

The Influence of the Media on Electoral Choice of Candidates in the 2013 and 2017 General Elections in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya

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Abstract: In liberal democracies world over, electoral participation in the choice of political representatives is an infringeable right of the citizen guaranteed by the constitution and International law. While most studies on the role of the media in democratization process are largely Eurocentric, there are scanty researches in Kenya and especially on how the media shapes voters' choice of candidates during election. This research assessed the influence of the media on electoral choice of candidates in the 2013 and 2017 general elections in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. A descriptive survey research design was adopted and targeted all 450,055 registered voters in Uasin Gishu County as per Independent Electoral and Boundary Commission statistics of 2017. A sample size of 384 respondents participated in the study and was drawn from 12 electoral Wards in all the six Sub-counties in Uasin Gishu County. Questionnaires, interview schedules and Focused Group Discussion were used as key research instruments in the collection of primary data and corroborated with the existing secondary data. Data analysis was carried out through the use of convergent parallel mixed method for the purpose of presentation. The study revealed that radio, television, social media and newspapers were key media outlets that influenced voters' choice of candidates with severity of influence increasing as the elective position became national from the ward level. The study concluded that the media is a key instrument for political education, mobilization and aggregation of social interests in electoral politics, and influences electoral outcomes in terms of choice of political representatives. The study recommended that while ensuring the freedom of the media continues to prevail, a bi-partisan legislation to ensure the media refrains from abuse and misuse to spread false information, hate speech and defamation during electioneering period should be enacted. A further study is also recommended on how the media shapes public opinion on different government policies and programmes.

Keywords: Media, Electoral Participation, County, Kenya

I. INTRODUCTION

The media constitute a fourth branch of government because of the power they wield and the oversight function they exercise in democratic societies, and this is a practice that has been deeply ingrained in both theory and practice since 17th century (Dubois and Blank, 2018). Political philosophers such as John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau are historically renowned advocates of media freedom given the significant role the media plays in keeping the public informed of political activities within and outside the state (Heywood, 2017). British and American thinkers later in that century

agreed with John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Montesquieu on the importance of the press in making government officials aware of the public's discontents and allowing governments to rectify their errors (Chadwick, 2017). Modern-day democrats equally appreciate the role of the media in democratization process, and in both advanced and emerging democracies, the notion of the media as watchdog is widely being accepted (Heywood, 2017). However, governments cannot be held accountable if citizens are ill informed about the actions of public officials and institutions. The media therefore, is the guardian of the public interest, warning citizens against those who are doing them harm. A

fearless and effective watchdog is critical in fledgling democracies where institutions are weak and pummeled by political pressure (Owen, 2014).

In new democracies, the expectation is that the media would help build a civic culture and a tradition of discussion and debate which was not possible during the period of authoritarian rule (Izuogu and Umoren, 2017). Since the late 1990s, donor countries and multilateral organizations have been preaching the virtues of a free press not just in ensuring good and accountable governance but also as a tool for poverty reduction, popular empowerment and national reconciliation (Giglio, 2015). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) posit that addressing poverty requires not just a transfer of economic resources to the needy but also making information available to the poor so that they can participate more meaningfully in political and social life (Kimani, 2017). If the poor are unaware of the laws and procedures for availing themselves of their entitlements or the mechanisms they can use to remedy their deprivations, they will always remain poor and therefore, democracy cannot take root if the poor and powerless are kept out of the public sphere (Shivarudrappa, 2014).

A study of Latin American states including Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela noted that continued investigative reporting on human rights violations and corruption has created a culture of transparency and accountability in government and thus strengthening democratization in the continent (Aririguzoh, 2014). In South-East Asia's states, continued reporting on malfeasance in public life has led to the removal of corrupt officials and boosted public awareness on the urgency for reforms (Chadwick, 2017). Dubois and Blank (2018) opined that investigative reporting on corruption and abuse of public office in the Philippines provided evidence used in the impeachment charges against President Joseph Estrada in the year 2000. The media as an instrument for dissemination of information also aids the public in making informed choices on whom to vote for and the policies to be endorsed and those to be opposed (Bosch, 2013).

As noted by Chadwick (2017), media outlet such as radio, newspapers and television helps to inform, educate and engage the public on important issues such as on human rights and electoral processes across states. Television for instance, has the capacity to inform, educate, entertain and present images to audience in vivid colours, and consequently appeal and grab the attention of the audience (Yamamoto, 2014). A survey of Television and radio networks in Philippines and Indonesia noted that these media outlets educates the voters on wise voting as well as the consequences of bad choices during elections (Aririguzoh, 2014). Additionally, political debates sponsored through media outlets such as television and radio stations have provided a platform to political candidates who can't afford to buy air time to articulate their views to target audience and majority of them have been elected on the basis of their development policies (Dubois and Blank, 2018).

Giglio (2015) noted that the use of radio as a means of reaching out during electioneering period is premised on the view that it is more accessible and less expensive to majority of citizens in developing countries. Localized FM radio stations helps to promote grassroots democracy since they provide a platform for citizens' political education. In 1996,

Nepal became the first country in South Asia to license a Non-Governmental FM station and by the year 2018, there were over 25 FM stations all over the country. These FM radio stations have provided an alternative source of information because they are established at the grassroots, focuses on local issues, and reflect the ethnic and linguistic diversity in Nepal (Chadwick, 2017). Similarly, Kenya has over 118 radio stations spread across the country, broadcasting in different vernacular languages and enjoying popular support than the national broadcasting stations (Kimani, 2017). Additionally, these popular vernacular radio stations enjoy more listenership in rural areas on social, economic and political information compared to the English and Kiswahili stations (Heywood, 2017).

Contemporary research studies also reveal an increase in the use of digital media in electoral related activities such as political campaigns (Li and Chan, 2017 and Heywood, 2017). From a purely support role such as electoral database, direct mail printing, and graphical design, Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) also provides a platform for direct communication from and to political parties, candidates and voters (McLaughlin and Baker, 2012). In political communication process, the key online tools include podcasting, blogging, and political websites with means for online participation and feedback, online video sharing, and social networking (Heywood, 2017). For instance, elections in USA since 2004 have been characterized by use of political party websites where electorates can obtain all information about the party as well as engage the party leaders in political discourse on electoral related activities (Hawker, 2013). In the UK, social media companies such as YouTube, Facebook, Google, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter are increasingly being used as platforms of communicating to voters (Dubois and Blank, 2018). Bosch (2013) also noted that the spread of the Arab revolution in 2011 in Algeria, Libya and Egypt was attributed to the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Youtube and Twitter in mass mobilization of street protests with over five hundred thousand protesters participating in Cairo alone. Research study by Heywood (2017) also established that political candidates in African countries such as Nigeria, Rwanda and South Africa have also used social media outlets such as Facebook, twitter, WhatsApp and You-tube extensively during their election campaigns.

While contemporary studies on media largely focuses on how it provide oversight to the government on transparency and accountability, provide coverage on human right violation, and aggregation of social interests in both developed and developing democracies, scanty research exists on how it shapes voters choice of candidates during elections including in Kenya. It is against this background that this study assessed the influence of the media on electoral choice of candidates in the 2013 and 2017 general elections in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. The County is largely a peri-urban and cosmopolitan and thus able to provide the varying attributes of media influence on electoral choice of candidates from the different ethnic groups and from a cross urban and rural setting.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is an output of a research study that was conducted in Uasin Gishu County in Kenya. A descriptive survey research design was adopted and targeted all 450,055 registered voters in Uasin Gishu County as per the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission statistics of 2017. A sample size of 384 respondents drawn from 12 electoral Wards participated in the study. Questionnaires, interview schedules and Focused Group Discussion were used in collection of primary data and corroborated with the existing secondary data. Data analysis was done through the use of convergent parallel mixed method for the purpose of presentation, and with strict adherence to research ethical considerations. The paper significantly revolves around assessing the influence of the media as a purposive corporate social bond in the 2013 and 2017 General Elections in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The subsequent sections highlight the discussion of major finding of the study.

A. THE MEDIA AND ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION IN UASIN GISHU COUNTY

As envisaged under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 34 and 35 of the 2010 Constitution of Kenya, the media wields much power in providing oversight function, keeping governments in light of transparency and accountability to the public, as well in providing political education and mobilization in electoral related activities (UDHR, 1948 and GoK, 2010). As a purposive corporate actor, this study examined how the different media platforms such as the radio, newspaper, television and internet shaped voters' choice of Presidential, Gubernatorial, Members of National Assembly and the Members of County Assembly candidates in Uasin Gishu County Kenya. First, it sought to assess the influence of radio on voters' choice of political candidates and the findings were as indicated in Table 3.1

Degree of Influence	President		Governor		Member of National Assembly		Member of County Assembly	
	No. of Respondents	%	No. of Respondents	%	No. of Respondents	%	No. of Respondents	%
Much Influence	236	67.2	134	38.2	115	32.8	39	11.1
Some Influence	81	23.1	156	44.4	152	43.3	140	39.9
No Influence	34	9.7	61	17.4	84	23.9	172	49.0
Total	351	100	351	100	351	100	351	100

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Table 3.1: Influence of Radio on Voters' Choice of Candidates in Uasin Gishu County

Analysis of findings in table 3.1 indicates that 317(90.3%) respondents acknowledged that the use of radio as a source of political information significantly influenced their choice of presidential candidate, 290(82.6%) cited that it influenced

their choice of gubernatorial candidate, 267(76.1%) agreed that it influenced their choice of MNA while only 179(51.0%) respondents agreed that it influenced their choice of MCA in the 2013 and 2017 general elections.

Apparent from this finding was that the use of radio had a significant influence on voters' choice of candidates in all the four elective positions, and with the level of influence increasing as the elective position becomes national i.e. increases from election of MCA to presidential elections. Key informants and discussants noted that Wards in the study area were generally small in geographical sizes and thus allowing contestants to easily transverse with ease as they campaigned and such individuals were well known to voters. Consequently, contestants vying for MCA finds it effective to use door to door campaigns unlike MNAs, Gubernatorial and presidential candidates whose electoral units are vast and making the use of radio as an effective means of reaching out to voters.

In relation to this study, the national radio stations (Kiswahili and English radio) cited by key informants and discussants as the major sources of political information during the 2013 and 2017 electioneering period included *Citizen FM*, *Radio Taifa*, *Radio Jambo*, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) and *Classic FM*. Further probing however, revealed that while these stations were platforms for obtaining general information on politics during prime time news, vernacular radio station were widely listened to in relation to ethnic community interests across all elective positions. It was cited that vernacular radio stations had open talk shows that allowed local and national political leaders to share their views with listeners on political issues such as on preferred political party for the community, party manifesto and individual candidate's political agenda. It was noted that through such talk shows, voters were able to assess the candidates who were in support of their national ethnic leader as well as candidates having the potential to articulate community interests at various levels of representations.

Among vernacular radio stations cited by key informants and discussants in FGDs to have been used by candidates in the 2013 and 2017 election campaign included *Kass Fm* (Kalenjin) and *Chamgei Fm* (Kalenjin), *Ramogi Fm* (Dholuo), *Kameme Fm* and *Inooro Fm* (Kikuyu), and *Mulembe Fm* (Luhya). As noted by Giglio (2015), the rapid penetration of radio as a source of information in developing countries is premised on the view that it's less expensive to purchase, more accessible to most citizens in remote areas, and localized (vernacular) FM radio stations allows the illiterate segment of the population to have access to political education. In this study the use of radio significantly influenced voters' choice of candidates in the different elective positions, however, key informants noted that caution was necessary in future to censure vernacular radio stations on the content to avoid abuse to incite violence as witnessed in 2007/8 general election in the study area.

The study also assessed the extent at which newspapers as source of political information influenced voters' choice of candidates in the different elective positions and the findings were as indicated in Table 3.2.

Degree of Influence	President		Governor		Member of National Assembly		Member of County Assembly	
	No. of Respondents	%	No. of Respondents	%	No. of Respondents	%	No. of Respondents	%
Much	27	7.7	21	6.0	20	5.7	2	0.6
Some	116	33.0	92	26.2	78	22.2	10	2.8
No	208	59.3	238	67.8	253	72.1	339	96.6
Total	351	100	351	100	351	100	351	100

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Table 3.2: Influence of Newspapers on Voters' Choice of Candidates in Uasin Gishu County

The findings in table 3.2 shows that 143(40.7%) respondents agreed that the use of newspaper as a source of political information influenced their choice of presidential candidates, 113(32.2%) respondents acknowledged that it influenced their choice of gubernatorial candidates, 98(27.9%) agreed that it influenced their choice of MNAs while only 12(3.4%) respondents agreed that it influenced their choice of MCAs in the 2013 and 2017 general elections.

The finding indicates that newspapers as source of political information had insignificant influence in the choice of political candidates across all the four elective positions under study as cited by over two-third of the respondents. Key informants and discussants in FGDs noted that newspapers are largely expensive, inaccessible to people in the rural areas, illiteracy among a section of the community members and unreliability of its information during the electioneering period, and with much focus on presidential elections. This finding was in tandem with Chadwick (2017) argument that newspapers penetration in developing countries is constrained by high illiteracy level among citizens, partiality in reportage, high cost of newspaper, and lack of access to communities in the rural areas.

Further probing with key informants noted that most newspaper outlets tend to concentrate in presidential elections with less focus on the county politics and thus reducing the extent at which it can influence choice of candidates at the County level politics. The major newspapers in circulation in the study area included; *The Star*, *Daily Nation*, *The Standard* and *Taifa Leo* which according to the Communication Authority of Kenya report (2019) only reaches 30 per cent of the Kenyan population and especially the urban population. This study also sought to interrogate the extent at which television as media platform influences voters choice of candidate in different elective positions in Uasin Gishu County and the findings were as indicated in table 3.3.

Degree of Influence	President		Governor		Member of National Assembly		Member of County Assembly	
	No. of Respondents	%	No. of Respondents	%	No. of Respondents	%	No. of Respondents	%
Much	168	47.9	98	27.9	56	16.0	7	2.0
Some	98	27.9	113	32.2	142	40.5	57	16.2
No	85	24.2	140	39.9	153	43.5	287	81.8
Total	351	100	351	100	351	100	351	100

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Table 3.3: Influence of Television on Voters' Choice of Candidates in Uasin Gishu County

The findings in table 3.3 shows 266(75.8%) respondents acknowledged that Television use as a source of political information influenced their choice of presidential candidates, 211(60.1%) respondents cited that it influenced their choice of

gubernatorial candidates, 198(56.5%) agreed that it influenced their choice of MNAs while 64(18.2%) respondents agreed that it influenced their choice of MCAs in the 2013 and 2017 general elections.

Evident from the finding was that the influence of television on voters' choice of candidates for elective positions increases as the elective position become national from the Ward level. Key informants noted that presidential candidates often prefer television to other media platforms owing to the centrality of their national development agenda and thus the need to reach out to the largest number of voters within a short time. A key informant noted that;

In the 2013 and 2017 presidential campaigns, several presidential debates were organized involving various contestants. These events captured live through prime time television networks were watched all over the country as every candidate demonstrated their priority issues if elected to power... (Key Informant, Male, 52 years)

Discussants in FGDs also noted that owing to the key role of the County government in relation to development and service provision to the citizens, voters gained much interest on the performance of the incumbent and where such County developments were aired through the television, voters would be influenced on the preferred candidate. A key informant noted that;

Repeated coverage on agricultural activities and the county government interventions played a key role in gubernatorial election campaigns in the run up for 2017 elections. The incumbent governor and BUZEKI were constantly on TV, each trying to reach out to electorates to have them voted with the view of enhancing maize, wheat and milk production and sourcing market... (Key Informant, Male, 48 years)

Evident from the study was the persistent use of television in the coverage of County and national development projects, and in conducting political campaigns thus influencing voters' choice of presidential and gubernatorial candidates. Key informants also noted that MNAs candidates would use the television to reach out to voters in their constituencies. Most of such candidates would debate over the development projects either already accomplished (by the incumbents) or those set as priority for the purpose of implementation and thus providing a platform through which voters could assess potential candidates for the elective position. The insignificant influence of television in the election of MCAs was attributed to the capacity by the different candidates to easily reach out to voters through alternative means such as door to door and roadside visits due to relatively small geographical sizes of their respective Wards.

Discussants in FGDs and key informants interviewed noted that television stations such as *Citizen TV*, *KTN*, *KTN News*, *KASS TV* and *NTV* were widely viewed in presidential, gubernatorial and MNA political campaigns and debates. This finding rhyme with the Communication Authority of Kenya Report (2019) that such stations were the leading countrywide in terms of viewership but only reaching 40 per cent of the Kenyan population, majority of whom are in urban areas. Aririguzoh (2014) opine that Television provides political candidates with an opportunity to by-pass their political parties and appeal to the voters directly, and candidates who

frequently appear on the television are perceived by voters as serious contestants. This study also sought to examine how the use of internet influenced voters' choice of a candidate and the findings were as indicated in table 3.4.

Degree of Influence	President		Governor		Member of National Assembly		Member of County Assembly	
	No. of Respondents	%	No. of Respondents	%	No. of Respondents	%	No. of Respondents	%
Much Influence	43	12.3	26	7.4	21	6.0	14	4.0
Some Influence	58	16.5	68	19.4	66	18.8	53	15.1
No Influence	250	71.2	257	73.2	264	75.2	284	80.9
Total	351	100	351	100	351	100	351	100

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Table 3.4: Influence of Internet on Voters' Choice of Candidates in Uasin Gishu County

The findings depicted in table 3.4 shows 101(28.8%) respondents acknowledged that internet use influenced their choice of presidential candidates, 94(26.8%) respondents cited that it influenced their choice of gubernatorial candidates, 87(24.1%) cited that it influenced their choice of MNAs while 67(19.1%) respondents acknowledged that it influenced their choice of MCAs in the 2013 and 2017 general elections.

Assessment of the influence of internet on voters' choice of candidates in the four elective positions indicated that over 70 per cent of the respondents were never influenced in their choice of candidates. While Chandwick (2017) posited that internet connectivity and uptake in developing countries is significantly increasing and transforming different sectors of the economy, key informants and discussants in FGDs in this study noted that most parts of rural Sub-counties were still constrained by inaccessibility to internet connectivity especially cyber cafes. Key informant noted that;

Most cyber cafes are largely located in the urban areas where most of the people from the rural areas cannot access. Despite some people having phones fitted with internet, the cost of buying internet bundles is also extremely high. In addition, it is difficult to ascertain internet information due to propaganda during electioneering period... (Key Informant, Male, 34 years)

From the response, the inability to adopt the use of internet by most of the respondents was attributed to lack of connectivity especially in rural areas where most of the voters live. Additionally, respondents also cited the high cost of internet bundles among those using mobile phones, as well as unreliability of information circulated through the internet during electioneering period. This finding rhymes with the Communication Authority of Kenya (2021) report that with Kenya having an estimated population of 54.38 million in January 2021 with 28.2% in urban centers and 71.8% in rural areas, only 40% of the entire population is able to access and use internet with majority of the users being in the urban areas. Respondents who acknowledged that internet influenced their choice of political candidates cited the use of digital social media platforms such as *Face-book*, *Twitter* and *Instagram*. These social media platform provided a means through which political candidates could communicate their development agenda to the voters and mobilize them to turn out and vote. A Key informants cited that Jubilee Alliance presidential candidate and Running mate (Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto respectively) in 2013 general election branded

themselves as 'Digital Team' owing to their use of digital platform such as *Twitter* and *Instagram* accounts to campaign even as they promised to digitalize service provision.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, the media as a purposive corporate social actor constitute an important tool for political education, mobilization and aggregation of social interests especially during electioneering period in Kenya. Different media platforms such as Television, radio, newspapers and social media have been used during the general elections to reach out to the voters but with varying severity of use across the different elective positions. This also indicates the ability for the media to influence voters' choice of candidates for the different levels of representation. The study however recommends that while ensuring the freedom of the media prevails, there should be a bi-partisan legislation to ensure the media refrains from abuse and misuse to spread false information, hate speech and defamation especially before, during and after elections. A further study is also recommended on how the media shapes public opinion on different government policies and programmes.

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