

The Mass Media and Voter Decision Making: An Assessment of Ghana's 2012 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections

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Abstract

Few citizens personally attend political campaign rallies. Many depend on the mass media and other sources for news about political campaigns. In an election without the media, the voters would likely end up not having full information about whatever took place during the election. It is against this background that the current study sought to investigate the role the media play in voter choices and how this role is perceived. Using questionnaire as a data collection instrument, views of some 300 respondents from Accra, the capital city of Ghana was surveyed. Findings indicate that a significant percent of voters in Ghana's 2012 Presidential and Parliamentary elections based their choices on what they have heard through media reports. A significant percent also were indifferent as to whether the media performed well or not. This brings to the fore the agenda-setting power of the media. The study therefore recommends that the media be more circumspect in their reportage because whatever is reported is regarded the "truth" by the many of the audiences, especially those without the capacity to personally interrogate the issues.

Keywords: Ghana, Accra, mass media, voter decision, political campaigns

1. Introduction

The media are essential to democracy and a democratic election is impossible without the media. This is more relevant in the context that the media is seen to be acting as a crucial watchdog to democratic elections, safeguarding the transparency of the process. Indeed it would be considered contradiction in-terms in a democratic election where the media is not seen and given freedom to educate and report on campaign activities. The mass media are the most common source for information about election campaigns in democracies and societies in transition around the world even though there had been consistent concerns about political bias in the mass media in the heart of debates about the roles and responsibilities of the media at election time.

During electioneering period, activities such as campaigns, political rallies and different political meetings are held and a huge percentage of the electorate never gets a direct opportunity to be present at any of these events. In terms of getting information about different political parties and candidates therefore, voters rely on the media to have full information in regards to the candidates and parties. Few citizens personally attend political-campaign rallies hence, most people depend on other sources of information. Voters turn to the news media to receive many of the messages about the candidates and not directly from the candidates. Patterson *et al* (1976) explains that "of all the information voters obtain through the mass media during a presidential campaign, knowledge about where the candidates stand and issues being talked about are very important.

Here in Ghana, both the state-owned and privately-owned media contribute to the general elections. Temin *et al* (2000) argue that not only do the media play an obviously crucial role in Ghana's presidential and parliamentary elections, but also they contribute to the general success of the elections.

Several issues dominate media discussions during electioneering periods which turn to favour one party or the other. In the United States for example, studies have dealt with newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns. Klein *et al* (1954) investigated newspaper coverage of the 1952 presidential contest and found that 60 percent of stories concerned policy or issues, 16 percent devoted to candidate's personal qualities (character), and 15 percent was about scandals.

Additionally, D'Alessio *et al* (2000) investigated whether candidates from one political party received more coverage than candidates from the other political parties. They found that newspapers, reporters and editors may have their ideological bias in the coverage of presidential campaigns, but such bias has insignificant influence on the net coverage of candidates.

Ghana currently has a vibrant press that plays a key role in political discourse and thus was very active during the presidential and parliamentary elections on the 7th of December 2012 which elected the president and 275 members of parliament. While the media were hailed by many onlookers of the success they have chalked in giving coverage for the election, little is known on the critical role the media has played in the voter-decision making during the elections. It is on that basis that this study becomes very significant.

2. Problem Statement

There has been decades of debate by various scholars about the influences of the media during elections (Blankson 2007). Many of the major findings in these studies assume that there are possibilities that the media do influence the public in terms of voter decision and the said influence(s) in which the media have on the

public, it is argued, could arise from the negative or positive standpoints. It could also be both negative/positive influences on the public.

Scholars still differ on the specific role, in terms of positive or negative, the media play during elections. Garret (2010), for example, supports the claim that the media plays very crucial roles during elections and further argues that the current role seems intent on misleading the public into a particular way of thinking, which is further described as propaganda. Graber (1990) on the other hand argue that the mass media is responsible for structuring voters' perceptions of political reality because, through their reporting capability and ability to reach large audience members, they can considerably influence issues that make up the agenda for any particular election.

While all the above studies indicate the role the media play during elections, significantly missing in the body of literature is how the electorate perceived these roles and their overall effects. Without such an understanding of the specific role, as perceived by the voters in each election, especially of those in "young democracies", we are left in an inadequate analysis that could create the condition for ill-informed policy decisions and a misunderstanding of the role the media play/ought to play in elections. This study will remedy this gap in the literature by examining the opinion of the average Ghanaian who has participated in the 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections about how they perceived the media and the specific areas of influence.

3. Study Objectives

While the general objective of the study is to investigate the perception of the Ghanaian electorate of the media in the 2012 Presidential and Parliamentary elections, the specific objectives are:

- a) to investigate if the respondents chose candidates they voted for in the 2012 presidential and parliamentary election based on media reports/coverage and
- b) to investigate the respondents' perception of the media coverage of Ghana's 2012 Presidential and Parliamentary election

4. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The study is situated within two theories – Media Dependency and Agenda Setting. The Media Dependency Theory says the more a person becomes dependent on the media to fulfill specific needs, the more the media become important to that individual. The media will also have much more influence and power over that individual. If someone is so dependent on the media for information, like those about candidates in an election, and the media is that person's only source of information, then it is easy for the media to set the agenda.

The Media Dependency theory was propounded by Ball-Rockeach and Defleur in 1970, in response to weak-effects models of mass communication. The theory focuses on dependency: a relationship in which the attainment of goals by one party is contingent upon the resources of another party.

The Agenda-Setting theory on the other hand, is good at explaining why people with similar media exposure place importance on the same issues. Although different people may feel differently about the issue at hand, most people feel the same issues are important. The history of Agenda-setting theory originated from Walter Lippmann's 1922 book, "Public Opinion" which clearly addressed the issue of media impact on its audience. In this book, Lippmann asserts that the media creates a picture of the world and through their constant reportage on this picture, influences the audience's mindset positively about the picture. The general understanding of agenda-setting by the audience is that the media has the ability to influence the important events or what McCombs and Shaw (1972) referred to as salience events in the public mind that has become part of how political influences of the media are described. Studies on agenda setting reveal that news coverage of campaigns can be a significant source of issue knowledge for voters.

A number of scholarly works exist on the role of the media during elections. Besley, Burgess and Prat (2002) for example, emphasize that a "free or non-captured media can affect political outcomes through three routes, namely: sorting, discipline and policy salience". Sorting they argue, refers to the process by which politicians are selected to hold office. The kind of information media provide can be important to voters who are deciding who to put in charge. This includes information about candidate's previous track records; their actions, while in office may also be an important source of information about their underlying motivation or competence. By publishing stories or advertisements that responsibly cast light on this, the media, they claim, can be a powerful force. The role of the media in achieving discipline is most relevant in situations of hidden action. This involves exposure of activities which perpetrators do not want the public to know. The media can also affect which issues are salient to voters which the Agenda-Setting theory fairly postulates. This would be made possible or easier through political communication or political advertisements

On their part, Zaller *et al* (1992) argue that the more negative information individuals "know" about a candidate, the less favorable they feel toward the candidate and the less likely they will vote for the candidate. This, when extended, would mean that a media that wants to set a negative agenda against one candidate may choose to continuously publish more negative stories about that candidate which may not allure to his/her

advantage. Voters also place greater emphasis on negative campaign information than they do on positive information, thus attend to negative information more closely and place more weight on negative candidate attributes than on positive ones when forming evaluations, all of which is consistent with models of attitude formation indicating negative information moves candidate assessment downward (ibid).

Grabber (2001) also claims that media coverage is the very life blood of politics because it shapes the perceptions that form the reality on which political action is based. Media, she continuous, do more than depict the political environment; they are the political environment. Indeed, the mass media are not only key avenues for providing the required information; they also determine what is available in the public domain. Mass media enrich democracy, while democracy provides conducive environment for an efficient functioning of the mass media. It is almost impossible to have a democratic society without the full complement of a robust mass media system. It can be fairly concluded that a country that could lay claim to high democratic standards but does not have very vibrant media may just be described as ‘wanting’ or at best ‘defective’. McNair (2002) thus fittingly pointed out that “in democratic political systems, media function both as transmitters of political communication which originates outside the media organization itself and as senders of political messages constructed by journalists”. This also explains why political parties spend a lot of fortune placing continuous political advertisement in the media during electioneering periods.

5. Methodology

This research design adopted the quantitative method to investigate if respondents chose candidates they voted for in the 2012 Presidential and Parliamentary elections based on media reports. The quantitative method is a method that involves both the measurement of facts through the ideas, opinions of people and placing them in tables that requires numerical data/analysis. Quantitative methods emphasize objective measurements and the statistical, mathematical or numerical analysis of data collected through polls, questionnaires and surveys or by manipulating pre-existing statistical data using computational techniques.

This study also adopted the primary method of data collection which involves administering a standardized questionnaire to 300 respondents. It was conducted in Accra; the capital of Ghana which is considered the hub of the major media houses in Ghana. Accra is also a cosmopolitan city and very interesting results are produced during elections as it is considered by election watchers as a ‘swing’ region in terms of voting trends. Multi-stage sampling was used. At the first stage of the sampling, the population of Accra was put into a cluster of four and the Western part chosen for the study. The sample was chosen purposively from among the electorate that voted in the 2012 Presidential and Parliamentary elections.

6. Findings and discussions

- a) The first objective was *to investigate if the respondents chose candidates they voted for in the 2012 presidential and parliamentary election based on media reports.*

Respondents were asked if they voted for their choices in the elections based on media reports, campaign advertisements, discussions or comments made in the media. The table below indicates the result.

Table 1 - Voter decision based on media influences

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	162	54
No	138	46
Total	300	100

From the figure above, a significant 54 percent of respondents said they were influenced by the media in voting for their respective candidates in the 2012 Presidential and Parliamentary elections in Ghana, while 46 percent of the respondents said they were not influenced by the media in their choice of candidates. These answers clearly illuminated the general concept of media dependency theory on most respondents.

Looking at the noteworthy number of respondents of over more than half of the respondents, who were influenced by the media in their choice of candidates in the 2012 Presidential and Parliamentary elections in Ghana, it reveals how powerful the media can be in setting the agenda on voter decisions.

The respondents were further asked to provide major attributes or frames that appealed to them in these media coverage. A higher number of respondents (34%) said they were motivated based on candidates’ personality/charisma exhibited when they see their candidates address large crowds that hail them. To this group, large crowds show the level of support across the country and they want to be part of the numbers. Again, 26 percent of respondents based their decision on the media discussions during news review programs on radio and television while 9 percent say campaign adverts influenced their choices. In terms of developmental projects, 30 percent agree that news reports on the major achievements of the NDC and NPP (the two major political parties in Ghana) while in office as showcased by the media in terms of news features played a significant role in their choices.

Dependency on media for different purposes has been exposed to predict a variety of attitudes and behaviours, including product purchases, participation in public deliberation political perceptions and voting decisions (Davies, 2009). The findings above can be clarified with the relevance of both the media dependency theory and the agenda –setting theory which explain that the more dependent an individual is on the media that sets various agenda, the more their contents affects the daily life of the individual which was shown in the significant percentage of respondents who based their voter decision on the media influence.

b) The second objective of the study was *to investigate the respondents’ perception of the media coverage of Ghana’s 2012 Presidential and Parliamentary election*

This objective has been very significant following the number that based their voter decisions on the media reports. Respondents were asked their opinion on the coverage of the media before and during the elections in 2012. The table below provides the findings.

Table 2 - Respondents’ assessment of media coverage of 2012 elections

Options	Frequency	Percent
Very Satisfactory	38	12.66
Satisfactory	81	27
Very unsatisfactory	21	7
Unsatisfactory	58	19.33
Indifferent	102	34
Total	300	100

The finding in the table above shows that out of the 300 respondents 38, making 12.66 percent rated the media coverage as very satisfactory, 81 representing 27 percent rated them as satisfactory while 21 representing 7 percent said their work was very unsatisfactory. Again, 58 respondents, representing 19.33 rated the coverage as unsatisfactory, while a significant 102, representing a 34 percent were just indifferent.

It may not be entirely surprising that a significant 34 percent claim they are indifferent because a high percentage of the Ghanaian population is still regarded as illiterate so to them, anything said on radio, or the television is ‘fine’. This is why the media is able to easily set the agenda because there is a ‘fertile’ population who may just accept that which they hear. This is easy especially so as many of the voting population could not have had a direct access to the political messages but for the media.

This finding is also important because a cumulative of 79 respondents, representing 26.33 percent seem not to be satisfied with the reports of the media for the period under study. It will mean that some level of bias or ‘insufficiency’ is still being observed by the respondents. The media would have to take steps in addressing this perception as it can affect the continuous dependency on them in future reports.

7. Conclusion and recommendation

The media’s primary role is to disseminate news to the general public. The public relies on the media to get information with respect to all issues of life including who to vote for in an election. It is in this light that in the effort to set the agenda of who to vote for, the media must be circumspect in their pronouncements as this study has again brought to the fore the significant role they (media) play in voter decision. The media is also encouraged to ensure that they do away with any perceived biases in order to continuously remain as the medium to depend on for decision making especially during elections.

People should also be aware that the media has limits as many issues in terms of ownership, advertisement powers of the parties and the individual biases of the media practitioners have a part to play in the overall media reports. This makes it almost impossible to wholly depend on only one medium for information. The media should however be aware of the improvement needed on its role so that mistakes wouldn’t be made repeatedly.

Seeing that this study was limited to a small area in Accra, further studies can be conducted across the country to fully access the influence of the media on the electorates in the 2012 Presidential and Parliamentary elections in Ghana. That notwithstanding, the findings in the current study, cannot be ignored since they are significant and can play tangible roles in policy formulation.

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