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The Influence of Political Advertising on Nigerian Electorate

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ABSTRACT This work examined the influence of political advertising messages on the choice of governorship candidates by the electorate in Imo State, South East Nigeria, in the 2011 governorship election in the state. In particular, the study sought to ascertain the extent that the electorate in Imo State was exposed to political advertising; which media was the electorate most exposed to in political advertising as well as the extent that political advertising influenced the voting decisions of the electorate. To achieve this, the study used the survey method with the questionnaire as research instrument. Through multi-stage sampling, 120 respondents were selected in the two of the three senatorial zones in the State and administered the questionnaire. The findings indicated, among other things, that the electorate in Imo State was well exposed to political advertising; that radio was the most effective channel for political advertising; that the respondents were influenced in their choice of candidates to the extent that they perceived such messages to be credible. In the light of the findings, it was concluded that political advertising was an essential factor in the political decisions of the electorate in Imo State. Similarly, it was recommended that candidates should strive for credibility in their political messages, while the electorate should be critical of all political messages to decipher the truth.

INTRODUCTION

A close look at old pictures of buses in the 19th century London quickly brings to mind the influence of advertising of products that are still famous today. As a proof of the effectiveness of advertising, some 19th century advertisements are still with us today. Pictures of products such as Coca-cola, Guinness, Beecham, Cadbury and Lever Brothers reveal that these companies constantly made use of advertising campaigns to bring these products to the consumers, and these campaigns worked greatly to boost the sale of these products. Even today, producers and distributors depend on advertising to sell their products. Without advertisements, buyers would not know about the existence of products and services and continue to remember them. Consequently, the modern industrialized world may collapse (Jefkin 2006).

If factory output is to be maintained profitably, political messages understood and internalized and economic policies interpreted, advertising must continue to be used in the right proportion. Jefkin (2007) argues that “mass production requires mass consumption, which in turn requires advertising to the mass market through the mass media”.

Apart from products, ideas and services also need to be advertised for acceptance. Such ideas could be economic or political. Hence, candi-

dates for elections into different positions, at different levels in all countries of the world, spend a fortune to sell themselves to the electorate.

The case of the 2011 election in Nigeria exemplifies a situation that different political parties in the race for political power made extensive use of advertising to sell their different political parties and candidates to the electorate. The implication of the above statement is that political parties may have had their chances enhanced through advertising messages persuading the electorate to vote for their parties or failed in realizing their goal because they ignored this or did not do it the right way. However, the process of this message delivery is a complex one. Some of the questions that may readily come up are: were these advertising messages properly delivered? Were they properly understood? Were they completely accepted as truth? And were they able to influence the voting behaviour of the electorate, who the messages were meant for? It is in the light of the above that the study examined the influence of political advertising on the voting pattern of the Nigerian electorate, using the 2011 gubernatorial election in Imo State as a case study.

Brief History of Imo State

Imo State is one of the 36 states of Nigeria and situates in the South East of Nigeria with

Owerri as its capital and largest city. The state came into existence in 1976 along with other states created by the late military ruler, General Murtala Muhammed. The state, named after the Imo River, was initially a part of the East Central State.

The main cities of the state are Owerri, Orlu and Okigwe, which also double as the headquarters of three senatorial districts in the state. The state has 27 local government areas; Igbo and English languages are predominantly spoken while residents are mainly Christians.

Geographically, Imo State lies within latitudes 4° 45'N and 7° 15'N and longitude 6° 50'E and 7° 25'E with an area of 5100 sq km. It is bordered on the East by Abia State, the West by Delta State, Anambra State to the North and Rivers State to the south. It is rich in natural resources such as crude oil, natural gas, lead and zinc; the state is also blessed with economically exploitable flora such as the iroko, mahogany, obeche bamboo, rubber tree and oil palm. The population is estimated at 4.8 million people. In its 36-year period, the leadership of the state has alternated between civilian and the military leaders. Both have led for 18 year each.

Currently, there are 2,040 primary, 305 secondary and 75 private secondary schools; four technical colleges and 65 approved private vocational/commercial schools in the state. There are five institutions of higher learning, namely Imo state University, Owerri; Federal University of Science and Technology, Owerri; Imo State Polytechnic, Umuagwo; Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri and the Federal Polytechnic, Nekede.

Statement of the Problem

During the governorship election in Imo State, as in other parts of Nigeria, political parties made use of advertising to sell their parties and the candidates on their platforms. That advertising was delivered does not necessarily mean that it was received, nor does it imply that it was understood and accepted as truthful, such that it actually influenced the behaviour of the electorate in Imo State during the governorship election. Or were there intervening variables in the communication process? It is in the light of the above that the study decided to investigate

the influence of political advertising on patterns of voting in the 2011 governorship election in Imo State.

Research Questions

This study was based on the following research questions:

1. To what extent is the electorate in Imo State exposed to political advertising?
2. Through which media is the electorate in Imo State exposed to political advertising?
3. To what extent is the electorate influenced by political advertising in its voting decisions?

Review of Related Literature

The Concept of Political Advertising

Two of the promotional mix elements are advertising and public relations. According to Samaila (2003), "advertising and public relations occupy the centrestage of promotion of political candidates and parties vying for different political positions during campaigns." Corroborating this view, Ansolabere and Iyenga (1995) argue that political advertising has become a veritable tool for selling candidates of political parties during election campaigns". Kaid (1999) stresses that "advertising messages do influence public perception of candidates". According to Sandman et al. (1976), "For many people the main source of 'news' about political candidates is not the news at all, it is political advertising", especially television advertising. Buttressing the above assertion, Sandman recounts a classic case of political advertising in the 1966 re-election bid of New York governor (later Vice President) Nelson Rockefeller. The incumbent Rockefeller, he notes:

was extremely unpopular with the electorate and early polls indicated that, literally, any democratic candidate who contested that election with him would defeat him. Frank. D.O. Connor was picked for the job. Rockefeller did not only win the election at the end of the day, but won with 4,000,000 votes, a wide margin; this success was based on the strength of massive media political advertising campaign that he mounted. He spent over \$2 million on television advertisements alone.

Having established the fact that advertising messages can be used as a powerful political tool to convince the electorate into voting for a particular political candidate, one may ask what actually is political advertising? It is the use of paid media (newspaper, radio, television, internet etc.) to influence the political decisions made for and by groups. The advertising message is designed by political consultants and campaign staff; it can include several different media and span several months over the course of the political campaign. Diamond and Bates (1992) note that unlike political campaigns in the past, “advances in media technology have streamlined the process, giving candidates more options to reach larger groups of constituents with little effort.” Commenting on the concept of political advertising, 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 2011 governorship election in Imo State between the contending candidates Ikedi Ohakim and Rochas Okorocha.

Categories of Political Advertising

There are three categories of political advertising:

- Political advertisement: This gives only statements about the candidate and no explicit mention of the candidate’s opponent(s).
- Contrast advertisement: This contains both positive and negative statements about the opponent(s).
- Negative or attack advertisement: This contains only negative statements about the opponent and nothing positive about the candidate.

All these can be lumped into two main groups which are: image advertisements (intended to humanize candidates) and issue advertisements (which show where a candidate stands on specific, key issues).

Political Advertising and Election Campaign in Nigeria

The past two decades have witnessed an increase in political advertising in Nigeria. This 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. Electoral campaigns are marketing actions employed to get 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. Nwosu (2006) underscores this:

The political parties in the Third Republic, SDP and NRC, engaged the services of Advertising/PR agencies to develop campaigns for their parties. The governorship hopefuls and Presidential aspirants such as Chief M.K.O Abiola for the Social Democratic Party and Alhaji Bashir Tofa of the National Republican Convention made use of Advertising and PR in their political campaigns.

Furthermore, it is worthy to note that political parties advertised their manifestoes to their customers (the electorate) in the newspaper and on radio and television. The political candidates (that is, the “products” who were being marketed by their producers – the political parties) also advertised their qualities and other attributes including their cognate experience and qualifications to persuade the electorate to vote for them. In doing this, governorship aspirants and presidential hopefuls made use of jingles of memorable songs to accompany their TV and radio advertisements. Banners and leaflets were freely used in these political campaigns which featured the advertisement of parties and political candidates by groups of party faithfuls moving in convoys of vehicles, from one community to another. In addition to all these, town criers were also employed to advertise candidates and parties. The 2011 election had its own peculiarities as Nigeria witnessed, perhaps, the most varied of campaign methods. Commenting on this, Nworah (2011) notes that: “The greatest challenges on the part of PDP candidate – Goodluck Jonathan, apart from being the only ruling president that was not elected to his post, has the task of convincing all Nigerians and eliminating doubt in them as to his capa-

bility for the intended post. It also included convincing the electorate, especially the Northern electorate, that he has their interest at heart. To do all these, the campaign organisers chose their targets, forwarded their individual messages to the intended audience and deployed the best media to do this.

Nworah (2011) further notes that “some of the messages embedded in the campaigns showed in the numerous pay-off lines chosen for each target audience”. There were such messages as, “The campaign promise is more than a promise”; “This is a promise in action”; “Goodluck for everybody, Goodluck for Nigeria”. There were other artistic efforts from Nigerian music artistes. Such messages as “*Goodluck na talk na do leader*”, “Goodluck transform Nigeria” were all in the media. All these advertisements bombarded both the print and electronic media, and produced, in the long run, the success which the campaign anticipated.

Although scholars and practitioners alike agree that political advertising is important for every election campaign, there seems to be no agreement on the effects of political advertising on electoral outcomes. However, in spite of the assumed effectiveness of political advertising, debates continue over the extent that these advertising campaigns mobilise or demobilise the electorate. For example, Ansolabere et al. (1999) argue that “negative advertising actually discourages people from going to the polls to vote, and diminishes confidence in the political system”. However, there are data that contradict such conclusions (Waltenberg and Briens 1995). Research by Finkel and Greer (1998) on the effects of attack advertisements has also cast doubt on the idea that political messages demobilise the electorate.

Ansolabere and Iyenga (2009) are of the view that advertising campaigns are effective as they help position the candidate positively in the minds of the electorate. They state that 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. They add that “although more involved and attentive voters learn more from competitive political advertising, people who do not pay close attention to campaigns, such as low-income voters, can benefit from the information in the advertising messages”. This may go a long way

in substantiating the reasons behind the landmark victory of Chief Rochas Okorocha against the then incumbent governor, Chief Godson Ikedi Ohakim, in the 2011 governorship election in Imo State.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). 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. The model identifies two conditions that determine whether the listener is doing central or peripheral processing. Central processing requires that receivers have both the ability and motivation to think about messages. The kinds of thought that listeners are likely to have include involvement, arguments quality, argument quantity, and argument credibility. According to the proponents of the theory, Petty and Cacioppo (1986), centrally routed messages are much more likely to create long-term change for the recipient than a peripheral message. They are of the view that centrally routed messages succeed in long-term change only when two factors are present. These factors are:

- (i). The target must be highly motivated to process the information.
- (ii). The target must be able to process the information cognitively.

For example, if one is not willing to sit through a two-hour televised debate between presidential candidates, then ELM suggests that one does not have the motivation required to process an elaborated message in this instance. Alternatively, imagine that you are motivated to watch the candidates’ debates but the politicians’ messages are filled with jargons or complex issues of international politics that you do not understand, ELM suggests that despite your motivation, your ability to understand is highly specific and the intricate message being offered is not present. Thus, the theory asserts that without motivation and ability to understand, an elaborated message is of no importance.

Viewed from the perspective of the theory, a good number of political candidates who contested for different posts in the 2011 election motivated the electorate in one way or the other

to enable it to process the contents of messages directed at it.

The particular case of Imo State which is under study saw one of the governorship candidates, Rochas Okorochoa, using such cues as, “reaching out to the poor”, “building of secondary schools” and “awarding scholarships to indigent, but bright students” to win the hearts of the Imo State electorate. He also made so many promises to the poor which endeared him to the electorate.

METHODOLOGY

In carrying out this study, a multi stage sampling technique was used. In the first stage, two senatorial zones were selected from the three senatorial zones in Imo State through the use of the simple random sampling technique. The two selected zones were Orlu and Owerri senatorial zones. At the senatorial zone level, two constituencies, Mbaitoli and Isu Njaba, were selected through a simple random method. It was also used to select two wards from each of the constituencies. For Mbaitoli constituency, Umunoha/Azara ward and Ezianya Obiato/Afara ward were selected, and for Isu Njaba constituency, Isu Njaba/Ezianya ward and Ihioma/Amaifeke wards were selected. At the ward level, the simple random method was used to select two villages from each of the wards. For Umunoha/Azara ward, Umuokparafor and Isieke villages were selected, while for Ezianya Obiato/Afara ward, Umuele and Akatta villages were selected. The same was done for Isu Njaba/Ezianya ward where Amaju and Umuakuma villages were selected, while for Ihioma/Amaifeke ward, Amadim and Umuola villages were selected. At this stage, eight villages emerged: Umuokparafor, Isieke, Umuele, Akatta, Amaju, Umuakuma, Amadim and Umuola. Fifteen respondents were picked from each of the villages. The study at this point made use of convenience sampling method. One individual was picked from each house. For respondents who were not educated enough to understand the questionnaire, the researchers guided them to answer the questions. Table 1 shows villages and respondents selected for the study.

The research instrument was a 12-item questionnaire divided into four sections. Section A surveyed the demographic components of the respondents. Section B looked at the media pattern, C surveyed respondents’ exposure to po-

Table 1: Villages and respondents selected for the study

<i>Villages</i>	<i>Respondents</i>
Umuokarafor	15
Isieke	15
Umuele	15
Akatta	15
Amaju	15
Umuakuma	15
Amadim	15
Umuola	15
Total	120

litical advertising, while section D looked at the influence of political advertising on the electorate. All the 120 copies of the questionnaire administered were properly completed and returned.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 shows that respondents whose age group was less than 20 years were 17.5%; those between 21 and 30 years were 17.5%; 31 to 40 years were 25.8%; 41 to 50 were 16.7%; 51 to 60, 12.5%, while respondents up to 60 years and above were 10%.

Table 2: Characteristics of the respondents

<i>Variables</i>	<i>No. of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Age</i>		
1 – 20	21	17.5
21 – 30	21	17.5
31 – 40	31	25.8
41 – 50	20	16.7
51 – 60	15	12.5
60 and above	12	10
Total	120	100
<i>Educational Qualification</i>		
WASC/GCE/NECO	30	25
Determinable Disposition	10	8.3
HND/BSC BA	78	65.1
Post-Graduate	2	1.6
Total	120	100
<i>Religion</i>		
Christianity	109	91.7
Muslim	3	1.7
Traditional Religion	8	6.6
Total	120	100
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Married	84	70
Single	36	30
Total	120	100
<i>Respondents’ Level of Exposure to Political Advertising Option</i>		
Always	60	50
Often	40	33.3
Rarely	20	16.7
Total	120	100

In terms of educational qualification, respondents with West African School Certificate; National Examination Council Certificate, General Certificate in Education were 25%. Respondents with professional diplomas were 8.33%. Those with HND, B.Sc and B.A were 33.3%, while the ones with postgraduate degrees were only 1.6% (Table 2).

In matters of religion, Christians were 91.7%, Muslims 1.7% and Traditional Religion adherents, 6.6%. Seventy percent of the respondents and (30%) were single. By ethnic origin, all the respondents were Igbo. Igbo is one of the three dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria (Table 2).

Table 2 shows that 84 (70%) respondents were married, while the singles were 36 (30%).

Table 2 shows that sixty respondents (50%) were always exposed to political advertising; 40 (33.3%) respondents were often exposed to political advertising, while 20 (16.7%) respondents were rarely exposed.

Research Question 1: To what extent is the electorate in Imo State exposed to political advertising?

All the respondents said they were exposed to political advertising in the last gubernatorial election in Imo State. Interestingly, 50% of the respondents were *always* exposed to political advertising during the 2011 governorship election in Imo State, while a little above 33% were *often* exposed to such political advertising. Of the 120 respondents, only 16.7% were *rarely* exposed to political advertising.

This finding suggests that the electorate in Imo State follows trends during election, particularly the one that would determine who governs them. The voters tend to show great interest in what their would-be governors are saying or giving out as their campaign message. Because they may not have direct access to the candidates, the voters seem to rely on political advertising for the campaign messages by the gubernatorial candidates. It is also possible that the electorate found the advertising messages interesting and entertaining, hence it did not have any hesitation exposing itself to the campaign messages packaged as advertising. It is also important to note that the political candidates for gubernatorial election are convinced of the necessity of political advertising in trying to win the electorate, hence they always bombard the electorate with campaign messages through advertising.

Research Question 2: Through which media is the electorate in Imo State exposed to political advertising?

According to the respondents, they mainly access political advertising messages through the electronic media, radio in particular. A greater percentage of the respondents consider the radio as the most efficient media for political advertising. Going by this, it is obvious that the electorate in Nigeria, particularly the electorate in Imo State, accessed political advertising more through the electronic media, particularly radio, than any other mass medium. This corroborates the assertion by scholars that in Africa, radio is the major mass medium because it overcomes the triple barrier of illiteracy, language and distances. In addition, the medium is portable and cheap to operate, hence many Nigerians consider the radio as a medium they cannot do without. And because of its portability and low cost, it offers the electorate a constant, continuous access to broadcast messages, including political advertising messages.

Research Question 3: To what extent is the electorate influenced by advertising in its voting decision?

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. The findings indicate that most of the respondents (58%) believed the messages contained in the political advertisements during the governorship election. They believe the political messages because of the perceived credibility of the candidates. Credibility is here defined as the consistency in telling the truth. Their conviction of the political messages may arise from their first hand experience with the candidates or may have been mediated by a third party, perhaps an opinion leader or a significant other. Or the electorate might have been persuaded by the aesthetics of the advertisements.

There is a possibility that the electorate is a simple, naïve, uncritical public easily swayed by pomp and pageantry or showmanship which is embedded in advertising. Quite unfortunately, the electorate simply believes. And without any means of finding out the truth, the electorate accepts as truth the more impressionistic advertising messages. The perceived credibility by the electorate translated into the message influencing the voting decisions of the electorate. This

influence was to the extent that the electorate believed and accepted as true the message contained in the political advertisements.

CONCLUSION

Political advertising has no doubt served as a good political communication medium through which political candidates attempt to market themselves to the electorate. These persuasive messages produce varying reactions from different segments of the electorate, either in favour or against a candidate or political party. This study concludes that political advertising does influence the electorate in its voting decisions but that it is to the extent that the electorate regards the advertising messages as credible. It further concludes that the electorate accesses political advertising messages more through the radio than any other mass medium.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is suggested that the study suggests that politicians and their political parties should make effective use of radio to reach the electorate during election. Secondly, it recommends that politicians and political parties should strive to give out only credible messages since the electorate is influenced in its voting decisions by the perceived credibility of the political advertising messages.

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.

Finally, the electorate should not rely on political advertising as its only source of information about contestants. It should explore other sources such as friends, family, party members and business associates who could offer useful information for its voting decisions.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

For purposes of clarity, the following terms in the study are defined.

(1) **Political Advertising:** Any paid form of non-personal political communication about a political party, its products, services, ideas and political candidates, sometimes

in the form of political campaigns in attempt to persuade or influence the behaviour of the electorate during the 2011 gubernatorial election in Imo State.

- (2) **Voting Pattern:** The way the electorate in Imo State voted in the 2011 governorship election.
- (3) **Advertising Campaign:** A comprehensive advertising plan that consisted of a series of messages in a variety of media centring on a single idea or theme during the gubernatorial election in Imo State.
- (4) **Advertising Messages:** Messages sent out in the form of advertising campaigns through the media with the aim of influencing voting behaviour at the 2011 Imo State governorship election.
- (5) **Electorate:** A body of those who were eligible to vote in the 2011 governorship election in Imo State.

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