Assessment of the Role of the Mass Media in Voter Behaviour in the 2019 Presidential/Governor Elections in Benue State

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ABSTRACT
This study makes an Assessment of the Role played by the Mass Media in the Voter Behaviour in Nigeria's 2019 Presidential/Governorship elections. The study was anchored in agenda setting theory and the survey method was employed using the questionnaire as the instrument for data collection with a sample size of 384 respondents. Findings revealed that the mass media channels exposed political electioneering messages to voters in the 2019 presidential/governorship elections in Nigeria. Findings again revealed that the mass media awareness creation campaign influenced the voter behaviour in the 2019 executive elections, and that language barrier, literacy level and power outage were the militating factors against effective media campaign in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. Based on these and other findings, the study concluded that through the mass media the voters' behaviour could be influenced to take positive decisions about candidates in various elective positions on the basisof societal values. The study therefore recommended that the mass media campaigns should be a continuous activity rather than a periodic programme.

***Key Words**: Voter Behaviour, Influence, Media Messages, Mass Media, Electorate*

Background of The Study

In advanced democratic environments like France, Britain, Sweden and the United States of America the mass media educate voters for elections (Erhagba, 1998). McQuail (2005, p.523) agrees with the assertion that "in such democracies, the media usually provide their information and educative services to theelectorate." In doing this, Curran (2005, p.29) adds that "the media achieve this from news stories, write-up by columnists, commentaries, features and interpretative stories by journalists, added to these is political advertising with the space and time allotted to candidates to

showcase their potential." Therefore, the leading television presidential debates that are not biased are critical, as deciding factorsin elections. For example, J.F Kennedy of Democrat vs Richard Nixon of the Republican in 1960 as well as Bill Clinton vs George Bush in 1992 debatedin America for the presidential elections. In Nigeria, the contest between MKO Abiola vs Bashir Tofa in 1993 experienced presidential debate. The *National Concord* newspaper as cited in Jirbo (1997, p. 13) gives a clinical report of the significance of the event thus:

> For about 105 minutes on Sunday, the presidential flag bearers of the two political parties "clashed'' on wide ranging issues, as they sold their candidature to millions of Nigerians who stayed glued to their television sets, tacking the trouble with oil subsidy give the spark of the great television debate, the first of its type in the nation's chequered political history. It was the first eyeball encounter between Bashorun MKO Abiola of the SDP and Alhaji Bashir Tofa of the NRC.

Such political debates continued up to the 2019 political elections in Nigeria as covered by the mass media. The mass media have the ability to effectively report and enlighten the people, and Utor (2000, p. 21) says "the mass media has the duty of enlightening the electorate to make basic decision during elections." By virtue of this responsibility the mass media shape the opinion and attitude of people, especially in their capacity as voters (Foster, 2010, p. 42).

Mass media act as channels of communication about polities. To be impactful, McNair (2003, p. 24) aversthat the political messageswhich cover verbal and nonverbal statements as well as visual presentations such as dress, makeup, hairstyle or Logo design including all those aspects that develop political identity or "image'' should be deliberate. According to Denton and Woodward (1998), what matters in political communication is not the source of the message but its content and purpose. This is because political communication, in substance, resolves around the intentions of its senders to influence the political environment. According to Wilcox, Ault and Agee (1998, p. 10),

> There has always been a need for political communication if for no other reason than to inform the citizens of the services available and the manner in which they may be used. In democracy, public information is crucial if citizens are allowed to make intelligent judgments about the policies and activities of their political parties. Through information it is hoped that the people will have the necessary background of participating fully in the activities and programmes of the party system.

Denver (2007, p. 125) maintains that "communicating with voters in the hope of influencing their behavior is not yet new. It is as old as competitive politics itself." Denver says that "as long as there have been contested elections, those standing for election and their supporters have endeavored to persuade the relevant electorate to vote for them, which is an essential ingredient for a successful election. This is particularly crucial in view of the fact that in developing societies like Nigeria the level of political awareness is very low. Lack of political awareness is greatly associated with the predominance of illiterates that constitute the electorate. Consequently, the uniformed electorate tend to ignore character or issues like infrastructure, unemployment, insecurity, corruption and living conditions. Their voting decisions are rather based on trivial consideration like part loyalty, societies, ethnic and religious affiliation. Jirbo (1997, p.127) is of the view that "in Tiv land, the party followers used to say that "Alukon kpase votu." That is to say, they were prepared to vote for even a tree if it was their party's candidate."

It is not surprising, therefore, that as the Nigeria's 2019Presidential/Governorship elections approached, politicians and other stakeholders sought more mass media messages about voter behaviour which have now constituted the main stream of modern electoral politics. The media interest in awareness creation is, therefore, obvious and pervasive. Government agencies like the National Orientation Agency (NAO), civic societies and electoral

bodies like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), in Nigeria, among others, involved the mass media in enlightening the citizens about the voting system in the 2019 President/Governorship elections.

Statement of the Problem

The media, which comprises newspaper, magazine, radio, television, film, social media platforms as well as leaflets are important sources of information and educate the electorates at times of political elections. In spite of the mass media presence in Nigeria, the level of political awareness and voting behavior among electorate seems very low. Majority of voters lack basic knowledge about the entire electioneering process in order to make informed decisions on the basis ofcritical issues of human existentialism. In most cases, religion and ethnic ties dominate the voters' reasons for voting particular candidates into positions like presidential and governorship positions. The research seeks to establish the extent to which mass media messages influenced the voter behavior in the 2019 Presidential/Governorship elections in Nigeria.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to assess the role of mass media in voter behavior in the 2019 Presidential/Governorship elections in Benue State. It specifically seeks

1. To determine the level of voter awareness in the 2019 Presidential/Governorshipelections in Benue State.

2. To determine the factors that influenced the voter behavior in the 2019 Presidential/Governorship elections.

3. To identify the possible factors that may militate against the success of the awareness created by the mass media in the 2019 Presidential/Governorship elections in Benue State.

Literature Review
Mass Media and Elections

The mass media are essential to the conduct of democratic elections. The mass media give parties an unparallel chance to talk directly with electorate. A free and fair election is not only about casting vote but also having adequate information about parties manifestoes, candidates, and the election process so that the voters can make informed choices. The mass media have the responsibility to report and analyze the electoral processes. The electorates have the right to decide on their leaders by casting their votes in the elections. There are many ways that political leaders can influence the minds of people and be winners in elections. The media is a powerful tool in the hands of political people to affect the minds of voters and win their votes. It is a natural tendency of common people to believe the information that they find in the media. There can be exceptions but the majority of the people come to know about national polities through the media; hence, they consider it as true information. If the media highlight the personality and achievement of a particular politician, he will undoubtedly get more voters. When a general election is declared, most of the media cover the news-related issues about politicians and their political parties. Voters may not have any direct link with the politicians, but they can get all the information about the politicians and their activities through the media (Five Points Cede, 2010).

Basley and Prat (2006, p.270) describe the mass media as political institutions that are capable of being deployed for manipulative purposes. Therefore, the media can be said to be the most effective means of achieving personal liberty and political emancipation. It can also be described as a mirror of the political, social and economic life of the society. The growth and progress of the country's democratic process have to a lager extent been influenced by the overwhelming support of the mass media. For this reason, therefore, Onyisi (1996, p.132) says that "in a democratic system

exercise of opinion or authority's allocation of vale is mainly through communication through the mass media".

Voting Behaviour

According to Idiong (2010, p.62), "Voting behavior is one of the major forms of political behavior of the electorates; it is discussed in relations to elections." This gives a good explanation why psychologistsand political scientists, who study voting and election empirically, regard it as a subset of electoral behavior, which can be explained to the totality of behavioral patterns of the electorates of any named constituency during an election period. The analysis of voting patterns invariably focuses on the determinants of why people vote as they do and how they arrive at the decisions they take. Sociologists tend to look at the socio-economic determinants of support for political parties. Observing the correlations between class, occupation, ethnicity, sex, and age, as they vote, political scientists have concentrated on the influence of political factors such as political programmes, electoral campaigns, and the popularity of party leaders on voting behaviors. According to Onyisi, (1996, p.16), "The aftermath of voting or rigging desperate political offices contenders of office manifest in bad governance; and extension of poverty." Oftentimes, social and economic infrastructural development is neglected, and lapses on security of lives and properties are affected.

According to Memillam and Zoide (2004), election periods in any nation generatea lot of interest among the political candidates in particular, and civil society in general. This is because the destiny of the people and the nation rests squarely on the shoulders of the successful candidates at the polls. It is no wonder then that both political actors and their supporters deploy different persuasive strategies to elicit supporters and voters in order to gain control and power. Butler (2006, p. 220) assertsthat

> it is important for voters to know their qualifications, opinions, voting records where they exist and personality traits of equal

importance is a need forvoters to have information about the politics and manifestos of the respected parties in order to make a clear choice.

One means of achieving this aim is through the use of mass media: the coverage and presentation of news, information, facts, figures, editorials and other analytical piece about an issue. The mass media has considerable influence onthe awareness creation. According to Enarhoro (2010, p.300), "There is little doubt that political advertising is a means of raising political consciousness in Nigeria." In the same vein, Tesumaiye (2008, p. 85) says that "regulatory bodies, like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), use political advertising messages to persuade voters on how to vote and use Permanent Voters Card (PVC) in Nigeria elections." On account that politicians effectively use the media as a mobilizing tool, Ogovbaire (2001, p.3) remarks that "The Nigeria electorate is getting more politically enlightened." They are also less inclined to vote based on religious or ethnic affiliations.

Theoretical Framework

The work is anchored in agenda setting theory. According to Folarin (2010, p. 95), "Agenda setting theory in the mass media pre-determines what issues are regarded as important at a given time in a society." Severin and Tankard (2001) looksat the media's capacity of awareness creation through repeated news coverage of raising issues of importance in the minds of the public. Most of the time also the agenda setting function is carried out through the process of gate-keeping. McQuail (2005) describes a phenomenon which had long been noticed studied in the context of election campaigns and the main issues of the day are reflected in which the public perceives as the main issues.

The idea behind the agenda setting theory is that the media tell the people what to think about. According to Folarin,(2010, p.95), "Agenda setting does not ascribe to the media power to determine what actually to think, but it does ascribe to them the power to determine what we are thinking about. For instance, they set the agenda setting for political campaigns." Sambe (2012, p.83) agree with Folarin's contention when he wrote that: "A recurrent focus in the study of agenda setting has proved that mass media are more

likely to set agenda on issues for discussion to influence attitudes and behaviours." This theory is therefore relevant to this study as it relates to political campaigns and voter behaviour.

Research Methodology

The study used the Survey method design to assessthe role of the mass media in voter behavior in Nigeria's 2019Presidential/Governorship elections. Democracy being a participatory system of government requires the electorate to be involved in the electoral process, and the media provides the channel through which the people can be sensitized, educated and enlightened to be actively involved. The survey method was therefore appropriate. The population of the study is 106, 9500 people derived from the three senatorial zones of Benue State. However, because of the large population of the various zones, the research selected one local government from each of the zones. The local government selected were Katsina Ala with a population of 304, 400 from zone A; Makurdi with 405,500 from zone B and Otukpo Local Government with 359, 600 from zone C. This projected figure for the 2016 population was gotten from Nigerian Population Commission. The choice of these local governments was because they are the headquarters of the various political zones. A total of 384 respondents were selected from the population as the study's sample size, statically determined using Taro Yaminne's sample size determination formula. Data collected were presented in tables, expressed in simple percentages and analyzed, using inferential and deductive approaches.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Level of Voter's Knowledge about the Parties/ Contestants

Responses	Frequency	Percentage%
Very High (70– 00%)	16	4
High (60 – 69%)	210	54
Very low (50 – 59%)	48	13

Low	(40 – 49%)	110	29
Total		**384**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Table 1: The question above sought to find out if the voters know the contestants and their party platforms. The information on the table shows that 210 (54%) voters had high knowledge of the contestants and their political parties while 110 (29%) respondents show that the knowledge of the parties and the contestants was low. This shows that voters in the presidential/governorship elections knew the contestants as well as their political parties.

Table 2: Level of Voter's Knowledge about Manifestoes of the Parties/Contestants

Responses	**Frequency**	**Percentage%**
Very High (70 – 100%)	16	4
High (60 – 69%)	210	54
Low (50 – 59%)	110	29
Very Low (40 – 49%)	48	13
Total	**384**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2019

The question above was to know the level of voters' knowledge of the manifestoes of the candidates and the parties. From table 2 above, 210 (54%) respondents show that the level of the knowledge of the manifestoes of the parties and the candidate was high while 110 (29%) respondents show that there was low knowledge of the manifestoes of the contestants and the parties.

Table 3: Knowledge about the voting process

Responses	**Frequency**	**Percentage%**
Very high (70 – 100%)	34	8.8

High (60 – 69%)	202	52.6
Low(50 – 59%)	36	9
Very Low (40 – 49%)	112	29
Total	**384**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2019

The question from table 3was to know if voters had good knowledge of the voting process; the data on the table indicate that 202 (52.6%) respondents agreed that the knowledge of the voting process in the 2019 presidential/governor elections was high, while 112 (29%) respondents show that the knowledge of the voting process was low. However, the data on the table show that the knowledge of voting process was high.

Table 4: Medium used to expose messages

Responses	**Frequency**	**Percentage%**
Radio	6	1.5
Television	4	1
Newspaper & Magazines	2	0.5
Billboards	-	0
Social Media	4	1
All of the above	368	96
Total	**384**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2019

The above question was to find out the medium in which the political messages were exposed to voters.The data on table 4

showed that 368 (96%) respondents agreed that the radio, television, newspapers, magazines, billboards and the social media were all the media platforms that were used to expose the messages to voters about the candidates and their political parties.

Table 5: Areas of Mass Media Messages

Responses	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
News items from Radio & TV	-	0
Adverts on Radio, TV & Social Media	-	0
Adverts on Newspapers, Magazines & Billboards	-	0
All of the above	384	100
Total	**384**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Table 5 sought to know the areas in which the media messages were used to inform the electorate about the voting process, the candidates and the political parties. There were 100% responses from the 384 respondentsshowing that the areas of mass media messages were news items from the radios and television, adverts on the radio, television and social media; and adverts placed on the newspapers, magazines and the billboards.

Table 6: Frequency of exposure of media messages

Frequency of Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage%**
Daily	384	100

Weekly	-	0
Monthly	-	0
Total	**384**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2019

The data on table 6 above shows that the 384 (100.9%) respondents agreed that the media messages were exposed to the electorate on a daily basis in many media platforms.

Table 7: Reasons for Voting

Responses	**Frequency**	**Percentage%**
Party manifestoes	62	16
Popularity of candidates and his manifestoes	204	53
Influences from relatives& friends	32	8
Religion& ethnicity	14	4
All of the above	72	19
Total	**384**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2019

The above question was to find out the reasons voters vote for candidates. Table 7 above shows that 204 (53%) respondents said that they were mostly influenced by the popularity and the manifestoes of the candidates, while 72 (19%) respondents are of the view that party manifestoes, popularity of the candidate, influence from relatives and friends, religion and ethnicity influenced voters to vote for the candidates.

Table 8: Whether the Mass Media Messages Exposed to the Electorate Influenced the Voting Decision in the 2019 Presidential/Governorship Elections in Nigeria?

Responses	Frequency	Percentage%
Strongly agree	235	61
Agree	133	35
Strongly disagree	-	0
Disagree	-	0
I do not know	16	4
Total	**384**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2019

The above question was to ascertain whether mass media messages as exposed to the electorate influence the voting decision of voters. The data on table 8 indicate that 235 (61%) respondents strongly agree that mass media messages as exposed on the media to the electorates influence voters' voting decisions. However, 16 (4%) respondents said they do not know whether such messages influence voters' decision. The data with 235 (61%) respondents clearly show that media messages influence the decision for voters.

Table 9: Factors militating against media messages

Frequency of Response	Frequency	Percentage%
Power outage	-	0
Language barrier and literacy level	-	0
All of the above	384	100
Total	**384**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Table 9 sought to know the militating factors to effective media campaign for voter awareness creation on the mass media. The data on the table with 384 (100%) respondents showed clearly that power outage,language barrier, and literacy level are the factors that militate against the mass media messages to enlighten the electorate

about the voting process, the political parties, candidates, and their manifestoes.

Discussion of Findings

This research basically made an attempt of assessing the role of the mass media in voter behaviour in the 2019 presidential/ governorship elections in Benue State. Results have shown that mass media messages exposed to the electorate influenced the voting decisions of voters in the 2019 presidential/governorship in Nigeria as confirmed on table 8 with a high percentage of 61 respondents strongly agreeing that the media messages influenced the voters' decisions in the 2019 elections. This influence obviously is in tandem with the statement in the review of concepts thatthe media is a powerful tool in the hands of political people to affect the minds of voters and capture their votes. It is a natural tendency of common people to believe the information that they find in the media.

Results from the study again show that the media messages exposed voters to the voting process, the candidates, party platforms and their manifestoes in the 2019 presidential/governorship elections in Nigeria. The media used were the radio, television, newspapers, magazines, billboards and the social media. These influenced the decisions of the voters. This was possible as confirmed on the basis of the agenda setting theory. According to Folarin (2010, p. 95), "Agenda setting theory in the mass media pre-determines what issues are regarded as important at a given time in a society." Severin and Tankard (2001) lookedat the media's capacity of awareness creation through repeated news coverage of raising issues of importance in the minds of the public. Elections are public and important issues of the society.

Findings have also shown that news items and adverts as placed on the media which are the radio, television, newspaper, magazines and the social media were quite effective in the awareness creation campaign in the 2019 presidential/governorship elections in Nigeria.

Apart from the data gotten from the above tables, the information from literature perfectly supports these findings when Basley and Prat (2006, p.270) describe the mass media as:

> political institution that are capable of being deployed for manipulative purposes. Therefore, the media can be said to be the most effective means of achieving personal liberty and political emancipation. It can also be described as a mirror of the political, social and economic life of the society. The growth and progress of the country's democratic process have to a lager extent been influenced by the over whelming support of the mass media. Besides, the uniqueness of the media have a positive influence on the body polity of the nation, the reason being that the media is capable of molding attitudes, behavior and perception of the general public

Findings from the study have also shown that there were factors that militated against effective media campaign for voter awareness in the 2019 presidential/governorship elections Benue State. The data from table 9 with 100% responses agreed that language barrier, literacy level and power outage were the militating factors against effective media campaign. Language barrier has been a major dysfunction in communication, a situation where messages intended for the electorate could not be understood because of language difference.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

The relevance and role of the mass media cannot be overemphasized in the society since the media monitors the society, and sets agenda on topical issues as watchdogs and gate keepers of the society. According to Memillam and Zoide (2004), election periods in any nation generates a lot of interest among the political candidate in particular, and civil society in general. This is because the destiny of the people and the nation rests squarely on the shoulders of the successful candidates at the polls. It is no wonder then that both political actors and their supporters deploy different persuasive strategies to elicit supporters and voters in order to gain control and

power. The mass media therefore creates awareness to help voters take informed decisions that will improve the lives of all members of the society. In the 2019 presidential/governorship elections, the mass media used news items and adverts from the radio, televisions, newspapers, magazines, billboards and the social media to channel their messages to the electorates for awareness creation as they voted. It was clear therefore that the mass media messages greatly influenced the voter behaviour in the 2019 presidential/governorship elections in Nigeria.

This research therefore recommends that:

1 Because of the relevance and the role of the mass media for awareness creation in the electoral process, the mass media in conjunction with stakeholders should frequently organize seminars and workshops to educate the electorates, those who conduct the elections, the political parties and their candidates.
2 The mass media as much as possible should deploy many and different languages for awareness creation to educate the electorates as they prepare to vote in elections.
3 The Federal Government of Nigeria should be proactive in the provision of the needed societal amenities like power supply to enable the electorates to have access to the media messages about the electoral process, the political party platforms, and the candidates and their manifestoes.

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