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# Electoral Democracy and Political Entrepreneurship in Nigeria: Exploring the Social Media Option

By Amobi P. Chiamogu, Uchechukwu P. Chiamogu, Agary N Nwokoye & Emeka Odikpo
*Federal Polytechnic, Oko*

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*Keywords: political networks, authoritarian populism, machine politics, self-worth electioneering, membership and candidate recruitment.*

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# Electoral Democracy and Political Entrepreneurship in Nigeria: Exploring the Social Media Option

Amobi P. Chiamogu [α], Uchechukwu P. Chiamogu [σ], Agary N Nwokoye [ρ] & Emeka Odikpo [ω]

*Abstract-* The conduct of regular elections by authoritarian populist regimes has engendered the advent of elections without democracies and democracies without rights and peoples' participation. The unwillingness of the elites and the powerful, who have taken hold of the political system, to cede to the views of the people is increasingly making the government unresponsive. The political system is fast turning into a playground for billionaires with very high propensity to exclude the people from the scheme of affairs. Political parties are getting frozen by populist leaders who are using their positions to destroy free media, undermine independent institutions, and muzzle the opposition. Individual and minority rights as well as popular will are no longer guaranteed. Citizens are thus disillusioned with politics; have grown restless, angry, disdainful and hostile to the resultant *democrazy.* This paper therefore analyzed the collapsing party prowess in membership and candidate recruitments that have pushed politicians on self-worth electioneering, political merchandising and entrepreneurship in their search for relevance. It further examines the vertical linkages between political parties and electorates as complemented by horizontal connection between parties and private contributors. The paper thus observed that Political entrepreneurship has become both an art and craft for evolving vents and clichés for endearing and repositioning relevance in elections and electioneering in Nigeria. The paper uses secondary sources of data knitted in in-depth review of related literature to polemically analyze through the spectrum of the theory of political clientelism built around reciprocity of machine politics where exchanges rely significantly on clients' feelings of obligation to return favours to their patrons to explain the evolving trend of political entrepreneurship in Nigeria where perspective minds are using technologically driven platforms to close latent gaps created by freezing political parties in mobilization, membership and candidate recruitment.

*Keywords: political networks, authoritarian populism, machine politics, self-worth electioneering, membership and candidate recruitment.*

*Author α: Ph.D, Department of Public Administration, Federal Polytechnic, Oko - Anambra State – Nigeria.*
*e-mail: amobi.chiamogu@federalpolyoko.edu.ng*
*Author σ: Department of Public Administration, Federal Polytechnic, Oko - Anambra State – Nigeria.*
*Author ρ: Ph.D, Department of Political Science, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University Igbariam, Nigeria.*
*Author ω: Department of Political Science, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University Igbariam, Nigeria.*

## I. Introduction

A final change in information communications technologies (ICTs) has conquered the whole wide world in the span of a few short decades (Mounk, 2018). Until recently, the costs associated with running traditional media houses (printing newspapers, running radio stations, or operating television networks) were prohibitive for most citizens. Mass communication was the exclusive preserve of political and financial elites, thus marginalizing extreme views and making politics comparatively consensual. Interestingly, contemporary advancements in information communication technologies (ICTs) generating unmitigated access to the internet and availability of multiple information technology (IT) devices, particularly of overarching social media, have rapidly shifted the power balance between "political insiders and political outsiders" (Mounk, 2018). Today, the costs of organizing political events/rallies have plummeted with greatly permissive and relatively affordable virtual resources. In Nigeria, the hitherto suppressed citizens have gained undue and hard to limit space for expression of extreme and marginalized views. The government is apprehensive of demands for accountability from social media platforms. Any citizen is able to share at little or no cost viral information with millions of people at great speed. A new socio-political order has been created where politicians and political entrepreneurs are grappling with the challenges of pseudo-democracy or illiberal populism. The electoral process is mortgaged by the political leadership to ensure guaranteed results in political recruitment. Institutional guarantees of democracy are getting destroyed by autocratizing forces within the government that watches over the conduct of regular elections. It thus has been elections without democracies and democracies without rights such that might masked in wealth and abuse of political power have continued to prevail. Elections are at the mercies of those who can access power brokers laced with state apparatuses and unregulated influence thereby resulting in poor nauseating citizens' participation. Nigerians are currently in extraordinary times where the basic contours of politics, democracy and society are being renegotiated in varied fronts. Political participation and followership is lost to individual values and worth. Crafty,



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dexterous and smart political entrepreneurs are thus moving outside the box by creating foundations and social networks funded with personal/individual, cartel monies, interventions and resources from those around the corridors of power to oil and shape political structures while deciding the tone of relevance in the wake of technology mixed with excess money for politics.

Invariably, Nigerian politics and administration have degenerated into a gimmick for political office holders and billionaires who have very high propensity to exclude the people from the scheme of affairs. Political leaders, parties and patrons including aspirants to public offices are devising strategies for engaging and getting the electorates through machine politics to support and vote for them in (s) elections. The alienated citizens are getting engaged in *qui-pro-quo* exchanges for electoral support by provision of jobs, undue assistance that would have been better allocated evenly for socio-economic development. The above situation illustrates realizations of collapsing party prowess in membership and candidate recruitment that elicits genuine followership from the electorates by the political elites. The study therefore seeks to analyze the nature of self-worth electioneering, political merchandising and entrepreneurship embarked upon by Nigerian political leaders, collapsing parties, financiers/brokers, dexterous and crafty politicians for political relevance. It further reassess the vertical linkages between political parties and electorates as complemented by horizontal connection between parties and private contributors that give rise to strategic political brokers who generate, oil and deploy political networks for electoral purposes. The study also explores adaptation and deployment of social media platforms as a sustainable network for political entrepreneurship in Nigeria.

## II. Literature Review and Theoretical Exposition

### a) *Electoral Democracy*

Call it electoral or liberal democracy, the fact remains that dramatic global waves of democratization endeared democracy to most societies as the best form of government but did not develop democratic culture in many claimant states hence the multifarious perceptions about principles and practices (Huntington, 1991; Rubinstein & Roznai, 2018; Obikeze, Obiora & Chiamogu, 2019). Democratic rules and procedures are described in many ways suiting societies and peoples. It again explains why in recent years democracy has been in recession. Democracy according to International IDEA (2016) is "in a state of unending crisis and there will always be a struggle to find better forms of representation and accountability". Democracy has in many instances and societies reduced to elections and representations in government. Since Schumpeter (1976, p.269) defined democracy as a system "for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote", the electoral criterion has been the conceptual anchor of democracy. Electoral democracy epitomizes what the minimalist perspective describes as a situation where positions of political power are filled through regular, free, and fair elections between competing parties, and an incumbent government to be turned out of office through elections (Freedom House, 2007). The practice of democracy according to Coppedge (2005) has in contemporary times been measured along the path of minimalist (thin) and thick perceptions. The thin conception corresponds closely with Dahl (1971) concept of polyarchy with eight components, or institutional requirements that include the following:

(a) Adult citizens have the right to vote;
(b) Adult citizens are eligible for public office;
(c) Political office seekers are free to canvass for votes/support;
(d) Conduct of free and fair elections;
(e) Citizens are free to join political parties as members;
(f) Citizens have and enjoy freedom of expression especially on political issues;
(g) The opposition and criticism are allowed and protected by law; and
(h) Government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference.

Those electoral criteria state that democracy is a form of government that does not just hold contested elections but define the character of the electoral contest to ensure mass participation through competitive political parties. How this works in Nigeria is a rationale for the collapse of political parties or if you like the destruction of democratic institutions which are fast defining electoral participation. In Nigeria, electoral competition and opposition are getting grossly suppressed in what Schmitter & Karl (1991) referred to as fallacy of electoralism. Elections have continued to receive priority over other dimensions of democracy as clearly enunciated by the maximalist theorists.

### b) *Political Entrepreneurship*

According to Holcombe (2002, p.143), "political entrepreneurship occurs when an individual acts on a political profit opportunity". For Carpio (2017), "political entrepreneurs are people who create ideas and innovations, and act as new leaders in the field of politics". They are individuals and groups who seek to improve the science and art of politics through disruption, innovation and evolution of new approaches to politicking. The founders of movements such as the Chartists and Suffragettes, Capitalists and Marxists, Futurists and Luddites were all political entrepreneurs. In Nigeria, the overt inability of political parties to galvanize,



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articulate and aggregate interests with clear-cut programmes and ideologies merged with unmitigated intraparty conflicts has created groups with deep rooted divisions as political associations where membership and candidate recruitment are grossly inefficient. Everybody is for and against the political parties and no nobody is a staunch member. Access and tendencies to fasten realization of personal interests determine membership of political parties in a society where citizens wield cards of various parties at the same time. Political entrepreneurs explore and exploit nuanced avenues to find placements for themselves, their candidates and political parties as the only legitimate framework for electoral participation. They create, oil and promote groups both physical and virtual to the advantage of their clients and ready brokers where votes are bought and sold. Political entrepreneurship therefore is the art and craft of creating, sustaining and using informal platforms for electoral mobilization and participation. Dexterous, innovative and technology savvy politicians create, oil and fund these structures for electoral purposes.

There are avalanche of such structures, groups, movements and umbrella bodies around communities, electoral wards, states and geopolitical zones. The existence and activities of such socio-cultural groups and platforms as Ohaneze Ndi-Igbo, Afenifere, Arewa Youth Assembly, National Youth Council of Nigeria, Ijaw Youth Council, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), United Anambra Youth Assembly (U-AYA), Egbesu amongst others speak volumes in describing the dynamics of politicking in the polarized Nigerian state. These groups endorse and promote the candidacies of their children in national elections and fan embers of sectionalism. They constitute unimaginable fora for charting unexplored courses where political brokers, godfathers and mothers exploit to garner endorsement that facilitate electoral malpractice. Votes are easily bought and sold in places where the electorate are not staunch supporters of opposition and will not stand to defend their preferences. The electorates mortgage their conscience over unresponsive government subsumed in flawed electoral processes where they feel that their votes are not likely to count.

## III. Theoretical Framework

The paper adopted political clientelism as its theoretical framework of analysis. Political clientelism refers to the practice of providing personal favours that could take the form of jobs, contracts, welfare support, money, and other kinds to members of the electorate in exchange for electoral support. Scholars traditionally defined the theory as the distribution of selective benefits to individuals or groups in exchange for political support (Katz, 1985; Hopkin, 2001; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). Hopkin (2006) qualified clientelism as a form of personal, dyadic exchange that is marked by a sense of obligation. The sense of obligation here refers to the drive to reciprocate the favour by way of granting electoral support. By dyadic exchange as an element of clientelism, Hicken (2011) observed that there must be direct, face-to-face interactions and transactions between the patron and client. Discussing clientelism as a method of electoral mobilization, Stokes (2013, p. 649) succinctly declares that it is "the proffering of material goods in return for electoral support, where the criterion of distribution that the patron uses is simply: did you (will you) support me?" In our context where there is poverty of leadership and governance challenges, resources distribution and allocations are grossly lopsided resulting in widespread poverty and massive unemployment. Extending personal favours ranging from payment of school fees for student members of a constituency, attendance and support for wedding parties and burial ceremonies/rites, sinking of boreholes and extending electricity to communities by patrons and brokers using state resources cornered unto private foundations became critical. It could come in the form of discretionary provision of privileges by government representatives, political parties and prospective contestants of public positions of trust to members of the electorates, political wards and or group of persons in anticipated exchange for their votes. This privilege or favour is gifted in contingent reciprocity of political support. The privilege could as well come in the form of pork-barrel programme from the government which shares a lot of similarities with clientelism. For Hicken (2011), clientelism describes unbalanced relationships between political patrons, brokers and clients. Where the patrons and brokers refer to the political financiers and godfathers, the electorates constitute the clients. The proponents of this theory include Alex Weingrod (1968), James Scott (1969; 1972), Sidney Tarrow (1967), Rene Lemarchand and Keith Legg (1972), Carl Landé (1977), Mario Caciagli and Frank Belloni (1979; 1981), Parisi Arturo and Gianfranco Pasquino (1979), Richard Katz (1985), Simona Piattoni (2001), Jonathan Hopkin, (2001; 2006), Herbert Kitschelt and Steven L. Wilkinson (2009), Allen Hicken (2011), Susan Stokes (2013), etc.

According to Scott (1969) as cited in Stokes (2013), the relationships between political patrons, brokers and clients constitute influential familiarity in which the patron provides protection or benefits, or both, for clients who in turn, reciprocate by offering political support and assistance to the patron in elections. Initially considered a pre-modern approach, contemporary democratization process in Nigeria, is making political clientelism pervasive. At the wake of poor governance subsumed in massive electoral apathy and withdrawal by the people from the sit-tight political leaders, Berenschot (2018) observed that political



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clientelism as "a means of electoral mobilization underlies a host of developmental challenges from corruption and inadequate public service provision to ethnic violence and a weak rule of law". Clientelism as a political theory is heightened by the pervasiveness of vote-trading in emergent but fledgling democracies where the government is not delivering the expected democracy dividends. Clientelism which is a *quid-pro-quo* kind of politicking and electioneering campaign automatically renegotiates political support from impoverished electorates who tend to accept and waiver on the platter of a bird at hand. People hold onto the gifts in expectation for never coming deliverables from political brokers. It makes people accept the candidacy and aspiration of entrepreneurial politicians by granting them political supports.

## IV. Electoral Democracy and Political Entrepreneurship in Nigeria: Tracing the Nexus

The Nigerian state is facing daunting challenges in its system of governance and administration such that political institutions are witnessing coping problems. Democracy is witnessing crises of political representation and accountability (Witter & de Vries, 2013). Citizens are deserting the political arena with rising trends of low electoral turnout, increasing volatility, and imminent collapse of political party and party systems. Clearly, the fourth industrial revolution is geometrically changing and shifting cultures, work and politics (Carpio, 2017). Exponential advancements in information and communication technologies (ICTs) are overarchingly opening up and disrupting socio-economic and political norms with political actors being in a hurry to find, anchor and sustain placement for themselves, their groups and sometimes for the society with a bid to remain politically relevant. Nigeria has witnessed a rising tide of contentious elections ending in heated debates, court challenges, protests and legitimacy crises. In other words, conduct of elections and electioneering have triggered bloodshed, destruction, and undermined the capacity for stable governance, political inclusion, and national integration. This is mainly because of the zero-sum nature of politics leading to bitter tumultuous elections laid bare by divisions within parties which is commonly propelled by the predatory character of its ruling class.

The continued evolving political environment of states where democracy is facing crises of consolidation with authoritarian populists harping on regular elections while destroying the real institutional guarantees of democracy are generating concerns for systemic analysis. As aptly captured by Lentsch (2018), liberal democracies are in crisis in states where the political leadership is wielding excessive powers. Today, it is difficult if not impossible to make definitive statements about politics. Politics has developed unguarded wings and indefinite tentacles that are going beyond traditional wits. Apt comprehension and forecasting are time, state and regime specific thereby making general statements fallacious and in some contexts incongruent. In Nigeria, the state is captured and operates in the hands and guide of political leaders (within the presidency) with minimal attention to the will of the people (Anazodo, Igbokwe-Ibeto & Nkah, 2015). Even when Diamond (2020) did not accept that Nigeria has attained the status of a liberal democracy, we assume that having conducted several elections since the beginning of the fourth republic that Nigeria can as well pass for one of the status as advanced by Schumpeter (1976; 2000). At that, the introduction and implementation of novel and innovative socio-political engineering becomes a central question of political analysis. No wonder, Year On Team (2013) observed that "we are living in an exciting time of expansive digital and social frontiers, where old paradigms and beliefs are crumbling under the weight of parasitic systems and corruption, giving rise to intelligent tribes searching for new answers and constructs". Political entrepreneurship has widespread spectrum with unimaginable potentials. Perspective individuals and organizations are now developing new group dynamics and citizen engagement to reinventing political leadership structures, breaking down ideological divides, evolving innovative advocacy tools and technology, trying more effective methods of social organization, changing cultural perceptions and perhaps most importantly citizenry empowerment to adapt structures, vents and clichés for power struggle and consolidation where political parties are becoming less relevant. They create new frameworks and tools for more effective political mobilization, support and grounds for easy rallies and seamless channels for profit maximization. Most Nigerian political entrepreneurs are not interested in effective leadership and communication but in creating viable business models for merchandizing political support and patronage. They build platforms to make money and garner relevance. Astuteness in political entrepreneurship is a function of apt identification of political problem situations and the ability to determine possible working solution to the problem situation. In Nigeria, one of the most ravaging problems of liberal or electoral democracy is the collapsing political party prowess in the recruitment of members and candidates for elections which have given rise to unprecedented withdrawal of citizens concerns to parties but to individuals. Votes are cast for candidates and not political parties in contemporary Nigerian elections. Politicians opting for elections today win and lose on the basis of self-worth and personality merged with state action. Ruling parties with apparatuses of state force and machinery, do influence election outcomes but votes cast are candidate specific and oriented. Knowing that Nigerian political parties are without clear cut ideologies and manifestoes, it is easy



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to observe that votes are given to candidates with greatest pay packages. The 2019 Anambra South Senatorial District election where Senator Ifeanyi Ubah of the Young Progressive Party (YPP) without structures defeated candidates of All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) draws the points closer home.

The vertical and horizontal relationships between political parties and political power brokers are fast collapsing in an era of mistrust between the duo. There is trust deficit between party financiers/brokers and party candidates owing to established informal protocol breach between Dr. Chris Ngige and Chief Chris Uba in Anambra state among others. Getting political godsons to stick to terms of engagement in contemporary Nigerian politicking has become problematic. If the political leadership (those wielding executive powers) did not endorse a candidate, he must go through the crucible to fare well in elections. He solely depends on his individual worth to achieve electoral success and not party structures. Billionaire candidates are fast taking over the system with uncouth wealth through the activities and programmes of pseudo political foundations. The new political normal is that aspirants to public positions start with charity bodies to achieve popularity. They have all come to the realization that the party has failed and that the electorates have withdrawn from the government due to long period of irresponsiveness and bad leadership. The emergent approach by political entrepreneurs involves savouring their paths with personal and or groups largesse to communities and sections of the constituencies to garner political support. Prospective aspirants now provide public infrastructures such as roads, hospitals, and empowerment programmes in order to earn the people's support during elections. This explains why even legislators scamper for projects to salvage their prospects of returning to the hallowed chambers. Thence, the real imports of the phrase "attracted and facilitated" that follow government projects today. Members of the State and National Assemblies aspiring to remain relevant move around offices in ministries and departments (MDAs) in search of job opportunities and projects to facilitate to earn the phrase on project signboards.

## V. Exploring the Social media Option for Political Entrepreneurship in Nigeria

Equally seeking relevance, dexterous and crafty politicians, who are not that wealthy, chart courses in the use of technology. ICTs has overwhelmingly changed the tone and pattern of politics especially in structure building and mobilization. Where parties are relapsing, individuals' networks and self worth are becoming paramount. Political entrepreneurs are becoming innovative with the use of ICTs to garner structures and memberships that can easily be mobilized. They build, promote and oil these members as ready hands for negotiating support for willing politicians who can foot their bills. The structures are their political investments whose access could go to those that can afford it.

With very high internet penetration in Nigeria and unassuming increment in the number of social media users, the chances of deploring and directly engaging the electorates in groups have become latent options. Nigerians use more of such social media platforms that have messengers where they easily get added or join group chats and follow notable personalities and celebrities. Political entrepreneurs explore social media chat groups such as those from States, Senatorial Districts, Federal Constituencies, State Constituencies, Local Government Areas, Clans, Town Union, Wards, Communities, Villages, Families, Party Groups, Professional Associations, Labour Unions, Alumni Chat Groups, Social Clubs, Big Cities' chat groups to build their political platforms. They also engage field workers to obtain direct phone contacts of registered voters from electoral wards to build their data bases from where they reach the electorates. Many social media users get added to groups without their permission and the need for connections and information push them to remain members of such groups. These coupled with overwhelming poverty, push many citizens to continue with groups where the entrepreneurs get to make stipends available to them and make promises of doing more. He periodically engages them in virtual and physical meetings where they part with foodstuff, clothing materials and information on state of the nation. He develops direct relations and gets to attend social events such as burial, wedding and other ceremonies thereby endearing himself to the members.

Everybody likes recognition and getting to be identified with in times of need especially in moments of grief. Members of this groups have shared responsibility of promoting its ideals and marketing its prospective candidates. The promoters of these groups also favour unemployed members with jobs and contracts to oil the group. A typical example of these groups is found in United Anambra Youth Assembly (U-AYA), Ifeanyi Ubah Youth Organization, Soludo Campaign Organization, etc. At the level of social media, promoters build and nurture groups as political structures that are easily mobilized for elections. They easily market their views and candidates at minimal costs using these social media groups. Members of such groups propagate their views and programmes consciously and subconsciously by discussing and sharing such views with other social media users.



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## VI. Concluding Remarks

Social media has become the engine of communication in contemporary Nigeria. It has given way to new modes of relationships and interactions where people build networks with persons that they do not know but have new media presence. It creates platforms for simultaneous and instant messaging and reaching out to people at very little or no costs and has revolutionized media landscape. Social media thus offers a variety of avenues through which political candidates can communicate with people. It has been widely used by politicians to create awareness and mobilize supporters. Social media sites offer connections and networks for political entrepreneurs to reach, keep in touch, feel the pulse of the electorates and mobilize communities for electoral purposes.

Social media platforms thus provide sustainable latitude for advancing electoral participation and consolidating democracy in Nigeria. Social media represents a veritable avenue for political change by socializing citizens into the political beliefs required for democratic citizenship, and thereby promoting liberal democracy. It facilitates online communities chat groups created by political entrepreneurs for members, readers, listeners and viewers to discuss issues, have their voices heard, and get feedback in record time. The fact that social media is a supportive avenue for sharing views and opinions and discussing political life in the country implies that the social media can play an important role in deepening democracy. Social media therefore is a plausible option for political mobilization and participation in Nigeria.

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