

Local Politics in International Media: Influence of International Newspaper Endorsements of Candidates on Political Opinion and Voting Behaviour of Women in Nigeria

**Ugwuanyi, John Chidi¹
Jonah, Alice Aladi²
Ohaja, Edith Ugochi³**

¹Department of Mass Communication, Madonna University, Okija, Nigeria
²Department of Mass Communication, Federal Polytechnic, Bida, Nigeria
³Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria Nsukka, Nigeria
Corresponding author: Ohaja, E.U., Email: edithohaja@gmail.com

Abstract

Background: Women constitute a large percentage of the voting public in Nigeria. Despite this, research on their political opinion and voting behaviour is limited.

Objective: The aim of this study was to examine the impact of international media candidates' endorsement on women in Nigeria.

Methodology: The researchers made use of survey research design and sampled 600 women voters in a developing democracy. The researchers used the questionnaire to collect data for the study and applied both descriptive and inferential statistics to analyse data for the study.

Result: Findings showed significant relationship between exposure to international media political endorsement and political opinion of women regarding candidates' political ideology. Also, a significant relationship was found between decision status of women and influence of international media candidates' endorsement on voting behaviour.

Contribution: This study has provided empirical evidence regarding the contributing role of international media to local politics.

Conclusion: It is concluded that international media endorsement of candidates during national elections influences local voters.

Key recommendation: Further studies are recommended to be conducted in more advanced democracies, like the United States of America, for better comparison.

Keywords: political endorsement, political opinion, voting behaviour, international media, women

Introduction

Women are key players in a democracy because of their potential to mobilise mass actions and educate others about political events. Due to the important role that women play in educating others, it is often said that when you educate a woman, you educate a whole nation. Omodia, Canice and Abdul (2013) hold the view that women play critical roles in politics, especially in developing countries like Nigeria. According to them, women who have occupied political offices in Nigeria have been able to utilise such offices for the benefit of Nigerians. Discourse related to women and political participation usually point to the fact that women are denied their pride of place in politics to the extent that very few of them are elected or appointed into positions of trust and power.

Irrespective of how anybody sees it, women are important in a democratic setting because they are part of the voting public. The implication here is that the political opinions of women as well as what makes them to cast their votes is an important area of research. During electioneering campaigns, politicians and their supporters seek for votes from women. They charge women to cast their votes for them as well as ask others to vote for them. This reality points to the fact that women are important stakeholders in an election.

The advancements in technologies have made access to international media easy and affordable. Cable television broadcasting and internet facilities have made it easy for people to have access to information from international media. Many years ago, McNelly and Izcaray (1986) found that exposure to international media significantly influences the type of image people hold of nations. This simply implies that exposure to international media political endorsements could also influence political opinion and voter behaviour of women. However, such a conclusion could be too hasty and lacking scientific proof. In this study, the researcher paid attention to the relationship between international media endorsements, political opinion and voter behaviour of women using the 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria as examples. Therefore, in this study, we applied reinforcement and reactance theories to determine the influence of international endorsements on political opinion and voting behaviour of women.

In addition to candidates' antecedents, the policy stand of political candidates is a crucial consideration to voters. Studies (Rabinowitz & MacDonald, 1989; Jessee, 2009) corroborate that the proposed policy position of a candidate plays a role in influencing opinion and eventual voting decision. Government policies are essential elements that deliver dividends of democracy. Such policies must therefore address the needs of the citizens. Researchers (e.g., Abelson, Kinder, Peters & Fiske, 1982; Rahn, 1993) also found that the character of candidates such as perceived integrity and competence are essential characteristics that electorates are concerned about. Politicians are aware of how serious voters take their character before casting their votes. This partly explains why during electioneering campaigns, personal issues about politicians normally come up. Such issues range from their family to professional life to sexual life, among others. The overall aim of political contestants is normally to ensure that voters perceive their opponents as lacking in character while those backing the opponents do the opposite. In Nigeria, for example, supporters of President Muhammadu Buhari often present him as a man of integrity who hates corruption. In the United States of America, supporters of Donald Trump present him as a man who protects the interests of Americans. Finally, stereotypes, social labels and bias have also been reported (Crawford, Jussim, Cain & Stevens, 2011; Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes, 1960) as candidate-centered predictors which influence voting decisions. In almost every country, there exists social bias. Such bias could be based on gender, race, religion, culture, ethnicity, or any

other consideration. The point is that social bias can hardly be ignored during elections. Consequently, we hypothesised that:

H1: *Bias significantly moderates the influence of media endorsement on voting decision of women-voters.*

Gerber, Karlan & Bergan (2009) did a study using an experiment to find out the association between exposure to newspapers and political behaviour and opinion. The result showed that media reports do not influence people's political knowledge, political opinion, or turnout in election. But is this always the case? Therefore, it was hypothesised that:

H2: *There is a significant relationship between exposure to international media political endorsement and political opinion of women regarding the endorsed candidate.*

Over the years, the relationship between political endorsements and voter behaviour has been a subject of interest. This is largely because the essence of political endorsement is to influence voter decision. In other words, political endorsements are aimed at directing the attention of the voters on who to vote for during an election. Druckman and Parkin (2005); Ladd and Lenz (2009); Hollander (1979) and Chiang and Knight (2011) reported a significant relationship between media endorsements and voter decision in an election.

Although evidence shows that media endorsements have an association with political opinion and voter behaviour, most of the studies examined local media, with less attention paid to international media. Most of the studies are also from advanced democracies with less attention paid to emerging democracies. Women voters have also not been significantly considered by previous studies. Investigating the relationship between international media endorsements and political opinion and voter behaviour of women is essential because people are more likely to have confidence in international media regarding political matters than local media.

The Nigerian Example

Although elections in Nigeria have often attracted the attention of the international media, it appears the 2015 and 2019 elections attracted more international media endorsements. Even though both 2015 and 2019 presidential elections had more than two presidential candidates, only the two leading ones received high media attention from both international and local media. For example, in 2015, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) cleared a total of 11 presidential candidates. In 2019, a total of 72 candidates featured. Although the Social Democratic Party appeared on the list, it did not feature a candidate as a result of a court order and the party was yet to submit the name of its candidate as at the time of release of the full list (Banjo, 2015; INEC, 2019).

Some of the popular endorsements that made headlines among the international media during the 2015 presidential election are examined here. For example, *The Observer of London* in its editorial of January 18, 2015, reprinted in *The Guardian* newspaper on January 22, 2015 with the caption, "Perilous polls amid Boko Haram," castigated President Goodluck Jonathan for remaining silent for many days after the Baga killings, but quickly sending words of sympathy to France after the Charlie Hebdo attacks. The newspaper predicted victory for Muhammadu Buhari, the candidate of the opposition All Progressives Congress (APC) in these words:

What Nigerians think about this deadly, do-little dilly-dallying may soon become clear as the country prepares for presidential, parliamentary, gubernatorial and local elections on February 14. In what is predicted to be the closest contest since democracy was restored, Jonathan, strong in the largely Christian south and seeking a second term, faces a stiff challenge from opposition parties united behind the candidacy of Muhammadu Buhari, from the Muslim-majority north. A former military coup leader, Buhari earned a reputation for strong leadership and intolerance of corruption during his brief period in power in 1983-85. Analysts suggest that intense public yearning for an end to Boko Haram's nihilism and to instability caused by rising communal, criminal and political violence may help the challenger, by overriding traditional voting patterns based on religious and ethnic affiliation (*The Observer*, 2015, para 5).

The submission above shows that Buhari was perceived as being a better candidate than the then incumbent, Jonathan. The newspaper went as far as highlighting the positive side of Buhari; portraying him as a candidate with strong leadership capacity and incorruptible. Also, the *Washington Post*, an American daily, in its January 6, 2015 editorial entitled, "Nigeria's election will be a test of peace and power," predicted that Nigeria has "a recipe for an explosive general-election season." The newspaper noted that the contest would be keen, but added that many Nigerians were unhappy with Mr. Jonathan's handling of state corruption and his failure to contain Boko Haram's violence. The newspaper generally had selected negative words for the then President and his readiness to conduct the entire election. It warned that:

To minimize the risk of post-election violence, the Nigerian government must first do more to support its electoral commission; there have been serious doubts about its readiness to organize the registration and voting process. Less than six weeks ahead of elections, the federal government has yet to approve the commission's budget. Millions of permanent voting cards have not yet been distributed (Nigeria's election will be a test ..., 2015, para 5).

The assertion above portrays the Nigerian Government as not willing to provide the financial support needed to conduct the 2015 general elections. Although the government may have done some things to ensure the success of the election, the paper did not look in that direction. Such negative choice of words could have had a corresponding impact on the manner the electorate perceived Jonathan. It had the possibility of instigating anger against the government.

Similarly, *The Economist* editorial of February 5, 2015, clearly endorsed Buhari. The editorial was captioned, "Nigeria's Election: The least awful," with a rider, "A former dictator is better than a failed president." The magazine, despite its open endorsement of Buhari, maintained that the former military Head of State had "blood on his hands." It added that, "Buhari is a sandal-wearing ascetic with a record of fighting corruption. Few nowadays question his commitment to democracy or expect him to turn autocratic." The magazine then concluded that, "We are relieved not to have a vote in this election, but if we were offered one, we would with a heavy heart, choose Buhari. If Buhari can save Nigeria, history might even be kind to him" (Nigeria's Election: The least awful, 2015).

Each of the endorsements was promoted in local news media and in the social media, particularly by Buhari and his supporters. Jonathan and his supporters also used the local news and social media to castigate such endorsements, apparently to whittle down their impact.

The *New York Times* also reported the 2015 presidential election. It predicted victory for Buhari while using harsh words against the then President, Jonathan. It opined as follows:

That Mr. Buhari, who helped launch a coup against a democratically elected government in 1983 and ruled until late 1985, has emerged as potential winner is more of an indictment of Mr. Jonathan's dismal rule than a recognition of the former military chief's appeal. Nigerian voters have grown increasingly worried about the stunning rise of Boko Haram, which has committed terrorist atrocities including bombings (Nigeria's miserable choices, 2015).

The excerpt above provides insights into how favourable Buhari was in the eyes of international media and how negatively the then president was portrayed. Eventually, Buhari won, but if one can attribute his victory to such endorsements, what about his re-election in 2019? Buhari did not receive such favourable international media reports then. For example, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) on February 1st, 2019, predicted victory for Atiku Abubakar over Buhari. Even though it was a forecast, Atiku interpreted it as an endorsement and quickly released a press statement to local media saying that the 'endorsement' was a sign of confidence in him and possible victory.

Foreign Policy magazine was one of the international media that used quite unfavourable words to describe Buhari. In an article captioned, "FP's Guide to Nigeria's Election," the magazine highlighted many challenges facing the country which Buhari was unable to address. Such challenges were: the bad economy, insecurity, undemocratic decisions, among others. One of the excerpts from the magazine read:

Buhari may have been elected democratically four years ago, but that doesn't mean he's a democrat, argues Remi Adekoya. Instead, he is behaving like the dictator he once was in the 1980s, harassing and arresting journalists, intimidating opponents, refusing to apologize for the army's killing of unarmed demonstrators, and many believe, preparing to rig the election in his favor. The latest controversy is his suspension of the country's Chief Justice who might have presided over election disputes—a move described as a "brazen dictatorial act" by Atiku (FP's Guide to Nigeria's Election, 2019).

From the assertion above, while it can be argued that raising questions about Buhari's democratic posture may have been attributed to Remi Adekoya by the magazine, other statements were directly from the medium itself. In fact, that the magazine quoted Remi Adekoya is an indication that it subscribes to his position on Buhari's anti-democratic posture. The magazine appeared hard on Buhari such that even after his re-election, it carried a story captioned, "Nigeria's Anti-Corruption Vote," with a rider, "Buhari promised an end to graft and corruption. Now, he'll have to deliver." The magazine described Buhari in bad light with regards to democracy using these words: "Buhari was a military dictator in the 1980s, and his actions today look more suited to that kind of leader than to the head of a modern democracy" (Mossman, 2019).

Also, the *New York Times* of February 14, 2019, carried a story with the headline, "It's Not Getting Better: Nigeria Braces for Election Day as Frustrations Boil." In the story, the newspaper

painted a picture of how those who voted for Mr Buhari in 2015 are disappointed because of his poor performance in office. Excerpts from the story read:

In 2015 when he cast a ballot for president, Mr. Daniel ... thought he would be in a better place by now ... any economic gains of the past four years are far from evident in Mr. Daniel's daily life. This weekend when he walks into the voting booth, Mr. Daniel is going to cast his ballot for Mr. Buhari's main opponent, Atiku Abubakar He's anxious to finish his medical degree, but administrators at his school, and all public universities, keep striking for months at a time to agitate for better resources. His brother has an engineering degree, but can't find a job that pays more than the tailors earn at Mr. Daniel's shop.

Although the newspaper cited a source from Nigeria in painting the picture of poor performance of the President and how Nigerians are suffering, it did not balance the story with other sources who may have something different to say. Besides, Gever (2018) found that source selection influences media content and that source selection is a deliberate strategy that the media use to frame stories. This practice, Ohaja (2012, pp. 351-352) explains, is common in advocacy journalism whereby the media "choose and present material in a way that amplifies and lends support to their sides of ... issues." DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) and George and Waldfogel (2006) also state that media sources play critical roles in determining media slant and eventually, public opinion. Therefore, from the story above, Atiku was favoured as a better option for Nigeria. Part of the story endorsed Atiku Abubakar as it noted thus: "Mr. Abubakar, who has put economic issues at the center of his campaign, knows what Nigerians need," said Mr. Daniel. Overall, Buhari did not receive favourable reports from the international media in 2019 as was the case in 2015. It is important to add here that Buhari's status changed from being an opposition candidate in 2015 to being an incumbent in 2019. This may have played a role in the direction of voting or the manipulation of the electoral process in his favour.

Theoretical Framework

This study found expression in reactance and reinforcement theories. The reactance theory was postulated by Jack Brehm in 1966. The theory holds that when people are limited from doing something, they will feel that their freedom has been limited and as such, could develop a strong urge in them to carry out the same action which they have been restricted from doing (Brehm, 2013). Political endorsements of candidates when interpreted within the lenses of the reactionary could mean that such endorsements limit the choice of the voters. The voters may feel compelled and decide to react by voting for the opponents of the endorsed candidates.

On the other hand, reinforcement theory was suggested by Skinner in 1972. The theory focuses on how people seek for and store information that offers cognitive assistance for their already existing behaviour and beliefs (see Staddon, 2013). Um (2017) in explaining the theory vis-à-vis political endorsement states that when a political candidate that a voter supports is endorsed, it will serve as reinforcement to that voter's already existing beliefs and behaviour towards the candidate. On the other hand, when a political candidate that a voter does not support is castigated by the media, it could also provide reinforcement for the voter not to support such a criticised candidate. What this means is that voting decision status could correlate influence of international media endorsement on voting behaviour. Based on these theories, the researchers postulated thus:

H3: *International media endorsement of candidates leads to reinforcement effect for their women-voter supporters, but reactance effect for their non-supporters.*

Methodology

This study adopted the survey research design. The participants were made up of 600 working class women voters. Although previous studies (e.g. Austin, Van de Vord, Pinkleton & Epstein, 2008; Jackson & Darrow, 2005; Um, 2017) on political endorsements have examined mostly young voters, the researchers did not seem to take into account that young college students' assessments of candidates may not be as elaborate and as logical as those of working class voters. This is because the latter group of voters can better interpret economic problems, infrastructural deficit and other issues that elected presidents are supposed to tackle. Working class women are also more experienced voters than young college students. Furthermore, working class women are more likely to vote than young college students who may still be in school (outside the place they registered to vote) during elections. This assumption is supported by Morgan and Lee (2017). Also, Morgan and Lee (2018) found that working class voters contributed the highest number of voters in US 2016 presidential election and that Trump won the election because he appealed to them.

The study was conducted in Enugu State, Nigeria. The population was all the registered women voters in Nigeria. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (2018), the total number of registered women during the 2019 general election was 39,598,645 out of the 84,004,084 total voters. The study was conducted in Enugu State, Nigeria. Simple random sampling technique was used for the study. The choice of simple random technique was to give equal chance of selection to all the registered voters and make the result generalisable to the population. A total of three research assistants were trained and requested to assist in the data collection. It was decided that research assistants were needed to make the process of data gathering faster.

The researchers made use of content-based media exposure scale and a self-developed questionnaire as the instrument for data collection. The content-based media exposure scale was developed by den Hamer, *et al.* (2017) to measure the exposure to media contents. Hamer *et al.*, developed and validated the scale and it was published in *Computers in Human Behaviour*. It has 17 items which evaluate exposure to media contents. Hamer *et al.* studied 2,164 respondents and reported that the scale is a valid measure for assessing media exposure. The researchers equally carried out a pilot study to validate the scale on a Nigerian population and the outcome showed an overall Cronbach figure of .87, showing that the scale was valid.

The questionnaire examined the impact of exposure to international media on voters. It was a four-point Likert scale. Overall, the questionnaire had 20 items. The questionnaire was organised in four subheadings based on the hypotheses tested. Recent studies (Ale, 2020; Ogbonne, 2020; Melugbo *et al.*, 2020; Ikeorji, 2020; Kari, 2020) have made use of the questionnaire to collect data and the outcome showed that it can serve as a reliable instrument for data collection. Two mass communication lecturers and one psychology lecturer at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, validated the instrument. Their comments were used to produce the final instrument. The test-retest (two weeks interval) approach was used to ascertain the reliability of the questionnaire instrument and the calculation yielded correlation coefficient of .78 for the subheading for the first table, .79, .81, and .80 for the second, third and fourth tables respectively. These show that the instrument was reliable.

Data were collected at two separate intervals for the study. First, data were collected two years before each election year. We ensured that no endorsement was done before the first stage

of data collection by searching specific key words like candidates' names within the repository of international media. The second stage of data collection was done 30 days after the election so as to measure the impact of such endorsement on actual voting. In the analysis of data for the study, both descriptive and inferential statistics were used. Among the descriptive statistics, simple percentages, mean, and standard deviation were used while among the inferential statistics, hierarchical multiple regression was used to test the first hypothesis, Chi-Square test of independence and multiple regression analysis were used to test the second assumption while correlation analysis was used to test the third assumption. Results were presented in tables. The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. All analyses were done with SPSS version 22.

Results

Among the 600 copies of the questionnaire that were administered to the women respondents, 567, representing 95% were filled and returned. The mean age of the respondents was 38 (range of 30 and 45 years). Fifty per cent of the respondents were from the private sector while the other 50% were from the public sector. The sample was made up of 57% of voters who reported that they had decided who to vote for before exposure to such endorsements and 43% of voters who were undecided as at the time of exposure. The result of the hypotheses testing is presented below:

Table 1: Hierarchical Regression analysis of the moderating effect of voter bias on the influence of media endorsement on voting decision

Exposure	<i>R Square</i>	<i>R Square change</i>	<i>F.</i>	<i>F change</i>	<i>P. value</i>
Model 1	.070	.070	2,351	2,351	.001
Model 2	.573	.503	8,361	12,473	.001

We conducted a hierarchical multiple regression model to assess the ability of three levels (low, moderate and high) of exposure to candidates’ endorsement by international media on voter voting decisions. At the first step, these three levels were entered and this accounted for 7% of the variance in voter decision. After adding voter bias at step 2, the total variance explained by the model as a whole was 50%. $F(2,513) = 12,473, p < 0.001$. Therefore, we conclude that voter bias significantly moderates the influence of candidate endorsement by international media on voter decision.

Table 2: Chi-Square analysis of the association between media political endorsements and voter opinion

Grouping	χ^2_{cal}	Df	Critical value	Decision
Pol. Endorsement	210.301	7	3.841	Sig
Political opinion				

The result from the table above reveals that the calculated χ^2 value (210.301) is greater than the critical value (3.841) at 7 degree of freedom (DF) and 0.05 confidence level. Therefore, the second

hypothesis was supported and the researchers conclude that there is a significant statistical relationship between media political endorsement and voter political opinion. Further validation for the hypothesis was obtained from regression analysis as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Regression analysis of exposure to international media candidates’ endorsements as predictors of women-voter perception of candidate political ideology

Exposure	Constant	β value	R square	F. value	P. value
Low exposure	3.017	.301	.471	11.441	.133
Moderate exposure		-.188			.002
High exposure		-.706			.001

In Table 3 above, we conducted a multiple regression to ascertain if exposure dimensions predict women-voter perception of candidates’ political ideology. Our analysis showed an overall p-value of 0.001 with R. Square value of .477. What this means is that our model explains 47.7% variance in perception of the political ideology of candidates as a result of exposure to candidate endorsements by international media. Nonetheless, we found that low degree of exposure did not make significant contribution, but moderate and high degree of exposure did. The result of the Beta value showed that higher degree of exposure to candidate endorsements in international media contributes more in predicting women-voter perception of candidates’ political ideology. Overall, the second assumption was supported.

Table 4: Correlation analysis on the effect of international media candidate endorsement

Voter status	Effect	
	Reactance	Reinforcement
Decided voters	.12** (p>0.005)	.78*(p< 0.005)
Undecided voters	.81*(p.< 0.005)	.17***(p>.0.005)

The table above tested the assumption that candidate endorsement by international media will produce different effects for decided and undecided voters. Our assumption was supported because, while candidate endorsement by international media produced a reactance effect for undecided voters, it resulted to a reinforcement effect for decided voters.

Discussion of Findings

This study attempted to examine how international media endorsement of presidential candidates in an election could influence political opinion and voting behaviour of women. The study tested three hypotheses. All of the hypotheses were confirmed. Therefore, it was found that a significant relationship exists between exposure to international media political endorsement and political opinion of women voters regarding the candidates’ political ideology in an election. Usually, when the media endorse a political candidate, they attempt to compare the endorsed candidate with the closest rival. In that way, the opposing candidate is also given publicity. The results of this study

confirm previous ones (Besley, Burgess & Prat, 2002; Hamilton, 2003) which reported that the media play a critical role regarding the information that people have about the politics of their countries. This study also showed that women's biases like: party identification, religion, and ethnicity equally guide voting behaviour even after exposure to international media endorsement of political candidates. This result is consistent with that of Um (2017) which reported that party identification significantly plays a role regarding how voters react to political endorsements. However, the current study goes a step further because it has examined international media endorsements and not celebrity endorsement or local media endorsement as was the case with most of the previous studies. The current study also focused on women and not on all voters.

It was also found that a significant relationship exists between voter decision status and influence of candidate endorsement by international media on voting behaviour of women. In particular, we found that the effect that international media endorsements of candidates have on women voters is based on their decision status. While exposure to international media candidate endorsement produces reactance effect for undecided women-voters, it leads to reinforcement effect for decided women-voters. This result is similar to the one on voter bias from Um (2017) This is because, in most cases, voters who identify with a political party during elections will automatically decide to vote for a candidate that such a political party fields. On the other hand, voters who do not identify with any political party will very likely examine presidential candidates based on their perceived merit. Other biases like religion and ethnicity also help in strengthening voter decision of women examined.

Conclusion/Implications of the Results for Women's Political Participation

We conclude that international media play a significant role in the national politics of countries. This is particularly with reference to developing democracies which typically look up to the western world for guidance. The result of this study has three broad contributions. These broad areas are: theoretical contributions, women's political participation, and scholarly contributions. Theoretically, the result of this study has contributed to our understanding of reactance and reinforcement theories. It shows that when international media organisations try to limit women-voters on who to vote and who not to vote for, it does not necessarily lead to a reactance for decided voters. Voter's biases are very strong moderating variables such that the reactance effect is not significant. On the other hand, when the endorsement goes the way of the voter, it results in an enhancement effect, making the voter to cast his or her vote for the endorsed candidate. The result of this study has contributed to women's political participation by providing empirical evidence on how the media play roles in shaping the political information that women have as well as their voting behaviour. This information may prove beneficial for promoting women's political participation. Scholarly, this result has contributed to existing literature on women and politics. Further studies are recommended to be conducted in more advanced democracies like the United States of America, for better comparison. In addition, other researchers should examine other voting categories like the unemployed. There is also the need for subsequent studies to examine public perception of international media endorsement of candidates during elections.

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