Political Advertising and Voters' Decision:
A Study of the 2015 Governorship Election in Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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Abstract
Through the agency of the mass media, political actors set the agenda for the electorate during campaigns. They seek to reach potential voters with well-articulated and aesthetically designed messages to persuade them to vote in a desired way. This study examined the influence of political advertising on the voting decision among the Ebonyi State electorate in the 2015 governorship election in the South East State. The objective was to determine the extent to which the electorate in Ebonyi State was exposed to political advertising, which group of media users were most disposed to political advertising as well as the extent such political advertising messages influenced the voting decisions of the electorate. To achieve this, the study used the survey method with the questionnaire as research instrument, employing multi-stage sampling to select the respondents. On the whole, 300 respondents were selected in the six federal constituencies that make up the three senatorial zones in the State. The findings indicated, among other things, that the electorate in Ebonyi State was well exposed to political advertising; that the voters who were both partisan and active constitute the group most disposed to political advertising messages and were therefore influenced more in their voting choice in the election. In the light of the findings, it was confirmed that political advertising was essential factor in the political decisions of majority of the electorate in Ebonyi State. Flowing from this, it was recommended that candidates seeking political offices should strive to understand their target audience in packaging their political messages and utilize effective strategies and tactics in designing and placement of political messages.
Keywords: Political Advertising .Opinion .Democracy .Political parties

INTRODUCTION
In democratic system of government, the primary duty of the political party is to provide the policy framework for governance and to sponsor candidates on its platform to pursue those policies. They serve as platform through which politicians contest for positions and machinery for mobilizing the people to vote their candidates into office. In ideal situations, the decision to vote any candidate or party depends on the level of political awareness of a people at a given time. As such, potential voters are availed of information about the policies and manifestoes of the respective parties, the qualifications, antecedents, political records as well as the personality traits of the candidates being put forward for election. It is for these reasons that political actors and their supporters deploy all manner of persuasive strategies and tactics to elicit support and woo voters in order to gain and control power.

Lack of political awareness is greatly associated with the predominance of illiterates that constitute the electorate. Consequently, the uninformed electorate tends to ignore character or the big issues of the campaign such as the economy, unemployment, infrastructure, unemployment, insecurity, and living conditions. Their voting decisions are rather based on trivial considerations like party loyalty, social ties, ethnic, religious affiliation, monetary inducement and material gifts, all the shadowy factors with which politicians take undue advantage of voters' lack of knowledge to perpetrate and consolidate the existing culture to

their gain. One of the most efficient means was the media of mass communication which have now constituted the mainstream of modern electoral politics. Public information is therefore crucial if citizens are to make informed judgments and decisions about the policies, proposals and political personalities in the political process. Through information, people get the necessary background to participate fully in the electoral process.

Jefkin (2007) cited in Udeze and Akpan (2013) argues that "mass production requires mass consumption, which in turn requires advertising to the mass market through the mass media." Just like tangible products, ideas and services need to be advertised for the people to be aware of its existence and very nature and subsequently accept them. It is for this reason that candidates running for elections into various offices, at different levels, in all climes, make big spends to market themselves to the potential voters. The 2015 election witnessed massive deployment of the arsenal of the media by different political parties, made extensive use of advertising to sell their different political parties and candidates to the electorate. The assumption underlying this position is the belief that through advertising messages, political parties may enhance their chances of persuading the electorate to vote for their candidates. The flip side of the coin in this assumption is that those who fail to use advertising as may be appropriate may not realize their electoral goals. However, this not to suggest a relapse to the era of unlimited effect of the media as there could as well be some intervening variables in the process.

Political advertising as a means of raising political consciousness and generating support base has gained ground in Nigeria political landscape. It has become a component of politics and politicking. While the political gladiators deploy it to seek for votes, the regulatory bodies and civil society groups use political advertising messages to sensitize the electorate on how to vote (Tejumaiye, 2008, p.85). The Nigerian electorate is getting more politically enlightened and therefore, becoming more knowledgeable about the voting process (Oyovbaire, 1992,p. iii). Obeta (2007, p.123) offers a piece of advice that any person or group of persons and even government that ignore the media in their life is courting some danger because media reportage on the political life alone is crucial to its survival and growth. Denton and Woodward (1998,p.11) add that "the crucial factor that makes communication 'political' is not the source of a message, but its content and purpose." This is because political communication, in substance, revolves around the intentions of its senders to influence the political environment.

Some of the questions that readily come up are: were these advertising messages properly packaged and delivered? Were they properly received by those they were meant for? Were they perceived as true and believable? And did they contribute to the nexus of influence that accounted for the voting behaviour of the electorate, for whom the messages were meant? It is in the light of the above that the study examined the influence of political advertising on the voting decision of the Nigerian electorate, using the 2015 gubernatorial election in Ebonyi State as a case in point.

Statement of the Problem

During the 2015 general election in Nigeria, political parties and their candidates made use of advertising to sell their parties and the candidates. In Ebonyi State, the campaign advertisement was massive and extensive. In the 2015 governorship election in the state, fourteen political parties participated. However, only four out of fourteen political parties had significant presence and visible campaign platform. They are the All Progressive Congress (APC) represented by Senator Julius Ali Ucha, the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) represented by Senator Anthony Agbo, the Labour Party (LP) represented by Arch. Edward Nkwegu and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) represented by Engr. Chief Dave Nweze Umahi. However, just sending out messages does not necessarily mean that they were properly targeted, nor does it imply that they were understood and accepted by the desired target group, such that it actually influenced their voting behaviour in the 2015 governorship elections in the state. Or were there intervening variables in the communication process? It is in the light of the above that the study seeks to determine the influence of political advertising on the voting decision of some critical groups in the 2015 governorship election in Ebonyi State.

Research Questions

This study was based on the following research questions:

1. To what extent was the electorate in Ebonyi State exposed to political advertising in the Mass Media?
2. Will the partisan elements in the population of study exhibit more knowledge of the political process than the non-partisan group?
3. Will the active elements in the population be more influenced by political advertising messages in their voting decisions than non-active group?

Review of Related Literature

The Concept of Political Advertising

Advertising is one of the elements in the promotional mix in marketing, a branch of which is political advertising. Alongside public relations, it occupies the centre stage of promotion of political candidates and parties vying for political positions during electioneering campaigns (Ansolabere and Iyenga, 1995). Advertising messages do influence public perception of candidates and for many people, the main source of 'news' about political candidates is not the news at all, it is political advertising. There are instances where early polls indicate that a candidate was extremely unpopular with the electorate who went ahead to win the election at the end of the day, as result of the strength of massive media political advertising campaign that he mounted.

Political advertising, according to McNair (2002), refers to the purchase and use of media space, in order to transmit political messages to a mass audience. Udeze and Akpan (2013) define political advertising as the use of paid media platforms to influence the political decisions made by individuals or groups. The advertising message is designed by political consultants and campaign staff working with the candidate or the party organs; it can include several different media and span several months over the course of the political campaign. Olujide *et al* (2010), state that "political advertising is the use of the media by political candidates to increase their exposure to the public." The authors are of the view that the extensive use of radio and television has supplanted direct appearances on campaign trail which was popularly used by politicians in the past five decades. Advertisements, they note, have become the most commonly used technique to create a favourable image for the candidate and a negative image for the opponent, a trend which appeared to be common during the 2015 governorship election in Ebonyi State between the contending candidates.

There are three different kinds of advertisements that a candidate will run during the election.

- Positive ads that praise and paint the candidate in a positive light.
- Negative ads that condemn and paint the opposing candidate in a negative light.
- Contrast advertisement is usually a response to attack ads.

This classification can be lumped into two main groups which are: image advertisements and issue advertisements (Udeze & Akpan, 2013).

Political Advertising and Election Campaign in Nigeria

Electoral campaigns are marketing actions employed to get out votes in elections. They enable parties and their candidates to know how to allocate their resources and develop better knowledge on how and why voters make their choices. In Nigerian, the electorate is getting more politically enlightened and therefore, becoming more knowledgeable about the voting process (Oyovbaire, 1992,p. iii). This is largely attributable to the developments in information and communication technology as well as the realization of the potent force of the media of mass communication in packaging ideas and building images in the mind.

Campaign organizers chose their targets, send their messages to the intended audience through the most effective media. Political parties advertise their manifestoes to the electorate through the print and broadcast media. The political candidates also advertise their qualities and other attributes including their cognate experience and qualifications to persuade the electorate to vote for them using jingles of memorable songs to accompany their TV and radio advertisements. Banners and leaflets are freely used by their support groups of party loyalists

moving round in motorcade, from one community to another. In addition to all these, town criers are also employed to advertise candidates and parties at the community levels.

Ansolabhere and Iyenga (2009) are of the view that advertising campaigns help position the candidate positively in the minds of the electorate. They stated that credible political advertising is persuasive and not manipulative, and that its messages inform voters about the candidates' position and allow voters to develop differentiated images of the candidates.

Understanding the Target Audience

In political advertising, audience is an important part of the communication process. By audience we mean the recipients of mass media messages. There is the audience of newspaper, television, radio, theatre, film and non-broadcast media, usually heterogeneously scattered. They are a mixture of age, sex, profession, education and social class, etc and are, in most cases strangers to one another. Audience is the ultimate source of mass media power. If there is no audience to subscribe the newspapers and magazines and attend to radio and TV programmes, no mass medium could stay in business. The messages of the media are determined according to the nature and behaviour of the target audience, and vice versa. For any political advert to be successful, the four segments of audience must be understood:

- **Elite Audience** comprises of highly educated people and their number in the society in relatively small.
- **Mass Audience** represents the dominant majority in a society. They are relatively average people. Mass audience represents almost all segments of the society.
- **Specialized Audience** refers to the special interest groups in the society.
- **Interactive Audience** consists of those who have control over the communication process in a society. They may be newspapers journalists or Radio or TV broadcasters.

In this study, the researcher focused on the key variables of political status, alignment and affiliation of the respondents. This researcher's decision was informed by the fact that the ways political messages from candidates and political parties are received, interpreted and acted on very considerably depending on several factors which include but not limited to the relationship between those concerned and the candidates. Since it is a perception game, the researcher chose to take this route to underscore the role played by the political disposition of those who are the primary target of political messages on their attitude to such messages. The schema below shows the four variables of political disposition considered in the study.

	PARTISAN AND ACTIVE	NON-PARTISAN, NOT ACTIVE
	PANE A **Partisan**	PANE B **Non-Partisan**
	PANE C **Active**	PANE D **Not Active**

Figure 1: Schema showing levels of partisanship and involvement in the political process (Onwe, 2015).

The two panes on top of the schema relate to partisanship while the two panes at the bottom of the schema relate to level of involvement in the political process. Pane A and C are made up of those who are both committed members of political parties and who are also actively involved in the political, electoral and campaign processes. Pane A and B are made up of people who are usually members of one political party of the other, but are not visibly active in the electoral process. They hardly canvass nor engage in political conversations and dialogues. The third group in Pane C and D belong to those who are active but not members of any political party, while the fourth category, Pane B and D, are made up of those who are neither committed members of any political party nor active in the political process.

Pane A in the above schema represents the group who are partisan in the society. Partisanship here is defined to mean those who belong to a political party. Pane B comprises those who do not belong to any political party as members. Pane C constitutes those who are actively involved in the political, electoral and campaign processes. Pane D is made up of those who are not very active and only show a passing interest, if any, in political matters. The two

panes on top of the schema relate to partisanship while the two panes at the bottom of the schema relate to level of involvement in the political process. The combination of these panes will show interesting mix. The combination of bane A and C produces a group describes as partisan and active. The persons in this group are both committed members of political parties and are also actively involved in the political, electoral and campaign processes. The combination of pane C and B produces a group described as active but non-partisan. Persons in this group are usually active in the campaign process but not necessarily members of any political party. The combination of bane A and D produces a group describes as partisan but not active. The persons in this group are committed members of political parties, but not actively involved in the campaign processes. The combination of pane B and D produces a group described as non-partisan and non-active. These people are neither members of any political party nor show and real interest in the political process.

Theoretical Framework

This study relied on the Agenda Setting theory of the Mass Media, as a framework that explains how the mass media is used to create awareness and to some extent influence the voting behaviour of electorate. Agenda setting describes a very powerful influence of the media in context - the ability to tell us what issues are important, determine what we think and worry about, meaning that though the media may not be very successful in telling us what opinions to hold, they are often quite effective in telling us what to think about. The underlying assumption in this thought is that a direct, positive relationship exists between media coverage and the salience of a topic in the public mind. The relationship is stated in causal terms: by conferring status on an issue, the media structure what is important.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) also complements the Agenda Setting theory. The model which postulates that there are two routes to persuasion – the central route and the peripheral route, posits that sometimes, the audience is active, thinking about messages and the argument in those messages and at other times, receivers are passive, and are persuaded by peripheral route. The assumption is that some persons may not be willing to sit, watch or listen to the political speeches of candidate. In such instance, ELM suggests that such people lack the motivation required to process an elaborated message. Others may have the drive, but may be put off by the packaging and delivery. In the same way, others may be carried away by the aesthetic of the message rather than the substance. Those who process the substance of the message are persuaded through the central route while those whose attention is on the externals are persuaded through the peripheral route. A good number of political candidates who contested in the Ebonyi governorship in the 2015 election motivated the electorate in one way or the other to enable it to process the contents of messages directed at it. Equally, the governorship candidates and their political parties used various means of persuasion to motivate and win the hearts of the Ebonyi electorate, while using the mass media to make mass appeal to the potential voters.

Methodology

This work adopted a survey method. The study population was residents of Ebonyi State during the 2015 election. A multi-stage approach was adopted in selecting the respondents. The senatorial zones that make up the state (Ebonyi North, Ebonyi Central and Ebonyi South) formed the cluster for the study. In the process, a multi stage sampling technique was used. In the first stage, two local government areas one from each of the two federal constituencies were selected. At the local government level, simple random method was used to select one study area. At this stage, the researcher made use of convenience sampling method to select respondents. One respondent was selected after the interval of five houses. Using the convenience sampling technique, a sample size of 300 respondents was drawn from the population. With the assistance of three assistants, questionnaire was administered and collected from the respondents. The research instrument was a 10-item questionnaire made up of the demographic components of the respondents as well as the media use pattern, respondents' exposure to political advertising and the influence of political advertising on the voting decision of the electorate. Data obtained were analyzed using the tables of distribution and percentages.

Data Analysis And Presentation

The return rate was 100% as a result of the personal approach used in administering the instrument; hence all 300 copies of the questionnaire were received, data collated from them and used for the analysis.

Table 2: Political Status of Respondents

Variables	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Partisan and active	153	51%
Active but not partisan	95	31.7%
Partisan but not active	22	7.3%
Not active, not partisan	30	10%
	300	**100%**

Table 2 shows the distribution of the respondents according to their level of partisanship and involvement in the campaign process. The first group is the partisan and active, made up of those who indicated that they belong to a political party and are actively involved in the electoral process. The active but not partisan are those who are actively involved in the electoral process though do not belong to any political party. The partisan but not active, are those who belong to a party and but not actively involved in electoral process. The non-partisan, not active, are those who neither belong to a party and nor actively involved in the electoral process.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question borders on the extent to which the electorate in Ebonyi State exposed to political advertising. The data generated from the responses from participants in the study shows that the people in Ebonyi were exposed to political advertising in the last gubernatorial election in the state. This finding goes to point to the fact political advertising was massively deployed in the mass media by some gubernatorial candidates during the campaigns in Ebonyi State. It suggests that the candidates in the race for the governor's office are conscious and convinced of the necessity of political advertising in trying to win the electorate; hence they filled the available airwaves and bought enough space in the print media to place their political messages top on the mind of the potential voters. The result further reveals that those who consider themselves as active and partisan were in the majority of those surveyed and as such was the most exposed group to political advertising. The result is also indicative of the fact that the electorate in Ebonyi State follows trends during election, particularly the one that would determine who governs them. The voters tend to show great interest in what those who aspire to govern them have to offer. Because they may not have direct access to the candidates, the voters seem to rely on political advertising for the information on campaign issues. It is also possible that the electorate found the advertising messages interesting and entertaining, and so took delight in watching, listening or reading the campaign messages packaged as advertising.

On the question of whether the partisan elements in the population of study exhibit more knowledge of the political process than the non-partisan group, the findings as shown on table 3 indicate that of the 94 respondents who know all the candidates and their parties, partisan respondent constitute 59.8% while the non-partisan respondents constitute 40.2%. Similarly, out of 161 respondents who know some of the candidates and their parties, partisan respondent constitute 70% while the non-partisan respondents constitute 30%. In the same vein, out of 71 respondents who know all know all the election days and the voting process, the findings as shown on table 3 indicate that partisan respondents constitute 70.4% while the non-partisan respondents constitute 29.6%. On the other hand, of the 114 who indicated that they know all the election days and part of the process, partisan respondents constitute 56% while the non-partisan respondents constitute 44%. The implication of these findings is that those who are identified as partisan know more about the voting process and the political candidates than the non-partisan group.

Research question three deals with the issue of whether the active elements in the population were more influenced by political advertising messages in their voting decisions

than non-active group. Though it is not automatic that once a message is delivered the effect intended would be achieved; however, influence is subject to level of knowledge and awareness. For the electorate to be influenced in its voting decision by political advertising, the electorate must first accept the message in the advertisements as credible. One can hardly be influenced by what one is not aware of or exposed to through any of the sense. It is on this basis that the result of the study would make more sense, namely, that those who were mostly exposed to political advertising were the group that was mostly by them in their decision in the governorship election in Ebonyi State. The findings indicate that out of the 300 respondents, 260 were influenced in their voting decision by the political messages they were exposed to. Of the 260 respondents, 86.5% were in the active group while 15.5% were non-active group. The implication of this finding is that those who were active in the reception and use of political message were more disposed to be influenced by them in their voting decision than those who are not active.

Conclusion

Political advertising serves useful purpose as a powerful political communication strategy with which political candidates market themselves to the electorate. Through it, persuasive messages are packaged and delivered to produce desired effect on the potential voters, donors and supporters. This study concludes that political advertising does influence a good proportion of the electorate especially the active, non partisan group in the society to the extent that the electorate regards the advertising messages as credible. It further concludes that the electorate in Ebonyi State accesses political advertising messages through the radio than any other mass medium.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the study recommends that:

i. Politicians and their political parties should be careful in their choice of media for their political adverts through which to reach the electorate during electioneering campaigns. Equally important, it is recommended that politicians and political parties should package their political message in such a way that, it not only attracts, but are seen to be believable and credible. In this era of increasing voter awareness, voters can only be influenced in their decisions by the perceived credibility of the political advertising messages.
ii. Furthermore, the electorate should be critical of all political advertising messages. This will enable it to decipher the truth as contained in these messages and consequently be properly informed on its voting decisions.

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