



IMPLICATIONS OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING ON VOTERS' CHOICE OF CANDIDATE DURING THE 2019 GOVERNORSHIP ELECTION IN AKWA IBOM STATE

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ABSTRACT

During the 2019 governorship elections in Akwa Ibom State, political parties and their candidates filled the media with a lot of information on their visions and agenda in order to gain the goodwill of the people especially during the polls. They believed that whereas people may already have their preferred party or candidates, it is possible that these advertising messages may have positive impact on voters' behaviour or even lead to behavioural adjustments. Hence, this study sought to determine the extent to which these advertising messages influenced voters' choice of a political party and/or candidate. The survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study was 1,548,531. Thus, 384 respondents were selected as sample size. Results from the survey revealed that there is no doubt that voters were greatly exposed to political advertising (40%). However, the effect on influencing choice of candidates to vote for during the polls was minimal (6%). The study recommends that advertising agencies for political parties and their candidates should be more persuasive and intimate in their message content to enhance its influence over other factors that are considered during choosing candidate.

Keywords: Political advertising, voters' behavior, the 2019 governorship election, PDP, APC, Akwa Ibom State

Introduction

Political parties and their candidates make use of an assortment of mass media channels to create awareness about their visions, programmes and also make their ideologies known to voters. This is referred to as political advertising. Political advertising and advertisements have increasingly become very common in today's world. It has grown to the point that its use as a political campaigning tool has great significance on voters' behaviour during the polls (Sharma, 2012, p.43). Asemah (2010, p.20) observes that "political advertising is used by politicians to persuade people to vote for them and it is therefore part and parcel of political process in Nigeria and any other democratic society".

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that for voters to choose a particular candidate over others, certain factors may influence such decision. These are; how persuasive enough the campaign messages are designed, previous held beliefs and attitude towards a political party or candidate. Given these reasons in mind, there is a possibility that advertising messages carried out by various political parties and their candidates may or may not influence the electorate decision to vote a particular candidate or not. Durante and Gutierrez (2014, p. 1) are proponents of the above school of thought. They think that "the mere fact that political actors invest considerable resources on advertisements does not merely suggest that they should have some influence on voters' attitudes and choices".

Since, advertising messages could be said to be designed to inform and persuade people, there are possibilities that people may be persuaded to have a change in mind about a political candidate or party. As a result of this change in perception, they could be some behavioural adjustments in people with regards to their voting choices. Given that the 2019 governorship election in Akwa Ibom State witnessed various political parties and their candidates carrying out various kinds of advertisements in order to persuade the voting public, it is therefore necessary to find out the impact these messages had on the Akwa Ibom State voters' behaviour during the 2019 governorship election in Akwa Ibom State.

Statement of the Research Problem:

In order to gain the goodwill of the people especially during elections, political parties and their candidates fill the media with a lot of information on their visions, agenda etc. In a bid to win favour from the electorate, some advertisers even go as far as presenting a bad image of another candidate by employing negative advertising messages. However, owing to the fact that people may already have their preferred party or candidates, it is possible that these advertising messages carried out by political advertisers may or may not have impact on voter behaviour or even lead to any behavioural adjustments. Given that political advertisements are aimed at informing and persuading the electorate, to vote a particular candidate or party. It is necessary to ask: To what extent did the political advertising messages carried out by political parties and their candidates during the 2019 governorship election in Akwa Ibom State influence voters' behaviour?

Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the study were to:

- i. Ascertain the level of exposure of voters' to the political ads during the 2019 governorship election in Akwa Ibom State.
- ii. Find out the media through which they were exposed to the advertising messages.

- iii. Examine voters' perception of the political advertising during the 2019 governorship election in Akwa Ibom State.
- iv. Determine the extent to which these advertising messages influenced voters' choice of a political party/candidate.
- v. Ascertain the other factors besides political ads that influenced voters' decision during the 2019 governorship election.

Review of Related Literature

Voter Behaviour in Nigeria

Eldersveld in his article, theory and method in voting behaviour research as cited in Hazarika (2015, p. 22), writes that “‘voting behaviour’ is not confined to the examination of voting statistics, records and computation of electoral shifts and swings. It also involves an analysis of individual psychological processes (perception, emotion, and motivation) and their relation to political action as well as of institutional patterns, such as the communication process and their impact on election”. In the words of Plano and Riggs as cited in Akhter and Sheik (2014, p. 104), “voting behaviour is a field of study concerned with the ways in which people tend to vote in public election and the reasons why they vote as they do.” Akhter and Sheik (2014, p. 105) observe that “the behaviour of a voter is influenced by several factors such as religion, caste, community, language, money, policy or ideology, purpose of the polls, extent of franchise....”

Empirical review of literature

Ojekwe, (n.d) carried out a study to examine the impact of the political advertising campaign messages of the All Progressive Congress (APC) gubernatorial candidate in Lagos state, Akinwunmi Amobde on the electorate voting behaviour. Findings from the study showed that political ad campaigns had a minimal effect on electorate voting behaviour although it still played an important role in the electoral process. According to the researcher, irrespective of whether political candidates advertise or not, the electorates have a preconceived choice of candidate. Hence, exposure to Ad campaigns of other contestants does little in changing that preconceived choice as peoples decision to vote a candidate or not; could most likely be as a result of party affiliations, word of mouth, strong opinion leader, simple personal appeal or other unknown factors.

Similarly, Abati, (2016) executed a study to examine the influence of political advertising messages on the choice of governorship candidates by the electorate in Ogun State, South West Nigeria, in the 2011 governorship election. And it was revealed that the electorates in Ogun State were well exposed to political advertising messages. According to the researcher, the findings suggest that the electorate in Ogun State follow trends during election. Particularly the one that would determine who governs them.

In the same vein, Owuamalam, (2014) studied how voters perception of political advertisements before the presidential election in Nigeria, influences their decision to select a specific candidate during the election or not. The findings reveal that the choice of a unique selling proposition in political advertisements is not a major compelling force for candidates' selection at election. The researcher concludes by saying that political communication content should be well focused to attract audience attention, retain their interest and elicit the desired response. It must be persuasive enough to generate zeal in achieving the communication objective.

Theoretical Framework: The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) was propounded by Petty and Cacioppo in the 80s and argues that they are two sets of people: those who seek more detailed information on an issue critically ask questions and those who may be passive about the same issue. According to Petty and Cacioppo, those that get more involved in information seeking follow the central route to persuasion while those who are passive on the issue use the peripheral route to persuasion. According to Udeze and Akpan (2013, p. 52), this “model argues that sometimes, the audience is active, thinking about messages and the argument in those messages. It also argues that at other times, receivers are passive, and are persuaded by peripheral route”.

In understanding voter's behaviour, this theory explains that they are those who are likely to be persuaded to vote for a political candidate on mere seeing of advertising messages about the candidate on the media. These people could be referred to as those following the peripheral route. They are those who are persuaded by the pictures of the candidates, their physical appearances, smiles etc. They could also be seen as those who at a face value believe whatever message a political advertiser says about the opponent.

Methodology

The survey research design was used to gather data for the study. The population of this study consisted of registered voters who were eligible to vote in the 2019 governorship elections from the three senatorial districts of Akwa Ibom State. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Uyo Senatorial district had 550, 234 registered voters, Ikot Ekpene Senatorial district had 464,863 registered voters while Eket Senatorial district 533,434. Hence, the population of the study was 1,548,531. Using Philip Meyer's guide (1979) as cited in (Bethel, 2003), 384 respondents were selected as a representative sample for this study. The researchers adopted the cluster sampling as sampling procedure for selecting sample size using three major towns in each senatorial districts headquarters namely: Ikot Ekpene, Eket and Uyo. 128 respondents were selected from each town to make up the sample size of 384.

The questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection and was administered directly on respondents by the researchers. The questionnaire was presented to experts in the field of political communication who accessed the correctness, clarity, appropriates and coherence of the instrument in measuring what it is expected to measure. Data obtained from this study was analysed using tables and percentages for presentation and interpretation of results.

Presentation and analysis of survey data

This section is basically designed to present, analyze and interpret the primary data obtained via the questionnaire which was administered to the respondents. These are shown in the table below:

Table 1: Responses on Exposure to Political Parties' Advertisement

S/N	Options	Very great extent *(%)	Great extent (%)	Neutral (%)	Little extent (%)	Very Little extent (%)	Total (%)
1	Level of exposure to political advertisement during the 2019 governorship elections in Akwa Ibom state	87 (28)	126 (40)	68 (22)	17 (5)	15 (5)	313 (100)
2	Level of exposure to political advertisement by People's Democratic Party during the 2019 governorship elections in Akwa Ibom state	108 (35)	113 (36)	20 (6)	52 (17)	20 (6)	313 (100)
3	Level of exposure to political advertisement by All Progressive Congress during the 2019 governorship elections in Akwa Ibom state	143 (46)	111 (35)	19 (6)	30 (10)	10 (3)	313 (100)

Source: Field work, 2019 * *Rounded up percentages inserted in brackets*

The data in table 1 presents responses on exposure to political advertising during the 2019 governorship elections in Akwa Ibom State. It revealed a sharp positive difference in the opinion of respondents on the level of exposure to political advertisement. Generally, entry 1 revealed that the respondents were greatly exposed to political advertisement with a wide margin between those greatly exposed to political advertisement (40%) and those exposed to a little extent (5%). Entry 2 and 3 presents a comparative analysis of the level of exposure to advertisement by PDP (35%) and APC (46%). Respondents were more exposure to political advertising by APC than PDP. This also implies that APC was more engaged in political advertising in the state than PDP which happened to be the government in power.

This finding goes in line with the assertion of Abati in 2016 that in the past two decades Nigeria has witnessed an increase in political advertising in Nigeria. This increase according to Abati (2016) is attributed to the developments in information and communication technology and the realization of the potent force of the media of mass communication in packaging not only products, but ideas and political candidates (p. 223).

Table 2: Responses on Medium of Political Advertisement Frequently Exposed to

Direction/Option	Very Great Extent *(%)	Great Extent (%)	Neutral (%)	Little Extent (%)	Very Little Extent (%)	Total (%)
Billboards	87 (28)	52 (17)	45 (14)	58 (18)	71 (23)	313 (100)
Posters	102 (33)	47 (15)	50 (16)	53 (17)	61 (19)	313 (100)
Radio	110 (35)	98 (32)	32 (10)	63 (20)	10 (3)	313 (100)
Television	82 (26)	120 (38)	68 (22)	22 (7)	21 (7)	313 (100)
Newspaper	100 (32)	100 (32)	33 (11)	51 (16)	29 (9)	313 (100)
Social Media	108 (35)	100 (32)	0 (0)	58 (19)	40 (13)	313 (100)

Source: Field work, 2019 * *Rounded up percentages inserted in brackets*

The table 2 above indicates the responses provided by respondents on the media through which they were exposed to political advertisement. In a comparative analysis of the media of political advertising through which the respondents were very greatly exposed to, radio (110 respondents) and social media (108 respondents with a rounded up 35%) ranked top of the list. Billboards (87 respondents with 28%) and Television (82 respondents with a rounded up 26%) ranked the two last media. Posters (33%) and newspapers (32%) stood in between. This implies that the urban as well as the rural communities had media of political advertising that appealed to them. The social media might have appealed to more urban communities while radio reached the rural communities.

Table 3: Political Advertisement Influence on Voters' Choice of Candidate

S/N	Options	Very great extent *(%)	Great extent (%)	Neutral (%)	Little extent (%)	Very Little extent (%)	Total (%)
1	Level of exposure to political advertisement during the 2019 governorship elections in Akwa Ibom state influence on voters' choice of candidate before the polls.	20 (6)	24 (8)	0 (0)	160 (51)	109 (35)	313 (100)
2	Level of exposure to political advertisement during the 2019 governorship elections in Akwa Ibom state influence on voters' choice of candidate after the polls.	0 (0)	43 (14)	55 (17)	80 (26)	135 (43)	313 (100)
3	Political advertisement during the 2019 governorship elections in Akwa Ibom state was intentional tailored to influence on voters' choice of candidate.	69 (22)	80 (26)	60 (19)	58 (19)	46 (15)	313 (100)

Source: Field work, 2019 * *Rounded up percentages inserted in brackets*

Table 3 reveals that respondents responses on how political advertisement influences voters' choice of candidate. The first entry on this table 3 shows that there was little influence of the political advertisement (51%) on voters' choice of governorship candidates. This implies that although the voters were greatly exposed to political advertisement, it had minimal positive effect on the voters' choice of candidate before the polls (51%) and during the polls (43%). Nonetheless, the second entry on the table revealed that political advertising seems to have slight increase in positive effect during the polls. That is, there is a high chance that the political advertisement seen few minutes before the polls or during the polls can influence choice of candidate slightly. Of course, voters (80 respondents with 26%) are to a great extent aware that political advertisements are uniquely tailored to influence their choice of party and candidate.

The finding above corresponds with Lazarsfeld *et al* (1944) sociological model of voting behaviour which states that the electorates are influenced by exposure to the media. But, it disagrees with the level of effect. According to Lazarsfeld *et al* in 1944, voting is an individual choice which is largely affected by the voter's personality and the voter's exposure to the media. That is, voters choice of candidates are greatly influenced by the amount of media they are exposed to and the kind of persons they are. Nonetheless, our finding corresponds ultimately with the finding made by Ojekwe (n.d) that political ad campaigns had a minimal effect on electorate voting behaviour although it still played an important role in the electoral process.

Table 4: Voters' Perception of Political Advertisement during the 2019 Governorship Elections in Akwa Ibom state

S/N	Options	Very great extent *(%)	Great extent (%)	Neutral (%)	Little extent (%)	Very Little extent (%)	Total (%)
1	PDP political advertisement was responsible for its success.	25 (8)	78 (25)	100 (32)	60 (19)	50 (16)	313 (100)
2	APC political advertisement was responsible for its failure.	47 (15)	58 (19)	60 (19)	85 (27)	63 (20)	313 (100)

Source: Field work, 2019 * *Rounded up percentages inserted in brackets*

Table 4 indicates in its first entry that 16% of the respondents were of a very strong opinion that the success of PDP in the election was not due to their political advertisement. This is also the case with the entry on whether the political advertising of APC was responsible for its failure. 20% of the respondents are of the opinion that the political advertising of APC had very little to do with its political advertising. Putting this two together, it is nothing far from true to assert that the respondents believed that political advertising was neither responsible for the success of the PDP nor the failure of the APC.

Table 5: Responses on other Factors that influenced Choice of Candidate

Options	Numbers of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Personal Interest	83	27
Religious Inclination	75	24
Friends' Opinion	50	16
Tips at polling Units	48	15
Candidate Ideology	37	12
Bang wagon (general opinion)	20	6
Total	313	100

Source: Field work, 2019 * *Rounded up percentages inserted in brackets*

The table 5 shows the opinions presented by the respondents and its frequency (that is, the number of respondents who stated them). According to the table respondents were asked to express other factors that influenced the choice of candidates during the 2019 governorship election. The table showed that the majority of opinions expressed were related to personal interest and liking for the political party as well as the candidate chosen (27%). Being a very religious state, 24% of the

respondents suggested factors that related to religious inclinations such as church denomination. Tips at polling units and monetary rewards were the summary of the opinion of 15% of the respondents.

It is nothing to argue that the choice of candidate by voters can be affected by other factors than political advertising. As earlier noticed in a study by Akhter and Sheik (2014), the behaviour of a voter can also be influenced by several other factors such as religion, caste, community, language, money, policy or ideology, purpose of the polls, extent of franchise, etc. These factors could suggest why two people may perceive a candidate or a political party differently. More so, people may feel obliged to vote for those they consider to be closely associated with – personal interest. Other reasons such as language and class may also influence voter's behaviour and choice of who to vote for. As a matter of fact, poverty and low job employments have made many Nigerian politicians take these opportunities to use money as a means to buy voters.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it can be said that even though there were other factors that influenced voters' choice of candidates such as personal interest, religious inclination, band wagon opinion, and friends' opinion, political advertisement remained a significant force to reckon with during the during the 2019 governorship election in Akwa Ibom state, although its influence on affect the choice of candidate was very little. However, the political advertisement increases the awareness as well as level political participation especially young ladies. It is important to note that political advertisement was deliberately useful as a persuasive device for and uniquely manipulated and tailored by political parties to influence voters' choice of candidates at the polls. But, the political advertisement of PDP and APC did not contribute to its success or failure respectively.

Recommendation

The study recommends that

- i. Advertising agencies for political parties and their candidates should be more persuasive and intimate in their message content to enhance its influence over other factors that are considered during choosing candidate as well as adopt newer approaches and methods to enhance the level of influence of political advertising during elections.

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