

Influence of Political Information Sources on Rural Voter Preference for Presidential Candidates in the Nigerian 2019 Elections

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Abstract: *There are lots of factors affecting voters' decision on who to vote for amongst presidential candidates most especially voters in the rural and sub-urban areas. These factors could be examined through the fusion of quantitative and qualitative tradition with a view to helping voters make up their choice of presidential candidates during elections. This study investigates how voters in rural areas of Nigeria sought information about presidential candidates in the 2019 presidential elections. Relying on previous studies and constructs of the two-step hypothesis/opinion leadership theory, it was assumed that voters in rural areas had poor access to the mass media. In addition, they obtained information about presidential candidates and their programmes through opinion leaders who might have greater access to the mass media. The study also identified factors influencing voters on their choice of presidential candidate. Information was obtained from a sample size of one thousand voters and were randomly stratified based on the six geo-political zones of the country. In addition to this, one Focus Group Discussion was held in each of the six zones to enhance the validity and reliability of data obtained. Among other findings, the study revealed that residents of rural and sub-urban areas are gaining more access to the mass media (radio, TV and social media) and are more likely to vote the presidential candidate of the party they are affiliated with, irrespective of the personal qualities of the candidate*

Keywords: *Influence, Information, Media, Voter, Preference, Election,*

Introduction

During election process, voters shift opinions and attitudes after their initial media inoculation and it was attributed to interpersonal influences which took place after the media exposure of voters to political messages. It was based on this that the Two-Step Flow Hypothesis (and its meta-theory Opinion Leadership) originated (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Media effects over the decades suggest that information management and media scholars still disagree on the nature and extent of *media influences and effects* on voters. One of the factors influencing voters' decision on presidential elections candidate is the patterns of media used among rural voters. This factor affects voters' decision on who to vote for amongst presidential candidates. Theoretical underpinning for the study is the Two-Step Flow/Opinion Leadership Hypothesis and related concepts such as news diffusion, framing effects, uses and gratifications as well as agenda building. This hypothesis adopted the 'quali-quant' research design' (a combination of qualitative and quantitative traditions in order to be able to provide answers to the proposed research questions).

Background Study

One of the most robustly debated issues in the field of mass communication is 'media effect' meaning the consequences of what the mass media do, whether intended or not. While virtually all communication scholars agree that the media exert significant effects on its audience, there is little agreement on the *nature* and *extent* of the effects (McQuail, 2012). Early studies on media effects (in the 1930s through 1950s) used the 'top-down' or 'powerful effect' model in which the media was thought to possess the power comparable to that of a hypodermic needle or bullet shot, which instantly impacts on the person or object it hits. The famous Erie County studies, conducted by Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld on the American presidential elections were some of the earliest effect studies that applied a different paradigm: focusing on what the audience does with the media in order to determine media effects (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The Two Step

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Flow Hypothesis should provide insight into why people in rural areas of Nigeria are constantly up-to-date in current affairs and political news despite that most of them have little or no (direct) access to the mass media. Katz, Lazarsfeld and numerous other scholars who have worked on the original two-step thesis would suggest that people in these rural communities (including Nigerian) who do not have good access to the mass media generally had been keeping themselves informed through a network of persons who influence their thinking or behaviour in informal social relationships. In Nigeria, access to radio, television (tv), newspapers and the internet is poor in rural areas due to remoteness of settlements, lack of electricity and poor economic capacities, among other reasons (Akinfeleye, 2003; Oso et al., 2012). In the Erie County study, analysis of the process of decision-making during the course of the election campaign led the researchers to suggest that the flow of mass communication was less direct than was commonly supposed. They proposed that influences stemming from the mass media first reached “opinion leaders”, who in turn, passed on what they had read and heard to those of their every-day associates for whom they were influential. This trail-blazing study aroused considerable interest and led to the impact of personal influence; the flow of personal influence and the interaction of opinion leaders with the mass media (Katz, 1957). According to the electoral body in Nigeria, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), in the 2015 presidential elections, more than 60 per cent of the total votes came from rural and sub-urban dwellers. Since most people in rural areas of Nigeria have poor media access, how did the voters obtain information with which they were able to assess the presidential candidates and their programmes and to what extent did the Two Step Flow/Opinion Leadership Hypothesis play significant roles in the people’s choices? There is need to understand if the two-step hypothesis still explains the political uses and gratifications of media, especially with rapid advances in media access and technologies. One of the most comprehensive recent studies on voters, the media and presidential elections in Nigeria (Owens-Ibie, 2018) did not use opinion leadership and influences of opinion leaders as referents, hence leaving out the underlining reasons for the patterns discovered unexplained.

The Two-Step Flow/Opinion Leadership Hypothesis stands on a tripod; Firstly the people (voters) exercising (their) personal influence in deciding which candidate to support. They are not puppets that the media or politicians push here and there. Many studies in which the hypothesis have been applied in the United States and United Kingdom, for instance, confirmed that people make up their minds late in the campaign and those who changed their minds during the course of the campaign were more likely than other people to mention personal influence as having figured in their decisions. It was concluded that personal contacts appear to have been both more frequent and more effective than the mass media in influencing voting decisions (McQuail, 2012). Secondly, opinion leaders are very much like the people whom they influence and the distribution of opinion leaders cut across every class and occupation. It was also confirmed that the influences are mutual: the opinion leaders exercise influence on voters and in many cases the opinion leaders are also influenced by voters (e.g. co-workers, fellow politicians, neighbours etc.) (Katz, 1957). Thirdly, compared to the rest of the population, opinion leaders were usually more exposed to the traditional mass media (radio, newspapers and magazines). Specifically, ideas often flowed from radio and print to opinion leaders and from these to the less active sections of the population (Katz, 1957).

Early studies on the two-step hypothesis had methodological challenges. First, the samples were small – in few hundreds. Second, the interviewers mostly focused on ‘flow of influence’ and less (or not at all) on the ‘process of influence’. Third, there were problems determining who qualified to be regarded as an opinion leader (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Many other studies concentrated less on the flow, but what happens after the flow. They found that opinion leaders may not necessarily be leaders of formal groups such as workers group and that an opinion leader could exercise influences on varying subjects. In other words, an opinion leader on religious matter may not be an opinion leader in political matter to the same individual. Some of the studies found new characteristics such as personality trait and public individuation (Chan & Misra, 1990); and networking through social media (Winter & Newbaum, 2016). One of the most recent comprehensive study on presidential elections in Nigeria was conducted by the Association of Communication Scholars and Professionals of Nigeria (Owens-Ibie, 2018). The study found the following, among others, concerning presidential elections in Nigeria: 1) Television was widely recognized as the most effective tool during the 2015 presidential campaigns; 2) The mass media: television, social media, radio, newspapers and magazines, billboards and flyers, announcements in places of worship (or word of mouth) and political rallies were effective communication channels during the election; 3) The candidate who won in the 2015 elections accounted for over two-thirds of radio and tv jingles; 4) Most political communication messages were deployed via the traditional mass media (radio, tv, newspapers, magazines and billboards) (Owens-Ibie, 2018). Also, the study focused principally on political messages, not influences on voters. It is noteworthy that the Owens-Ibie (2008) study did not include the role of interpersonal communication networks during the election. Most voters reside in rural and sub-urban areas without adequate access to the traditional mass media; it is expedient to also examine the extent to which interpersonal media and opinion leadership complement the mass media. This is with a view to helping voters make up their choice of presidential candidates.

Methodology

The design for this study was a fusion of quantitative and qualitative tradition. The *quantitative approach* is context-free and deductive in process, thereby enabling the researcher to make generalizations leading to a prediction, explanation and understanding. The use of this approach made it possible to manage the huge data generated from the 1,000 respondents. However, in order to understand the decision making process of voters, there was need to apply complementary qualitative methods. In the qualitative *approach*, categories emerge from informants, rather than are identified *a priori* by the researcher, to provide rich “context-bound” information leading to patterns and theories that help explain a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2006). The study covers the entire six geo-political zones that make up Nigeria. There are about 30 million registered voters who live in rural communities in Nigeria and this figure represents about half of the voters projected for the 2019 elections. According to INEC, 52 million voters were registered for the 2015 general elections. Total voters in the 2015 presidential election were 29,432,083 out of 67, 422,005 registered voters while in 2019, 28,614,170 voted in the presidential elections out of 82, 344,107 registered voters (INEC, 2019). A *sample size* of 1,000 (or one per cent of the total population) was taken. The *stratified sampling method* was used to distribute the questionnaires to the sampled voters nationwide by stratifying the voters according to the six geo-political zones: South West, South East, South South, North West, North Central and the North East. One hundred and sixty-six (166) questionnaires were administered in each zone. Two states were randomly picked in each geo-political zone as Study Locations. These are: Benue, Kaduna, FCT, Adamawa, Kano, Taraba, Osun, Oyo, Imo, Edo, Anambra and Rivers. Five wards were randomly selected in each of the three senatorial districts in each state selected and shared out the 166 questionnaires equally among voters who resided in rural or sub-urban areas. One (1) Focus Group Discussion (FDG) was conducted in each of the six states selected for the study.

Results and Discussion

Tables 1 to 5 shows the characteristics of voters who participated in the study while Tables 6 to 11 shows media use of respondents, sources of most information about presidential candidate, relationship between party preference and voting, political information search in social media, influence of choice of presidential candidate across states and finally mass media usage for political purposes by voters across states respectively. The least represented zone is the South-West with 14.7 per cent (n=131) of respondents; while the North West zone recorded the highest number of respondents with 18.0 per cent (n=166). Generally, all the political zones in the country were adequately proportionately represented in the study (n is the total number of respondents). A little over half of the respondents were female (56.5 per cent, n= 505) while about 55 per cent of the respondents were youths and one-third of the total respondents were aged between 23 and 35. Those aged 50 and above constituted only one-tenth of respondents (Table 3). Half of the respondents were politically-affiliated to the ruling party (All Progressive Congress, APC), while almost 40 per cent had sympathy for the main opposition party (People’s Democratic Party, PDP). An overwhelming majority of the respondents could be considered educated elite. This is reflected in Table 5 which has 98.7 per cent having a minimum of school certificate/GCE Ordinary level.

S/N	ZONE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	NORTH EAST	157	17.6
2	NORTH CENTRAL	161	18.0
3	NORTH WEST	166	18.6
4	SOUTH WEST	131	14.7
5	SOUTH SOUTH	139	15.5
6	SOUTH EAST	140	15.7
7	TOTAL	894	100.0

TABLE 2: GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS			
S/N	GENDER	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	FEMALE	505	56.5
2	MALE	389	43.5
	TOTAL	894	100.0

TABLE 3: AGE DISTRIBUTION OF THE RESPONDENTS			
S/N	AGE		PERCENTAGE
1	LESS THAN 16 YEARS	25	2.8
2	16-22	235	26.3
3	23-35	301	33.7
4	36-50	213	23.9
5	ABOVE 50	90	10.1
6	MISSING	29	3.2
	TOTAL	893	100.0

TABLE 4: POLITICAL AFFILIATION			
S/N	PARTY	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	APC	454	50.8
2	PDP	356	39.8
3	OTHER	84	9.4
	TOTAL	894	100.0

TABLE 5: EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF RESPONDENTS			
S/N	LEVEL	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	PRIMARY SCHOOL/ STADARD 6	24	2.7
2	SECONDARY SCH./GCE/WASSCE	276	30.9
3	POLYTECHNIC / UNIVERSITY	539	60.3
3	OTHER/MISSING	55	6.2
	TOTAL	894	100.0

Also of importance is how voters in rural areas obtain information about presidential candidates and their programmes. Most respondents watched television (tv) more than they listened to the radio generally. As shown in Table 6, 62.6 per cent (n=56) respondents said they watched tv daily while only a third (31.8 per cent, n=492) said they listened to the radio on daily basis. Considering the percentages of those who watched tv and listened to the radio “2-3 times a week”, “once in a while” and “daily”, it can be inferred from Table 6 that an overwhelmingly majority of respondents were frequently exposed to radio and tv. Those who claimed they were not exposed to the tv and radio represented only 1.5 per cent and 16.8 per cent respectively.

TABLE 6: MEDIA USE OF RESPONDENTS							
S/N	EXPOSURE	MEDIA					
		TV	%	NEWS-PAPER	%	RADIO	%
1	DAILY	560	62.6	284	31.8	492	55.0
2	2-3 TIMES A WEEK	153	17.1	128	14.3	190	21.3
3	ONCE A WEEK	63	7.0	83	9.3	49	5.5
4	ONCE IN A WHILE	105	11.7	249	27.9	143	16.0
4	I'M NOT EXPOSED TO MASS MEDIA	13	1.5	150	16.8	20	2.2
	TOTAL	894	100	894	100	894	100

In addition to this are the sources of political information to voters in rural areas. Radio is the most popular source of political information for voters in rural areas according to data generated from this study. As shown in Table 7, well over one-third of the voters confirmed that the main source of political information is the radio (35.2 per cent; n=315). Television as another source of political information stands at 25.2 per cent (n=225) while social media came a distant third in terms of mass media preference as source of political information (12.2 per cent, n=105). Newspapers and magazines are not a major source of political information for voters in rural areas (4.7 per cent, n=42). Non-mass media sources formed the rest of media sources for political information for the respondents such as opinion leaders (6.0, n=54); friends and associates (7.3, n=65) and other such as congresses, rallies, meetings, clubs, making up 9.4 per cent (n=84). Results suggests that most rural voters were just beginning to use the social media as sources of political information as reflected in Table 8, which shows that those who used the social media for political information “once in a while” and “not at all” together constituted 34.4 per cent (n=308). On the other hand, those who used the social media daily as their main source of political information represents 39.7 per cent of the respondents (n=355). These suggest that the main sources of political information in rural areas of Nigeria are the traditional media (radio and television) except the print media. Social media sources are becoming more influential political information sources, however.

TABLE 7: SOURCES OF MOST INFORMATION ABOUT PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES			
S/N	SOURCES	FREQUENCY	PERCENT AGE
1	RADIO	315	35.2
2	TELEVISION	225	25.2
3	NEWSPAPERS/ MAGAZINES	42	4.7
4	SOCIAL MEDIA	109	12.2
5	FRIENDS AND ASSOCIATES	65	7.3
6	OPINION LEADERS	54	6.0
7	OTHER	84	9.4
	TOTAL	894	100.0

TABLE 8: POLITICAL INFORMATION SEARCH IN SOCIAL MEDIA			
S/N			PERCENTAGE
1	DAILY	355	39.7
2	2-3 TIMES WEEKLY	146	16.3
3	ONCE A WEEK	85	9.5
4	ONCE IN A WHILE	198	22.1
5	I DON'T USE THE SOCIAL MEDIA	110	12.3
	TOTAL	894	100

TABLE 9: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARTY PREFERENCE AND VOTING					
S/N	POLITICAL PARTY	MEMBERSHIP/ AFFILIATION AMONG RESPONDENTS		MEMBERS WHO VOTED FOR THEIR PARTY'S PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE	
		FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	APC	454	54.1	402	47.9
2	PDP	356	42.4	337	40.2
3	OTHER	29	3.5	100	11.9
	TOTAL	839	100	839	100

According to Table 9, more voters voted for the presidential candidate of the political party they belonged to or were affiliated with. This means that, all things being equal, voters are not likely to vote across party lines. Extent of influence of opinion leaders on voters' choices in the presidential elections is shown in Table 11 and it presents the role of opinion leaders in influencing the choices of voters during presidential elections side-by-side the mass media influences on state-by-state basis. On the aggregate, opinion leaders are low on the scale of major influencers, coming behind radio, television (tv), and social media. Table 11 shows a break-down of influences and this presents a slightly different pattern. For example, Benue recorded opinion leaders accounting for higher percentage of respondents with their major influences from opinion leaders (12.5 for party leader and 32.6 per cent for opinion leaders generally). Rivers, Kaduna and Imo for instance, recorded less than 1 per cent in this category. Thus, while opinion leaders were highly effective political influences on voters, opinion leaders for instance were much more influential in many states in the North. South West portrayed more of independent-minded voting populace (Tables 10 and 11).

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TABLE 10: INFLUENCE ON CHOICE OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES ACROSS STATES

S/N	STATE	Radio	TV	News paper	Social Media	Party Leader	Opinion Leader	Others	Total
1	Benue	19	20	7	14	2	14	0	76
	%	6.0	8.9	16.7	8.3	12.5	32.6	0.0	9.3
2	Kaduna	24	26	0	25	3	0	0	78
	%	7.6	11.6	0.0	14.8	18.8	0.0	0.0	9.6
3	Rivers	16	36	4	8	0	6	0	70
	%	5.1	16.0	9.5	4.7	0.0	14.0	0.0	8.6
4	Anambra	28	18	8	12	2	0	0	68
	%	8.9	8.0	19.0	7.1	12.5	0.0	0.0	8.3
5	Oyo	9	16	6	7	0	0	0	38
	%	2.9	7.1	14.3	4.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.7
6	Ogun	35	11	0	3	2	1	0	52
	%	11.4	4.9	0.0	1.8	12.5	2.3	0.0	6.5
7	Adamawa	27	15	2	16	5	8	1	74
	%	8.6	6.7	4.8	9.5	31.2	18.6	20.0	9.1
8	Imo	19	32	1	10	0	2	0	64
	%	6	14.2	2.4	5.9	0.0	4.7	0.0	7.9
9	FCT Abuja	33	11	3	23	2	6	3	81
	%	14.7	13.6	3.7	28.4	2.5	7.4	3.7	0.0
10	Kano	48	19	2	9	0	1	1	80
	%	15.2	8.4	4.8	5.3	0.0	2.3	20.0	9.8
11	Taraba	41	6	6	12	0	5	0	70
	%	13	2.7	14.8	7.1	0.0	11.6	0.0	8.6
12	Edo	15	15	3	30	0	0	0	63
	%	4.8	6.7	7.1	17.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.7
	Total	418.2	333.8	139.1	283.8	106	136.5	48.7	896.4
	Total Percentage	36.7%	27.6%	5.2%	20.7%	2.0%	5.3%	0.6%	*****

Factors affecting voters decision for presidential elections candidates

It can be deduced from Tables 6 to 11 that multivariate factors affect voters in their choices of presidential candidates. These factors include: access to the mass media, exposure to the mass media and influence of opinion/party leaders, in that order of importance. The influence of opinion leaders vary remarkably across states, whereas the influence of the radio, television (tv) and social media were dominant in all the states studied. Radio was more popular in influence in the Northern states while newspapers are the least influential on voters of the three media types studied.

Results of Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

The Focus Group Discussions did not differ remarkably from the responses from the questionnaires. The discussants agree that people in rural and sub-urban areas obtain quality political information from others who are heavy users of the mass media. But unlike decades ago when they had very poor access to the media, in contemporary terms, they seemed to have more access through media convergence. The improved access to mobile telephony for Nigerians generally may have extended the access of people in rural environments to the mass media. The FGD participants believe that the rural voters do gain access to the mass media to seek and obtain information about the presidential candidates. In addition, the main information sources for political information in rural areas are the social media, the radio and television (tv). The FGD participants (unlike the picture painted by the responses to the questionnaires) unanimously agreed that newspapers had practically no critical influences on voters in the rural areas. They rate the social media much higher than all other media types, arguing that the social media is steadily breaking the 'illiteracy barrier' to civic education in rural areas. Furthermore, the FGD panel considered 'opinion leaders' as more influential whereas in the responses to the questionnaire, the voters rated radio and tv as more influential across the states. Finally, majority of the FGD members suggested that personality, political party, financial inducement, programmes proposed and popularity of candidates as projected by the media (in that order) are the major factors affecting voters' decision on whom to vote for amongst the presidential candidates.

S/N	STATE	Radio	TV	Newspaper
1	Bamue	29	44	73
	%	8.4	101.1	9.3
2	Kaduna	22	59	81
	%	6.3	10.1	10.3
3	River	59	7	66
	%	7.0	13.5	8.4
4	Anambra	40	21	81
	%	11.5	4.6	7.8
5	Oyo	52	12	64
	%	15.0	4.8	8.2
6	Ogun	15	2.7	51
	%	4.3	8.2	6.5
7	Adamawa	16	57	73
	%	4.6	13.0	9.3
8	Imo	17	43	60
	%	4.9	9.8	7.1
9	FCT Abuja	13	62	75
	%	3.7	14.2	9.6
10	Kano	47	23	70
	%	13.5	5.3	8.9
11	Taraba	19	53	72
	%	5.5	12.1	9.2
12	Edo	18	20	38
	%	5.2	4.6	4.8
	Total	436.9	605	804
		100%	100%	

Conclusion

This study has provided scientific information on how voters in rural areas, given their poor access to the mass media in Nigeria, obtain information about presidential candidates and their programmes. In this study, about half of the rural voters have more access to television (tv) and radio, hence the two-step/opinion leadership influence could be interpreted as “indirect influence”. In addition, this study also revealed factors which affect voters’ decision on presidential candidates in Nigeria. Extraneous factors such as financial inducement and rigging could be factors in the outcome of elections as popularly believed, membership/affiliation to political parties and access to the mass media (including social media) engender more influence in terms of which candidate is voted for. Furthermore, this study also revealed that residents of rural and sub-urban areas are gaining more access to the mass media (radio, television and social media) and this could serve as cheaper and effective platforms to reach rural voters than rallies and other interpersonal communication channels. Finally rural dwellers in Nigeria now seek more political information through the social media. This machine-mediated interpersonal communication channel offers prospects for political communication campaign for presidential elections because of the vast territorial spread and huge population to cover by the presidential candidates.

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