

**VOTING AS VOCATION? CHRISTIAN ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR
ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION AND THE 2023 ‘OBIDIENT’ MOVEMENT IN
NIGERIA**

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Abstract

The 2023 Nigerian general elections produced a sociologically remarkable phenomenon: the mass mobilisation of predominantly young Christian voters around the Labour Party candidacy of Peter Obi, a Roman Catholic layman whose supporters deployed explicitly theological language, stewardship, integrity, and servant leadership to frame their political choices. Employing a qualitative theological-ethical analysis and normative discourse examination, this study investigates this study examines the theological frameworks Nigerian Christians invoke to justify or critique electoral participation, analysing how Christian ethical discourse functioned within the ‘Obidient’ movement’s political imagination. Drawing on Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian realism, John Howard Yoder’s politics of Jesus, and African political theology as developed by Bénézet Bujo and Emmanuel Katongole, the article argues that the 2023 electoral cycle represents a discernible, if contested, shift in how Nigerian Christian publics conceptualise the relationship between faith and democratic citizenship. It further contends that denominational identity, generational cleavages, and ethnic affinities continue to complicate any straightforward account of a unified Christian political ethic in Nigeria, even as the Obidient movement gestured towards a post-ethnic, theologically grounded democratic imagination. The study concludes that while youth-driven, faith-informed political mobilisation holds significant potential to reframe Nigerian democratic participation around moral accountability and the common good, its long-term impact remains constrained by entrenched ethnic loyalties, denominational fragmentation, and clerical institutionalism. Sustainable democratic transformation, therefore, requires intentional theological formation, cross-ethnic civic education, and a deliberate decoupling of Christian witness from partisan patronage.

Keywords: Christian ethics, electoral participation, Nigeria, Obidient movement, African political theology, Christian realism, denominationalism, democracy

1. Introduction

Religion and politics in Nigeria have never occupied neatly separate domains. Since the colonial period, Christian institutions mission schools, hospitals, printing presses served simultaneously as sites of evangelisation and civic formation (Rueda, 2023) (Oyebanji, 2025).

The post-independence era deepened rather than dissolved this entanglement, as successive political crises forced Nigerian churches to take positions on public life that ranged from quietist accommodation to prophetic confrontation. The 2023 general elections, however, introduced a qualitatively distinctive element into this longstanding relationship: the emergence of a decentralised, digitally mediated movement in which young Christian voters particularly from the South-East and South-West geopolitical zones constructed a political theology in real time, deploying the language of Christian ethics to legitimise their electoral preferences and delegitimise those of their interlocutors.

The candidacy of Peter Obi of the Labour Party became the catalyst for this development. A practising Catholic businessman and former Governor of Anambra State, Obi was framed by his supporters not merely as a competent administrator but as a morally exemplary public servant whose personal piety and documented frugality embodied the Christian virtues of stewardship and accountability (Onebunne, 2021). His supporters, popularly designated ‘Obidients’, appropriated theological categories with a facility that surprised many observers, suggesting that the boundary between the sacred and the political had become considerably more porous for this demographic than conventional wisdom had assumed.

This article interrogates that phenomenon through the lens of Christian ethics and political theology. It asks what theological frameworks Nigerian Christians deploy in electoral contexts, how Christian ethical language functioned within the Obidient movement’s discourse, how denominational identity shaped political behaviour, and how ethnicity mediated the relationship between Christian conviction and electoral choice. In pursuing these questions, it contributes to two overlapping scholarly conversations: the empirical sociology of religion and politics in sub-Saharan Africa and the theoretical development of African political theology as a distinctive intellectual tradition. To address these questions, this article follows a structured analytical procedure. Section 2 outlines the specific research objectives and guiding questions that frame the inquiry. Section 3 establishes the theoretical framework, critically engaging Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian realism, John Howard Yoder’s discipleship politics, and contemporary African political theology. Section 4 provides a theological and ethical reading of the 2023 election, analysing the Obidient movement’s moral grammar, denominational variations in political behaviour, and the persistent mediating role of ethnicity. Section 5 examines the complex dynamics of clerical engagement, highlighting the tension between prophetic duty and institutional self-interest in Nigeria’s political economy. Section 6 synthesises these findings to articulate the contours of an emerging African Christian democratic ethic. The article concludes with a summary of key insights and practical recommendations for churches, religious leaders, and Christian youth to foster responsible, issue-based political participation in Nigeria.

2. Research Objectives

The following are the objectives of the study:

- i. To examine how Nigerian Christians use biblical and ethical teachings to guide their voting decisions.
- ii. To analyse how Christian ethical ideas like stewardship, integrity, and servant leadership influenced the Obidient movement.
- iii. To investigate how denominational differences affect political participation among Christians in Nigeria.
- iv. To explore the role of ethnicity in shaping Christian voting behaviour during the 2023 elections.
- v. To assess how Christian theology can contribute to responsible democratic participation in Nigeria.

3. Research Questions

Based on the objectives of the study stated above, below are the research questions formulated to guide the focus of this study:

- i. What Christian ethical principles influence voting behaviour among Nigerian Christians?
- ii. How did the Obidient movement use Christian language and values in political mobilisation?
- iii. In what ways do denominational differences shape political choices among Christians?
- iv. How does ethnicity affect the relationship between Christian belief and electoral decisions?
- v. What role can Christian theology play in promoting good governance and democratic responsibility?

4. Theoretical Framework: Between Realism, Discipleship, and Hope

Any attempt to map Christian ethical frameworks onto Nigerian electoral behaviour must reckon with the diversity of the Christian tradition's own resources for political engagement. Three theoretical currents are particularly germane.

4.1 Niebuhr's Christian Realism

Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism, developed principally in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941) and *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944), offers a framework that takes seriously both the moral aspirations of political actors and the structural limitations imposed by human sinfulness. For Niebuhr, democratic politics is not the Kingdom of God; it is, rather, the least corruptible arrangement available to fallen human beings for balancing

competing interests and restraining the inevitable abuses of power (Castellin, 2021). The implications for electoral participation are significant: voting is not a sacramental act of world transformation but a prudential exercise in damage limitation, a way of tilting the balance of power towards those less likely to abuse it.

Niebuhr's framework has considerable explanatory purchase in the Nigerian context. The pragmatic dimension of much Nigerian Christian political discourse, the insistence on examining a candidate's track record, scrutinising their financial conduct, assessing their capacity for governance, reflects something of this Niebuhrian disposition, even when its practitioners have never encountered his work directly. The Obidient movement's emphasis on Peter Obi's documented frugality as Governor of Anambra State, his reputed refusal to draw foreign allowances and his investment of the state's Excess Crude Account savings exemplifies this prudential calculus (Amaechi & Oguji, 2024). What is being evaluated is not sainthood but competence constrained by character.

Yet Christian realism has its critics, most notably from those who argue that its accommodation to existing power structures renders it insufficiently prophetic. This critique finds its most sustained expression in Yoder's political theology.

4.2 Yoder's Politics of Jesus

John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* (1972) represents a fundamental challenge to the Niebuhrian settlement. For Yoder, the church does not exist primarily to make the world's political arrangements marginally more humane; it exists as an alternative community whose practices of reconciliation, enemy love, and radical equality constitute a standing political critique of the world's arrangements (Villegas, 2021). On this reading, the relevant political question is not which candidate will best manage the existing system but whether the church is embodying, in its own corporate life, the social values it wishes to see instantiated in the broader society.

Yoder's framework complicates a straightforward endorsement of electoral participation. If the church's primary political witness is its own communal life, then the enthusiasm with which some Nigerian Christians threw themselves into the Obidient movement, treating the election as a moment of near-eschatological significance, might be read as a displacement of proper theological energy from ecclesial formation to electoral politics. Several Nigerian Pentecostal leaders who maintained distance from the Obi campaign arguably operated within something like a Yoderian logic, insisting that the church's transformation of individuals, rather than its mobilisation of voters, was the appropriate mode of Christian political engagement (Kuperus & Asante, 2021).

4.3 African Political Theology: Bujo, Katongole, and Moltmann

If Niebuhr and Yoder represent two poles of an essentially North Atlantic theological debate, the project of African political theology introduces contextually specific resources that neither

pole adequately provides. Bénézet Bujo's work insists that African Christian ethics must be grounded in the communitarian ontology of the palaver tradition, the deliberative, consensus-building discourse of African village governance rather than in imported individualist frameworks (Maina, 2016). For Bujo, authentic political engagement is not the act of an autonomous liberal individual casting a secret ballot but the expression of a community's collective discernment about the common good.

Emmanuel Katongole pushes this argument further, contending that African Christianity must develop a theological imagination capable of interrupting the cycles of violence, patronage, and ethnic mobilisation that have characterised post-colonial African politics (Katongole, 2017). His concept of a 'new creation' politics rooted in baptismal identity rather than ethnic or partisan identity resonates with aspects of the Obidient movement's self-presentation, particularly its insistence on a post-ethnic, pan-Nigerian solidarity that transcended the conventional alignments of Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa-Fulani political blocs.

Jürgen Moltmann's political theology of hope, while not African in provenance, provides a further theoretical resource. For Moltmann, Christian political engagement is animated by an eschatological horizon, the promised transformation of creation that prevents both quietist withdrawal and uncritical accommodation to the existing order (Moltmann, 1993). The language of hope that permeated Obidient discourse, the hashtag #NotTooYoungToRun, and the insistence that a different Nigeria was possible suggest a structure of political feeling that Moltmann's framework illuminates particularly well, even if its practitioners would not have used his vocabulary.

5. The 2023 Election and the Obidient Movement: A Theological Reading

5.1 The Theological Grammar of the Movement

The Obidient movement did not produce systematic theology; it produced what might be called a popular theological grammar, a set of recurring ethical categories whose religious resonance was unmistakable, even when their deployment was informal and unsystematic. The most prominent of these categories were stewardship (*oikonomia*), integrity, and servant leadership (Oyebanji & Oyunwola, 2024).

Stewardship language was particularly pervasive. Supporters consistently framed the electoral choice as a question of which candidate had demonstrated faithful management of the resources entrusted to them (Campbell, Green, & Layman, 2011). Peter Obi's record in Anambra State, his reported savings of public funds, and his completion of infrastructure projects within budget were narrated not merely in technocratic terms but in explicitly moral ones: here was a man who had treated public office as a divine trust rather than a personal entitlement (Udeh, Okoye, & Obaze, 2018). This framework draws on a deep vein of Protestant and Catholic social thought, from the Reformed concept of earthly vocation to the Catholic principle of subsidiarity, even as Nigerian Christians adapted these resources to their own context without necessarily acknowledging their genealogy.

Integrity language served a related function, constituting a moral threshold that disqualified candidates regardless of their other attributes. The dominant narrative framing among Obidient Christians was that Nigeria's fundamental problem was not policy but character, that a nation governed by people of integrity would generate sound policy almost as a natural consequence. This is a recognisably virtue-ethical framework, one that privileges the inner formation of the political actor over the external design of institutions. Its theological roots in both the Protestant tradition's emphasis on regeneration and the Catholic tradition's emphasis on natural law virtue are discernible, even if its expression in social media hashtags and WhatsApp group discussions bore little resemblance to formal theological discourse.

5.2 Denominational Differentiation and Political Behaviour

The relationship between denominational identity and political behaviour in the 2023 election was considerably more nuanced than a simple Christian/Muslim binary would suggest. Nigerian Christianity is internally heterogeneous, comprising Roman Catholics, mainline Protestants (Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians), and a vast and rapidly growing Pentecostal/charismatic sector, and these denominational traditions brought different institutional cultures, social locations, and theological dispositions to the electoral moment.

Catholic support for Obi was substantially, though not exclusively, shaped by co-ethnic solidarity: as an Igbo Catholic, Obi commanded considerable loyalty from Catholic communities in the South-East, where the Church has historically played a central role in education, healthcare, and community formation (Nwaka, 2013). However, Catholic social teaching also provided a normative framework that supplemented ethnic solidarity. The principles of the common good, the preferential option for the poor, and the integral development of the human person are all central to Catholic Social Teaching as codified in documents from *Rerum Novarum* (1891) to *Laudato Si'* (2015), furnished a vocabulary for articulating what an Obi presidency might mean for Nigeria's structurally disadvantaged populations (Okiemute & Uwasomba, 2024).

Mainline Protestant support was more geographically and ethnically dispersed, reflecting these denominations' broader national reach. Anglican bishops in particular found themselves navigating complex institutional pressures: the Church of Nigeria's historical role as a national institution created obligations to speak for a constituency that crossed ethnic and partisan lines, while individual bishops' personal convictions frequently inclined them towards more explicit political engagement (Odeyemi, 2014). The result was a pattern of carefully qualified pastoral letters that acknowledged the importance of ethical voting without explicitly endorsing candidates, a characteristically Niebuhrian accommodation between prophetic impulse and institutional prudence.

The Pentecostal constituency presented the most complex picture. Nigeria's Pentecostal landscape is dominated by large ministries whose founding pastors wield enormous influence over their congregations' political attitudes. Several prominent Pentecostal leaders, including figures associated with the Redeemed Christian Church of God and Winners' Chapel,

maintained conspicuous silence on the Obi candidacy, some reportedly aligning with the APC candidate Bola Tinubu through networks of patronage and political connections (Omaren, 2025). This silence was itself politically legible: in the Nigerian context, where pastoral endorsement is a recognised form of political capital, the withholding of support constitutes a message. Younger Pentecostals, by contrast, frequently defied their pastors' implicit preferences, reasoning that their Christian conscience demanded a vote for demonstrated integrity over entrenched patronage, a generational fracture with potentially significant long-term implications for the political influence of Nigeria's megachurches.

This generational recalibration reflects broader shifts in youth spiritual formation, wherein digital media environments prompt a critical reassessment of traditional ecclesiastical authority in favour of autonomously negotiated ethical commitments (Oyebanji et al., 2025). Rather than mere electoral enthusiasm, young Obidient activism thus exemplifies a digitally mediated spirituality that privileges empirical accountability and moral consistency over institutional patronage. By decoupling doctrinal fidelity from political quietism, younger believers are forging a distinctively post-institutional Christian political consciousness.

5.3 Ethnicity as Mediating Variable

No honest account of the relationship between Christian ethics and the 2023 election can avoid the question of ethnicity. Nigeria's political culture has been structured, since independence, by the competition between its three major ethnic blocs, Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa-Fulani, and this structure exerted a persistent gravitational pull on Christian political behaviour even when the explicit discourse of the Obidient movement sought to transcend it (Nederman, 2024).

The uncomfortable reality is that support for Peter Obi was overwhelmingly concentrated in the South-East (Igbo homeland) and in the South-West among Yoruba voters whose primary motivation was opposition to Bola Tinubu rather than identification with Obi or the Labour Party. The Obidient movement's claim to post-ethnic universalism was thus partly aspirational and partly ideological, a sincere but incompletely realised attempt to construct a political identity that transcended the ethnic logic without fully escaping it (Agbim, Etumnu & Iredibia, 2023).

Ethnic solidarity in Christian voting behaviour cannot be divorced from the religio-cultural matrices that inform moral reasoning. Among Yoruba Christians, political preferences are frequently mediated by culturally embedded conceptions of communal obligation and ethical continuity, which operate alongside explicitly theological frameworks (Oyebanji et al., 2025). This cultural-theological intersection explains why segments of the South-West electorate aligned with the Labour Party through a moral calculus weighing regional equity, perceived marginalisation, and cultural self-determination. Ethnicity, therefore, functions not merely as a sociological variable but as a lived ethical paradigm negotiating Christian universalism and particularistic loyalty.

The theological resources deployed within the movement addressed this tension with varying degrees of success. Katongole's insistence on baptismal identity as the primary political identity of the Christian was invoked, explicitly or implicitly, by movement intellectuals who argued that Christian solidarity should override ethnic solidarity (Ngong, 2019). The ecumenical composition of Obidient WhatsApp groups, which, at their most idealistic, brought together Igbo Catholics, Yoruba Pentecostals, and Middle Belt Anglicans around a shared commitment to good governance, represented a real, if partial, instantiation of this aspiration. That it fell short of fully displacing ethnic calculation does not negate its significance as a normative experiment in Christian democratic imagination.

6. Prophetic Engagement and Institutional Self-Interest: The Clergy in Electoral Politics

Nigerian Christian leaders occupy a peculiar structural position in the country's political economy. On the one hand, the prophetic tradition mediated through the Old Testament, liberation theology, and specifically African theological resources demands that religious leaders speak truth to power, regardless of personal cost. On the other hand, Nigerian religious institutions are deeply embedded in networks of patronage, land allocation, building permits, and government recognition that create powerful incentives for accommodation (Agbato et al., 2025).

The 2023 election made this tension unusually visible. Several prominent clergy who had previously positioned themselves as critics of the Nigerian political establishment found, under the pressure of the election, that their critical posture had limits that corresponded, with some precision, to the boundaries of their ethnic loyalties and their institutional interests. Conversely, some figures whose ministries had historically been quietist found themselves impelled, by what they described as prophetic conviction, to speak with unusual directness about the moral stakes of the election.

Katongole's concept of a 'discipleship of lament', the willingness to name, without premature resolution, the suffering that political failure produces, proved more descriptively adequate to the actual behaviour of Nigerian Christian leaders than either a naïve prophetic triumphalism or a cynical account of religious leaders as mere political entrepreneurs (Katongole, 2017). Many pastors and priests appeared genuinely torn between competing obligations: to their ethnic communities, to their institutional patrons, to their theological convictions, and to the younger members of their congregations who were demanding more direct guidance. That this tension was rarely resolved cleanly is less a sign of hypocrisy than of the genuine complexity of prophetic ministry in a context where the personal and the institutional consequences of public political speech are severe.

Clerical reluctance to issue unambiguous moral directives during the 2023 electoral cycle reflects the enduring tension between prophetic duty and institutional preservation when confronting structural manifestations of moral evil. Philosophical-theological analyses of Nigeria's governance crises demonstrate that moral evil in this context is rarely an aberration

but a structural condition sustained by compromised ethical frameworks and institutional complicity (Oyebanji et al., 2024). Prophetic engagement must therefore transcend periodic electoral pronouncements to interrogate the institutional ecosystems that normalise ethical compromise. Only by addressing these foundational pathologies can the church foster genuine democratic accountability.

7. Towards an African Christian Democratic Ethic

The evidence of the 2023 Nigerian election cycle suggests that something new is forming within Nigerian Christian political culture, even if its outlines remain indistinct. A generation of young Nigerian Christians, educated, digitally connected, and increasingly impatient with both the quietism of their elders and the ethnic patronage politics of the political class is articulating, in fragmented and unsystematic ways, the elements of a distinctively Christian democratic ethic. This ethic draws on the global Christian tradition - stewardship, the common good, and servant leadership, while insisting on its applicability to specifically Nigerian conditions of poverty, corruption, and ethnic division.

Several features of this emerging ethic deserve analytical attention. First, it is characteristically lay-led rather than clergy-directed. The Obidient movement's theological creativity resided not in episcopal pastoral letters or presidential addresses to the Christian Association of Nigeria but in the informal theological reasoning of young professionals, students, and activists whose primary formation had been in church youth groups and university Christian Unions (Abbas, 2025: 13). This suggests that the democratisation of theological production enabled, in part, by digital media is generating new sites of Christian political reflection that institutional religious leadership has not yet learned to engage with adequately.

Digital platforms have increasingly evolved from mere mobilisation tools into contested normative spaces where faith communities co-design frameworks for moral governance. Recent scholarship emphasises that the intersection of digital ecosystems and religious ethics necessitates resilient environments prioritising participatory deliberation and communal accountability over algorithmic polarisation (Olayinka et al., 2025). This dynamic is evident in the Obidient movement's deployment of social media for real-time ethical reasoning, wherein young believers operationalise stewardship and integrity as criteria for democratic citizenship. Consequently, the movement's informal theological production constitutes an emergent form of digitally mediated moral governance, simultaneously challenging institutional hierarchies and elevating standards of public accountability.

Second, it is characteristically oriented towards accountability as a theological category. The movement's preoccupation with Peter Obi's financial record was not merely technocratic; it expressed a conviction that the management of public resources is a moral and spiritual matter, that stewardship of the common wealth is accountable ultimately to God rather than merely to electoral cycles. This represents a significant, if partial, appropriation of the Reformed theological tradition's emphasis on the sanctification of ordinary life and the accountability of

all human activity including political activity before a sovereign God (Amaechi & Oguji, 2024).

Third, and perhaps most significantly, it is characteristically oriented towards inclusion across denominational and ethnic lines. The Obidient movement's symbolic politics its insistence on the irrelevance of Peter Obi's Igbo ethnicity and Catholic faith to the case for his candidacy gestured towards a form of Christian political solidarity that transcends the internal boundaries of Nigerian Christianity. Whether this gesture can be institutionalised in durable political formations, or whether it will dissolve under the renewed pressure of ethnic and denominational interest, remains an open empirical question.

8. Conclusion

The 2023 Nigerian elections highlight a growing shift in how Christians engage in politics, with many emphasising values such as integrity, accountability, and good leadership in their voting decisions. The Obidient movement reflects this emerging faith-based political awareness, especially among younger Christians. However, this engagement is still shaped by factors like ethnicity and denominational differences, which limit a fully unified Christian political voice. Overall, the study suggests the need for a more grounded and context-sensitive Christian political ethic that can promote responsible citizenship, unity, and good governance in Nigeria.

9 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Churches should teach members how to apply Christian ethics to political participation responsibly.
- ii. Christian leaders should encourage issue-based voting rather than ethnic or denominational bias.
- iii. There should be more civic education within churches on democracy, governance, and accountability.
- iv. Christian youths should be guided to engage in politics with integrity and critical thinking.
- v. Religious institutions should promote unity and discourage divisive political narratives among believers.

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