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**INFLUENCE OF OPINION LEADERS ON VOTING DECISIONS OF  
URBAN AND RURAL ELECTORATES IN THE 2019  
GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION IN SOUTH-WEST, NIGERIA.**

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**Abstract**

*The successful conduct of elections in a democratic society depends largely on the flow of information about the candidates as it will determine the voting decisions of electorates. Opinion leaders are key sources of such information. Past studies revealed that opinion leaders are influential at swaying voting decisions of the electorate. The type of strategies used to influence voting decisions and the extent of their influence on voting decisions of electorate have however not been established by existing studies. Significant efforts have also not been made by existing studies to compare the influence of opinion leaders on the voting decisions of urban and rural electorates. The study adopted survey research design. The population of the study comprised all 11,897,401 registered voters in the three sampled states in South-west, Nigeria. A sample size of 1,067 was obtained. The multistage sampling technique was used for the study. The result showed that the extent to which opinion leadership influenced voting decisions was low for both urban ( $x=3.33$ ) and rural ( $x=3.31$ ) The study also discovered that appeal to ethnic and religious sentiments was a strategy that opinion leaders used highly in the urban areas ( $x=3.53$ ), while it used to a low extent in the rural areas ( $x=3.35$ ). The study concluded that the extent of influence of opinion leaders was not as significant as generally perceived to be among urban and rural electorates. The study recommended that opinion leaders should evolve better strategies in order to significantly influence the voting decisions of urban and rural electorates.*

**Keywords:** *Opinion leadership influence, Opinion leadership strategies, voting decisions, Urban and rural electorates.*

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## **Introduction**

Electioneering campaign processes come and go but the role played by some political actors or gladiators is not usually forgotten because of the influence they exert on their followers and probably the entire immediate environment. This is because the contributions of the political gladiators, in a way, determine the outcome of election for their chosen political party or candidate. Among the political gladiators or actors/players is the opinion leader whose worth is not negotiable.

Shah and Scheufele (2006), in a research they conducted found that political strategists globally are interested in knowing how voting decisions are influenced by influential individuals and have consequently been engaging opinion leaders to disseminate political messages to potential voters.

The importance of opinion leaders as key influencers of opinion was first revealed in Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) when the authors conducted a classic survey on the voting behaviour of the American public during the American presidential election campaigns in the 1940s as reported in the 'People's Choice'. Lazarsfeld et al (1944) conducted the study in Erie County in 1940 with the hope of discovering media campaigns dictating the voting choice of Americans. Surprisingly, the researchers found that the media did not exert much influence on voters' choice as opinion leaders did. Lazarsfeld et al (1944) further discovered that majority of those who changed their voting decisions during the electioneering campaigns attributed such changes to other people (opinion leaders) not the media. The research, therefore, brought a new concept different from the Magic Bullet Theory that assumed media consumers as passive.

Researchers have thrown more light on the multi layered process of communication in a mass society. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) argued that the elite of the community first form their opinion after getting information from the media, and then relay the information from one segment of the society to the next. Converse (1964) also argued that because of their interest in political issues, opinion leaders process political information more efficiently than general voters.

Despite the influence of traditional and social media, opinion leaders still assume important roles in influencing voting decisions in both urban and rural areas. This view was echoed by Hammed (2017) when he noted that opinion leaders have the ability to use their skills to influence people's opinion and bring the people together for societal development especially, in a society where people are still drawn back by deep rooted beliefs, customs, superstitions and illiteracy.

To examine the extent of influence of opinion leaders on the urban and rural electorates, one must understand the characteristics of urban and rural electorates. Lichter and Brown (2011) submitted that relative to their urban counterparts in the other countries, rural residents are more likely to work in agriculture, mining, other extractive sectors and manufacturing companies. Tickamyer, Sherman and Warlick (2017) described them as people with lower income and educational attainments with higher rates of poverty. Gimpel and Karmes (2006) observed that religious affiliations and religiosity are important factors in explaining rural-urban voting decisions as the higher concentration of evangelical denominations in rural areas have been responsible for voting choices in the rural areas.

Explaining the factors determining the voting decisions of the rural electorate, Ahmed (2008) said clan and tribal sentiments are stronger than political fidelity as far as motivations for voting decisions are concerned. The implication of this is that since most rural electorates are assumed to vote based on group interest and tribal considerations, they are likely to be more influenced by opinion leaders than the urban electorate.

Lobao and Kelly (2018) also echoed racial and ethnic considerations as dictating the voting choice of rural voters. They also added religion as a key influence for rural voters, claiming that more of the churches and missionary activities are concentrated in the rural areas. This submission is also a pointer to the possibility of the opinion leadership influence being more pronounced in the rural areas. On the other hand, Albritton, Bureekul and Gino (2003) claimed that some level of individualism is attached to urban voting decisions, meaning that the influence of opinion leaders might not be so strong in the urban area.

Buttressing the independent nature of urban voters, Roy and Borden (2015) said that while the rural voters were more apt to support conservative parties, the urban voters were supporting the liberals. The implication of this is that rural

voters who support the conservative are likely to be people who would always pitch their tent with group identity and such people are more likely to be influenced by opinion leaders.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Having realized the influential position of opinion leaders, political parties and political office seekers actually engaged them as a tool for political mobilization in order to influence the voting decisions of both urban and rural electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in Nigeria.

The electorate, on whom opinion leaders exert their influence, can be looked at from two perspectives: those who live in the urban areas and those in the rural areas. Tickamyer, Sherman and Warlick (2017) asserted that rural voters are people who earn lower income and have lesser educational attainments than their urban counterparts; they are predominantly engaged in subsistent farming while their urban counterparts are highly skilled, non-farming group with technical abilities. In the rural areas, opinion leaders can easily emerge and may also be able to exert a lot of influence based on their characteristics. However in the urban centres, the parameters identified may make them appear to be intellectually independent and economically buoyant to resist the influence of opinion leaders. However, it has been observed that the number of information sources available to them may require that they also seek information from opinion leaders such as religious leaders and social media influencers. It was in line with the observations that the researchers sought to investigate and compare the extent of influence of opinion leaders on the voting decisions of urban and rural electorates.

### **Research questions**

1. What is the influence of opinion leaders on voting decisions of urban and rural electorates in the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria?
2. What are the opinion leadership strategies used to influence voting decisions of urban and rural electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria?

### **Scope of the study**

This study focused on the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria. All the three South-west States that conducted gubernatorial election in 2019

were enumerated. The states are: Lagos, Ogun and Oyo. This study evaluated the use of opinion leaders as a strategy employed by political parties and their influence on the voting decisions of urban and rural electorates in South-west states of Nigeria. The study was conducted between November, 2020 and January, 2021.

## **Conceptual review**

### **Political Communication and Opinion Leadership**

Communication between key political actors and the people is indispensable to any country's democratic development. Mahama (2012) explained that, "democracy comes with it, the need for political education and effective political participation based on access to information which pushes a greater demand for political involvement and influence" Today, the electorate are no longer passive. They do not just go to vote, they actively seek information that will help them make informed decisions. This development has therefore widened the scope of political communication as various groups jostle for media space to attract the attention of the people.

Mahama (2012) believes that effective political communication centres on factual discussions on the image or credibility of policies, parties and political leadership. The quest to catch the attention of the people by competing groups has led to the professionalization of political communication. This must have informed the thinking of Mancini (1999) when he said that professionalization of political communication has made political communication better because of the opportunity for more groups to be heard.

It has therefore become imperative to employ contemporary strategies to political communication, which will centre on governance, development and the welfare of the voters and must be engineered by political communication practitioners with good understanding of the ingredients of political communication for development. One of such political communication practitioners is the opinion leader. Because of the opinion leader's closeness to the electorate, he has a duty to ensure, as noted by Mahama (2012), that effective political communication in the form of factual discussions on the image or credibility of policies, parties and political leadership is well articulated to the people.

### **Opinion Leadership and Political Participation/Mobilization**

Democracy, political communication and political participation are three variables that are interrelated because they are all indispensable. The process of entrenching democracy requires political communication as well as full participation of the people. Political participation is, therefore, the involvement of the people in the political system. Adelekan (2010) defined political participation as a means by which the stakeholders participate in the political activity within a society and is equally engaged in determining the common goals of the society and the best way of achieving such goals.

Osondu claimed that turnout of people for elections in 2007 was very poor because they were not adequately mobilized and that candidates for the elections were more or less handpicked by the political parties.

Osondu's claim of poor political participation in Nigeria could only be understood in the context of a nation's political culture. Javier (2012) submitted that political participation is subject to the dominant political culture among a particular group or nation. Explaining the role of a country's political culture in political participation, Olsson (2014) stated that while some nations are politically and culturally advanced, most third world nations are still operating between traditional and foreign democratic culture. This means the involvement of individuals in politics (political participation) is directly related to the traditional political history of such a nation.

Kearney (1976) defined political mobilization as a "process where a great number of previously passive individuals perform some relatively intentional and agreed political actions...voting, engagement into political organization ... political strike or demonstration, riot... in order to get a political change. Without adequate political mobilization, there cannot be political participation". The low level of political participation as a result of the social, cultural, political, religious and educational backgrounds of the people shows that opinion leaders must be incorporated as key partners or intermediaries in order to increase the level of political participation of urban and rural electorates.

### **Voting Behaviour/Voter Turnout in Nigeria**

The term voting behaviour tries to seek explanation into the factors responsible for the actions and inactions of individuals during elections. Voting behaviour is derived from political behaviour. It is about the factors that affect an

individual disposition to election. Voting behaviour talks about the reasons behind the voting behaviour of the electorate.

Durotoye (2014) identified the following as factors that influence voting behaviour: Orientations on specific issues of public policy, general evaluation of government performance, evaluation of the general characteristics of the candidates, party identification, general ideological orientations and psychological factors.

Akpakpan (2009) gave a long list of factors that could influence who an individual votes for. They are: level of one's education, membership of organizations, sex, religion, social class, ideological leaning, position on ideological divide, party image, issues, programmes and policy statements, identification with party, candidates' orientation, the principle of embourgeoisement, economic factor/poverty, promise of political patronage, provision of amenities, force of relationship, location within the geo-politics, ethnicity and language.

### **Identification, Characteristics and Influence of Opinion Leaders**

Katz (1957) submitted that the best means of identifying opinion leaders is to ask people about persons who influence their actions and if they believe that they themselves are also influential. Merwe and Heerden (2009) were not fascinated by a simple survey process of just asking individuals who they are influenced by. They were of the opinion that the identification of opinion leaders is usually cumbersome involving deep survey research and complex statistical analysis. They however noted that identification of opinion leaders can be simplified by discovering individuals who are central to any social network as they can be assumed to be opinion leaders on all subjects in general. By this, it is believed that if a person is a domain-specific opinion leader, he can as well be an opinion leader on all subjects in general. Dubois and Gaffney (2016) aligned with the thinking of Merwe and Heerden by advocating an individual's position within a network as a measure of opinion leadership. They claimed that either calculating the frequency of mentioning of a user by other users or assessing a user's knowledge/expertise on a subject based on the content of the user's tweets could prove a good way of identifying an opinion leader. This approach basically considers the quality of messages a user sends as a measure of his/her knowledge and expertise.

Trepte (2010) identified people who had a particular influence on others as opinion leaders; they were characteristically sieving and transmitting messages on the election as well as restructuring and facilitating it. They were frequent media users and were keenly interested in the election and the electioneering more than others. Karlsen (2011), discovered that media messages were further filtered by what scholars referred to as opinion leaders who disseminated and interpreted messages to their personal networks.

Katz and Lazarsfeld, (1955) defined opinion leaders as individuals who will likely influence other people in their immediate abode. Corroborating this definition, Roch (2005) explained that in real life situations, there are individuals called opinion leaders in a society who have more power to influence other people's opinions because of their skills or positions. Merwe and Heerden (2009) defined opinion leadership as the extent to which an individual is able to influence other individuals' opinions or behaviour in a desired way with predictable frequency. Burt (1999) also defined opinion leaders as people whose interactions make innovations infectious for the people with whom they speak. In his definition as a marketer, Roch (2005) explained that as consumers always depend on other people as sources of information, in addition to advertisements and media sources, opinion leaders exert enormous influence on the decisions of other consumers. Having examined all the definitions by different scholars, one thing that is clear is their ability to influence others to act in a suggested way. The question is – why are they so influential or why do people follow them? The answer actually lies in their special characteristics.

While some scholars believe that opinion leaders still exert great influence on their followers, others believe that the influence of opinion leaders on choices made by individuals is being exaggerated. Kwon and Song (2015) argued that there are other factors, which determine the behaviour of consumers towards making purchases. They contended that prices play a critical role in influencing consumer choice. If consumers are offered high prices, they are more likely to embrace other products. This means that regardless of the recommendation of opinion leaders, consumers will consider the price they are required to pay and the value of the purchases made. Corroborating the limitedness of the influence of opinion leaders, Song (2015) submitted that a number of individuals receive information or messages directly from the media. This simply means that



opinion leaders may, after all, not play much role in influencing the thinking of members of the community.

A lot of studies, according to Schafer and Taddicken (2015) identified opinion leaders in complex information systems or social media by limiting themselves to identifying likely opinion leaders while the effects or influence of these opinion leaders on the preferences of their followers are often assumed. The actual social character of opinion leadership as a bridge between individuals is not properly addressed.

### **Characteristics of Urban/Rural Electorates**

The urban electorate is more literate and better enlightened about political issues than the rural voter. The urban electorate is assumed to have better access to information than the rural electorate because of the nearness of the mass media of communication to the urban voter. This view was confirmed by James and Akintunde (2018) when they opined that rural dwellers are often left behind in the designing of development policies. Development communication from urban based mass media often come to the rural residents as new ideas thereby limiting proper spread of innovation.

Shedding more light on why rural areas maintain a more traditional character, Iwuoha (2018) explained that rural dwellers are generally confronted with infrastructural decay than their urban counterparts. These infrastructural deficits have impacted negatively on the involvement of the rural dwellers in political participation. Iwuoha (2018) noted that poor supply of electricity has reduced the awareness of rural voters in respect of informational programmes that are transmitted through cable media channels such as television, which provides audio-visual advantage in relation to voter education. Buttressing the impact of infrastructural deficits on the voting behaviour of rural voters, Simon, Minnesota Representative on the American Congress explains that there are certain setbacks when an innovation is conceived in the urban area. He recalled how electronic poll books were the major toll in Minnesota's election but their use in the rural areas proved impossible because of inadequate wireless connectivity. (See American NCSL. The canvass states and election Reforms. Issue 52 October, 2014.

Buttressing the question of moral traditionalism as raised by Roy, et al (2015), Iwuoha (2018) explained that the hostile superstition held by rural voters

produced emotional objects that do not enhance rural dwellers' ability to adapt to new innovations. He went on to describe how "frustrating the feeling of some voters were during the 2015 elections that the electronic voting system adopted would expose them to demonic influence, and could be used for occult practices by their enemies" (Iwuoha, 2018:103). Their inability to access informational programmes which would have aided voter education in no small measure contributed to the bad voting habit during the 2015 general elections. Some of the rural voters according to Iwuoha (2018) came up with means of pressing their thumbs against the SCRS so many times to boost their population. This voting behaviour was responsible for the reason about 94 percent of SCRs could not consistently verify fingerprints (the European Union Election Observation Mission Report, 2015). The rural voters also have distance constraint. The distance between polling booths and their homes is enormous.

The voting decision of rural voters is also dictated by common interest. Harding (2010) argued that rural voters to a large extent share a lot in common. For example, in the area of education, roads, electrification or agricultural produce, which may distinguish them from urban voters. Such interests could also be occupational, religious or cultural. Frank (2004) argued that Red-Kansas is distinguished by voters detached from their economic self-interests but is bound by cultural and religious issues as defined by Republican political elites.

The literature examined on the attributes of both urban and rural voters have given an insight into who is likely to be more influenced by opinion leaders as the rural voters have generally been described as less independent in their voting decisions and on the basis of their loyalty to identity groups, they are likely to be controlled by influential traditional rulers. However, as literate and independent minded as the urban voters are assumed to be, they are also unbelievably controlled by religious and social class influence. It has therefore become difficult to categorically say that the rural voters are more prone to opinion leadership influence. It is our hope that this study will provide an answer at the end of the field work.

### **Opinion Leadership Strategies**

Opinion leaders, in their quest to influence voting decisions of the electorate, engage certain strategies. Udemezue (2018) described opinion leaders as people who strategically mix easily with people and are interesting to listen to and

always conforming to the norms of their social system. Atik (2018) described opinion leaders as masters at public relations efforts and have a way with words that can influence their audience. By implication, it means opinion leaders are public relations experts who strategically make use of various public relations tools to influence their followers.

Dubois (2015) argued that traditionally, opinion leaders use social pressure and social support via interpersonal communication to personally influence opinions, attitudes and behaviours of their everyday associates. Today, however, in a hybrid media system, opinion leaders have access to added channels which make it possible to communicate with audience beyond their everyday associates. The extended channels has also facilitated extended influence of opinion leaders as they can access more members of the general public. Today, the extended channels of communication has also increased the strategies used by opinion leaders all over the world. Opinion leaders are now involved in talk shows, creating blogs and social platforms where they introduce issues that will attract the attention of their followers. Because opinion leaders are public relations experts, they make use of souvenir, gift items and organize rallies to influence or attract followership.

In Africa, opinion leaders are said to be involved in the use of such strategies as distribution of monetary and material items to influence the decisions of their followers. Gotlieb (2014) noted that the exchange of goods for votes, often described as undemocratic, has been an instrument employed by local political intermediaries (opinion leaders) in Senegal to extract resources from political parties and redistributing them among needy supporters. Nossiter (2012) also noted that top politicians in Senegal tried to curry favour with village chiefs and religious leaders by offering them vehicles and monetary incentives. Baldwin (2013) also noted an exploitative patron-client relationship between voters in Zambia and the customary chiefs.

Another strategy used by opinion leaders in Africa is the bringing up of ethnic and religious sentiments to influence the voting decisions of the electorate. There were reports of notable ethnic and religious figures deploying ethnic and religious sentiments to promote favoured candidates. The use of ethnic and religious sentiments is not even limited to Africa as Donald Trump and his associates strategically used ethnic and religious sentiments to get the support of a huge number of voters in the 2020 American Presidential Election.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Two Step Flow Theory**

The theory, which was propounded by Lazarsfeld and Katz (1955), has the following assumption: That most people are not directly influenced by mass media, that media effects are indirectly established through personal influence of opinion leaders, opinion leaders are those initially exposed to a specific media content, and who interpret it based on their own opinion, they then begin to infiltrate these opinions through the general public who become opinion followers, these opinion leaders gain their influence through more elite media as opposed to mainstream mass media, in this process, social influence is created and adjusted by the ideals and opinions of each specific elite media group, and by these media group's opposing ideals and opinions and in combination with popular mass media sources and therefore, the leading influence in these opinions is primarily a social influence.

The concept of a two-step flow of communication started with Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1994) in their study on the American election campaigns in the 1940s reported in the *People's Choice*. They conducted the study hoping to discover that media campaigns dictated the voting choice of Americans.

The thrust of this theory, according to Gutlin (1995) is that media messages get to the consumers not as directly as assumed but through the selective lens of opinion leaders. The theory assumes that opinions leaders are more highly exposed to the news media content associated with their leadership and are more likely to access national level news sources. It sees opinion leaders as people with higher social economic status and more social relationships.

Liu (2007) stated that the idea the theory conveys is clear because opinion leaders are interested in public issues and better enlightened than non-leaders. They are regarded as the primary source of influence on the public. Before the study, scholars had thought that opinions were formed by the elite of the community and then relayed from one social stratum to the other (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955:3). Now, scholars have found that opinion leaders cut across all occupational groups and are found at every socio-economic level (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955:32). By implication, Katz & Lazarsfeld believed that opinion leaders were experts in a particular field, not all. It, therefore, means that an opinion leader on educational issues might not be the same person as opinion leader on religion or fashion.

The theory, according to Rogers and Shoemaker (1971) failed to recognize that opinion leaders do not always actively seek information. Opinion leaders can also be passive information receivers. It also failed to recognize that their influence is conditional because the extent to which followers are framed depends on whether or not the issue discussed is controversial. This is especially

true in the urban areas of Nigeria where we have opposing opinion leaders with each marshalling his points to win followers to his/her side.

The weaknesses of the theory notwithstanding, the theory is very relevant to this study, especially in Nigeria where the population is predominantly illiterate and rural. Therefore, people do not have access to the vehicles of the mass media. Secondly, because of the sociological bond of the African people where people act based on the influence of the social group to which they belong, the influence of opinion leaders is still largely pronounced.

### **Knowledge Gap Theory**

The theory was developed by Tichenor, Donohue and Olien (1970) as a result of the observed imbalance in the flow of information within the American society. The theory posits that society does not evenly acquire information as it varies with the social and economic status of the people. Tichenor, Donohue and Olien (1970) argued that as the infusion of mass media information into a social system increases, segments of the population with higher socio-economic status tend to acquire this information at a faster rate than the lower status segments, so that the gap in knowledge between these segments tends to increase rather than decrease. The theory, in essence, talks about the gap between the higher and the lower educated people. The theory posits increasing differences in knowledge due to social structure – based inequality.

The theory is anchored on the following assumptions: People of higher socio-economic status have better communication skills and education. They are versed in reading, comprehending and remembering information, people of higher socio-economic status can store information more easily or remember the topic from background knowledge. People of higher socio-economic status have more relevant social context as they generally have a broader sphere of activity and interpersonal groups or contacts and are more likely to discuss new topics with others, they are better in selective exposure, acceptance and retention whereas, lower status are less likely to expose themselves to certain new topics. That knowledge, like other forms of wealth, is often differentially distributed throughout a social system and the nature of the mass media itself is such that is geared towards persons of higher socio-economic status.

Some scholars have however accused the theory of being deterministic, biased and having overlooked the abilities of the less advantaged. Rogers (2003) perceived it as the result of communication activities and renamed it a communication effects gap hypothesis, locating causes in information sources rather than in receivers. Ettema and Kline (1977) also argued that the less educated had knowledge that was functional for them. They opined that motivation was essential for knowledge acquisition and proposed a

reformulation of the hypothesis based on differentials in motivation, seeking to move from deficits to differences. Dervin (1980) also opined that focusing on failure to receive the message is “blaming the victim”.

The knowledge gap theory is relevant to this study because it captures the educational, infrastructural and informational gap between the rural and urban voters occasioned by the differences in the socio-economic status of the people. It explains why the urban voters are more likely to make independent electoral decisions as a result of their ability to easily acquire information than their rural counterparts who do not have the requisite ingredients. As predicted by the theory, there will always be information gap between the rural and urban voters because of the disparities in data available to be learned. Urban voters are exposed to a lot of informational data, whereas the rural voters are not.

## **Empirical Review**

### **Opinion Leadership and Influence**

Liu (2007) examined the influence of opinion leaders on voting decisions in his work, “Constrained opinion leader influence in an electoral season: Revisiting the two-steps flow theory with multi-agent simulation”. Liu purposely investigated the extent of the influence of opinion leaders on their followers as the two-step flow theory suggests that opinion leaders have great influence on their followers. The research was specifically interested in the extent of the influence because it has been difficult for social scientists to measure and describe the extent to which political opinion leaders influence voters, especially when voters today access multiple information sources such as the available communication networks and self-selected news media. Liu concluded that opinion leaders’ influence does not diffuse widely to the public because it inevitably faces resistance from self-strengthening communication networks.

Merwe and Heerden (2009) sought to provide an answer to the extent to which opinion leaders exist across issues in their work, “Finding and utilizing opinion leaders: Social networks and the power of relationships”. Merwe and Heerden (2009) argued that opinion leaders guide our decision making process because when faced with a complex choice, we often seek the opinion of an expert.

They argued that the Web has fueled an unprecedented expansion of this concept by enabling virtual opinion leaders. In answering the question of the extent of influence of opinion leadership, they discovered that domain-specific opinion leadership is related to opinion leadership in general.

### **Factors Influencing Voting Behaviour/Decisions of Voters**

Krosnick and Harder (2008) examined the factors that make some democratic citizens vote while others do not in their work, “Why do people vote?: A psychological analysis of the causes of voter turnout”. Krosnick and Harder found that turnout is made difficult and less likely by onerous registration

procedures. That turnout is more likely among some demographic groups because of greater motivation or ability or less difficulty.

They also discovered that the social setting in which a person lives and the psychological disposition he or she possesses can affect turnout by shaping motivation, ability or difficulty, that are characteristic of a specific electoral content and that conversing and interviewing people about an election can increase turnout. In a similar study on the issues that influence the voting decisions of the American voters, Smith (2009), in his work, "Issues matter: A case study of factors influencing voting choices" found that apart from onerous registration process, the partisan dispositions of party identification and political philosophy to the issues of campaign, economy, health care reforms, the environment and character of the candidates were salient in voting decisions. The influence of ethnicity and religion on voting choices was confirmed by Adams and Agomor (2015) when they investigated the factors determining voting choice in their work, "Democratic politics and voting behaviour". The result indicated that ethnicity, religion, human relations of the candidates, gift from candidates and promise of jobs and good health care policy were key determinants of voting decisions. The emphasis on ethnicity and religion was also reiterated by Hazarika (2015) when he examined the determinants of electoral behaviour of Indians in his work, "Voting behaviour in India and its determinants". They also identified mass illiteracy as key to the irrational choices of the electorate. The influence of ethnicity on voting decision was further confirmed by Isiaq, Adebisi and Bakare (2018) in their work, "Ethnicity and election outcomes in Nigeria: Interrogating the 2015 Presidential Election". The study revealed that ethnicity played a major role in the election as the major contestants received bloc votes from their various states and geo-political zones. This finding correlates with the discovery of Adams and Agomor (2015) that ethnicity plays an important role in Africa as this study indicated that candidates appealed to ethnic sentiments.

### **Influence of Urban- Rural Divide on Voting Decisions**

To understand the voting behaviour of rural dwellers, Islam and Ahmed (2012) examined the information seeking behaviour of rural dwellers in developed and developing countries in their work, "The information needs and information – seeking behaviour of rural dwellers: A review of research". The work discovered that the information needs of rural communities in all countries are similar as they always require information for their day-to-day living, such as health, occupation, income generation, self-governance, agriculture, education, religion, recreation and current affairs. Lobao and Kelly's (2018) findings closely align with Ahmed's discovery, in their work, "The social bases of rural-

urban political divides: Social status, work and socio cultural beliefs”, Lobao and Kelly just like Ahmed found that racial and ethnicity still largely determine voting decisions in the rural areas more than in the urban areas.

### **Methodology**

This study employed survey as the research design. Survey is the most engaged design in social and behavioural sciences for investigating the nature, the cause and effects of a phenomenon. Kothari and Garg (2014) defined survey as the method of securing information concerning a phenomenon under study from all or a selected number of respondents of the concerned universe. Survey enabled the researcher to generate quantitative data from the respondents, who are the electorate in South-west, Nigeria. Survey was found appropriate because of its relevance in providing accurate responses to sensitive issues. The survey approach was triangulated using questionnaire and interview guide as instruments of data collection to answer key questions raised in the study.

A total enumeration of the three states that conducted gubernatorial election in 2019 was done. The states are: Lagos, Ogun and Oyo. The number of registered voters for the 2019 general elections in the three states was 11,879,401 as supplied by Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).

The sample size for this study is one thousand and sixty seven (1067) participants.

The sampling process for this study involved the use of multistage sampling technique. It was used because for the sampling process, more than one sampling techniques were deemed appropriate and were used at different phases of the sampling process.

Questionnaire was used as it afforded the researcher the opportunity of sourcing information directly from primary sources. The questionnaire was constructed in such a manner that ensured clarity and completeness. The questionnaire contained close-ended items. The questionnaire was structured into six sections (A-F) with each section consisting of questions that provided answers to each of the formulated research questions. Section A, which addressed research question one consisted of items that were close-ended while all the items from sections B-F were close-ended using the Likert format. Therefore, the responses were Very High Extent (VHE), High Extent (HE), Low Extent (LE), Very Low Extent (VLE), and Not at All (NA). The format was used to ensure easy coding and expression of respondents' opinions. The questionnaire items were interpreted to Yoruba for some respondent who could not read and write in English Language.

The research instruments were subjected to experts' perusal and correction. The instruments were assessed by two experts in the field of Mass Communication



(Political Communication), two Political scientists and one INEC official, and their opinions and corrections were taken into consideration.

The Cronbach's Alpha test was carried out with 60 copies of the instrument administered at Ifelodun Local Government, Osun State in the pilot test. The benchmark for reliability of Cronbach's Alpha score is 0.70 (Ezekiel et.al, 2010). All the constructs scored above the minimal 0.70. Therefore, the instrument was reliable.

The questionnaire as an instrument was administered by the researcher using the face-to-face approach as it helped the researcher to explain any confusing items in the questionnaire to the respondents (Okonkwo, 2018). The researcher also engaged trained research assistants to administer copies of the questionnaire. Most of the research assistants were people who were familiar with the environment so that information can be freely given to them, especially in the rural areas. The face-to-face administration of research instruments enhanced a high level of returns.

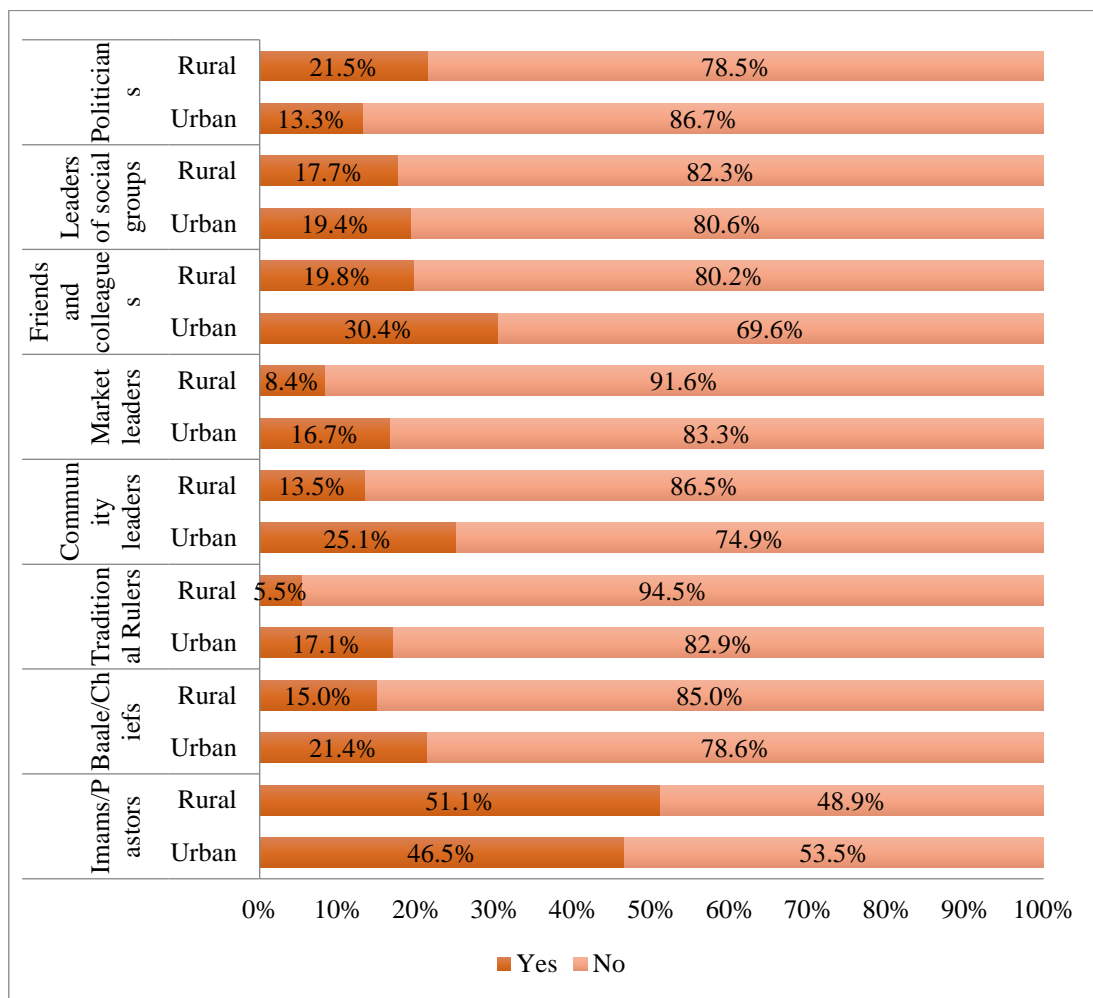
The statistical data analysis adopted included descriptive analysis (simple percentages and frequency tables) and inferential analysis (Hayes process analysis, version 3.4; model 1 and multiple linear regression). The Statistical Products and Service Solutions (SPSS), version 25 was used for the analysis. The descriptive analysis was used to analyze the research questions as it helped to view the proportion of respondents sharing similar characteristics while also noting how dispersed the observation about the phenomenon under study was (Unyimadu, 2016, Dipeolu, 2015).

### **Data analysis**

This section analyses the data collected in order to evaluate and compare the influence of opinion leaders on the voting decisions of urban and rural electorates in South West, Nigeria and how this influence translated to electoral gains for political parties. One thousand and sixty seven (1067) copies of the questionnaire were administered, while nine hundred and eighty four copies (984) were retrieved and found valid for analysis; resulting in 92.2 percent response rate.

**Research Question One:** What is the influence of opinion leaders on voting decisions of urban and rural electorates in the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria?

**Opinion leaders that urban and rural participants turn to for advice/additional information on voting choice.**



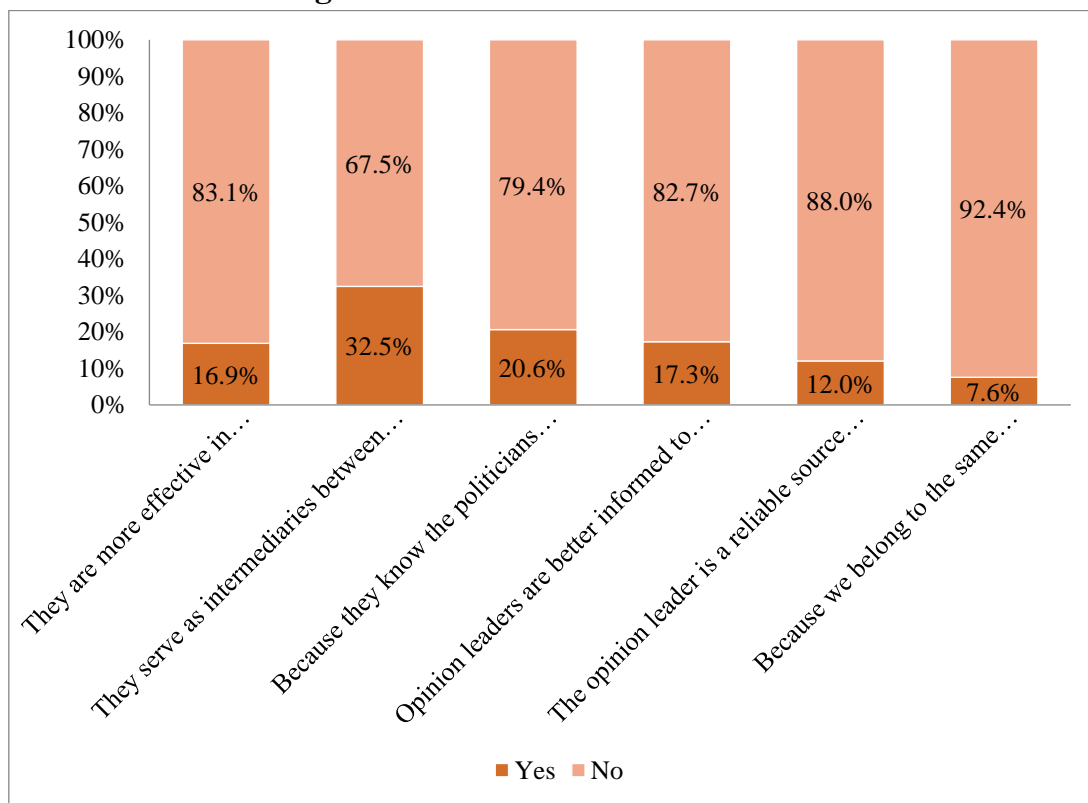
Source: Field Survey 2020

**Fig. 1.0 Opinion Leaders Urban and Rural Participants Turn to for Advice/Additional Information on Voting Choice**

Fig. 1.0 indicates that more participants in the rural areas (51.1%) turned to *Imams*/pastors for advice and additional information on voting choice compared to their urban counterparts (46.5%). In addition, more urban participants turned to friends and colleagues (30.4%) than rural respondents (19.8%) for advice and additional information on voting choice compared to their urban counterparts. More urban participants turned to community leaders for advice and additional information on voting choice (25.1%) than their rural participants (13.5%). In addition, more urban respondents turned to *Baale*/Chiefs for advice and additional information on voting choice (21.4%) than rural participants (15%).

This implies that more urban and rural voters turn to *Imams*/pastors for advice and additional information on voting choice than they get advice from friends and colleagues, community leaders and *Baale*/Chiefs.

**Reasons urban participants turn to opinion leaders for advice/additional information on voting choice**



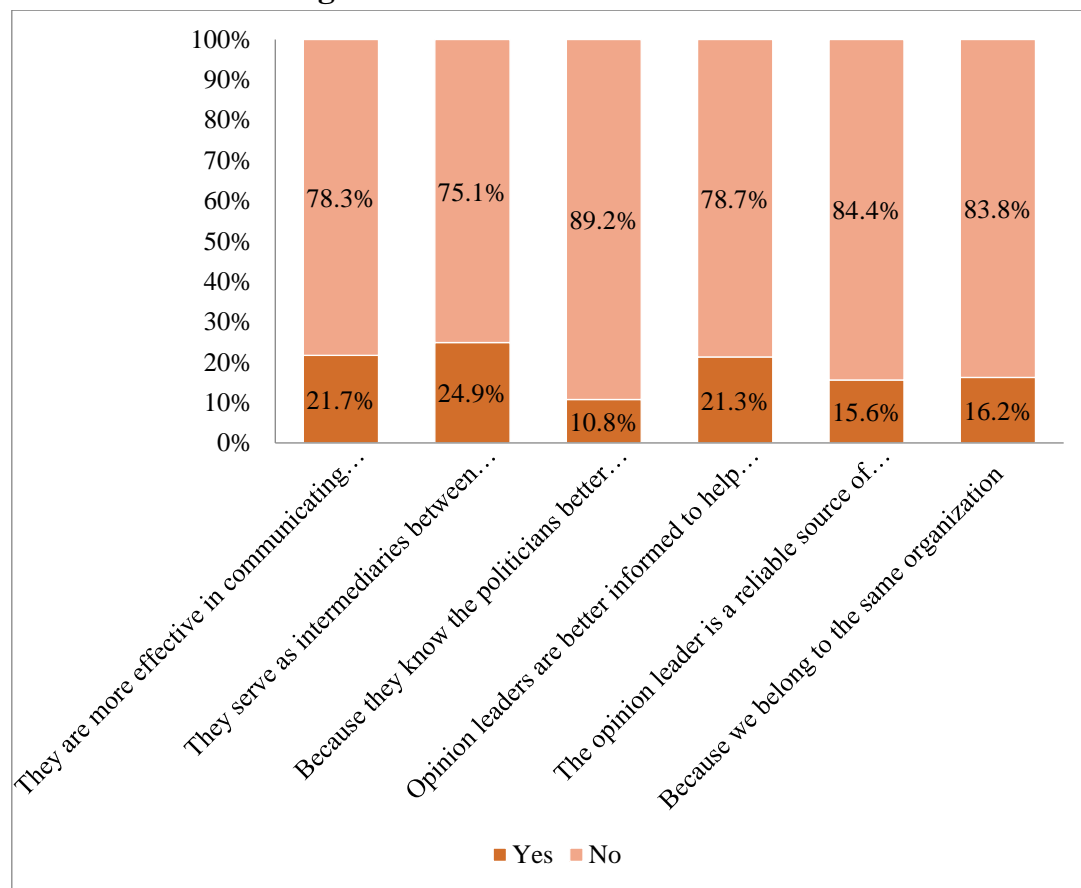
Source: Field Survey 2020

**Fig. 1.1 Reasons Urban Participants Turn to Opinion Leaders for Advice/Additional Information on Voting Choice**

Fig. 1.1 shows that many urban voters turn to opinion leaders because they serve as intermediaries between politicians and the people (32.5%). This is followed by the assertion that they turn to opinion leaders because they know the politicians better than the electorate (20.6%), opinion leaders are better informed to help determine the best candidate (17.3%) and that they are more effective in communicating political information than the mass media and social media (16.9%). This implies that opinion leaders are perceived as necessary by

urban voters because they serve as intermediaries between politicians and them, because they are perceived to have better knowledge of the politicians than the electorate, because they are perceived to be better informed to help determine the best candidate and that because they are perceived to be more effective in communicating political information than the mass media and social media.

**Reason rural participants turn to opinion leaders for advice/additional information on voting choice**



Source: Field Survey 2020

**Fig. 1.2 Reasons Rural Participants Turn to Opinion Leaders for Advice/Additional Information on Voting Choice**

Fig. 1.2 depicts that many rural voters turn to opinion leaders because they serve as intermediaries between politicians and the people (24.9%). They are also perceived to be more effective in communicating political information than the mass media and social media (21.7%), they are perceived to be better informed

to help determine the best candidate (21.3%) and because they belong to the same organization (16.2%).

This suggests that opinion leaders are perceived as necessary by rural voters because they serve as intermediaries between politicians and the people, they are perceived to be more effective in communicating political information than the mass media and social media, they are perceived to be better informed to help determine the best candidate and because they belong to the same organization.

**Table 1.0a Extent Opinion Leaders Influenced the Voting Decisions of the Electorate among Urban Participants during the 2019 Gubernatorial Election**

Variable	Frequency	Percent	Mean	Standard Deviation
Not at all	69	13.5	3.33	1.27
Very Low Extent	58	11.4		
Low Extent	106	20.8		
High Extent	189	37.1		
Very High Extent	88	17.3		
Total	510	100.0		

Source: Field Survey 2020

**KEY: VHE=Very High Extent, HE=High Extent, LE=Low Extent, VLE=Very Low Extent, NA= Not at all\*\*\*Decision Rule if mean is ≤ 1.49=Not at all; 1.5 to 2.49 = Very Low Extent; 2.5 to 3.49 =Low Extent; 3.5 to 4.49= High Extent; 4.5 to 5= Very High Extent**

Table 1.0a shows that urban participants noted that opinion leaders influenced the voting decision of the electorate during the 2019 gubernatorial election to a low extent ( $\bar{x}$ =3.33). This implies that urban electorates stated that opinion leaders could not highly influence their voting decision during the 2019 gubernatorial election.

**Table 1.0b Extent Opinion Leaders Influenced the Voting Decisions of the Electorate among Rural Participants during the 2019 Gubernatorial Election**

Variable	Frequency	Percent	Mean	Standard Deviation
Not at all	98	20.7	3.31	1.50
Very Low Extent	54	11.4		
Low Extent	54	11.4		
High Extent	137	28.9		
Very High Extent	131	27.6		
Total	474	100.0		

Source: Field Survey 2020

**KEY:** VHE=Very High Extent, HE=High Extent, LE=Low Extent, VLE=Very Low Extent, NA= Not at all\*\*\*Decision Rule if mean is  $\leq 1.49$ =Not at all; 1.5 to 2.49 = Very Low Extent; 2.5 to 3.49 =Low Extent; 3.5 to 4.49= High Extent; 4.5 to 5= Very High Extent

Table 1.0b depicts that rural participants stated that opinion leaders influenced the voting decision of the electorate during the 2019 gubernatorial election to a low extent ( $\bar{x}$ =3.31). This suggests that rural electorates indicated that opinion leaders could not highly influence their voting decision during the 2019 gubernatorial election.

**Research Question Two:** What are the opinion leadership strategies used to influence voting decisions of urban and rural electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria?

**Table 1.1 Link between Opinion Leadership Strategies and Followership among Urban and Rural Voters**

Items	Urban		Rural	
	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD
Opinion leaders in my area make use of gifts to enjoy followership of the people.	3.67	1.35	3.52	1.33

<b>Opinion leaders in my community engage in community services such as distribution of fertilizer and facilitating the provision of essential services by government to extend their sphere of influence.</b>	3.34	1.23	3.07	1.27
<b>Opinion leaders in my area make use of village square/town hall meetings.</b>	3.47	1.29	3.55	1.35
<b>Opinion leaders in my area bring up ethnic and religious sentiments to influence people in my community.</b>	3.53	1.29	3.28	1.41
<b>Average Overall Mean</b>	<b>3.50</b>	<b>1.29</b>	<b>3.35</b>	<b>1.34</b>

Source: Field Survey 2020

**KEY: VHE=Very High Extent, HE=High Extent, LE=Low Extent, VLE=Very Low Extent, NA= Not at all\*\*\*Decision Rule if mean is ≤ 1.49=Not at all; 1.5 to 2.49 = Very Low Extent; 2.5 to 3.49 =Low Extent; 3.5 to 4.49= High Extent; 4.5 to 5= Very High Extent**

Table 1.1 depicts that generally, the connection between opinion leadership strategies and followership among urban electorates was high ( $\bar{x}$ =3.50); while it was low among rural electorates ( $\bar{x}$ =3.35). Specifically, the connection between opinion leadership strategies and followership among urban and rural voters was high in terms of: opinion leaders making use of gifts to enjoy followership of the people (Urban=  $\bar{x}$ =3.67; Rural=  $\bar{x}$ =3.52). The connection between opinion leadership strategies and followership among rural voters was high in terms of: opinion leaders making use of village square/town hall meetings ( $\bar{x}$ =3.55); while it was low for urban voters ( $\bar{x}$ =3.47). The connection between opinion leadership strategies and followership among urban voters was high in terms of: opinion leaders bringing up ethnic and religious sentiments to influence people in communities ( $\bar{x}$ =3.53) but it was low among rural electorates ( $\bar{x}$ =3.35).

This analysis suggests that generally, the link between opinion leadership strategies and followership among urban electorates was high, while it was low among rural electorates. The connection between opinion leadership strategies and followership among urban and rural electorates was high in terms of:

opinion leaders making use of gifts to enjoy followership of the people. This connection among rural electorates was high in terms of: opinion leaders making use of village square/town hall meetings; while it was low for urban electorates. In addition, this connection among urban electorates was high in terms of: opinion leaders bringing up ethnic and religious sentiments to influence people in communities; while it was low among rural electorates.

### **Discussion of findings**

This study sought to specifically find out the strategies used by opinion leaders to influence voting decisions and the extent of opinion leaders' influence on the voting decisions of urban and rural electorates in the 2019 gubernatorial election in selected states in Southwest Nigeria. The study operationalized influence as strategies used by opinion leaders to sway or determine the voting decisions of urban and rural electorates in the 2019 gubernatorial election.

The study revealed that opinion leaders actually influenced the voting decisions of both urban and rural electorates as both urban and rural electorates confirmed that they sought the advice of opinion leaders. This finding agrees with those of Gotlieb (2014) stating that voters depended on their local leaders for direction on voting decisions. The finding is also a confirmation of one of the principles of the two-step flow theory that most people are not directly influenced by mass media, but through personal influence of opinion leaders. The finding that more urban and rural electorates turned to Imams/Pastors for advice and additional information on voting choice than they seek advice from community leaders, baales and chiefs or friends and colleagues is an indication that more electorates in the Southwest trust pastors/imams than other opinion leaders for political information. This could also mean that religious considerations played important role in the voting decisions of electorates in Southwest Nigeria during the 2019 gubernatorial election.

The finding of this study that both urban and rural electorates turn to opinion leaders because they are experts who act as intermediaries between politicians and the people also confirms the findings of Kwon and Song (2015) that consumers still make their purchase decisions based on the opinion of those they consider as experts and are knowledgeable about the products they want to buy. The finding that more rural electorates believe that opinion leaders are more effective in communicating political information than the mass media is a



confirmation of one of the principles of knowledge gap theory that says- as the infusion of mass media information into a social system increases, segments of the population with higher socio-economic status tend to acquire the information at a faster rate than the lower status segment. It explains why more urban electorates do not see opinion leaders as more effective in communicating political information than the mass media because their socio-economic status offers them the opportunity of direct access to the mass media. The revelation by the study that both urban and rural electorates felt that political candidates relied on opinion leaders for success during the 2019 gubernatorial election to a high extent shows that politicians see opinion leaders as trusted experts who provide authoritative information. This revelation is in agreement with the findings of Dubois and Gaffney (2014) that followers' reliance on opinion leaders is predicated upon the standard measures of centrality as trusted experts who provide authoritative information and insights on political issues.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The extent of influence of opinion leaders in Southwest, Nigeria was not as significant as generally perceived to be among urban and rural electorates in South-west, Nigerian during the 2019 gubernatorial election. Appeal to ethnic and religious sentiments was a key strategy of influence especially, in urban areas during the 2019 gubernatorial election.

No nation thrives by voting along ethnic and religious lines. Therefore, electorates, especially the urban ones should refrain from listening to opinion leaders who bring up ethnic and religious sentiments to influence their followers' voting decisions. The study also recommended that opinion leaders should evolve better strategies in order to significantly influence the voting decisions of urban and rural electorates.

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