

BETWEEN THE PULPIT AND THE POLLS: PENTECOSTALISM, YOUTH MOBILISATION, AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The intersection of Pentecostalism and youth political engagement in Nigeria has emerged as a significant area of scholarly inquiry, particularly as the country's democratic processes remain contested and unevenly participatory. Employing a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that integrates theoretical analysis, secondary data synthesis, critical discourse examination of pastoral and digital religious content, and case-based analysis of recent civic and electoral events, this study examines the extent to which Pentecostal churches function as sites of political socialisation, moral authority, and civic mobilisation for young Nigerians. Drawing on political sociology, religious studies, and African democratic theory, the study argues that Pentecostalism does not operate as a monolithic political force; rather, it produces ambivalent and often contradictory effects on youth political participation. Whilst certain Pentecostal formations actively cultivate civic consciousness and encourage electoral engagement, others reproduce a theology of political quietism that discourages sustained democratic participation. The article further interrogates

how prophetic authority, prosperity theology, and charismatic leadership interact with emerging youth identities to shape political behaviour. By situating these dynamics within Nigeria's complex religious landscape and democratic deficits, the paper contributes to an expanding body of literature on religion and democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. The findings suggest that the political influence of Pentecostalism on Nigerian youth is best understood not as a straightforward mobilising or demobilising force, but as a dialectical process shaped by theological orientation, institutional culture, and the broader sociopolitical context.

Keywords: *Pentecostalism, youth political engagement, Nigeria, religious mobilisation, democratic participation, faith and politics*

Introduction

Nigeria occupies a distinctive position in the global Pentecostal landscape. Home to some of the largest and most influential Pentecostal congregations in the world, including the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Winners Chapel, and Living Faith Church, the country has witnessed an extraordinary proliferation of charismatic Christianity since the 1970s (Adogame, 2016). This growth has coincided with a period of profound political instability, military rule, democratic transition, and sustained governance failures, all of which have shaped the ways in which ordinary Nigerians, and particularly young people, relate to the political sphere. Understanding how Pentecostal institutions mediate this relationship has thus become an urgent scholarly and policy question.

Youth constitute Nigeria's demographic majority. With over 70 per cent of the population below the age of 35, and with youth unemployment rates remaining persistently high, the political futures of Nigerian democracy are inextricably bound up with how young people are engaged, mobilised, or alienated from civic life (Maxwell, 2025). Pentecostal churches, which draw disproportionately from this demographic, are therefore positioned as critical intermediary institutions between young Nigerians and the formal political order. Yet the scholarly literature has not fully resolved whether this positioning translates into democratic empowerment or, alternatively, into forms of dependency and political passivity mediated through charismatic authority.

To address this gap, this study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodological approach. Rather than relying on primary survey data, the research utilises secondary data synthesis, critical discourse analysis of pastoral pronouncements, digital religious communications, and youth-focused civic initiatives, alongside

contextual case studies of recent socio-political phenomena such as the #EndSARS protests and the 2023 general elections. This methodology is triangulated with theoretical frameworks from political sociology and religious studies to interpret how theological narratives, institutional practices, and algorithmic media architectures collectively shape youth political subjectivity. By synthesising existing scholarly literature, policy documents, and documented religious-political interactions, the study constructs an empirically grounded, critically nuanced analysis of the dialectical relationship between Pentecostal formations and youth civic engagement in Nigeria.

This article intervenes in this debate by advancing a nuanced account of the relationship between Pentecostalism, youth identity, and political participation in Nigeria. It argues that to understand this relationship adequately, scholars must move beyond simplistic binaries of religious engagement and disengagement, attending instead to the theological, institutional, and sociological specificities that shape how different Pentecostal formations produce particular kinds of political subjects. The article proceeds through four substantive sections: first, a review of relevant literature on religion and political participation in Africa; second, a theoretical framework drawing on Gramsci's concept of organic intellectuals and Bourdieu's field theory; third, an empirical analysis of how Pentecostalism shapes youth political behaviour; and fourth, a critical examination of the tensions and contradictions within Pentecostal political culture in Nigeria.

Literature Review: Religion, Youth, and Democratic Life in Africa

The literature on religion and politics in Africa has expanded considerably over the past decade, reflecting broader scholarly recognition that religious institutions are not peripheral to African democratic processes but are, in many contexts, constitutive of them (Douglas, 2024). In Nigeria specifically, a rich body of scholarship has examined the political entanglements of both Islam and Christianity, often focusing on how religious identity shapes electoral behaviour, inter-communal relations, and state legitimacy (Katu, 2023). However, much of this literature has attended primarily to elite-level religious politics, leaving under-examined the ways in which ordinary religious participation, particularly among youth, shapes political subjectivity and civic behaviour at the grassroots.

Pentecostalism's political dimensions have attracted particular scholarly attention. Orogun, & Pillay (2021) have argued that African Pentecostalism is characterised by a paradoxical politics: whilst it critiques corruption and moral failure in public life, it simultaneously produces cultures of submission to anointed leaders that can undermine democratic accountability. This tension is especially acute in Nigeria, where Pentecostal pastors exercise enormous social authority and where the prosperity gospel has created powerful incentives for both loyalty to church

leadership and engagement with political patrons who can deliver material resources (Smith, 2021). Young people embedded in such environments are exposed to complex and sometimes contradictory political messages that simultaneously affirm civic virtue and reinforce hierarchical deference.

This epistemic complexity is further mediated by the algorithmic architectures of digital platforms, which Oyebanji, Oyunwola, and Ogunbiyi (2026) argue tend to amplify content that aligns with users' pre-existing ideological commitments. In the Nigerian Pentecostal context, this means that young believers encountering political content through religious digital networks may experience a form of algorithmic reinforcement, wherein prophetic pronouncements and partisan narratives circulate within epistemic enclaves that discourage critical scrutiny. Without intentional frameworks for verifying civic information, such digitally mediated religious socialisation risks producing political subjects who are highly mobilised yet insufficiently equipped for deliberative democratic engagement (Oyebanji et al., 2026).

The political socialisation literature provides useful conceptual tools for understanding how institutions shape political attitudes and behaviours over time (Touseef, Khan, Ali, Abbas & Raza, 2023). Churches, as primary social institutions, perform important socialising functions: they transmit values, model civic norms, and provide organisational templates for collective action. Pentecostal churches in Nigeria are particularly effective in this respect because they occupy so much of young people's social time and because they offer a sense of belonging and purpose that secular institutions have largely failed to provide (Novak. et al, 2024). The question, however, is whether the civic dispositions cultivated within Pentecostal settings translate into substantive political engagement, or whether they remain bounded within the church community itself.

This institutional entanglement extends beyond spiritual formation to encompass tangible welfare provision. Oyebanji (2025), examining the interplay between religion and healthcare in Nigeria, demonstrates that faith-based organisations frequently operate clinics, counselling services, and emergency relief programmes that compensate for infrastructural deficits. For young Nigerians, such entanglements mean that religious participation is rarely confined to the soteriological realm; rather, it constitutes a primary site of socialisation into norms of reciprocity, collective responsibility, and community governance. However, as Oyebanji cautions, when religious institutions become de facto providers of public goods, they may inadvertently reinforce clientelistic relationships that undermine demands for state accountability a dynamic with significant implications for how Pentecostal youth conceptualise their civic obligations.

Recent scholarship has begun to address this question more directly. Ovbiebo

(2021). has documented how Pentecostal youth ministries in Lagos and Abuja have increasingly incorporated civic education into their programming, responding to growing youth frustration with governance failures. This development, which accelerated following the #EndSARS protests of 2020, suggests that Pentecostalism's relationship to youth political engagement is dynamic rather than static, evolving in response to shifting sociopolitical conditions. Yet, as Hoek, (2024) cautions, such civic turns within Pentecostal institutions must be read critically, as they do not necessarily displace the underlying theology of divine sovereignty that can function to depoliticise suffering and inequality by attributing them to spiritual rather than structural causes.

Research Objective

The Objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the ways by which Pentecostal churches in Nigeria function as spaces of political socialisation for young people
2. To examine how prophetic authority within Pentecostal settings influence the political choices and voting behaviour of Nigerian youth
3. To examine the extent at which prosperity theology promote or inhibit civic engagement and collective political action among Pentecostal youth in Nigeria
4. To examine how digital media and Pentecostal online networks shape the political culture and participation of young Nigerians
5. To examine the key tensions between Pentecostal religious authority and the requirements of democratic culture among Nigerian youth

Research Questions

This article is guided by the following research questions:

1. In what ways do Pentecostal churches in Nigeria function as spaces of political socialisation for young people?
2. How does prophetic authority within Pentecostal settings influence the political choices and voting behaviour of Nigerian youth?
3. To what extent does prosperity theology promote or inhibit civic engagement and collective political action among Pentecostal youth in Nigeria?
4. How do digital media and Pentecostal online networks shape the political culture and participation of young Nigerians?
5. What are the key tensions between Pentecostal religious authority and the requirements of democratic culture among Nigerian youth?

Theoretical Framework

This article draws on two principal theoretical traditions to analyse the relationship

between Pentecostalism and youth political engagement in Nigeria. The first is Antonio Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual, which refers to those figures who emerge from within a social group and who articulate its interests and worldviews in the broader social and political sphere (Getman et al, 2021). In the Nigerian Pentecostal context, charismatic pastors frequently function as organic intellectuals for the urban poor and the aspiring lower-middle class, providing frameworks of meaning, moral authority, and, increasingly, political direction. Understanding pastors in this way illuminates how Pentecostal institutions can serve as vehicles for political consciousness formation, even when their explicit theological discourse is ostensibly apolitical.

The second theoretical resource is Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, particularly his concepts of religious capital and symbolic power (Grenfell, 2009). In Bourdieu's framework, the religious field is a structured space of competition over the legitimate definition of religious goods, and those who accumulate religious capital including knowledge, institutional position, and the authority to pronounce on spiritual matters acquire symbolic power that extends beyond the strictly religious domain. In the Nigerian context, Pentecostal pastors command enormous stocks of symbolic capital, which they deploy not only in spiritual matters but also in relation to political candidates, policy debates, and civic norms. Young people who inhabit Pentecostal social worlds are thus exposed to a distinctive form of political communication that is mediated through religious authority and legitimated by claims to divine revelation.

Together, these frameworks suggest that Pentecostalism's political effects on Nigerian youth are neither simply ideological nor merely institutional, but are produced at the intersection of symbolic authority, social belonging, and theological meaning-making. This perspective guards against both an overly rationalist account that treats young people as autonomous political actors unaffected by their religious environments and a deterministic account that treats Pentecostal ideology as straightforwardly shaping political behaviour. Instead, it opens space for an analysis that attends to the creative, contested, and sometimes subversive ways in which young Nigerians navigate the political claims made upon them by their religious communities.

Pentecostalism as a Site of Youth Political Socialisation

The Church as a Civic Institution

Pentecostal churches in Nigeria function as multifaceted institutions that extend well beyond their strictly spiritual mandates. In many urban and peri-urban communities, they provide social services, educational opportunities, economic networks, and emotional support that state institutions have comprehensively failed

to deliver. For young Nigerians in particular, the church represents one of the few functioning civic spaces in which they exercise leadership, develop organisational skills, and encounter norms of accountability and collective decision-making (Nwankwo, Gbadamosi & Ojo, 2012). Youth departments within major Pentecostal denominations frequently organise leadership training programmes, public speaking competitions, community outreach projects, and, increasingly, voter registration drives. These activities cultivate civic competencies that can, under certain conditions, translate into political engagement beyond the church walls.

The #EndSARS protests of October 2020 provided a vivid, if complex, illustration of this dynamic. Whilst the protests were largely secular in their immediate organisation, a significant proportion of young participants were drawn from Pentecostal communities, and many reported that their experience of church-based leadership and collective action had equipped them with the practical and psychological resources necessary for street-level political mobilisation (Udenze, 2024). Several Pentecostal youth leaders assumed visible roles in the protests, and some churches provided logistical support and spiritual framing for demonstrators. This episode suggests that Pentecostal socialisation, even when not explicitly political, can produce young people with the capacity and the motivation to engage in transformative political action.

However, the relationship between church-based civic development and formal political participation is neither linear nor guaranteed. Whilst some Pentecostal youth acquire civic dispositions that translate into voting, activism, or community organising, others remain primarily oriented toward intra-church forms of civic life, regarding formal politics as irredeemably corrupt and as a domain incompatible with sincere Christian commitment (Pettus-Hargrove, 2003). This latter disposition is reinforced by a strand of Pentecostal theology that frames the world of politics as inherently fallen and as a distraction from the pursuit of spiritual transformation. The extent to which any given young person moves from church-based civic engagement to broader political participation thus depends on a complex interaction between theological formation, institutional culture, and individual biography.

The ambivalence of religious authority in shaping civic dispositions is further illuminated by research on religious leaders' peacebuilding roles. Oyebanji and Olayinka (2024) document instances wherein clergy in Southwest Nigeria have successfully mediated inter-communal tensions, leveraging their moral capital to foster dialogue and restraint. Yet the same institutional authority that enables peacebuilding can, in electoral contexts, consolidate hierarchical decision-making that marginalises lay voices. This duality suggests that prophetic influence is neither inherently democratising nor authoritarian; rather, its political valence depends on whether religious leaders cultivate spaces for critical discernment or demand uncritical allegiance. For young Pentecostals, exposure to such ambivalent models

of authority may shape their expectations of political leadership, privileging charismatic certainty over procedural accountability.

Prophetic Authority and Electoral Politics

One of the most distinctive ways in which Pentecostalism shapes youth political engagement in Nigeria is through the exercise of prophetic authority over electoral politics. Nigerian Pentecostal pastors regularly issue prophecies about political events, endorse or denounce candidates, and frame electoral outcomes in terms of divine will (Patrick et al. 2025). These prophetic interventions carry enormous weight among believers, particularly younger and less politically experienced congregants, who may lack independent frameworks for evaluating political claims and who are socialised to trust the spiritual discernment of their pastors. The effect is a distinctive form of political guidance that is legitimated not by deliberative reasoning but by claims to supernatural authority.

The consequences of this prophetic politics are ambivalent. On the one hand, pastoral endorsements can mobilise young people to vote, thereby increasing their formal political participation. Several major Pentecostal leaders explicitly encouraged youth voter registration in the lead-up to the 2023 general elections, framing civic participation as a Christian obligation and linking it to the broader project of national renewal (Thoma, 2024). On the other hand, prophetic politics can also suppress independent political reasoning, creating what scholars of religious authority have called "political ventriloquism," in which the political views of charismatic leaders are mediated through religious language in ways that foreclose critique and dissent (Otubanjo & Balogun, 2025). Young people subjected to intense prophetic authority may end up participating in elections as extensions of their pastors' political will rather than as autonomous democratic agents.

The 2023 presidential election offered a compelling case study of these dynamics. The emergence of Peter Obi, a Catholic candidate, as a major contender generated significant excitement among Christian youth, and Pentecostal networks played a notable role in mobilising the "Obidient" movement, which drew heavily on social media-savvy young urban Christians (Okeke, 2026). Yet analysis of this mobilisation must be careful not to reduce it to purely religious motivation: youth disenchantment with established parties, economic frustration, and a broader desire for generational change were at least as significant as faith-based solidarity. What the election did reveal, however, was that Pentecostal networks constitute significant political infrastructure that can be activated rapidly under the right conditions, and that young Christians are not passive recipients of pastoral political guidance but active interpreters and negotiators of religious political messages.

Emerging scholarship on religion and digital culture further complicates this

picture. Oyebanji, Oyunwola, Segun, and Ogunbiyi (2025) demonstrate that artificial intelligence and algorithmic curation are increasingly shaping how Christian youth in Nigeria encounter and interpret religious content, with implications for identity formation and moral reasoning. When political messages are disseminated through these same digitally mediated religious networks, young believers may struggle to distinguish between prophetic insight and partisan persuasion, particularly when content is personalised to affirm pre-existing theological commitments. This technological mediation of religious-political socialisation represents an underexplored dimension of Pentecostalism's influence on youth civic engagement, warranting greater scholarly attention as digital platforms continue to restructure the public sphere in Nigeria.

Prosperity Theology, Political Aspiration, and Civic Quietism

The prosperity gospel, or what Barron, (2022) has termed "the theology of success," represents perhaps the most complex theological force shaping Pentecostal youth political engagement in Nigeria. Prosperity theology holds that material blessing is the will of God for the faithful, and that poverty, failure, and social marginalisation are consequences of insufficient faith or spiritual contamination (Barron, 2022). This theology has enormous appeal to young Nigerians who face chronic unemployment, economic exclusion, and social immobility, as it offers a framework for understanding and overcoming disadvantage that locates agency primarily in the spiritual domain.

The political implications of prosperity theology are profound and largely conservative. By attributing economic hardship to spiritual deficiency rather than structural inequality, it tends to individualise problems that are collective and systemic, thereby discouraging the kinds of solidarity and collective action on which effective political mobilisation depends (Williams, 2022). Furthermore, by holding out the promise of individual advancement through spiritual discipline, it can cultivate in young people a disposition of patient aspiration that is more compatible with political quietism than with democratic contestation. The young Pentecostal who believes that prayer and tithing will unlock divine favour has less incentive to engage in the laborious and often unrewarding work of political organising than one who has a structural analysis of her condition.

Yet it would be reductive to argue that prosperity theology straightforwardly depoliticises Pentecostal youth. Gaskins, (2024). has noted that prosperity theology also generates a distinctive form of aspirational citizenship: a sense that young Nigerians deserve better governance, better public services, and better economic opportunities, and that they have a divine right to demand these things. This aspirational dimension can fuel political discontent and motivate civic engagement, particularly when fused with charismatic leadership that channels personal ambition into collective political projects. The relationship between prosperity theology and

political engagement is thus itself ambivalent, capable of producing both quiescence and mobilisation depending on how it is theologically framed and institutionally organised.

This theological tendency to spiritualise socio-economic adversity finds parallel expression in broader Nigerian religious discourse. Oyebanji and Olayinka (2024), in their religio-philosophical appraisal of banditry, note that attributing systemic violence to demonic forces or individual moral failure can obscure the institutional and historical conditions that enable such crises. Similarly, Oyebanji's (2025) analysis of the Ogunpa floods as both natural and moral evil underscores how theodical narratives, while offering existential comfort, may inadvertently legitimise political inaction by framing suffering as divinely ordained rather than politically contingent. When applied to political economy, these interpretive frameworks risk displacing collective responsibility onto spiritual remediation, thereby attenuating the impetus for structural reform a dynamic with profound implications for how prosperity theology shapes Pentecostal youth political engagement.

Digital Media, Pentecostalism, and Youth Political Culture

Any adequate account of Pentecostalism's influence on youth political engagement in Nigeria must attend to the digital media ecosystem within which contemporary Pentecostal culture is embedded. Nigerian Pentecostal churches are amongst the most digitally sophisticated religious institutions in Africa, maintaining extensive presences on YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X, and deploying digital platforms to extend their reach to young Nigerians who may not attend physical services regularly (Agu et al, 2024). This digital presence creates new modalities of religious socialisation and political communication that operate partly independently of the physical church community.

The #EndSARS protests demonstrated the potential for Pentecostal digital networks to be repurposed for political mobilisation. Whilst these networks were built primarily around religious content sermons, testimonies, worship music, they also served as channels for political information, organisational coordination, and solidarity formation during the protests (Akin-Adetoro, 2021). Young Pentecostals who were embedded in these digital communities found themselves exposed to political content alongside religious content, blurring the boundaries between spiritual and civic life in ways that could lower the barriers to political participation. At the same time, digital Pentecostal culture also circulates political misinformation, conspiracy theories dressed in prophetic language, and partisan propaganda authorised by pastoral endorsement, all of which complicate the democratic quality of the political engagement it facilitates.

Navigating this tension requires intentional pedagogical strategies within religious communities. Olayinka, Oyebanji, Thomas, and Oluwole (2025) argue that

faith communities engaging with emerging technologies must adopt co-design methodologies that empower lay members to participate in ethical deliberation, rather than deferring exclusively to clerical expertise. Translated to the political sphere, this suggests that Pentecostal churches could foster democratic culture by creating structured opportunities for youth to interrogate pastoral political guidance, debate policy alternatives, and develop independent civic judgements. Such internal deliberative practices would not only enhance the political autonomy of young congregants but also model the pluralistic, evidence-based reasoning that democratic citizenship demands. Without such intentional cultivation, however, the civic competencies acquired within Pentecostal settings may remain subordinated to hierarchical authority, limiting their transformative potential in the broader political arena.

Critical Tensions and Contradictions

The foregoing analysis reveals several fundamental tensions within Pentecostalism's relationship to youth political engagement in Nigeria. The first is the tension between civic empowerment and spiritual dependency. Pentecostal churches develop civic competencies in young people, but they do so within institutional structures of charismatic authority that can undermine the autonomous political reasoning on which democratic participation depends. The young person who has learnt to organise, speak publicly, and lead within a Pentecostal community may still defer to pastoral authority when it comes to making political judgements, thereby combining civic capacity with political heteronomy.

The second tension is between prophetic politics and democratic deliberation. Pentecostal culture valorises revelation over reason, divine direction over deliberative consensus, and spiritual certainty over political ambiguity. These epistemological dispositions sit uneasily with the demands of democratic culture, which requires citizens capable of tolerating uncertainty, engaging with competing perspectives, and revising their views in response to evidence and argument (Jónsson & Garces, 2021). When Pentecostal youth bring these dispositions into the political sphere, they may participate in elections without necessarily participating in the broader democratic culture of accountability, transparency, and pluralism.

The third tension concerns class and geography. Pentecostalism's political effects are not uniform across the Nigerian youth population but are shaped by significant inequalities of class, education, and urban-rural location. Educated, urban, middle-class Pentecostal youth are more likely than their rural or working-class counterparts to develop sophisticated engagements with formal political processes, in part because they possess the social and cultural capital to translate church-based civic competencies into effective political action (Oyebanji & Oyunwola, 2024). The risk is that scholarly accounts of Pentecostal youth political engagement, which

necessarily draw on research conducted primarily in urban centres, may overstate its democratic potential by attending to the experiences of a relatively privileged segment of the Pentecostal youth population.

This methodological caution aligns with broader calls for participatory research methodologies that centremarginalised voices. Olayinka et al. (2025) emphasise that co-design approaches, which actively involve community members in shaping research questions and interventions, are essential for producing ethically robust and contextually grounded scholarship. Applied to the study of Pentecostal youth political engagement, such methodologies would require researchers to move beyond urban, educated, middle-class samples and to engage deliberately with rural, working-class, and female Pentecostal youth whose political experiences may differ significantly from those documented in existing literature. Only through such inclusive scholarly practices can the field develop a sufficiently nuanced understanding of Pentecostalism's heterogeneous political effects across Nigeria's diverse youth population.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Pentecostalism neither simply mobilises nor demobilises Nigerian youth politically, its effects are contradictory. Churches build civic skills while limiting independent political thought; prosperity theology fuels both discontent and passivity; prophetic authority drives voter turnout while suppressing democratic reasoning; and digital networks spread both political awareness and misinformation. For democracy to benefit from Pentecostal influence, churches must create space for young people's political autonomy, encourage internal debate, and critically reassess how prosperity theology can mask structural inequality. Scholars are also reminded that Pentecostalism is not monolithic theology, class, and pastoral style produce very different political outcomes among youth, and longitudinal, community-specific research would yield far deeper insight. Ultimately, how Pentecostal institutions respond to growing youth demands for accountability will significantly shape the future of Nigerian democracy.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this article, the following recommendations are offered to relevant stakeholders:

1. Pentecostal church leaders should deliberately create space within their communities for young people to develop independent political thinking.
2. Pentecostal denominations should formally incorporate civic education into their youth ministry programmes.
3. Pentecostal theologians and church leaders should engage critically with the

prosperity gospel and its political consequences.

4. Pentecostal churches should use their digital platforms more responsibly by promoting verified civic information and discouraging the spread of political misinformation.
5. Civil society organisations and electoral bodies such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should build partnerships with Pentecostal churches to leverage their reach among youth.

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