International Journal of Humanities, Education, and Social Sciences

e-ISSN : 3026-0892
p-ISSN : 3026-1422

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

https://doi.org/10.58578/IJHESS.v3i3.7003

An Interpretive Inquiry into Electoral Zoning Politics in Cross River State Before the 2023 Gubernatorial Elections

Essien Oku Essien
University of Cross River State, Nigeria
essienokuessien@gmail.com

Article Info:

Submitted:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
Jul 1, 2025	Jul 26, 2025	Aug 7, 2025	Aug 12, 2025

Abstract

This study evaluates the dynamics of electoral zoning in Nigeria in the context of the 2023 Cross River State gubernatorial election, analyzing how zoning politics intersect with public persuasion to shape electoral outcomes. Situated within a qualitative interpretivist paradigm, the research draws on in-depth interviews with key political actors and prospective voters. Guided by Agenda Setting and Social Judgment theories, the analysis examines the media's influence in framing zoning debates and the electorate's attitudinal responses to competing narratives. Findings reveal a nuanced relationship between historical zoning arrangements and shifting voter preferences, where loyalty to senatorial districts persists alongside an increasing demand for competence and visionary leadership beyond geographic identity. While zoning remains a strong determinant of political expectations, particularly benefiting the Southern Senatorial District, party ideology and candidate credibility emerge as equally decisive factors. The study also cautions against divisive ethnic rhetoric, emphasizing that failure to foster unity could threaten democratic stability in the state.

Keywords: Electoral Zoning; Public Persuasion; Cross River State Politics; Gubernatorial Elections; Democratic Stability

IJHESS Journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria's democratic landscape, elections have historically served as the principal mechanism for determining political leadership. From independence to the present day, the country has witnessed leaders emerge through electoral processes at virtually every level of governance, only for many of these mandates to be truncated by military interventions and other disruptions (Jeje, Adebayo & Azaigba, 2022). As Ojie (2006) asserts, democratic leadership derives its legitimacy from the people's expressed will, exercised through periodic, transparent, free, and fair elections. Yet, democratic governance only thrives when there is a mutual rhythm, a shared pace, between the leaders and the citizenry.

Elections, therefore, are not merely administrative exercises but are instrumental to the peaceful transfer of power, the reinforcement of political legitimacy, and the expression of collective will. They function as dynamic tools for political renewal and as indicators of regime popularity. Ojie (2006) further posits that elections reflect the strength of the social contract between government and governed, and lay the foundation for legitimacy, authority, and civic responsibility. This contract is sustained through reciprocity, a mutual exchange of accountability between leaders and citizens (Osinakachukwu & Jawan, 2011).

However, Nigeria's electoral history continues to grapple with challenges that undermine these democratic ideals. One such challenge is the persistent implementation of political zoning, a framework originally intended to foster inclusivity but which, in practice, often distorts democratic fairness (Vanguard, 2022). Nigeria remains among the Sub-Saharan African nations where electoral administration is frequently compromised, giving rise to politically skewed zoning formulas that favor specific regions, often to the detriment of broader national cohesion. Zoning, rather than being a unifying strategy, has increasingly become a source of division and instability. It has fostered a climate in which elections are less about merit and more about regional entitlement (Sun, 2022). In Cross River State, zoning arrangements are used to rotate power among the three senatorial districts: North, Central, and South. However, as reported by Sahara Reporters (2022), there is a growing public perception that candidate selection is sometimes manipulated in favor of predetermined zones, with elections serving as rubber stamps for elite consensus rather than instruments of public choice.

This raises important questions about the character of federalism in states like Cross River, which is known for its immense cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity.

Genuine federalism must not only accommodate this diversity but also actively reflect it through mechanisms that ensure equitable power distribution and sustainable unity. Cross River State is home to over 150 distinct linguistic communities spread across 18 local government areas: Abi, Akamkpa, Akpabuyo, Bakassi, Bekwarra, Biase, Boki, Calabar Municipality, Calabar South, Etung, Ikom, Obanliku, Obudu, Obubra, Ogoja, Odukpani, Yakurr, and Yala. With such rich heterogeneity, it would be inherently unjust for political power to be continuously concentrated in one area at the exclusion of others.



Figure 1: Map of Cross River State, Illustrating the Distribution of the Three Senatorial Districts Across All 18 Local Government Areas (LGAs)

For zoning to fulfill its original purpose, it must be guided by a broad-based party consensus and structured in a way that reflects fair rotation across all regions. A sustainable zoning framework should allow for equitable alternation, North to Central, Central to

South, and so forth, ensuring that every region has a legitimate opportunity to contribute to the state's leadership and development. According to Amadi et al (2023), one of the most prevalent forms of political zoning in Nigeria is the informal yet influential "*gentleman's agreement*." This unwritten pact typically involves a political leader from one region promising to transfer power to a counterpart from another region at the end of their tenure, thereby promoting continuity and political stability through mutual understanding rather than legal enforcement.

The formal origins of Nigeria's zoning arrangement trace back to the second civilian republic in 1979, under the leadership of President Alhaji Shehu Shagari and Vice President Dr. Alex Ekwueme. Their administration laid the foundational principles of the modern zoning system as a tool to promote equitable power distribution across Nigeria's major geopolitical regions (Premium Times, 2022). This arrangement envisioned a rotational pattern across an eight-year cycle, ensuring that the North, Central, and South zones each had an opportunity to produce a state governor. Over time, as Nigeria's political institutions evolved, this practice became embedded in political culture and gained broad acceptance. However, the zoning formula established in 1979 was disrupted by the military regime of General Muhammadu Buhari and General Tunde Idiagbon. Their intervention interrupted the implementation of this rotational strategy, effectively sidelining southern interests from experiencing the original Shagari framework.

After more than two decades of alternating the presidency between the North and South, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), long the dominant political force, was displaced in 2015 by the All-Progressives Congress (APC), a coalition that had strategically absorbed factions of the PDP into what became known as the Nigerian People's Party (NPP). According to Oni and Fauyi (2020), Nigeria must now reassess whether zoning, as a political mechanism rooted in social contract theory, or a merit-based quota system, is better suited to deliver the leadership necessary for national development. Both systems, they argue, have historically contributed to political stability, but their future utility deserves scrutiny. This discussion takes on added relevance in the context of Cross River State, where the zoning debate has become increasingly contentious. While zoning has the potential to foster equity, inclusion, and national cohesion, especially in a country as culturally diverse as Nigeria, it also raises critical questions about fairness, merit, and strategic political representation (This Day, 2022).

Historically, Cross River State has practiced a rotational gubernatorial pattern. Mr. Donald Etim Duke (1999–2007) represented the Southern senatorial district, followed by Senator Liyel Imoke (2007–2015) from the Central zone, and then Professor Benedict Ayade (2015–present) from the Northern zone, making him the first governor from that region. In keeping with the spirit of equitable representation, deputy governors have traditionally been selected from one of the remaining senatorial districts, irrespective of political party differences. Nevertheless, a significant rift has emerged regarding the next phase of gubernatorial zoning. One school of thought argues that the cycle should restart from the Southern district, maintaining the established rotation. Conversely, another group insists that the governorship can justifiably originate from any district, without being bound to reset the sequence. This division in interpretation, acceptance, and strategic interest constitutes the core dilemma this article seeks to interrogate. At stake is not only the question of where the next governor should emerge from but the broader implications for political fairness, state cohesion, and the very legitimacy of zoning as a tool for democratic equity in Cross River State and Nigeria at large.

Objectives of the Study

This article is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the viability and sustainability of political zoning as a power-sharing mechanism in Cross River State.
2. To analyze how both contending schools of thought utilize the media to influence and persuade the electorate.
3. To evaluate the impact of media strategies employed by these groups on voter perception, sentiment, and behavior.
4. To assess the extent to which the ideological divergence between these schools of thought may shape or influence the outcome of the 2023 gubernatorial election in Cross River State.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two interrelated theories of persuasive communication, Agenda-Setting Theory and Social Judgment Theory, both of which provide critical insights

into how public opinion is shaped within the context of political zoning in Cross River State.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Originally proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972, the Agenda-Setting Theory suggests that the media does not tell people what to think, but rather what to think about. In their seminal study of the 1968 U.S. presidential election in North Carolina, McCombs and Shaw found a strong correlation between what the media emphasized and what the public perceived as the most important issues (Orr & Harrington, 2021). The core assumption of the theory is that media content filters and shapes reality, guiding the public's perception of priority concerns. In the context of Cross River State, the agenda-setting framework helps to explain how both contending schools of thought utilize various forms of media, such as billboards, television interviews, print publications, and campaign materials, to set the public discourse around zoning. For instance, a billboard that uses a traffic light metaphor, green for one senatorial district and red or amber for others, quietly signals approval or disapproval of political succession from a specific zone. Likewise, visual campaigns that display past governors with named origins and a fourth blank slot (marked with a "?") tied to a specific senatorial district subtly frame the narrative that it is *that* district's "turn."

Two fundamental assumptions of agenda-setting theory apply directly to this case:

- First, media platforms actively construct narratives that influence what the public should be concerned about, rather than passively reflecting existing realities.
- Second, the more visibility and attention a specific issue receives in the media, the more likely the public is to assign it greater importance.

Through this lens, it becomes clear that political actors in Cross River State are leveraging agenda-setting mechanisms to steer public perception toward supporting particular zones over others in the 2023 gubernatorial race.

Social Judgment Theory

Social Judgment Theory, developed by Carolyn Sherif, Muzafer Sherif, and Carl Hovland, focuses on how individuals evaluate new information in relation to their pre-existing attitudes, beliefs, and biases (Hovland & Carl, 1980). It postulates that every individual possesses an "attitude anchor" on a given issue, and when confronted with new

ideas, they judge those ideas based on how closely they align with their existing positions. Applied to this study, Social Judgment Theory offers insight into how voters in Cross River State process persuasive messages from opposing political camps. It accounts for the range of voter responses, from outright rejection to acceptance, based on the perceived alignment of each zoning argument with their personal or communal beliefs.

According to Mallard (2010), persuasive communication is most effective when it operates within a person's "latitude of acceptance," and least effective when it falls into their "latitude of rejection." In a diverse political environment such as Cross River State, media narratives pushed by either school of thought are filtered by the electorate through the lens of social judgment, which includes factors like regional loyalty, historical sentiment, and perceived fairness. While voters are presented with two dominant zoning positions, the theory posits that their final choice is not purely objective. Instead, it is influenced by external persuasive cues, such as media framing, communal pressure, and cultural alignment, all of which shape judgment and reinforce cognitive bias. A crucial component of Social Judgment Theory lies in understanding how individuals compare their personal perspectives on an issue with those held by others. People not only hold their own opinions, but they also maintain a mental range of what they consider acceptable or unacceptable viewpoints in others. Particularly in emotionally charged or deeply entrenched issues, such as political zoning, these latitudes of acceptance, rejection, and non-commitment become highly polarized.

The theory emphasizes that attitudes do not exist in isolation. Even when two individuals share a broadly similar view, their most favored and least preferred alternatives may differ significantly. This variation becomes especially evident when considering voter attitudes toward the 2023 Cross River State gubernatorial election. To fully grasp public opinion, it is necessary to analyze not just the electorate's position but also their tolerance for opposing views and the social pressures influencing them. For any of the zoning-based schools of thought to effectively persuade voters, they must first understand the anchor attitudes of the electorate. From there, they can assess the psychological distance between their campaign messages and the electorate's existing beliefs. For example, it may prove extremely difficult to convince a voter from the southern senatorial district that the next governor should not come from their region. However, persuading a voter from the central zone to support a northern candidate, based on equity or alliance, may be more achievable.

This demonstrates that attitude change is only possible when it is preceded by targeted political mobilization, capable of shifting the foundational structures of public opinion.

Once individuals perceive a new message as falling within their latitude of acceptance, they are more likely to adjust their position and integrate that message into their worldview. On the contrary, if the message lies within their latitude of rejection, it can trigger a boomerang effect, causing the individual to become even more entrenched in their original stance. This insight helps explain why fear-based appeals often fail; when audiences feel coerced or threatened, they are more inclined to resist the message rather than conform to it. Moreover, social environment and interpersonal influence play vital roles in shaping and evolving attitudes. People tend to align their views with those of significant social partners, whether family, peers, or political leaders, resulting in a collective shift that reinforces conformity within social groups. This interplay of personal judgment and social conformity forms the backbone of persuasive communication.

Notably, persuasion, as defined by Social Judgment Theory, is not easy. To be effective, messages must fall within the recipient's latitude of acceptance yet still differ enough from their current anchor position to induce change without being rejected. Consequently, even successful persuasion often results in only incremental shifts in behavior or belief. Importantly, Social Judgment Theory reinforces the utility of Agenda-Setting Theory by supporting the idea that consistent exposure to a range of persuasive messages can gradually shape public discourse. While Agenda-Setting Theory explains how the media determines what issues the public thinks about, Social Judgment Theory explains how the public reacts to and internalizes those issues. Together, they form a comprehensive lens for analyzing how political communication influences voter perception in the Cross River zoning debate.

METHODS

This article adopts the interpretivist paradigm of qualitative analysis to prospectively evaluate the likely outcomes of the 2023 Cross River State gubernatorial election. The interpretivist paradigm emphasizes an interactive process between the researcher and the subject, grounded in negotiation, collaboration, and context-specific meaning-making. Unlike positivist approaches that seek objective generalizations, interpretivism recognizes that reality is socially constructed and uniquely understood within

particular temporal and cultural contexts. Interpretivist methodologies often include interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis, and are deeply rooted in hermeneutics, the theory and methodology of interpretation. Within this framework, texts are viewed as reflections of the author's thoughts, and it becomes the interpreter's task to reconstruct the intended meaning by entering the cognitive and cultural context of the author.

Sometimes referred to as anti-positivism or naturalistic inquiry, the interpretivist paradigm permits a more subjective analysis of data (Myers, 2008). It is underpinned by three major schools of thought in the social sciences: phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and symbolic interactionism. While each of these schools has distinct emphases, they all converge on the idea that understanding human behavior requires an exploration of lived experiences, social meanings, and the interpretation of symbolic interactions. Thus, they collectively advocate for qualitative methodologies as the most suitable for uncovering the complexities of human behavior and social processes, particularly in contexts as dynamic and culturally embedded as political decision-making in Cross River State.

Study Areas

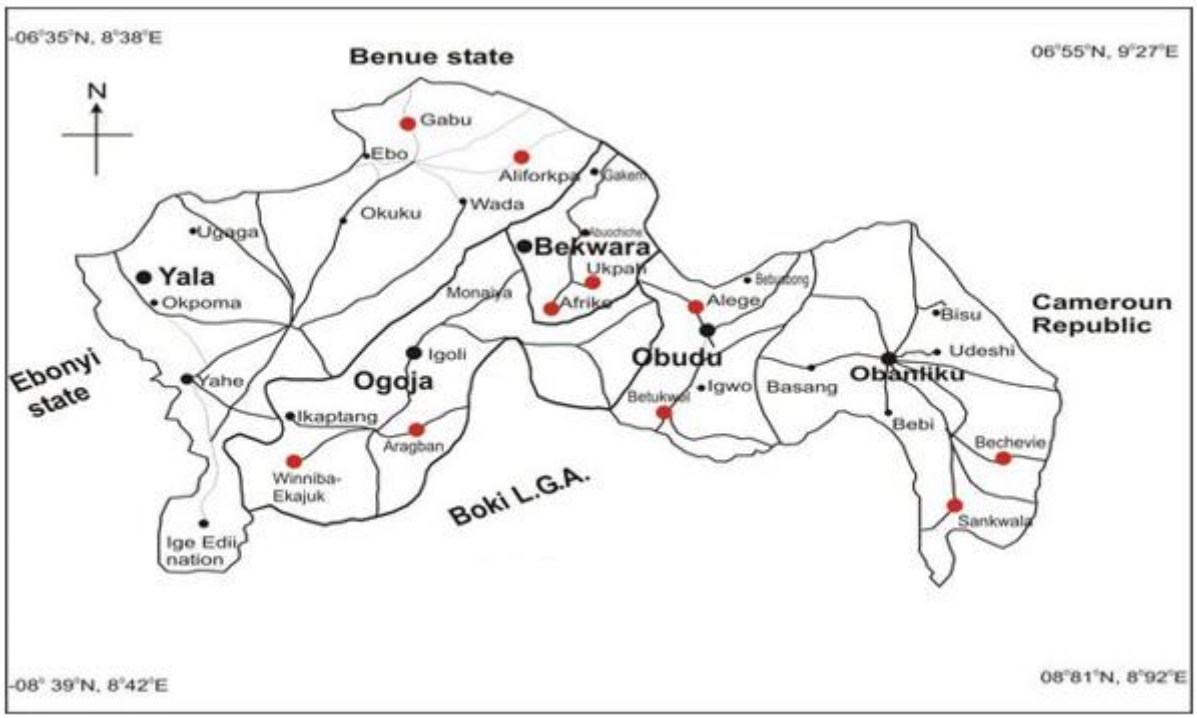

Figure 2: Map of Cross River State Northern Senatorial District, Illustrating the Constituent LGAs

Tucked in the northern expanse of Cross River State, the Northern Senatorial District is a region of serene landscapes, cultural wealth, and natural beauty. Encompassing five Local Government Areas: Ogoja, Yala, Obudu, Obanliku, and Bekwarra, the district is bounded by the lush greenery of tropical rainforests and rolling savannahs that stretch toward Nigeria's border with Cameroon. Its terrain is a geographical masterpiece, blending highland plateaus, fertile lowlands, and riverine plains that make it one of the most agriculturally endowed zones in southeastern Nigeria. One of the region's most iconic features is the Obudu Plateau, home to the famed Obudu Mountain Resort, a scenic highland destination known for its cool climate, cable cars, and panoramic views. With mist-covered hills and untouched natural springs, the resort stands as a crown jewel of Nigeria's eco-tourism and a symbol of the district's environmental richness. Beyond the resort, the district is dotted with forests, waterfalls, and farmland, offering an immersive experience of nature's grandeur.

The Northern Senatorial District is home to a diverse array of ethnic communities, including the Bekwarra, Bette, Mbube, Igede, and Utugwang, each with a distinct language, traditional system, and vibrant customs. These communities maintain a rich cultural heritage, marked by elaborate festivals, oral traditions, folklore, music, and art. Notably, annual celebrations such as the New Yam Festival in Obudu and Ogoja are not only communal feasts but serve as powerful symbols of thanksgiving, identity, and continuity. Agriculture forms the backbone of daily life in the district. The fertile soils and favorable climate support the cultivation of staple crops such as yams, cassava, maize, groundnut, and rice. Local markets bustle with trade, connecting farmers and traders across the region. In addition to crop farming, small-scale animal husbandry and fishing contribute to the region's subsistence and local economy.

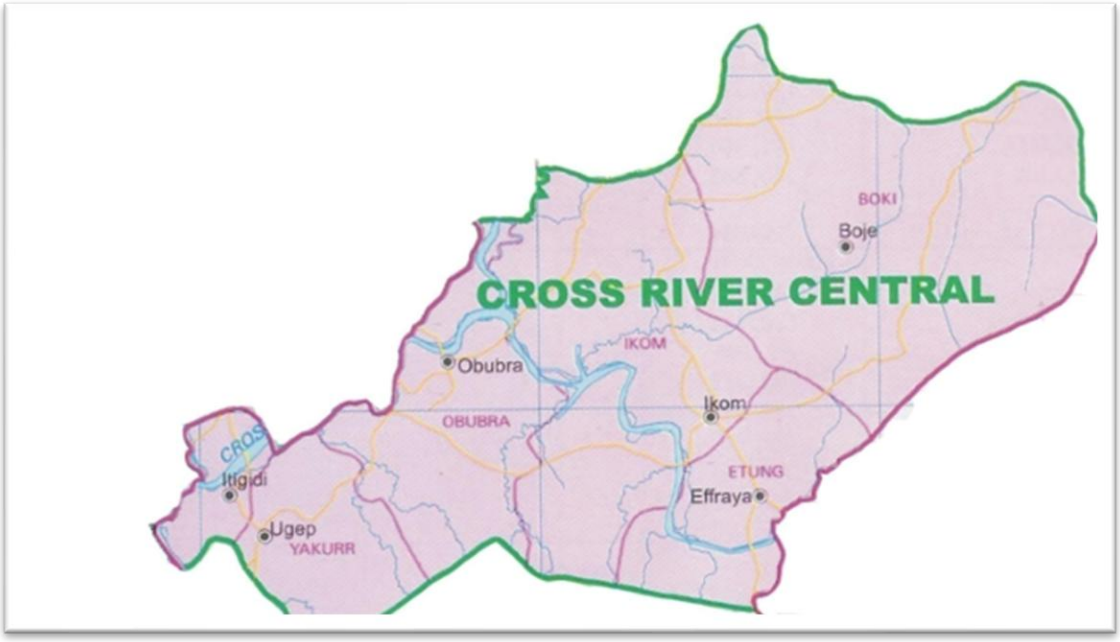

Figure 3: Map of Cross River State Central Senatorial District, Illustrating the Constituent LGAs

Stretching across the heartland of Cross River State, the Central Senatorial District is a region of vibrant contrasts and cultural harmony. Encompassing six Local Government Areas: Abi, Yakurr, Obubra, Ikom, Etung, and Boki, the district forms a geographic and cultural bridge between the northern highlands and the coastal southern region of the state. It is a lush expanse teeming with tropical forests, winding rivers, expansive farmlands, and a people whose heritage and hospitality define the soul of the Cross River basin. The geography of the Central District is as diverse as it is captivating. From the dense rainforests of Boki to the cocoa plantations of Ikom and the sprawling oil palm fields of Yakurr, the land is alive with color, scent, and productivity. The Cross River itself, a vital waterway from which the state derives its name, flows prominently through this region, shaping both the ecosystem and the rhythms of daily life. This watery thread nourishes the land, supports agriculture, and connects communities through fishing and canoe transport.

Culturally, the Central Senatorial District is a web of traditions, languages, and age-old practices. Ethnic groups such as the Yakurr, Ejagham, Boki, Bahumono, and Agoi have long coexisted, each with its own dialect, folklore, and customs, yet united by a deep respect for communal living. Traditional festivals like the Leboku New Yam Festival in Ugep (Yakurr) are major cultural landmarks, attracting visitors from across Nigeria and beyond. These celebrations serve as living museums of dance, music, oral storytelling, and

thanksgiving, reinforcing identity and generational bonds. One of the most remarkable aspects of the district is its ecological wealth. The Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary in Boki is a globally recognized conservation site, home to endangered species such as the Cross River gorilla and the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee. Agriculture remains the bedrock of the economy in the Central District. The district is renowned for its high-yield cocoa plantations, palm oil production, banana farms, plantain clusters, and cassava fields.



Figure 3: Map of Cross River State Southern Senatorial District, Illustrating the Constituent LGAs

The Southern Senatorial District of Cross River State unfolds like a vibrant coastal canvas, where rivers kiss the Atlantic shoreline, mangroves whisper ancient songs, and cultures converge in rhythm and color. Comprising seven Local Government Areas: Calabar South, Calabar Municipal, Akpabuyo, Bakassi, Odukpani, Akamkpa, and Biase, the district is a captivating mosaic of landscapes, languages, and livelihoods. As the gateway to the state and the country's southeastern coast, it is a region where heritage, hospitality, and history blend seamlessly into everyday life. Geographically, the Southern District is one of the most ecologically diverse in Nigeria. It features everything from the coastal wetlands of Bakassi to the expansive rainforest corridors of Akamkpa and Biase. The estuarine beauty of Calabar's waterfront and the tranquil flow of the Calabar and Kwa Rivers form scenic arteries that feed the land, support aquatic life, and offer a natural backdrop to urban and

rural settlements. The Atlantic breeze flows gently across communities, shaping climate patterns that favor fishing, farming, and tourism.

Calabar, the district's urban heart and state capital, is often regarded as one of Nigeria's cleanest and most culturally refined cities. With its tree-lined streets, colonial-era architecture, and vibrant arts scene, Calabar serves as both an administrative hub and a cultural sanctuary. Home to the world-famous Calabar Carnival, the city transforms every December into a kaleidoscope of music, costumes, parades, and global visitors. Beyond its urban flair, the Southern Senatorial District is home to a deeply rooted traditional life. Ethnic groups such as the Efik, Qua, Efut, Ejagham, and Akamkpa peoples maintain a rich legacy of storytelling, masquerade dances, culinary traditions, and oral history. Names like Obong of Calabar still resonate with regal significance, representing a centuries-old kingship institution that has engaged with global powers since the pre-colonial era.

The natural environment is another marvel. The district hosts the Cross River-National Park, one of West Africa's most important biodiversity hotspots. Within its depths live rare species such as the drill monkey, forest elephants, and a stunning array of birdlife and butterflies. Researchers, conservationists, and eco-tourists are drawn to this verdant sanctuary, while surrounding communities blend traditional forest knowledge with conservation awareness in ways that protect both people and nature. Fishing and farming are the lifelines of many Southern District communities. Coastal towns like Bakassi and Akpabuyo are known for their rich fish markets, fresh seafood delicacies, and waterway trade. Inland areas like Biase and Akamkpa thrive on oil palm plantations, cocoa farming, plantains, and cassava production.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interview Method and Participant Overview

In alignment with the study's interpretivist paradigm, qualitative interviews were conducted with five participants selected through purposive sampling. These included three experienced political actors, one from each senatorial district of Cross River State, and two prospective voters. To ensure a balanced political representation, two of the political actors interviewed are members of the ruling party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), while the third represents the main opposition party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Their

identities have been anonymized to preserve confidentiality and encourage candid responses.

Given Nigeria's multiparty system, the selection of the APC and PDP was influenced by their dominance and influence within the public sphere, particularly in Cross River State. These parties have historically shaped political discourse and public expectations, thus offering critical insight into the issues surrounding electoral zoning.

Objective 1: Will Electoral Zoning Ever Work in Cross River State?

One of the key objectives of this study is to evaluate the viability of the zoning principle as a workable political arrangement in Cross River State. The data derived from interviews suggests deep skepticism among political actors about zoning's long-term effectiveness or sincerity in implementation.

A respondent from the ruling party (APC) argued that zoning, although frequently discussed, lacks constitutional and legislative grounding, rendering it fragile and largely rhetorical:

"Zoning is not enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution. It's become more of a tradition within party conventions than a statutory requirement. If it were genuinely important, our laws would have captured it clearly. But even the political parties that claim to support zoning often contradict themselves by selling nomination forms to aspirants from all districts, regardless of the supposed rotational agreement. That tells you it's not sacrosanct. What Cross River needs now is not zoning, it's competence."

This view was echoed by another political figure who also expressed concern over the inconsistent application of zoning:

"People talk about zoning, but let's be honest, it's mostly lip service. There's no binding framework to enforce it. Without legal backing, it remains vulnerable to manipulation by political elites."

Conversely, a respondent from the opposition party (PDP), while acknowledging zoning's imperfections, defended it on ethical and equitable grounds:

"I support zoning because I believe in equity and justice. Given that the southern senatorial district has been marginalized in recent cycles, it's only fair that the region produces the next governor. It's not just about politics; it's about ensuring a sense of inclusion."

This ideological divergence shows a fundamental challenge to zoning: its contested legitimacy and lack of formalization, coupled with inconsistent adherence by political stakeholders.

Objective 2: **Determining How Both Political Schools of Thought Use the Media to Persuade the Electorate**

The interview responses provided insight into how the media is strategically employed by proponents of both zoning and anti-zoning ideologies to influence public perception and voter behavior. A prospective voter interviewed expressed concern about the credibility and integrity of Nigeria's media landscape, remarking:

"*The Nigerian press is no longer a watchdog but has become a co-conspirator, with politically motivated and dishonest publications circulated nationwide*."

According to this respondent, media outlets, particularly private newspapers and online platforms, are being co-opted by political candidates. These candidates allegedly fund editorials and sponsored features to manipulate narratives in favor of their zoning position or to undermine the opposing view. The goal, he claimed, is to subtly persuade the public why leadership should rotate to or remain with a specific region. He recounted a notable instance in which a gubernatorial aspirant used the press to frame his zone as agriculturally rich, promising massive food production if elected, yet such claims, he argued, were merely rhetorical.

"That same person had never been seen near farmlands, yet he was marketing a vision of agricultural rebirth to win votes."

Another interviewee raised concerns regarding the role of government-owned media organizations, suggesting they may be even more entangled in politically motivated reporting. In his words, the challenges with state-owned outlets are "complicated," pointing out their susceptibility to directives from incumbent administrations, especially during election cycles. A particularly revealing observation was made concerning the role of civic advocacy groups. One respondent noted the appearance of outdoor billboards and campaign-style media content from such groups, seemingly endorsing power rotation to specific districts. He criticized this as premature and polarizing, suggesting instead that campaign messaging should focus on individual candidates' competence and policies, rather than on their geographical origin.

"Cross River's savior can come from anywhere. We should be promoting capable individuals, not senatorial districts," he asserted.

These responses collectively reflect the growing perception that media, whether mainstream or alternative, is no longer a neutral player in the electoral process. Rather, it serves as a tool of influence wielded by political actors and interest groups to legitimize particular narratives, be they in favor of zoning or opposed to it.

Objective 3: Defining the Effect of the Employed Media on the Electorate

In a conversation with a respondent holding a strategic role within one of the selected political parties, he likened the forthcoming gubernatorial election campaigns to a football match, one where electorates are most likely to support candidates from their own senatorial district. According to him, even in cases where voters support candidates from districts other than their own, such decisions are often driven by anticipated personal or regional benefits.

When asked whether the media can be held accountable for this form of politicized allegiance, he noted that electorates consume various forms of mass media, many of which are strategically employed by different interest groups to shape public opinion about where the next governor should emerge from. He stressed that political parties, however, do not use mass media platforms to dictate or apportion candidacy along senatorial lines. Instead, each party adheres to an established process, namely, primary elections conducted among party members, to determine its official flagbearer. According to the respondent, any winner that emerges from this process can come from any region, unless there is a formal and collective agreement within the party to zone the ticket to a particular district. Therefore, the use of mass media to promote zoning, he argued, is not an official party mechanism but rather the activity of independent actors. Responding to a follow-up question on whether his party engages in unofficial consultations aimed at influencing internal leadership to favor candidates from specific districts, he firmly stated that, to the best of his knowledge, such practices are not part of the party's constitutional operations. He added that if such backdoor negotiations are occurring elsewhere or within other parties, he is not aware of them.

Objective 4: Ascertaining How the Disparity Between the Two Schools May Affect the Outcome of the 2023 Election

In a discussion with a prospective voter ahead of the gubernatorial election, she expressed her expectation that, following the tenure of Professor Benedict Ayade, who defected from the PDP to the APC and hails from the Northern Senatorial District, it was

only natural that the next gubernatorial candidate of the ruling party, the APC, should emerge from the Southern Senatorial District. She anchored her reasoning on the informal rotational arrangement observed by the political elite, which, in her view, transcends factional or party lines. According to her, this unwritten norm implies that all qualified candidates from the Northern and Central Senatorial Districts, particularly the Central, which handed over power to the North, are effectively excluded. Hence, she believes the next governor must come from the South, regardless of whether this is achieved through political lobbying or internal consensus.

Conversely, another respondent, also a prospective voter, opposed the concept of zoning altogether. In his view, zoning fosters exclusionary politics under the guise of fairness. He stated,

"To me, zoning transforms exclusion into political virtue by rationalizing discriminatory arrangements in favor of a particular zone. With each electoral cycle, the rhetoric changes. I consider zoning a distraction and, frankly, a waste of time. I don't believe it will significantly influence the outcome of the 2023 general election."

Adding a historical dimension, a political activist traced the origin of zoning to Nigeria's military era, particularly after the tenure of General Yakubu Gowon. He noted that the Gowon administration, followed by the Murtala/Obasanjo regime, featured a power-sharing structure reflective of religious and regional balance. Gowon and his deputies were Christians, while Murtala, a Muslim, had Obasanjo (a Christian) as deputy, who in turn appointed a Muslim (Shehu Musa Yar'Adua) upon succeeding Murtala. He emphasized that zoning has since evolved into an entrenched political practice, *"an unwritten grundnorm"*, that politicians across all parties are expected to uphold. Despite the supposed consensus, the activist warned that reality may be more complex. As of the time of this writing, at least two candidates from the Central Senatorial District had declared interest in the governorship. This development suggests potential divisions among supporters in the Central District, thereby introducing a level of unpredictability into the forthcoming election.

CONCLUSION

The heightened calls for zoning in the lead-up to the 2023 Cross River State gubernatorial election underscore the enduring influence of Nigeria's historical and political

realities. Born out of the profound political crisis following the annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential election, zoning emerged as a strategic tool for managing diversity and fostering inclusion within Nigeria's fragile democracy. Institutionalized through informal agreements during the transition to civilian rule, zoning seeks to balance power across regions, ensuring equitable representation and preventing marginalization.

Yet, this study reveals that zoning remains deeply contested. Critics rightly challenge its limitations, arguing that it constrains political freedom, risks promoting mediocrity, and may sacrifice effective leadership on the altar of geographic considerations. Proponents, however, defend zoning as a necessary framework for fairness, unity, and nation-building in a pluralistic society. The responses gathered suggest that, while zoning continues to shape political expectations, especially the view that the Southern Senatorial District should produce the next governor, it is ultimately the appeal of party ideologies, candidate competence, and visionary leadership that will determine the electoral outcome. Cross Riverians are increasingly willing to look beyond regional identity to choose leaders capable of advancing the state's development.

Crucially, this study highlights the fragile nature of political cohesion in the state. Campaigns that fail to foster social unity and avoid ethnic or sectional bias threaten to deepen divisions and destabilize democratic progress. The future of Cross River's governance depends not merely on zoning agreements but on inclusive politics that prioritize competence, justice, and collective progress above parochial interests. In this critical moment, the state stands at a crossroads, between the enduring legacy of zoning as a power-sharing mechanism and the pressing demand for effective, unifying leadership that transcends regional divides. The 2023 election will thus serve as a pivotal test of Cross River's democratic maturity and political resilience.

REFERENCES

Amadi, E. I., Osai, J. O., Kalagbor, S. B., & Okene, N. V. (2023). Altercation for Zoning Principles: The Political Game and Gain for Nigeria. International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Research 9(3), 64-78

Eyinla, B. (2000). *The political transition and the future of democracy in Nigeria*. Political Science Review, 1.

Hovland, C., & Sherif, M. (1980). *Social judgement* (Reprinted from 1961 edition). Greenwood.

Jeje, E., Adebayo, O., & Azaigba, K. (2022). The implications of military rules on democracy in Nigeria, 1966–2018. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359380954_The_Implications_of_Military_Rules_on_Democracy_in_Nigeria_1966-2018

Mallard, J. (2010). Engaging students in social judgment theory. *Communication Teacher*, 24(4), 197–202. https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2010.512869

Myers, M. D. (2008). *Qualitative research in business & management*. SAGE Publications.

Nwabueze, B. (2005). Nature and forms of election rigging. Retrieved from https://www.nigerdeltacongress.com

Ojie, A. E. (2006). Democracy, ethnicity, and the problem of extrajudicial killing in Nigeria. *Journal of Black Studies*, 36, 546. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934705280304

Oni, E., & Faluyi, O. (2020). Political institutions and the collapse of the social contract in Nigeria. *Ibadan Journal of Sociology*. Retrieved March 11, 2021, from https://www.researchgate.net

Orr, A., & Harrington, S. (2021). Agenda setting: Definition, function, process and examples. Retrieved from https://www.study.com/agenda_setting_definition_function_process_and_examples

Osinakachukwu, N., & Jawan, J. (2011). The electoral process and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. *Journal of Politics and Law*, 4(2), 128. https://doi.org/10.5539/jpl.v4n2p128

Premium Times. (2022). Zoning and the political history of Nigeria. Retrieved from https://www.premiumtimesng.com

Sahara Reporters. (2022). Buhari meets ex-Lagos governor, Tinubu in State House behind closed doors. Retrieved from https://www.saharareporters.com

Sun. (2022). We don't support zoning, says northern group. Retrieved from https://www.sunnewsonline.com

This Day. (2022). Zoning for peace and unity. Retrieved from https://www.thisdaylive.com

Vanguard. (2022, May 16). 2023 and the demonisation of zoning. Retrieved from https://www.vanguardngr.com