



## Exposure to Political News and its Influence on Voters' Choice of Candidates during the 2023 Presidential Election in Rivers State, Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Voters worldwide are usually exposed to news items during any election. Some of the news appear to influence their voting choices. Some voters may not be highly exposed to political news and what determines voters' choices may vary according to different motivations.

**Objective:** This study investigated exposure to political news and its influence on voters' choice of candidates during the 2023 presidential elections in Rivers State, Nigeria.

**Method:** The study employed descriptive survey design. The population of the study was 7,476, 800. The study employed the Taro Yamane sample size determination formula to arrive at a sample size. Participants were selected through multi-stage sampling technique. Structured questionnaire served as instrument for data collection. Collected data were analysed using the Weighted Mean Score.

**Results:** There was high level of exposure to political news during the 2023 presidential elections among residents of Rivers State, Nigeria. There was significant relationship between exposure to political news of the 2023 presidential election and the voting choices of electorate in Rivers State during the election. Again, issues that made news during the electioneering such as the state of the economy, insecurity, education, infrastructure and corruption, were the major factors that motivated voters' voting choices in Rivers State.

**Conclusion:** The conclusion of this study is that exposure to the news media influenced voters' choice of candidates during the 2023 presidential election in Rivers State, Nigeria.

**Unique Contribution:** The study offers fresh insights into how the news media set agenda for public's thoughts and discussions which translates into actions during issues of major national importance such as national elections. It is therefore hoped that policymakers and key stakeholders such as the government, electoral bodies, politicians, political parties, media practitioners, researchers and the general public would find this fresh insights useful in making decisions for future elections.

**Key Recommendation:** There is need for deliberate efforts by media managers at improving and sustaining media credibility through positive agenda setting for societal development. Efforts should also be channelled at presenting objective and unbiased news analysis and interpretations to guide the society in making informed and right decisions at defining moments such as election period.

**Keywords:** Exposure, Political News, 2023 Presidential Election, Voting Choices, Rivers State.



## **INTRODUCTION**

Information is an age-long phenomenon and a precondition for social change. Information is the oxygen of life (Asemah, 2011). At the heart of information is news. Adomi and Ukaegbu (2019) observe that news is everywhere, you cannot avoid news. News is the timely report of facts or opinions that hold interest of importance, or both for a considerable number of people (Ogunsiji, 1999, cited in Nwafor, 2019). News is everybody engages in news nearly every minute of every day of life. This is why Nkwan-Uwaoma (2019) avers that news is an indispensable agent of social change. This change in every living creature's actions is the core strategy of political news (McNaair, 2017).

Political news is a political marketing technique that uses various channels of communication to strategies the support of voters to win an election. Political communication uses different strategies to sell and promote the political ideologies of candidates and their political parties (Iyengar & Simon, 2000). Olatunji (2018), Eseer and Pfetsch (2004) opine that political news is a tool not only for business promotion but also a strategic weapon for advancing socio-economic and political changes and development. Politicians and their employers' strategies communicate to advance their quest for political power. However, in the course of seeking political power, politicians employ some strategic issues in the media specifically to motivate and influence voters' choices during elections (Odoemelam, & Nwafor, 2012).

The major goal of political news is to change voters' opinions and choices. Opara, Anofuru and Achor (2016; Nwala & Uwalaka, 2022) observe that political issues should be audience-faced if they are to be effective in addition to being meaningful to the people, loading up their norms and values, and addressing their needs. Several Nigerian news outlets presented political messages, especially on issues bordering the 2023 presidential elections. Such messages include revamping the economy, security, infrastructure, agriculture, and education among others within four months of the campaigns in a bid to influence the choices of voters. The messages were seen as important and became the most discussed and burning issue among Rivers State residents. The Rivers State voters seem to be aware of the political messages political parties and their supporters presented during the 2023 presidential election. Therefore, they think and talk about these messages regularly; this means that the media have set the agenda for them. And this agrees with the position of Wimmer and Dominick (2000) when they posit that the public agenda or kinds of things people discuss, think and worry about is powerfully shaped and directed by what the media choose to publicize.

The media whether print or electronic raise salient issues as news items in our society and people begin to think along those lines to form opinions (Asemah, Nwanmuo & Nkwam-Uwoama, 2017). This implies that the insecurity, poor economy, and lack of infrastructure candidates, parties and their supporters presented as news during 2023 presidential elections to the voters of Rivers State set the agenda since these elements formed public discourse. Rivers State is one of the States in South-South Nigeria and has been agitating for resource control and better governance. The level of exposure of Rivers State voters to political news of 2023 by political parties, candidates and supported and how they influence voters' choice of candidates is not clear. It is on this basis the



study investigated Exposure to political news of 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria and how they were consequential to the voting choices of Rivers State residents.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The following objectives motivated the study

1. Investigate the extent of Rivers State voters' exposure to political news during the 2023 presidential election.
2. determine the influence of political news on voters' choice of candidates during the 2023 presidential election in Rivers State Nigeria.
3. Identify the factors that motivated voters' choice of candidates during the 2023 presidential election in RSN

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study

1. What is the extent of Rivers State voters' exposure to political news during the 2023 presidential election?
2. What is the influence of political news on voters' choice of candidates during the 2023 presidential election in Rivers State Nigeria?
4. What are the factors that motivated voters' choice of candidates during the 2023 presidential election in Rivers State, Nigeria?

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **Exposure to Political News**

Political news is concerned with politics. Its area of coverage spans vast and amorphous stretches from the interpersonal discussion, group discussion as well as various messages placed on electronic radio, television, print (newspaper, magazine, billboard) and social media platforms (Idiong, 2012). News is an age-long phenomenon that started with the creation of man. Ukaegbu (2019) notes that the practice of news is as old as man. The beginning of early political news is difficult to be traced to any one group of people. But it has always been to promote political ideologies.

### **Factors that Influence Voting Choice during Elections**

Voting is seen as a human action and phenomenon used in the determination of the democratic process. It is the form of political participation in a liberal democratic society like ours. Voting is a universal system that enables individuals to make collective decisions. Voters' choices could result from the total impact on media, peer group influence, political party affiliations as well as opinion leaders and several other forces. Have you ever thought of why voters vote the way they do? No voter has ever voted without being influenced, by one force or another (Iwundu, n.d).

These opinion leaders are said to interpret the media content in light of the values, beliefs and norms of the opinion followers.



## **EMPIRICAL REVIEW**

Ogboda (2018) examined the impact of politics and the voting choice of the electorate during the 2003 presidential in Nigeria. The study adopted a survey research design which is one of the methods adopted in this study. The study found that political communication has a significant effect on the electorates. Talabi and Adebola (2016) investigated the influence of political advertising on voters' endorsement in the 2015 General Elections in Ondo State. The study adopted the survey research design with a sample size of 400 and used a designed questionnaire to elicit information. The findings of the study revealed that political advertisements did not stimulate voters to cast their votes in the 2015 general elections in Ondo State. Similarly, Olufemi (2016) examined the 'influence of television political advertisement on the electorate' perception of 2015 presidential candidates'. The study adopts a survey research design with a population of 1, 524,655 which is the registered voters of Ondo State as of 2015. It has a sample size of 384. The results revealed that the electorates in Ondo State were well exposed to political advertisements on television, and the respondents were influenced in their choice of presidential candidate to the extent that they perceived the messages to be credible and changed their perception towards the candidate.

Achanso, Benson and Zuure (2021) investigated factors influencing voters' choices in elections in Ghana. The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-method design to gather data. The findings indicate that the voting behaviour of electorates is not primarily influenced by stable and distinctive factors, such as ethnic or regional ties, but rather the electorate makes voting decisions based on a conscious evaluation of government performance, economic conditions, and campaign issues.

Muchango (2017) investigated the factors influencing voters' choices of candidates during tripartite elections in Mandevu and Munali constituencies in Zambia from 2001 to 2011. The study employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches in the context of a cross-sectional study design. Nyiayaana (2019) studied ethnic voting behaviour and voting patterns in Nigeria's 2015 presidential elections and the implications for the institutionalization of social conflict. It argues that while scholarly examinations portray the presidential election results as a 'victory for democracy', not least because an incumbent president was defeated for the first time in Nigeria. Again, Sule (2019) examined the voting patterns, issues and impact of the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria. The research discovered that the outcome of the 2019 General Election continued to reflect the voting pattern in Nigeria where ethno-religious and regional affiliations determine how the electorates choose their President even though, the two major contenders this time emerged from the same region, unlike the previous situations.

Nwankwo (2019) investigated the spatial pattern of voting choice homogeneity in the Nigerian presidential elections in the Fourth Republic. The analysis showed that voting patterns have structured Nigeria's electoral landscape from a random to clutter but dissected then to a cluster but regionalized milieu or a nation of two voting worlds depicting the ethnoreligious divide of the country. While economic, security and governance issues do not shape voting behaviour, they only become weighty when comingled with ethnic and religious sentiments.



Abati (2016) conducts a study on the ‘impact of political advertising on Nigeria's electorate’. The study adopted a survey research design with only a questionnaire as an instrument of study through multi-stage sampling with 120 respondents. The findings reveal that 50% of the respondents were always exposed to political advertising during the 2011 governorship election in Ogun state, 33% were often exposed and 16.7% were rarely exposed to political advertising. Ise-Olorunkanmi (2023) investigated the influence of social media on political communication: a case study of Nigeria's 2023 general elections in Omu-Aran and found that voter education programmes facilitated by the media have contributed to increased election literacy, improved voter turnout, and reduced invalid ballots. The media's presence during the entire electoral process acts as a deterrent to fraudulent activities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study adopted the Knowledge Gap Theory. The theory was propounded by Philip J. Tichenor, George A. Donohue and Clarie N. Olien in 1970. The theory believes that every member of society does not evenly acquire information. The theory says that the spread of news in a society can bring about an increase in the gap between people of lower and higher socioeconomic status. The attempt to improve people's lives might not always work the way it is planned (Asemah, 2011).

The news about the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria published in the newspapers may have the effect of increasing the different gaps between members of social classes. In this theory, knowledge is treated as any other commodity which is not distributed equally throughout the society and the people at the top of the leader have more easy access to it. The implication of this is that the more the political news about the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria increased in Rivers State, the more knowledgeable the voters of the state get, thereby creating a gap between the more educated and less educated. It is therefore believed that the political news NGOs, political parties and supports placed in the newspapers about the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria appear to have exacerbated underlying inequalities previously held among voters of Rivers State.

### **METHOD**

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. This was necessary because the researcher investigated the voting choices of Rivers State voters during the 2023 presidential election. The population of the study consisted of all registered voters of Rivers State during the 2023 election. The population of Rivers State according to INEC is 3, 537,190. The sample size was 400 using the Taro Yamane (1967) method of sample size determination formula. Therefore, a sample of 400 respondents was drawn from the population of Rivers State.

However, the study adopted a multi-stage sampling technique. This allowed the researcher to divide different parts of Rivers State into strata and select from each of the stratum. The study used the questionnaire and question guide as measuring instruments. The method of data analysis was the Weighted Mean Score using the modified 4-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA)= 4, Agree (A)=3, Disagree (D)=2 and Strongly Disagree (SD)=1. The data were analysed and presented in table. To arrive at the decision of respondents on each of these questionnaire item, the



decision rule adopted is taken as  $4 + 3+2+1=10/4=2.5$ . This implies that responses on any questionnaire item ranging from 2.5 above would be accepted and less than 2.5 is rejected.

### Data Presentation

**Table 1: Extent of Rivers State residents' exposure to political news during the 2023 presidential elections**

The extent of Rivers State residents' exposure to political news during the 2023 presidential elections	SA	A	D	SD	TOTAL	WMS	RMK
I am exposed to political news about 2023 presidential election in Nigeria twice a day	141	86	129	24	1041	2.7	Agreed
I am exposed to political news about 2023 presidential election in Nigeria every day	172	103	78	27	1180	3.1	Agreed
I am exposed to political news about the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria twice every week	79	66	15	18 5	729	1.9	Disagreed
I am exposed to political news of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria every week	41	57	104	17 8	721	1.9	Disagreed

The data in Table 1 indicated that the extent of Rivers State voters' exposure to political news during the 2023 presidential elections was very high.





**Table 2: Influence of political news of the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria on the voting choices of Rivers State voters**

<b>Influence of political news of the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria on the voting choices of Rivers State voters</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>WMS</b>	<b>RMK</b>
Insecurity news presented in Nigerian newspapers during the 2023 presidential election was influence voting choice in Rivers State voters.	131	115	173	61	1276	3.4	Agreed
Promise messages to improve education/job creation presented as news during the 2023 presidential election influence voting choices in Rivers State voters.	153	126	49	52	1140	3.0	Agreed
The promises of the improvement of infrastructure presented news during the 2023 presidential election was influence voting choices in Rivers State voters.	51	62	96	17 1	753	2.0	Disagreed
Promise messages to improve the economy presented as news during the 2023 presidential election influence voting choices in Rivers State voters.	131	151	79	19	1142	3.0	Agreed
The promises of the improvement of the health care system/obedience to the rule of law presented in the newspapers during the 2023 presidential election influence voting choices in Rivers State voters.	131	151	79	19	1154	3.0	Agreed

The data in Table 2 indicated that the items presented in newspapers on improvement in the security, economy, education/job creation and health care services/obedience to the rule of law



were the major political news of the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria was consequential to the voting choices of Rivers State voters.

**Table 3: Factors that motivated the choices of Rivers State voters during the 2023 presidential elections**

<b>Factors that motivated the choices of Rivers State voters during the 2023 presidential elections.</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>WMS</b>	<b>RMK</b>
	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>		
Ethnic sentiment was a factor that motivated voting choices during the 2023 presidential election in Rivers State	37	83	133	12 7	790	2.0	Disagreed
My religious' belief was a factor that motivated voting choices during the 2023 presidential election in Rivers State	43	83	112	14 2	787	2.1	Disagreed
Party affiliation/gift items were the major factor that motivated voting choices in River State	64	61	113	14 2	807	2.1	Disagreed
The issues in the news like the state of the economy, insecurity, education, infrastructure and corruption, were the major factors that motivated my voting choices	153	126	49	52	1140	3.0	Agreed

The data in Table 3 showed that the issues political parties raised in the news like the state of the economy, insecurity, education, infrastructure and corruption, were the major factors that motivated voters' voting choices in Rivers State.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The study also found that the extent of Rivers State residents' exposure to political news during the 2023 presidential elections was very high. This is due to the daily exposure to political news as observed in Table 1 of the study. This finding is similar to those of Najeem and Agbboluaje (2019) who found that viewers and listeners were adequately exposed to the station contents of NTA, featuring more of voters' education content. Bassey, Bernard and Anthony (2024) revealed that listenership of FRCN's political programmes among voters of Abi LGA was very high. Also, Penelope, Stuart and Thierry (2013) affirm that news provide information to voters as they weigh their voting options. That is why Olufemi (2016) found that the electorates in Ondo State were





exposed to political news on television. Although, political news seems to alter the composition of the voters since they are likely to vote for their own party's candidate.

Again, the study discovered that the items presented in news on improvement on the security, economy, education/job creation and health care services/obedience to the rule of law were the major political news of the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria and are influence to the voting choices of Rivers State voters. The Rivers State voters have been agitating for resource control and quality leadership over the years. This finding is similar to the findings of other scholars like; Teyumaiye, Simon and Obia (2018). They found that political information was the major factor that influenced voters' choice during the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. Opara, Anuforo and Achor (2016) found that political news has significant effects on the electorate. This is because voters' choice of candidates in the 2015 governorship election in Imo States was significantly influenced by the candidate's political advertising. McNeil and Jackson (2011) found that the different formats, language, styles and techniques used in delivering a candidate's political messages help in determining voters' choice of candidate in an election this resonates with Opene's (2012) findings. He discovered that a good number of the public has great regard for media messages and this passively influences them. Maamaa and Akurega (2017) found that new media had a tremendous influence on the success of the 2015 general elections in Northwest Nigeria.

The finding resonates with the Knowledge gap theory used in the study. The theory believes that every member of society does not evenly acquire information. People with higher socioeconomic status tend to have a better ability to acquire information. This has brought about two groups- a group of better-educated people who know more about things and those with low education who know less. Theory, theory says that the spread of news in a society can bring about an increase in the gap between people of lower and higher socioeconomic status. The attempt to improve people's lives might not always work the way it is planned (Asemah, 2011).

The study further observed that the issues political parties raised in the news like the state of the economy, insecurity, education, infrastructure and corruption, were the major factors that motivated voters' voting choices in Rivers State. The majority of the respondents affirmed that the state of economic insecurity, poor infrastructure, education, health care delivery system and high level of corruption in Nigeria contributed to the factors that motivated Rivers State voters' choices. The finding is similar to the findings of other scholars. For example, Okoro and Santa (2017) found that voters' choice of political candidates was influenced by political communication on social media. The findings further indicated that religious affiliations and ethnicity were also factors that influenced voter's choice of candidates. *Voter education programs facilitated by the media have contributed to increased election literacy, improved voter turnout, and reduced invalid ballots. The media's presence during the entire electoral process acts as a deterrent to fraudulent activities (Ise-Olorukwmi et al. 2023).*



## **CONCLUSION**

Rivers State voters were highly exposed to political news during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. This is because the majority of the voters agreed they were exposed to political news daily. However, the political news presented on improvement in the security, economy, education/job creation and health care services/obedience to the rule of law were the major political news of the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria and were consequential to the voting choices of Rivers state residents. The study recommended that: The voters of Rivers State should continue to be exposed to political news since their level of exposure contributes to the choices of voters during elections. The media should continue to present critical items such as poor economic, education, infrastructure and insecurity raised during the election as a front burner in the news since such are consequential to voters' choices. News items such as ethnicity, religion, political party affiliation and distribution of gifts during the election should not be brought to the front burner since they are inconsequential to voters' choices during elections.

### **Ethical clearance**

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

### **Acknowledgements**

We acknowledge Rivers State library and Dr. BIg Man Nwala for assisting us with data collection. We equally appreciate the Rivers state University Library staff for their cooperation and support.

### **Sources of funding**

The study was not funded.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

### **Authors' Contributions**

Nwoka Alikor conceived and conducted the study under the supervision of Prof B.G. Nsereka and Dr. Harry Itieke-Idamieba. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.



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