, Dwight (2017) states that in developing the Whig ideology underlying the Revolution of 1688, Locke formulated the classic expression of liberalism, which was to inspire the American Revolution and the authors of the United States Constitution. Holmes (2024) states that the largest number of the founding fathers of America were raised in the three largest Christian traditions of colonial America—Anglicanism (as in the cases of John Jay, George Washington, and Edward Rutledge), Presbyterianism (as in the cases of Richard Stockton and the Rev. John Witherspoon), and Congregationalism (as in the cases of John Adams and Samuel Adams). Other Protestant groups included the Society of Friends (Quakers), the Lutherans, and the Dutch Reformed. Three Founders: Charles Carroll and Daniel Carroll of Maryland and Thomas Fitzsimmons of Pennsylvania—were of Roman Catholic heritage. Some American presidents are noted for their staunch practice of the Christian faith like Joe Biden a Catholic while Donald Trump was formerly a Presbyterian and now a non-denominational Christian. Dwight (2017) affirmed that "Geneva's leader, John Calvin, is widely regarded as the father of modern Western democracy. The clearest map of Calvin's political thought is found in his Institutes of the Christian Faith, which constitutes a blueprint for just civil government" (p.67).

Nwaozuru (2020) observes that in contemporary Nigeria, there are many Christians who have involved in politics, vied for one political position or the other; some have won political seats as Governors, Senators while others have not. Rotimi (2010) points to Rev. Chris Okotie presidential candidate of the Fresh Party in the 2007 general elections. Nwaozuru (2020) asserts that:

Pastor Tunde Bakare (Latter Rain Assembly) was former running mate of President Muhammadu Buhari in 2011 under the umbrella of Congress for Progressive Change, Pastor Osagie Ize-Iyamu of Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) under Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) gubernatorial candidate in 2016 election in Edo state, Bishop Dr. Emeka Nwankpa (Chapel of Faith Bible Assembly International) contested for governorship in Anambra State in 2011 and also contested for IsialaNgwa North House of Assembly Constituency under All Progressive Grand Alliance in 2019 General Elections. Both the 2015 and 2019 general elections, Buhari picked a Pentecostal pastor and

Professor, Yemi Osinbajo of RCCG as his running mate and they won in the general elections respectively (p.19).

Presently, Hyacinth Alia the governor of Benue State was formally a Catholic priest and Pastor Emo Uno the governor of Akwa Ibom State is a Pentecostal pastor. Hence, there is no doubt that Christianity does not oppose politics but only warns against misuse of political power for selfish interest. Thus, Christians should be guided by Christian ethics while engaging in politics.

Islam as a religion is inseparable from politics because the polity under Islamic control must practice theocracy (Okebukola, 2012). In the opinion of Adelekan (2020), this indicates that political power resides with the religious leaders; a political order of a secular pattern will be non-existential. In Islam therefore, politics and religion are parts of a single alley. It is said that the greatest achievement of Prophet Muhammed (SAW) was the religious and political unification of Arabia. On the other hand, Ekpeyong (2017) views that Moslems believed in the concept of divine right of Caliph (direct descendants and successors of Prophet Muhammad) as the supreme leaders of the Muslim community. Under Muhammad, the Muslim State was theocratic, with sharia as the religious and moral principles of Islam, and the law of the land. The Caliphs were seen as secular and religious leaders. They were not empowered to promulgate dogma, because it was believed that the revelation of the faith had been completed by Muhammad. However, as representatives of Allah and direct successors of Muhammad, Caliphs were to enforce Sharia as the religious and moral principles of the land. Their powers were not limited to secular issues only but divine since they were representing Allah. It was on this note that Muhammad advocated that the Muslim community should choose a successor or a Caliph by consensus to lead the theocratic process of leadership to exemplify the earthly kingdom under divine rule. It is also on this note that Islamic States seek to apply in every detail the Islamic laws in any society they find themselves in order to create an Islamic culture, as evident throughout the Middle East.

In Nigeria, the Sultan of Sokoto is the religious leader of Muslims in the country yet, very influential in the political activities of the nation. From the foregoing, it could be said that Islam allows for a spiritual relationship between religion and politics. Thus, the two Abrahamic religions in Nigeria and America have effectively influenced politics. As the divine plays the religious role, human plays the political role. And the effectiveness of both

religion and politics have been based, not only on the involvement of the divine in the activities of man, but also in following its ethics and principles in governance.

Religion and politics is further portrayed in Nigeria and America as their constitutions approve the Bible and the Koran to be used for those who are to be sworn in, into elective offices like the president, vice president, governor and so forth.

Influence of Religion in 2023 Nigerian and 2024 American Presidential Elections

It was observed that majority of the electorates in Nigeria and America belong to Islam and Christianity hence, some of the presidential candidates saw this as an advantage to publicize their manifestos through religious strategies. They did this to gain their support of the electorates. Coming to Nigeria, Tinubu a Moslem made references to Scriptural passages in his various campaign rallies to gain the favour of qualified adult citizens who are Christians to vote for him. He began to visit various notable Christian bodies like Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). It was rumoured that CAN was divided into two that is CAN and CANT (Christian Association of Nigeria for Tinubu). Furthermore, Mosadioluwa (2022) reported that during an interactive session with Kano State Chapter of CAN, Tinubu recalled the story of how Pastor Enoch Adeboye of Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) during the priestly ordination of his wife Oluremi Tinubu rechristened him Abraham meaning father of the nation. This paraphrased statement is found in Genesis 12:2. Tinubu was indirectly saying that God has chosen him to lead Nigeria, a nation made up of people from diverse ethnic nationalities.

Ailemen (2023) further reported that on Tuesday, January 31, 2023, while campaigning in Awka, Anambra State, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) said thus, the man who left here, he calls himself Peter Obi. We read in the Bible that before the cock crows, he will deny Jesus Christ. Is it not true? So, how can he keep his promise to you? He cannot prove a point. It could be inferred that Tinubu pointed to Luke 22:34; 54-58, the story of how Peter denied Jesus Christ. To portray that if Peter Obi is elected as president, just as Peter denied Jesus, Peter Obi will deny making promises during his campaign hence, will not keep them. For Tinubu, since his audience read and believe the Scripture, they will not found it difficult to accept his viewpoint about Obi. Hence, they will no longer support Obi. According to Kezie (2023), is not ironical that the same Tinubu who, on few occasions, could not recite basic Islamic prayer at his

campaign rallies, has suddenly turned into a Biblical exegete, quoting the Holy Bible and drawing typological analogy between Saint Peter, the head of the Apostles and he (Peter Obi), all in the bid to smear and discredit him.

On the side of Obi, he also strategized through various religious approaches. Peter Obi attended services of notable Churches in Nigeria such as: Lord's Chosen, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Dunamis International Gospel Centre, Living Faith Church and so forth. Obi was present in most renowned Christian programmes like crusades, gospel concerts including the annual Experience anchored by House on the Rock Church in Tafawa Belewa Square in Lagos in December 2022. He was present at the 14th National Conference and Jubilee Celebration of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Ubulu Uku, Delta State. In some of these occasions, Obi gave account of his stewardship as a governor. He gave a detailed account of how he reduced the cost of governance as Governor of Anambra State. Joe (2023) documented that Obi narrated the story of how he reduced his Abuja travelling entourage from 30 to one person, just him. Obi also gave accounts regarding his cutbacks on unnecessary security costs, exaggerated budget estimates for state house renovation and furniture purchase, a state visit by the president, courtesy calls by the clergy and businessmen and entertainment.

In addition, he shared with the audience personal life stories on his relationship with his wife and children and detailed how he repurposed saved funds for overall development of Anambra. For instance, Akinkuotu (2022) cited that Peter Obi while addressing a mammoth crowd at the 14th National Conference and Jubilee Celebration of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Peter Obi said: "I am asking you to vote for me because I have shown and I am showing you on this holy ground that I will turn around Nigeria." Moreover, according to Obi's tweet on X handle formally Twitter, Obi wrote as we go into the final stretch for the 2023 elections, I call on all Nigerians regardless of political affiliation or tendency, to eschew violence.

These excerpts from Obi have scriptural references. As regards to reduction of expenditure and increase savings, Obi made reference to Matthew 25:14-21, where the servant who received five talents made judicious use of the talents to make more profit. Hence, if elected he will be resourceful with public funds for national development. His passionate appeal to citizens to avoid violence could be equated to Christ's appeal to Peter to shield his sword at the time of his arrest in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:51-52). Peter Obi

portrayed himself to be a man of peace just like former president Good Luck Jonathan. As regards to his cordial relationship with his wife and children, Obi referenced 1Timothy 3:4-5 to prove that, since he can manage his household well invariably he can do so if elected as president of Nigeria. With these in view, he portrayed himself as a good steward which is the epitome of service in Christianity. Also, Obi made several visits to Northern states of Nigeria to acquaint himself with the Moslem brothers, all to show himself as one who upholds right to freedom of religion and association. Furthermore, Obi did this to show that he does not discriminate base on religious or ethnic bias but that a patriot. All these were to appeal to both Christians and Muslims to vote for him.

Coming to 2024 American presidential election, the utilization of religious strategy was adopted by Trump especially after the incidence that happened in Kamala Harris' campaign rally at Wisconsin. Gattuso (2024) reported that Kamala Harris (KH) responded to two undergraduates who attended her really at La Crosse, Wisconsin, shouting Jesus is Lord. Harris said "Oh, you guys are at the wrong rally. No, I think you meant to go to the smaller one down the street," she added. This statement generated remarks by various Christian networks in America. For instance, Gattuso (2024) recorded that Catholic Vote, a nonprofit political advocacy group, shared the clip on X handle (formerly Twitter), stating thus, "Kamala Harris exposes her vile hatred toward Christians once again by ridiculing a rallygoer for invoking the name of God." Daily Wire commentator Michael Knowles also tweeted out the clip to his followers on X, asking, "which side are you on?" Christians are not welcome in Kamala's Democrat Party,

Based on this Harris' statement, Donald Trump a non-denominational Christian, capitalized on this, to show his good intentions towards Christians if elected. While he addressed a forum organized by Christians in America. He stated that, he has fought for Christians more than any other American president as well said that in his rally he does not tell Christians to get out but get up and vote. This was a stepping stone towards his election victory.

Conclusion

Religion and politics are indispensable in human society. Religion particularly Christianity through reformation gave birth to modern democracy. Nigeria and USA are two democratic nations where the influence of religion is felt in their political terrain. This

was exemplified in 2023 Nigerian and 2024 US presidential elections. Where some candidates utilized various religious strategies to mobilize support as well smear their opponents. The use of religious strategies like quoting the Scriptures in campaign rallies, attending religious programmes among others helped Tinubu and Trump to win elections.

To this end, there is a clear indication that religion is very influential in modern day politics. However, in Nigeria there is seems to be poor participation of Christians in politics. The reason according to Nwaozuru (2020) is that, the political culture of Nigerian politics is associated with corruption, election violence, thuggery, election malpractices, kidnapping and assassination of political opponents, political instability and many more. This has made many Nigerian Christians to conceive politics as a dirty game, evil and something not worth venturing into. Based on this, this research recommends that Christians should participate actively in politics in order to right the wrongs in the society and to ensure that the desired change is realized. There should be massive turn out of Christians in future general elections in Nigeria.

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