

MULTIPARTY DEMOCRACY AND CAMPAIGN COVERAGE OF NIGERIA'S 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: A STUDY OF DAILY TRUST AND VANGUARD NEWSPAPERS

Mohammed, Shauibu*

Mohammedshuaibu76@gmail.com

Department of Political Science and International Studies,
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Danladi, Kabiru

Kblondon2003@yahoo.com

Department of Mass Communication,
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Yahaya, Aliyu

Aliyuyahya2@gmail.com

Department of Political Science and International Studies,
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

*Corresponding Author: mohammedshuaibu76@gmail.com

Abstract

Multiparty democracy thrives on competitive political engagement and access to a diverse range of choices for the electorate. In Nigeria, the news media, particularly newspapers, play a central role in shaping public understanding of electoral campaigns. This study examines how two prominent Nigerian newspapers, Daily Trust and Vanguard, covered the 2023 presidential election campaigns. Drawing on agenda-setting theory, the study explores the extent to which campaign promises, candidate character, and policy direction were emphasised in media coverage. Using quantitative content analysis, 298 editions published between 28 September 2022 and 23 February 2023 were analysed. A structured coding sheet was developed, and inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, yielding kappa coefficients ranging from 0.78 to 0.84 across categories. The findings reveal that both newspapers disproportionately covered specific candidates. Daily Trust emphasised Atiku Abubakar's promises and Bola Ahmed Tinubu's character and policies, whereas Vanguard presented a more balanced coverage of the major contenders. The analysis shows that political coverage was shaped not only by issue salience but also by regional media affiliations, reinforcing Nigeria's longstanding electoral fault lines. The study concludes that newspapers, while central to political communication, may inadvertently contribute to uneven visibility and electoral perception in a fragile multiparty democracy.

Keywords: Multiparty Democracy, Agenda-Setting, Campaign Coverage, Presidential Election, Newspaper Analysis, Nigeria 2023

Introduction

A multiparty system is a cornerstone of liberal democracy, enhancing political competition and expanding the electorate's choices. In such a system, citizens are not limited

to binary political options but can select from multiple parties with distinct ideologies, candidates, and different policy orientations. This competitiveness serves as a check on ruling parties and fosters accountability, innovation, and broader political representation (Dahl, 1971). In other words, this competitive environment is essential not only for enhancing electoral legitimacy but also for holding governing parties accountable through the scrutiny of opposition forces.

In Nigeria, the transition to multiparty democracy has expanded political participation, yet it has also exposed deep-rooted societal cleavages. Ethnicity, religion, and regional affiliations continue to shape political campaigns and voting patterns, often at the expense of issue-based political discourse (Omotola, 2010). Within this context, the mass media, particularly newspapers play a pivotal role in shaping how campaigns are conducted and perceived. As mediators of political communication, newspapers do not merely report events; they also frame issues, amplify certain voices, and marginalize others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

One of the guidelines is the windows for campaign by political parties and their candidates. Elections are the primary mechanism through which citizens participate in shaping governance. However, democratic elections transcend the mere act of voting; they require an informed electorate capable of making rational choices. The campaign period, typically regulated by law, provides the critical window during which parties and candidates communicate their promises, policies, and character to the public. In Nigeria, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) officially opened the 2023 presidential campaign window on September 28, 2022, and closed it on February 23, 2023. Within this period, political communication intensified, and the media became a key conduit for shaping public discourse. As such, political parties conducted their campaigns within the specified period. Media outlets were used by political parties and candidates to set agendas through campaigns.

This study therefore investigates how two leading national newspapers – Daily Trust and Vanguard, covered the 2023 presidential election campaigns. Specifically, it examines the extent to which these outlets reported candidates' campaign promises, policy directions, and character traits. The analysis is situated within the Agenda-Setting Theory. The theory posits that the salience given to issues in the media significantly shapes public perceptions and opinions. Through selective coverage, prominence, and framing, newspapers contribute to constructing the political narratives that define electoral choices. Their function extends beyond information dissemination to include agenda-building and legitimacy assignment. Thus, any skew in media coverage whether in tone, frequency, or focus can have substantive consequences for democratic equity and electoral outcomes. Moreover, the media plays a critical role as a guardian, ensuring transparency in the electoral process. It is evident that a democratic election without media freedom, or with suppressed media freedom, would be a paradox. Understanding these roles is essential to evaluating the role of the press in promoting or undermining democratic consolidation in Nigeria's evolving multiparty system. The study is guided by the following questions:

- i. Which candidate's campaign promises did the Vanguard and Daily Trust newspapers cover the most among the political candidates?
- ii. Whose character did they cover the most?
- iii. Whose policy direction was covered the most by the two newspapers?

Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted about the role of media in entrenching democracy. When applied to African democracy, these roles have both negative and positive impacts. The media plays an indispensable role in democratic societies by facilitating access to information, shaping political participation, and acting as a watchdog over government actions. According

to the Center for Democracy and Governance (1999), access to credible information is fundamental to the health of a democracy, allowing citizens to make informed choices and hold public officials accountable. Without the media, elections risk becoming procedural rather than participatory, lacking in substance and legitimacy. Similarly, Ogah and Ogenyi (2014) emphasize the importance of patriotic journalism in fostering democratic development, arguing that democratic governance thrives only when mass media responsibly disseminate accurate and balanced information. These perspectives underscore the media's dual function in both representing public interest and ensuring electoral transparency.

Within the broader media landscape, traditional print media, particularly newspapers, retain a central role in electoral discourse in many developing democracies, including Nigeria. Ergan and Karsten (2019), in a comparative study of newspapers in the Netherlands and the United States, demonstrate that the media is a principal source of information on campaign promises. However, they note that media logic i.e., the norms that guide what is covered and how differs across contexts and can lead to biased or skewed coverage. Notably, their findings reveal more negative coverage of campaign promises in the Netherlands than in the U.S., challenging assumptions about uniform media behavior in liberal democracies.

Democratic governance would not survive without mass media disseminating the right information to the people. Democratic development can only be achieved when media outlets embrace patriotism in disseminating information to the people. While much scholarly attention has shifted to digital and social media, studies continue to reveal persistent structural inequalities in access and impact. Knowles, Camica, and Nelson (2023) contend that social media has amplified hidden structures of exclusion and polarization in political communication. They argue that critical media literacy is necessary to recognize inaccuracies, omissions, and ideological bias in digital platforms. Although social media can offer low-

threshold access to civic engagement, it can also deepen societal divides if left unregulated or misused.

However, unlike social media, traditional newspapers in Nigeria remain authoritative and agenda-setting in formal political discourse, especially during elections. Yet, as noted earlier, empirical studies examining their framing of campaign content such as promises, policy visions, or candidate character are sparse. Despite Nigeria's unique socio-political context, there has been limited empirical analysis of how its newspapers report campaign content, especially in ways that reflect political fault lines like ethnicity, religion, and region. This highlights a gap in comparative and context-specific studies that explore how traditional media either uphold or undermine democratic ideals in multi-ethnic societies.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Agenda-setting theory. The theory, first articulated by McCombs and Shaw (1972), remains one of the most influential frameworks in understanding how media coverage affects public perception during elections. The theory posits that the media does not tell people what to think, but what to think about. By giving prominence to certain issues or candidates, the media influences the salience of these topics in the public mind. Subsequent studies (McCombs, 1976; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004) affirm that this agenda-setting power is particularly strong during electoral periods, where voters rely heavily on media narratives to form opinions, especially in low-information environments.

In the Nigerian context, however, there is insufficient empirical research applying agenda-setting theory to evaluate how print media frame the campaign activities of presidential candidates, particularly in the context of a multi-party democracy characterized by ethno-regional competition and partisan journalism.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a quantitative content analysis design, suitable for systematically examining patterns of media coverage within a defined period. Content analysis is particularly effective for analyzing print media output such as news articles, features, editorials, and illustrations, allowing for empirical generalization and replicability (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). The study investigates how two nationally influential Nigerian newspapers, Daily Trust and Vanguard, covered presidential campaign content during the 2023 general election campaign window. The study period spans from September 28, 2022, when the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) officially lifted the ban on campaign activities, to February 23, 2023, when campaign activities were officially closed.

The selection of the newspapers was based on the location of the newspapers – one from the southern part of the country and one from the north. This is to look at how the campaigns went in terms of campaigns promises and explaining the character and policy direction of the presidential candidates. Content analysis was employed to provide an opportunity to give an explicit organization of the data collected and to also simplify the data collection process. Wimmer and Dominic (2011) posit that content analysis is appropriate method for studying recorded information like books, newspapers, historical and audiovisual materials through a systematic procedure, especially for documenting trends over time (Bryman, 2012).

Population of the study

The population of the study consists of all daily editions of Daily Trust and Vanguard newspapers published within the campaign period. This is the period when the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), the Nigeria's electoral body announced dates for the 2023 elections' campaign for 2023 elections. This constitutes a combined 298 newspaper editions (149 from each newspaper). Given the manageable size of the population, the study employed

a census sampling technique, which eliminates sampling error and ensures comprehensive coverage of the data universe (Israel, 1992; Kukutai, & Thompson, 2014). The population of the study constitutes the daily publications of the Daily Trust, and Vanguard from 28th September, 2022 to 23rd February, 2023.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis includes all forms of campaign-related content found within the selected newspapers during the study period. These include:

- i. News reports
- ii. Feature articles
- iii. Editorials
- iv. Interviews
- v. Opinion columns
- vi. Cartoons and illustrations
- vii. Photographs with campaign-related captions

Only content that explicitly mentions, discusses, or visually represents presidential candidates or their campaign activities was coded.

Content Categories

To ensure conceptual clarity and consistent coding, the following operational definitions were adopted:

- i. Campaign Promises – Any direct statement or policy proposal attributed to a candidate or their party, outlining what they intend to do if elected. These include economic plans, governance reforms, and sectoral targets (e.g., education, infrastructure).

- ii. Character Traits – Descriptions or portrayals (positive or negative) of a candidate's personality, credibility, competence, integrity, health, leadership style, or past behavior, as highlighted by journalists or quoted sources.
- iii. Policy Direction – Content reflecting the broader ideological or programmatic orientation of a candidate or party, typically beyond a single promise. This includes macro-level discussions of economic frameworks, national unity, or governance approaches.

Each article or visual element was coded for the presence, frequency, and valence (neutral, positive, negative) of the above variables across each candidate: Atiku Abubakar, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Peter Obi, and Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso.

Data Gathering Instruments

The instrument for this study was the coding sheet. For the purpose of this study. It was used to record findings derived from the entire coding exercise. The code sheet is developed based on the objectives of the study.

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

A structured coding sheet was developed based on the research objectives and coding categories. Two trained coders with background in political communication were recruited and trained to identify relevant content and apply coding rules consistently. A two-step procedure was followed:

- i. Pilot Coding - A pilot test using a randomly selected subset of 30 editions (15 from each paper) was conducted to refine coding categories and establish clarity in definitions.
- ii. Main Coding - After achieving agreement on category definitions, coders independently coded the entire sample of 298 editions using NVivo-assisted manual tagging and an Excel template for tracking frequencies.

Each coder worked independently and was blinded to the other's entries. To assess inter-coder reliability, Cohen's Kappa (κ) was calculated using the results from the pilot test. Cohen's Kappa is appropriate for measuring agreement between two raters beyond chance. The values obtained were:

- i. Campaign Promises: $\kappa = 0.84$
- ii. Character Traits: $\kappa = 0.78$
- iii. Policy Direction: $\kappa = 0.81$

All values exceed the 0.70 threshold recommended by Neuendorf (2017) and indicate substantial to near-perfect agreement.

Frequencies and percentages were computed for each category and visualized in bar graphs using SPSS (version 27). The analysis was both comparative (Daily Trust vs. Vanguard) and candidate-specific, enabling the identification of skewed coverage, candidate emphasis, and dominant campaign narratives across media outlets.

Analysis

Figure 1: Coverage of Campaign Promises by Daily Trust and Vanguard Newspapers

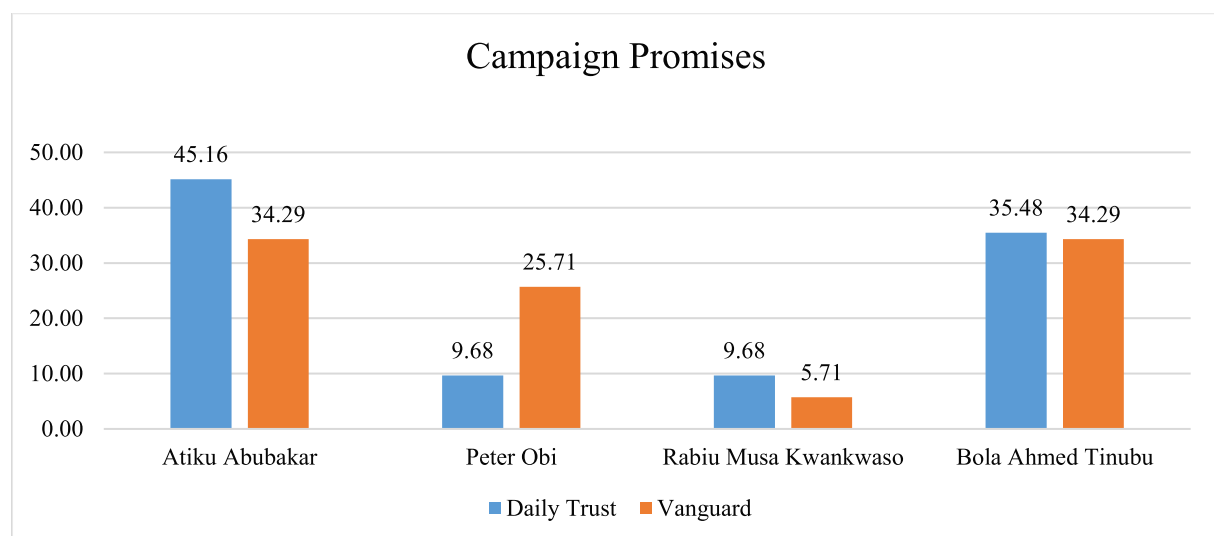


Figure 1 shows that in terms of campaign promises covered by Daily Trust, Atiku Abubakar has 45.16%, Peter Obi 9.68%, Rabiul Musa Kwankwaso 9.68% and Bola Ahmed Tinubu 35.48%. For Vanguard, Atiku Abubakar has 34.29%, Peter Obi 25.71%, Rabiul Musa Kwankwaso 5.71% and Bola Ahmed Tinubu 34.29%. This indicates that Daily Trust covered most of the Atiku campaign promise while Vanguard has a balanced coverage between Atiku and Tinubu.

Figure 2: Coverage of Character of Presidential Candidates by Daily Trust and Vanguard Newspapers

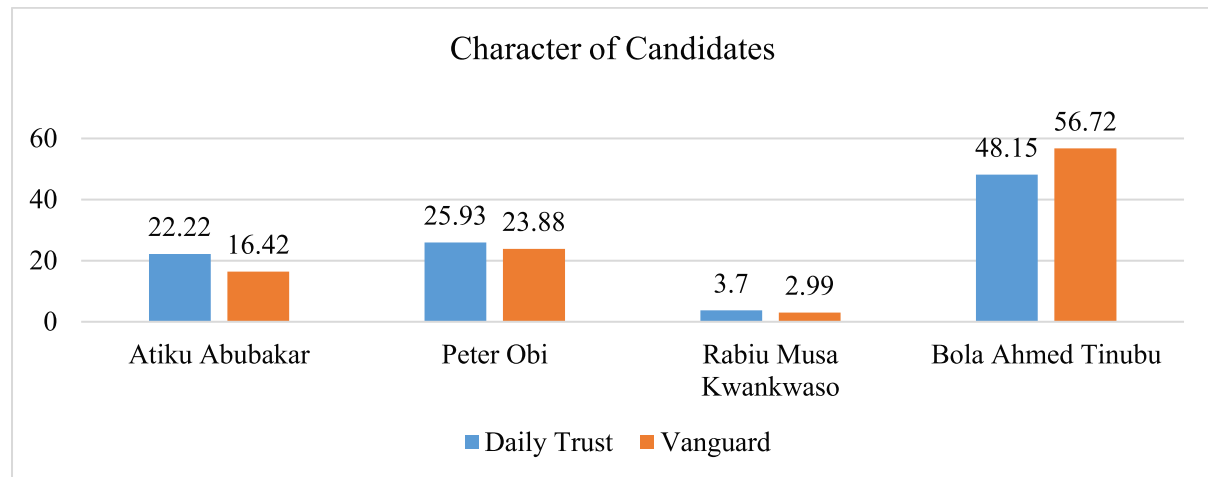


Figure 2 indicates coverage of character of presidential candidates by Daily Trust and Vanguard newspapers. For Daily Trust Atiku Abubakar has 22.22%, Peter Obi 25.93%, Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso 3.70% and Bola Ahmed Tinubu 48.15%. For Vanguard, Atiku Abubakar has 16.42%, Peter Obi 23.88%, Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso 2.99% and Bola Ahmed Tinubu 56.72%. This shows that Daily Trust covered the most Bola Ahmed Tinubu's character.

Figure 3: Coverage of Policy Direction of Presidential Candidates by Daily Trust and Vanguard Newspapers

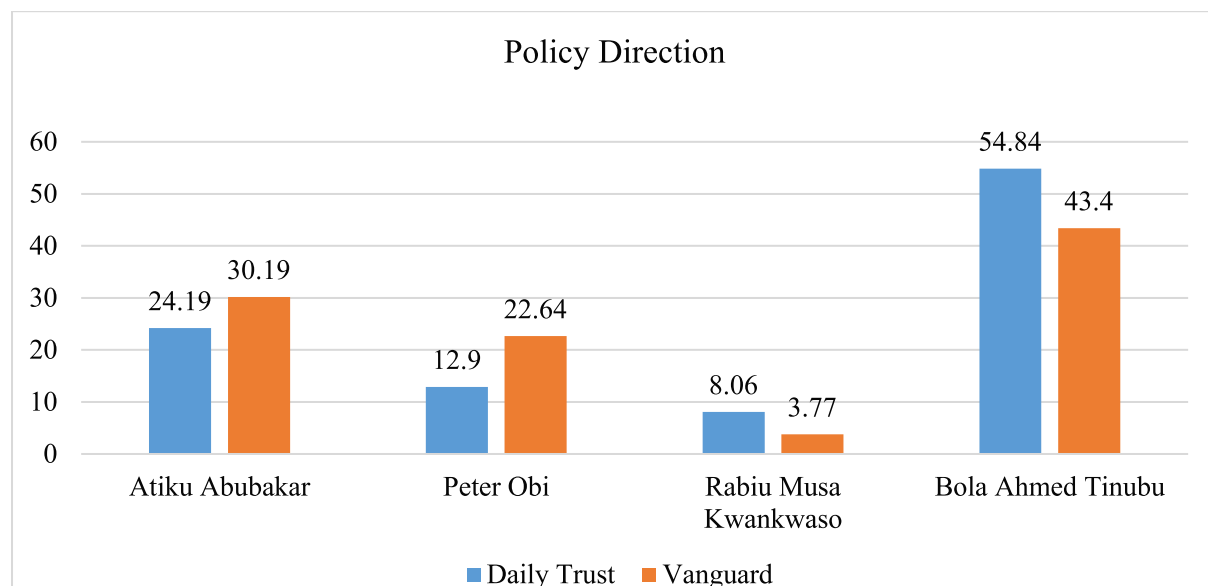


Figure 3 shows that in terms of policy direction covered by Daily Trust, Atiku Abubakar has 24.19%, Peter Obi 12.90%, Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso 8.06% and Bola Ahmed Tinubu 54.84%. For Vanguard, Atiku Abubakar has 30.19%, Peter Obi 22.64%, Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso 3.77% and Bola Ahmed Tinubu 43.4%. This indicates that Daily Trust covered the most Bola Ahmed Tinubu's policy direction.

Figure 4: Campaign Coverage of Presidential Candidates by Daily Trust and Vanguard Newspapers

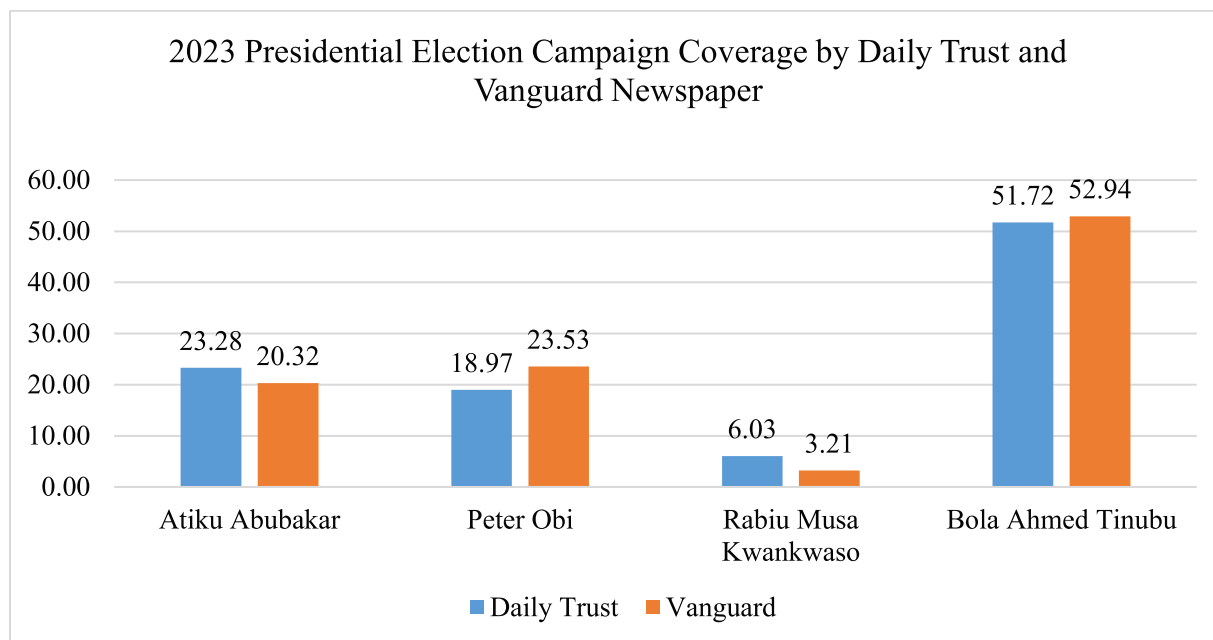


Figure 4 demonstrates the general election campaign coverage by Daily Trust and Vanguard newspapers. For Daily Trust, Atiku Abubakar has 23.28%, Peter Obi 18.97%, Rabiul Musa Kwankwaso 6.03% and Bola Ahmed Tinubu 51.72%. For Vanguard, Atiku Abubakar has 20.32%, Peter Obi 23.53% Rabiul Musa Kwankwaso 3.21% and Bola Ahmed Tinubu 52.94%. This indicates that both Daily Trust and Vanguard have covered the most Bola Ahmed Tinubu's election campaigns.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis shows that Daily Trust allocated the highest percentage of policy direction coverage to Tinubu (54.84%), while Vanguard distributed coverage more moderately across Tinubu (43.4%), Atiku (30.19%), and Obi (22.64%). Kwankwaso received minimal policy attention in both papers. This means there is a systematic asymmetry in the campaign coverage of the contestants by the two newspapers. Quantitatively, both Daily Trust and Vanguard allocated substantially greater attention to Bola Ahmed Tinubu in the overall campaign coverage and the domains of character and policy direction, while Atiku Abubakar received relatively higher attention in certain promise-focused coverage in Daily Trust and more balanced attention in Vanguard. Peter Obi and Rabiul Musa Kwankwaso were consistently less visible, particularly in policy-direction framing.

These patterns suggest situating them within the agenda-setting theory. Which means that the volume of coverage directly shapes how important the issues are and candidate salience for low-information voters (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Where newspapers concentrate space on a candidate's character or policy platform, they make those aspects available to readers, thereby increasing perceived viability and importance. On the other hand, gatekeeping and framing processes within newsrooms, driven by editorial priorities, source access, and news values, selectively amplify certain narratives above others. For instance, candidate prominence, elite accessibility, and the circulation of party press materials likely raised Tinubu's visibility. Another issue also is the political economy of newspapers, regional constituencies, ownership linkages, and advertiser sensitivities, structures coverage priorities and may reproduce electoral fault lines. The observed north-south differences in emphasis are consistent with the assumption that geographic and institutional proximity influence both what is covered and how.

Different candidate activity like frequency and scale of rallies, press releases could explain part of the coverage skew; though our findings do not fully disentangle media initiative from campaign supply. Similarly, episodic events like scandals, court rulings, endorsements can produce transient spikes that inflate aggregate shares. The prominence-weighted and time-series analyses (recommended above) are therefore crucial: if coverage skew remains large after prominence weighting and controls for event frequency, this strengthens the argument that editorial priorities not only campaign behaviour but drive exposure differentials.

From a normative standpoint, the consequences of the findings to journalism practice are substantial. In multiparty democracies like ours where many voters rely on legacy mass media for campaign information, skewed coverage risks narrowing the effective choice set. This means fewer citizens will be familiar with the programmatic differences among candidates, which favours front-runners and reduces meaningful contestation. Disproportionate visibility increases perceived viability (bandwagon effects), shapes voting intentions for

undecided voters, and may suppress turnout among supporters of less-visible candidates. This pathway is well documented in agenda-setting and bandwagon literature and should be treated as empirically testable rather than speculative.

The observed emphasis on character and personality over substantive policy detail in many items reflects a broader media logic that prizes conflict, novelty, and personalization. Daily Trust talks more on Tinubu character (48.15%) than other candidates like Atiku Abubakar (22.22%), or Peter Obi (25.93%), and Rabiun Musa Kwankwaso (3.70%). This is also the same with Vanguard newspaper where Tinubu character received 56.72%, Peter Obi 23.88% while Atiku Abubakar and Rabiun Musa Kwankwaso had 16.42% and 2.99% coverage respectively. This is not unique to Nigeria, but in a polity where identity politics and regional cleavages already structure voting, such coverage amplifies affective polarization and reduces deliberation on policy trade-offs.

Conclusion and Implications for Journalism Practice

The findings of the study demonstrate that Nigerian newspapers played an agenda-setting role that was both selective and uneven, often giving privilege to some candidates based on regional affiliation, prominence, or controversy. This undermines the normative democratic ideal of equal media access and pluralistic representation. Furthermore, the study reinforces critiques that multiparty democracy in Nigeria remains formally competitive but substantively uneven, as media coverage mirrors societal fault lines, particularly region and ethnicity, rather than neutral, policy-driven evaluation of candidates.

The findings are particularly important in fragile democracies where media influence is high and issue-based political culture is still emerging. The dominance of character-based and selective campaign reporting reflects the media's dual role as both agenda-setter and amplifier of elite narratives.

The finding of the study indicates a media-driven narrative emphasis on Tinubu's campaign, particularly in Daily Trust, possibly due to his front-runner status and the political leverage of the All Progressives' Congress (APC). More critically, the lack of depth in reporting the policy platforms of less-prominent candidates, especially Kwankwaso and Obi, reflects a media tendency to prioritize "winnable" candidates, thereby shaping public opinion around a limited pool of "viable" options. From an agenda-setting perspective, this selective exposure limits voters' access to the full range of political alternatives, thereby narrowing the democratic space despite the formal presence of a multiparty structure. Based on this conclusion the study recommends that:

- i. Newsrooms should adopt explicit guidelines for equitable campaign coverage during official campaign periods (e.g., track monthly parity metrics, ensure balanced front-page representation across major contenders unless newsworthiness justifies deviation).
- ii. Newspapers should publish brief transparency notes with campaign reports (e.g., indicate press-release sources), and external monitors should report prominence-weighted summaries.
- iii. Invest newsroom training for beat reporters to prioritize programmatic analysis over personality profiling; partner with fact-checking outfits to highlight policy comparators across candidates.
- iv. For scholars and future research, this work highlights the need for mixed-methods study with qualitative interviews with editors to understand editorial rationales, voter surveys to test the salience pathway from media exposure to perceived viability, and comparative work across additional outlets and broadcast media.
- v. Ensuring pluralistic and substantive media coverage during campaigns is a necessary condition for substantive multiparty democracy; this study provides empirical evidence that Nigeria's media still struggles with that responsibility.

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