

Mass Media and Opinion Polls in Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election: Facts or Fiction?

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Abstract

Before the conduct of any election, there are speculations, permutations and predictions about the probable outcome of the election. These emanate from people's interest in the election which in the long run, determines what happens in the polity. For obvious reasons, to be in a position to take informed decisions before or during the election, stakeholders want to know, in advance the likely winner or the loser as the case may be. In view of this, it has become a tradition for people to speculate the likely winner. This paper, through analytical method, looked at some of the opinion polls that preceded the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria, especially those conducted by media organizations and how they were able to rightly or wrongly predict the outcome of the election. It also analyzed some of the biases noticed on the part of the pollsters, the research methodologies and their implication on both the electorates and the mass media. The findings show that some of these polls were not able to rightly gauge the pulse of the people and this may be attributed to certain factors such as biases at different stages of the process and the interest of the pollsters.

Keywords: *.Mass Media .Opinion Polls .Elections .Reliability .Biases*

INTRODUCTION

It is often said that, every individual is a political animal. Every right thinking member of the society is therefore politically active and desirous to know who the leaders are and how the masses are being led. This is understandable given that politics and governance affects every aspect of human lives; be it economic, political, social or religious. To justify this interest which people place on political activities, Pohl (1972), cited in Theis and Steponkus (1972) poses to an audience this question: "How much time is your government worth to you? In response to the question, the author states:

It costs you a fair chunk of your income. It may cost you your life – it can draft you and send you off to die in a war.; it can fail to protect you against murderers and traffic speeders; it can destroy your job and let you starve (p. 52).

The import of this question and the response is that politics is everything to the people therefore should be accorded a proportionate interest. Passivity in the political activities in ones environment means an endorsement of the end product which may be unpalatable. The emphasis here is the need for every member of the society to be keenly involved in the political process since its outcome positively or negatively affect them – even the most docile one. The political events determine not only how people live their lives but their existence in the society. Even when they decide to remain docile, they cannot run away from political decisions and government policies since every aspect of their lives – social, economic, political and even religious activities are guided by government policies (Nwodu & Agbanu, 2015).

In Nigeria for instance, especially in the present political dispensation, both individuals and corporate organizations are becoming aware of their rights and privileges in the polity. Not only that they are conscious of the political environment, they are also speculative of future political developments since their future are tied to these developments.

In a democracy, power belongs to the people or as it is often said: *Vox Populi, Vox Dei*, (the voice of the people is the voice of God), So, those that by the will of the people find themselves in position of authority want to feel the pulse of the people to know where the political pendulum may likely swing. The government and the political actors also are desirous of public opinion especially during elections. This opinion directs political activities and campaigns before and during elections.

Conceptual Clarifications

According to Adeyanju (2013), the concept of public opinion connotes different things to different people because these people view its meaning, process and usefulness from different perspectives. The author, citing Glynn *et al* (1999) posits that the concept was coined in the late 18th Century when large publics were coming into existence as a result of increasing population and urbanization.

Despite these variegated views on public opinion, its commonest form measures the aggregate views of the people. This proposition forms the thrust of our discussion here. That is, the aggregation of individual views on an issue.

On the other hand, public opinion poll or opinion poll for short, refers to a systematic and scientific approach aimed at measuring the opinion of a people on a particular issue. It is a constant element of press and broadcast coverage of politics that tells us what the public thinks (McNair, 2011). This is because the opinion of the people has become a powerful force in modern society and influence different political, social and economic lives of the people. In a democratic setting, the formation of government policies and the legitimacy of the government rest on public opinion. That explains why even an illegitimate government needs the consent of the people to remain in power.

Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored on the Bandwagon Effect hypothesis. Etymologically, bandwagon as a media/political concept has its root from the two words "Band" and "Wagon" meaning the wagon that carries the band. This is a theory of media effect developed on the belief that public opinion is influenced by those who are most outspoken and can influence others. According to the concept, the increasing popularity or acceptance of a product or phenomenon encourages more people to "get on the bandwagon" too.

According to Theis and Steponkus (1972), although not widely used until 1900, bandwagon effect became a political concept in the 1840 campaign of William Henry Harrison when his supporters made use of band wagon during their campaigns. Then, people who want to identify with the candidate climb on the wagon (vehicle) while those less enthusiastic ignored them.

During elections, bandwagon occurs in voting: some people vote for those candidates or parties who are likely to win. In view of this, not only that the public office holders want to know the feelings, beliefs and convictions of the potential voters, some electorates on their part want to know the feeling of fellow electorates before they take the final decision on who gets their vote. In the view of some electorates, any vote cast in favour of a losing candidate is wasted therefore, they want to follow the bandwagon or the winning team. Politicians on their part want to be seen as leading during the electoral process to attract bandwagon effect from those electorates that are undecided or those that want to join the winning team. This is based on the feeling that everyone wants to be a winner.

In modern world, bandwagon has become a major appeal in political advertisement where people are advised to identify with the winner. The common use of the concept notwithstanding, in recent time, bandwagon is attaining a derogatory form, implying that people associate themselves with successes or the majority view based on mere sentiment rather than reasons.

Build-up to the 2015 Presidential Election

When Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999, the country retained the presidential system of government and the four year term for the President and Governors, their deputies and the lawmakers at the federal and state levels. In view of this, the year 2015 became an election year

in the country. Though 14 political parties fielded candidates for the election, the contest in reality was between the then incumbent President, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan who was the candidate of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and former military Head of State, General Mohammadu Buhari who was the candidate of the major opposition party - All Progressive Congress (APC). Both campaigned using some of the issues mentioned above including ethnic sentiment as their Unique Selling Point (USP). As expected in this kind of election, the election campaign witnessed hate speeches and name-calling as propaganda approaches for swaying voters' support to a particular candidate.

There were also the fear that based on the number of candidates and political parties for the election, and the multiplicity of alignments and re-alignments, none of the candidates would be able to secure victory at the first ballot. To be declared winner, a candidate or party is required to obtain a simple majority of the total votes cast and secure 25 per cent of the votes cast in two-third of the states. Even in the face of securing a simple majority of the votes cast, failure to satisfy the latter requirement by a candidate would lead to a second round of voting - a runoff. All these generated the interest in the election and the desire on the part of the people to know the direction of the political pendulum.

Review of 2015 Presidential Election Opinion Polls

Before the March 28, 2015 presidential election, some media organizations and research institutes conducted opinion polls to gauge the pulse of the people and know the likely direction the political pendulum will swing. Discussed below are just a few of such research efforts.

One of the groups that conducted an opinion poll to forecast the election is *Premium Times*. In the poll conducted by the renowned online newspaper, Buhari won the election by a wide margin. Out of a total of 9,206 respondents to the poll, 8,176 said they would cast their votes for Buhari. The online newspaper simply asked the respondents the question: who do you think will win Nigeria's 2015 presidential election? Thousands of people voted for Buhari who polled 88.81 per cent of the total votes cast while Jonathan who got 877 votes - about 9.53 per cent came a distant second. All other parties' presidential candidates shared the remaining votes in the poll.

In another opinion poll conducted by Kevin Charlyn and Kimberly Associates, a United Kingdom based research and political risk consultancy firm, Jonathan was predicted to win the poll with a probable margin of 13 percent. A statement issued few weeks to the poll by the firm's Vice President for Africa and Middle East, Mr O.C. Vince, the firm said it used both the "monkey survey" and "political risk index" to forecast the Nigerian election which culminated in projecting Jonathan's victory (Ugbodaga, 2015).

The three questions the respondents were asked were:

1. Between General Buhari and President Goodluck Jonathan, who would best protect the fundamental human rights of Nigerians?
2. Between the two dates Feb 14 and March 28 as rescheduled, which date do you feel safer to participate in the election?
3. Between Buhari and Jonathan, who would best grow the economy?

On the credibility of the test, the statement said:

We randomly conducted a nationwide opinion poll focusing on the six geo-political regions of Nigeria: North East, North West, North Central, South West, South East and South South. The sampled population was asked question centring on human rights, the economy and security (Ugbodaga, 2015).

The research firm reported that in view of the above, it viewed Jonathan as a favourite to win re-election based also on a number of factors even though the election would still be difficult to call. It also said their expectation of Jonathan's win was predicated also on the assumption that the postponement of the election may help him come back decisively into the race.

In February 2015, the African Independent Television (AIT), a privately-owned television station in Nigeria conducted a poll to gauge the popularity of Jonathan after the station ran documentaries that were alleged to be damaging to the reputation of Buhari. After the two days poll, Buhari was said to be leading Jonathan by 7,158 votes (76.23%) as against 1,953 votes (20.8%) polled by Jonathan. The station later shut down its website alleging massive rigging of the opinion poll (Ugbodaga, 2015). The management of AIT accused the supporters of Buhari of manipulating the online opinion poll it was conducting to enable Nigerians predict who was going to be the winner of the 2015 election (Ugbodaga, 2015).

AIT in a statement broadcast on the station said suspected supporters of General Buhari have been manipulating the opinion poll platform by voting multiple times in favour of the APC candidate. The station alleged that many unique IP (Internet Protocol) addresses were seen to have voted multiple times for the APC candidate, a clear index that some people were voting more than once. The station alleged that although it built the platform in such a way that such practice was difficult to perform, supporters of the APC candidate were able to manipulate the system to vote multiple times, a situation that forced it to shut down the platform.

Daily Post, another online media commenced an opinion poll on Friday March 20, 2015 and closed on Tuesday March 24, 2015. A total of 10,423 votes were recorded. The media house said it took great care to make the online poll credible and made sure that no one voted twice as voting was based on unique computer IP address. At the close of the poll which asked: "Who would you vote for right now - GEJ or GMB?" majority of the respondents numbering 6,849 constituting 65.71 per cent voted for General Mohammadu Buhari while 2,951 respondents making up 28.31 per cent voted for Goodluck Jonathan. There were those who opted for the other 12 presidential candidates. Respondents in this category numbered 623 and constitute 5.98 per cent. The media organization obtained the responses through three platforms - opinion poll portal, *Daily Post* site and *Daily Post* pages on Facebook (Ugwuanyi, 2015).

In a study titled *Nigeria Election Watch* and published in February 2015, *Africappractice*, a strategy and communication consultancy predicted a slim victory for the ruling PDP or an inconclusive election where none of the candidates would be able to obtain the legal requirement for an outright victory.

Also, a survey by a Pan African non-partisan research network - Afrobarometre, disclosed that the candidates of the Peoples Democratic Party and All Progressive Congress would each score 42 percent of the votes in the election. The group described the election as the closest in the history of elections in the country. Another poll conducted by an online news media *Sahara Reporter* gave Buhari victory with a wide margin. In the opinion poll where 15,435 Nigerians voted within 24 hours, Buhari got 12,246 votes representing 79 percent of the total votes cast while Jonathan got 3,189 votes representing 21 percent. Again the opinion poll conducted by an online news portal - *Nigeria Eye* also tilted the election in favour of Buhari. Out of a total of 7043 respondents who voted in the poll, Buhari got 72 per cent of the votes to defeat Jonathan who scored 25 per cent. The remaining three percent was shared by the presidential candidate of the 12 other political parties (Ugbodaga, 2015).

2015 Presidential Election Result: The Realities

Though 14 presidential candidates flying the flag of different political parties contested the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria, the election in reality was a two horse race between Goodluck Ebere Jonathan - the then ruling party's candidate and General Mohammadu Buhari - the candidate of the leading opposition party. Events and political permutations preceding the election indicated this. Apart from Anambra State that is being controlled by the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) - one of the opposition parties, the other 35 states of the federation and the Federal capital Territory - Abuja were under the control of either PDP or APC. The presidential election manifested this expectation. According to the result released by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), out of a total of 28,587,564 valid votes cast, the two frontrunners pulled 28,278,083 representing 98.9 per cent of the total valid votes. The PDP candidate pulled 12, 853, 162 representing 44.9 per cent while the APC candidate pulled 15, 424, 921 votes representing 53.9 per cent. The remaining 309,481 votes representing 1.08 per cent were shared among the remaining 12 candidates flying the flag of different

political parties. PDP also won majority of the votes cast in 15 states and the FCT while APC won in 21 states.

Table I: Parties, Candidates and Scores

	Political Party	Acronym	Presidential Candidate	Vote Scored
1	Action Alliance	AA	Tunde Anifowoshe-Kelani	22,125
2	Allied Cong. Party of Nig.	ACPN	Ganiyu Galadima	40,311
3	Alliance for Democracy	AD	Rafiu Salau	30,673
4	African Democratic Cong.	ADC	Mani Ibrahim Ahmed	29,665
5	African Peoples Alliance	APA	Adebayo Musa Ayeni	53,537
6	All Progressive Congress	APC	Muhammadu Buhari	15,424,921
7	Citizens Popular Party	CPP	Sam Eke	36,300
8	Hope Democratic Party	HDP	Ambrose Albert	7,435
9	KOWA Party	KOWA	Comfort Oluremi Sonaiya	13,076
10	National Conscience Party	NCP	Martin Onovo	24,455
11	Peoples Democratic Party	PDP	Goodluck Jonathan	12,853,162
12	Peoples Party of Nigeria	PPN	Chinedu Allagoa	24,475
13	United Democratic Party	UDP	Godson Okoye	9,208
14	United Progressive Party	UPP	Chekwas Okorie	18,220
			Total Valid votes	28,587,564

**Source: INEC's Official Result and Publications*

Opinion Polls and 2015 Presidential Election: The Realities

Looking at the result of the 2015 presidential election, none of the opinion polls discussed above was able to precisely capture the outcome of the presidential election won by General Mohammadu Buhari. While some of the polls went quite off the mark as they outrightly predicted a Jonathan victory, others that were close at least by predicting a Buhari victory missed the target by the margin of victory. This puts a question mark on the credibility of the polls – both in terms of the intention of the pollsters and the credibility of the procedure.

An opinion poll is a kind of precision journalism. This is a technique of inquiry where journalists employ social science research methods in news gathering (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010). As is always the case with such methods, once the methodology is followed to the letters within a small margin of error, the scientific approach will produce a result not far from the reality. The question then is: what really went wrong? Is the procedure employed by the pollsters flawed or the personnel biased?

Areas of Bias in the Opinion Polls

Though some of the pollsters or research firms did not specifically disclose in details the methodology they employed and the limitations in the opinion poll; and while it is difficult to ascertain the biases of the pollsters, the inability of the polls to correctly predict the 2015 presidential election could be attributed to the following biases:

1. **Bias in Study design and Procedure:** According to Agbanu (2014, p.139): “In picking research design or method, a researcher is prone to accept the procedure that promises acceptable results and reject techniques likely to produce unreliable result.” In virtually all the polls mentioned above, though the polling firms did not provide in details the research methodologies used; it is obvious that they are flawed therefore could not provide a correct representation of the population – Nigerians of all shades of opinion, tribes and creed. All the polls employed online voting without considering the level of internet penetration in the country and the usage among the people.
2. **Bias in the Samples and Sampling Methods:** In every survey, the sample and how the sample is drawn take on extreme importance (Traudt, 2005). And, for a sample to be representative of the population, each element in the population has an equal chance or equal probability of being chosen (Punch, 1998). In the same vein, the key to an accurate measurement of public opinion is the ability of a researcher to select a sample that has the characteristics of the population in every important way (Agbanu, 2014). A biased or

unrepresentative sample will no doubt lead to a wrong result. Then question then is: how representative are the samples used in the opinion polls. Does the sampling procedure give every Nigerian equal chance of being part of the poll? The answer is no. The sample used by the various studies did not in any way represent the different fragmentations existing in the Nigerian nation. This is very important in an election especially in this environment where elections are won and lost due to an individual's ethnic and religious inclination rather than the ability to perform. Opinions were simply solicited from individuals not considering their ethnicity, religion or political inclination. It may not be surprising if a great percentage of the voters came from one ethnic group, religious group or political party. For instance, all the polls were done online. The questions then are: how many Nigerians were fortunate to participate in this online poll considering the hiccups? What is the spread of the participants in terms of age, sex, political affiliation, religious affiliation, ethnic group, etc. Also, there is nothing to show that those that participated in the online opinion polls are registered voters.

These factors no doubt, affected the result of the polls. A sampling error could mar the entire effort invested in a poll. For instance, in 2012, Gallup poll wrongly predicted the American presidential election because the polling firm adopted a sampling technique that neglected blacks and Hispanic Americans – the groups that are crucial in American presidential elections.

3. **Bias in research questions:** In different elections, some of the voters do not make up their mind until the election day. Also, Theis and Steponkus (1972, p. 74), posit that "a small percentage of the voters perhaps up to 2 or 3 per cent don't make up their minds until they walk into the voting booth." This has to be taken into consideration by pre-election polls. Some of the opinion polls reviewed above seem not to have considered these. For instance, the *Daily Post* opinion poll worked with the question. "Who would you vote for right now – GEJ or GMB?" not minding that last minute campaigns and other political variables could produce a change. According to Agbanu (2014, p. 145):

During elections, people change their views in respect to campaign issues and the turn of events. Opinion polls conducted few weeks to an election measures the intention at the time the interview was conducted. Such intention may change before the day of the voting. Some voters even decide who to vote at the polling booth where most of the 'lobbying and inducement' take place.

4. **Bias Emanating from Individual Emotional Preference:** People's attitudes and desires manifest in everything they do. And, as Lauser (1953) puts it, "everyone is biased. It can't be avoided." Every individual or group has an emotional preference which often affects the attitude or handling of issues including research activities. Often client-researcher relationship leads to the production of unreliable results that are intended to impress a group rather than being a true representation of the view or feelings of the people. Allegedly, this was manifest in the 2015 presidential election opinion polls which became a tug of war between the two leading candidates of PDP and APC that each tries to see the pre-election poll in its favour. When some of the polls predicted a Buhari victory supporters of GEJ saw that as a vote of no confidence and allegedly made effort to reverse the trend through alternative polls. One of them was initiated by Presidential Aide – Remo Omokri.

Implications for Nigeria's Media and Politics

In different parts of the world especially the developing countries, where ethnicity, religious intolerance, political and other differences polarize the people and prevent them from achieving national objectives, the mass media play an important role in ensuring that the different ethnic nationalities and religious groups appreciate and accommodate their religious, political and ethnic differences (Agbanu, 2013). This, Nwokeafor (2015) argues could be achieved if they remain responsible and continue to play "an unbiased role in reporting issues of newsworthiness without giving unnecessary hype to attract the attention of the gullible public with the object of making money or ranking".

The question then is: Have the media been able to play this role effectively with special reference to the 2015 presidential election. The answer is no. In recent time, the media have become completely prejudiced in favor of different political parties, candidates or individuals. As a propaganda tool, they become partisan and during political campaigns and elections, try

to get candidates of their choice elected into power. In so doing, they consistently cover their choice candidate much as opposed to the candidate of the minority party (Okorafor, 2015).

Though in different parts of the world, the media should be as objective as possible, in Third World countries such as Nigeria and other countries that are being ravaged by wars and social conflicts, the media have greater responsibility. In such a situation, the different ethnic groups and political interests should be galvanized to identify with and aspire to common national goals (Konkwo, 2009). The 2015 presidential opinion poll where the media conferred status to certain individuals and political parties through “manipulated” opinion polls is an evil wind that may negatively affect the media in the eyes of the people.

Conclusion

During elections, the mass media are perceived to wield enormous influence on the people especially on their participation in the electoral process (Ochonogor & Omego, 2012). With the advancement in technology, the face of the mass media and their influence increase. In Nigeria, for instance, the emergence of Global System for Mobiles, (GSM) in 2001 affected the political lives of the people especially in gauging public opinion. Today, the mass media, government agencies and NGOs engage in e-polling as a feedback mechanism to direct the radar of government, governance and public opinion. The media not only put ideas into the head of the consumers of media content, but draw out emotional responses from them (Aririguzoh, 2011). These emotional responses often lead to a bandwagon effect which most of the time is the object of opinion polls conducted in this part of the world.

But, unlike in other nations such as the advanced democracies where the people look on to opinion polls to predict political events; pre-election opinion polls in Nigeria have not lived up to expectation and often greeted with criticisms. They are often seen as the biased views of the pollsters and their “paymasters”. This denies such predictions the credibility accorded to such practice in advanced democracies where precision journalism is given serious attention and followed to the letters.

Despite the obvious flaws on the part of the media practitioners, it is absolutely wrong to place the entire blame on the doorstep of these media practitioners since the socio-political and economic systems operational in a country give rise to the media system in such a country.

In Nigeria for instance, elections are seen as a do or die affair and candidates, their political parties and followers employ different means (fair or foul) to get to power. So, it may not be out of place if some of these polls are influenced to achieve not only the political goal of the pollsters but that of other stakeholders.

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