

A Policy and Institutional Agenda for Engaging Generation Z Voters in Nigeria's Southeast

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Abstract: Empirical findings on the drivers of Generation Z candidate choice carry limited public value unless they are translated into concrete guidance for the institutions responsible for electoral administration, civic education, and democratic legitimacy. This article performs that translation for Nigeria's Southeast geopolitical zone, drawing on a structural equation model of 364 Generation Z voters that identified party orientation, campaign credibility, candidate reputation, and identity-based moderators as the decisive levers of youth political choice, and on institutional-trust theory's distinction between regime principles, regime performance, and regime institutions. It argues that three institutional actors carry the primary responsibility for translating these findings into practice: electoral management bodies and civic-education institutions, which must intensify issue-based voter education targeted specifically at digitally native cohorts; political parties, whose internal architecture and candidate-vetting processes remain oriented toward visibility rather than accountability; and researchers and pollsters, whose pre-election models continue to rely on simple voting-intention measures that cannot anticipate the scale of identity-based swing this study documents. The article sets out a concrete institutional agenda across these three actors, addresses the standing risk that identity-based political mobilisation poses to democratic consolidation in plural societies, and situates Nigeria's experience within the wider, still geographically concentrated, international literature on Generation Z political behaviour.

Keywords: Electoral governance; civic education; institutional trust; political party reform; Generation Z; democratic consolidation; Nigeria

1. Introduction: Why Findings Need Institutions

A well-designed empirical study of voter behaviour can identify, with some precision, what actually moves an electorate. It cannot, on its own, change how that electorate is engaged. That translation from finding to institutional practice depends on actors external to the research process: electoral management bodies, political parties, civic-education organisations, and the research and polling community itself. This article undertakes that translation for a specific body of findings: a structural equation model of 364 Generation Z voters in Nigeria's Southeast geopolitical zone, which identified party orientation, campaign credibility, and candidate reputation as the strongest

drivers of choice under ordinary conditions, and religious and ethnic identity as a moderating force capable of overriding nearly all of them.

The argument proceeds in four parts. Section 2 summarises the empirical findings in policy-relevant terms, without the statistical apparatus of the companion empirical articles. Section 3 situates those findings within institutional-trust theory, to explain why they matter for democratic legitimacy and not merely campaign strategy. Section 4 sets out a concrete institutional agenda across three classes of actor. Section 5 addresses the risks and limits of that agenda, and Section 6 concludes with directions for further comparative work.

2. What the Evidence Shows, in Policy Terms

2.1 What Moves Generation Z Voters

Under ordinary campaign conditions, six factors measurably shape Generation Z candidate choice in the Southeast zone: whether a party demonstrably orients itself toward voters rather than merely toward visibility; sustained social media engagement; continuous prior engagement with the party between election cycles; a candidate's perceived reputation; ideological positioning; and candidate personality. Two factors that campaigns commonly treat as central; party name recognition and generic engagement metrics such as likes and shares show no measurable effect at all. Most strikingly, campaign promises, the single most resource-intensive element of most campaigns, carry substantial rhetorical weight with voters but do not translate into confirmed electoral effect under ordinary conditions, a pattern consistent with an electorate that pays close attention to promises while discounting their reliability.

2.2 What Happens Under Identity Pressure

Once religious affiliation and ethnic background are accounted for, this picture changes sharply. Every one of the six factors identified above loses its measurable effect. The only factor that remains reliably predictive of choice, across every combination of religious and ethnic identity tested, is the credibility of campaign promises, the one input voters can, in principle, verify without first resolving a question of identity. This indicates that religious and ethnic identity in the Southeast zone are not simply additional considerations alongside performance and reputation; where activated, they displace those considerations almost entirely.

3. Why This Matters for Institutions, Not Only Campaigns

Institutional-trust scholarship distinguishes three components of a citizen's political support: regime principles (belief in democracy itself as the appropriate form of government), regime performance (confidence that government institutions act in the interest of citizens), and regime institutions (confidence in the specific apparatus of government like the electoral commission, the courts, the police, and the bureaucracy). Political parties occupy a distinctive position in this structure: a citizen's satisfaction with a party they identify with shapes broader system support, and that satisfaction

depends substantially on whether the party is seen to deliver on the priorities it identified during the campaign. A pattern in which voters attend closely to campaign promises but do not trust them enough for those promises to shape their choice — except under identity pressure, where a different dynamic dominates entirely — describes an electorate whose relationship to regime performance is already under strain, independent of the outcome of any single election.

This reframes the empirical findings from a campaign-strategy question into an institutional-legitimacy question. If a large and growing share of the electorate is choosing candidates on the basis of religious or ethnic identity because performance-based signals have become unreliable, that pattern has consequences for regime-performance trust that extend well beyond any single election cycle, and beyond what political parties acting alone can be expected to address.

4. An Institutional Agenda

4.1 Electoral Management Bodies and Civic-Education Institutions

Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and civic-education organisations working with it are best positioned to intervene directly on the credibility problem this study documents. Three actions follow from the evidence. First, issue-based voter education targeted specifically at Generation Z and delivered through the digital channels this cohort already uses rather than legacy formats — should be intensified with the explicit goal of strengthening voters' capacity to evaluate candidates on verifiable performance criteria rather than identity or rhetoric alone. Second, mechanisms for candidates and parties to publish verifiable, trackable manifesto commitments, and for those commitments to be checked against subsequent performance, would directly address the promise-credibility gap this study identifies as the central obstacle to performance-based voting. Third, given the scale of the identity-based override documented in this study, civic-education content should explicitly address the mechanics of identity-based political mobilisation, not merely encourage general civic participation, since generic engagement messaging is unlikely to counteract an effect this large.

4.2 Political Parties

Parties bear direct responsibility for two of the findings reported here: the weak, statistically unconfirmed effect of campaign promises, and the demonstrated strength of voter-oriented engagement as a predictor of choice. Three institutional reforms follow. First, parties should build durable, ward-level voter engagement infrastructure that operates continuously between election cycles, rather than campaign-season mobilisation alone, consistent with the finding that prior experience with the party is a significant, positive predictor of Generation Z choice. Second, candidate selection processes should incorporate structured reputation and integrity screening prior to candidate adoption, given the significant role of perceived candidate reputation in this

study's model. Third, parties seeking cross-cutting appeal in religiously or ethnically plural constituencies should recognise that, on this evidence, only verifiable and credible commitments retain predictive power once identity is activated — meaning that investment in demonstrable, trackable delivery is not merely good governance but a strategically necessary response to the limits of identity-based mobilisation.

4.3 Researchers, Pollsters, and Civil Society

Pre-election polling in Nigeria, as elsewhere, continues to rely predominantly on simple voting-intention questions that cannot anticipate the scale of identity-based swing this study documents. Incorporating attitude and identity-moderation measures into polling instruments — rather than intention alone — would materially improve the accuracy of pre-election forecasting in plural constituencies. Civil society organisations and election-monitoring bodies focused on youth political behaviour should likewise treat identity-based mobilisation as a distinct, measurable phenomenon requiring its own monitoring indicators, rather than an unmeasured background condition.

Institutional actor	Primary responsibility arising from the evidence	Concrete action
Electoral management bodies (e.g., INEC) & civic-education NGOs	Strengthen issue-based evaluation capacity among Gen Z voters	Digitally native, issue-based civic education; verifiable/trackable manifesto commitment mechanisms; explicit identity-mobilisation literacy content
Political parties	Close the promise-credibility gap; build durable voter orientation	Continuous ward-level engagement; infrastructure; structured candidate reputation and integrity screening; investment in trackable, verifiable delivery commitments
Candidates	Build reputation as a long-horizon asset, not a campaign-season tactic	Early and sustained reputation management; authentic, relatable personal branding
Researchers & pollsters	Improve pre-election forecasting accuracy in plural constituencies	Incorporate attitude and identity-moderation measures into polling instruments, not intention alone
Civil society & election monitors	Track identity-based mobilisation as a distinct phenomenon	Develop specific monitoring indicators for identity-based swing rather than treating it as unmeasured background noise

Table 1. Institutional agenda arising from the empirical findings, by actor, responsibility, and concrete action.

5. Risks and Limits of This Agenda

Three limits temper this agenda. First, civic education and verification mechanisms can strengthen the reliability of performance-based signals, but cannot by themselves neutralise identity-based mobilisation where political actors have a direct incentive to activate it; institutional reform on the supply side (parties, candidates) matters as much as demand-side education. Second, the findings reported here are specific to a single geopolitical zone with a particular religious and ethnic composition, and the scale of identity override documented should not be assumed to generalise in magnitude to zones with different identity compositions without direct comparative testing. Third, mechanisms for verifying campaign promises require institutional capacity — a functioning tracking and reporting infrastructure — that is itself a governance achievement rather than a simple administrative fix, and building it is a multi-year institutional project rather than a pre-election intervention.

6. Conclusion and Directions for Comparative Work

This article has translated a specific empirical finding — that Generation Z voters in Nigeria's Southeast respond to verifiable credibility more reliably than to promise volume, brand recognition, or, under ordinary conditions, even identity itself, but that identity can override nearly everything else where it is activated — into a concrete institutional agenda for electoral bodies, parties, and the research community. Comparative replication in other Nigerian geopolitical zones, and in other plural emerging democracies with Generation Z electorates of comparable scale, would substantially strengthen the evidentiary base for the specific institutional interventions proposed here, and would help clarify whether the scale of identity override documented in this study is a feature of the Southeast zone specifically or of a broader pattern in religiously and ethnically plural young democracies.

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