

## **Electoral Laws and Newspaper Reports during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study examined the Electoral Laws and Newspaper Reports during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria. The aim is to investigate the influence of some Newspaper reports on Nigeria's national unity during the 2023 presidential election. The content of six newspapers was analyzed to determine how their reports affected national unity in the period of the election. The items analyzed include news stories, features, opinion columns, and editorials. The study was anchored on the Agenda-Setting Theory of the mass media. Findings of the study showed that the newspaper reports affected positively as well as negatively the nation's national unity. Other reports were neutral in focus. Based on the findings and conclusion reached, the study made some useful recommendations that would help to shore up the nation's national unity, especially during the electioneering period.*

**Keywords:** *Electoral Laws, Newspaper Reports, Presidential Election, democracy, political participation*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In any democracy, whether advanced or emerging, an election is the most visible form of political participation, and it corresponds with a period of heightened activity where almost all aspects of a nation's life are pushed to a fever pitch. It is a formal decision-making process by which a population chooses an individual to hold public office.

Ochim (2013, p. 105) averred that an election is an exercise of freedom of choice with expectations from the political parties and groups whose votes are canvassed. Ibrahim & Ibeanu (2009, p. 31) corroborated this when they asserted that freedom to exercise their franchise is fundamental to liberal democracy... Thus, elections have meaning for most people only in a democratic context because they

lead to the choice of decision-making by the majority of citizens. Election, therefore, gives the electorate the opportunity to decide who should rule them, what the rulers' policies and programmes should be.

An election serves as an important mechanism and viable means that ensures orderliness in the process of leadership succession and change. It gives legitimacy and political authority to every administration. An election plays a dominant role in a democracy and is highly circumscribed by the popular will, inculcating political changes, and actualizing the regime's legitimacy. As Schumpeter (1947), cited in Nwokeke & Jayun (2011, p. 130), noted, democracy ensures that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them. This means that democracy is all about conducting elections and choosing political leaders.

An election ensures that a government is popular, and the social pact that exists between the government and the governed. This illustrates the basis of political authority, legitimacy, and citizens' obligations. It also helps to shape and sharpen political accountability between the governors and governed through reciprocity and exchange. Sandbrook (1988, p.15) succinctly captures this when he posited that, "elections and the struggle for power are essential because it gives the oppressed classes the chance to put the question of alternative ideologies on the agenda and therefore constitute an important stage in the socialist quest to extend democratic control to the social and economic as well as political sphere.

In extolling the virtues of an election in a polity, Dunmoye (2010, p. 3) submitted that an election is also a government administered process by which people, whether opposed or unopposed, seek a political party's nomination for, or election to, public office. Martin (1995, p. 18) captured the impact of elections; thus, the idea of elections as the ultimate democratic device is a deep-seated one... It is hard to escape it. Children are taught about elections in school, and may vote for school council or club officers... Indeed, the main connection that most people have with their rulers is the ballot box. It is no wonder that electoral politics is sanctified. In the same way that elections are an important ingredient of democracy, so are political parties a necessary precondition for elections. Mutfwang (2010, p.117) rightly emphasized that the conduct of free and fair elections is only possible on the platform of organized political parties. Newspapers and other media play an indispensable role in the conduct of elections.

Discussion of the media's functions within electoral contexts often focuses on their 'watchdog role', through unfettered scrutiny and discussion of the successes and failures of candidates, governments, and electoral management bodies. Newspapers and other media can inform the public of how effectively they have performed and help to hold them to account.

Yet they also have other roles in enabling full public participation in elections. The roles, according to Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2011, p.25), are:

- i. By educating voters on how to exercise their democratic rights
- ii. By reporting on the development of an election campaign
- iii. By providing a platform for the political parties and candidates to communicate their message to the electorate;
- iv. By providing a platform for the public to communicate their concerns, opinions, and needs to the parties/ candidates, the EMR, the government, and to other voters, and to interact on these issues;
- v. By allowing the parties and candidates to debate with each other;
- vi. By reporting results and monitoring vote counting;
- vii. By scrutinizing the electoral process itself, including electoral management, to evaluate the processes of fairness, efficiency, and probity;
- viii. By providing information that, as far as possible, avoids inflammatory language to help prevent election-related violence.

Newspapers and other media are not the sole source of information for voters, but in a world dominated by mass communication. Newspapers and other media likely determine the political agenda, even in less technologically developed countries.

In most nations' constitutions, the national unity is usually considered sacrosanct and well cherished. Most governments would go the extra mile to ensure that the unity of their country is not jeopardized in any way, irrespective of the prevailing situation. During elections, the way electoral processes are handled could be a tendency for the unity of the country to be tampered with, and media reports skewed along ethnic and tribal lines. Media reports can also polarize the citizens and cause division among the people. It is not immediately clear how newspaper reports in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria created disunity or promoted national unity, hence the need for this study.

This study, therefore, examines the influence of the print media reports, particularly newspapers, on Nigeria's national unity during the 2023 presidential election.

### **Objective of the Study**

The objective of the study is to examine the influence of newspapers reports on Nigeria's national unity during the 2023 presidential election. Specifically, the objectives of the study are:

- i. To find out the various type of reports published by newspapers during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria

- ii. To identify which of the newspapers focus more on reports that negatively or positively influence national unity during the 2023 presidential election
- iii. To find out how the various types of newspaper reports influence the nation's unity during the 2023 presidential election.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

- i. What are the various types of reports published by newspapers during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria?
- ii. Which of the newspapers focus more on reports that negatively or positively influence national unity during the 2023 presidential election?
- iii. How did the various types of the newspaper reports influence the nation's unity during the 2023 presidential election?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the Agenda-setting theory of the mass media. The basic idea of Agenda-Setting is that the news media, through their news, have the power to structure public issues and exert some influence on public consciousness, cognition, and behaviour. Livingstone (1992, p.52) noted that, "through control of the agenda, the mass media place some emphasis on news stories by size, placement and frequency of appearance of stories."

Writing about the Agenda-Setting power of the media, Baran (2012, p.368) pointed out that the Agenda-Setting power of the media resides in more than the amount of space or time devoted to a story and its placement in the broadcast or the page. Also important, he said, is the fact that there is great consistency between media sources across all media in the choice and type of coverage they give an issue or event. This consistency and repetition signal to people the importance of the issue or event.

According to Baran & Davis (2006, p. 316), the Agenda-Setting idea has been with us since the days of the penny press and has evolved in stages. Lippmann (1922), in his work on Public Opinion, argued that people do not deal directly with their environments as much as they respond to "pictures" in their heads. According to Lippmann (1922, p.16), the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. He argued further that people are not equipped to deal with much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations, and that even when people have to act in that environment, they have to reconstruct it on a simpler level before they can manage it.

The modern Agenda-Setting notion credited to Bernard Cohen is a refined version of Lippmann's idea. Cohen (1963, p. 13) averred that, "The press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think about. And it follows from this that the world looks differently to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn from them by the writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read."

The idea of agenda-setting, as presented by Cohen, has limited effects and bias. Cohen first argued that the press is rarely successful in telling people what to think, but then that the world is different to people depending on what the press offers them. The bias noticed in Cohen's work, as Baran & Davis (2006) put it, forms the basis for what we now call the agenda-setting function of the mass media. They further added that this perspective might have lingered in obscurity had it not been empirically confirmed by research conducted by McCombs and Shaw (1972).

McCombs (2006, p.37) articulated the interpretation of agenda-setting thus: In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters shape the political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position ... The mass media may well determine the important issues; that is, the media may set the agenda of the campaign. This confirmation by McCombs & Shaw (1972) of what Cohen (1963) earlier stated and reinforced the notion of agenda-setting, and some scholars, like McQuail (2010), ascribed the development of the theory to McCombs and Shaw. McQuail (2010, p. 512) added that the core idea of the theory is that the news media indicate to the public what the main issues of the day are, and this is reflected in what the public perceives as the main issues.

## **Election**

In most democratic societies, elections are held periodically for several purposes, and very often, election periods generate a lot of interest among the political candidates in particular, and the civil society, in general, because the destiny of the people and the nation rests squarely on the shoulders of the successful candidates at the polls. It is no wonder, then, that both political actors and their supporters deploy different persuasive strategies to elicit support and woo voters to gain and control power.

Shiverly (1999, p. 204) posited that, election... serve two main purposes, the purely democratic purpose of allowing the mass of the people to have some direct say in the choice of leaders and policies... and the more or less universal purpose of

allowing the state to mobilize its people and to build up their support for the state by acting it out and participating in the process of government. Janda et al. (2005, p. 220) contended that democratic governance benefits from elections in two ways: First, citizens can choose the candidates they think will best serve their interests. Second, voting (election) allows the people to re-elect the officials they guessed right about and to kick out those they guessed wrong about.

Elections are held for elective offices for a prescribed term allowed by the constitution and electoral law of each democratic country. In Nigeria, general elections for the State Houses of Assembly, the National Assembly, the office of Governor, and that of the President take place every four years. The last general elections were held in 2023. Under the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended) and the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended), it is the right of political parties to sponsor candidates for elections. And the right of voters to elect their preferred candidates into offices, and the power and authority of the tribunals and courts to review and ensure that both the sponsorship of candidates and the electoral process conform to the provisions of the constitution and the Electoral Act.

For elections to thrive, every democratic country should endeavour to establish an independent and non-partisan electoral body that conducts free and fair elections; an impartial judiciary that interprets electoral laws and adjudicates on electoral matters. There will also be a need for contestants and other political actors/stakeholders to play by the rules of the game.

### **Electoral Process**

The Electoral process is very fundamental to any democratic dispensation. According to Sokoh & Umukoro (2010, p. 52), the electoral process refers to all activities that take place in a democratic country in an attempt to choose political leaders through voting at a given time. The activities include voter registration, registration of political parties, candidate selection, and the voting procedures, among others.

A secure electoral process guarantees good governance, human rights, and poverty elimination. The absence of a secure electoral process not only brings abuse of democracy, but also the process and the result may be open to legal challenge. The rules laid down for the registration and conduct of political parties must be fair and equitable and have the parties' support. The way this is handled by the electoral authority will send important signals to the electorate about the likely quality of the rest of the electoral process. A secure electoral process, which naturally paves the



way for a free and fair election, as Mohammed & Bashir (2010, p.3) noted, has the potential of opening up new opportunities for improved democratic processes.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is the body charged with managing the electoral process in Nigeria. It was established in 1998 by General Abdulsalami Abubakar's administration following the dissolution of National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON). Established in accordance with Section 153 (f) of the 1999 Constitution as amended, INEC is saddled with the following responsibilities:

- a. Organize, undertake, and supervise all elections to the offices of the president and vice-president, the governor and deputy governor of a state, and the membership of the senate, the House of Representatives, and the House of Assembly of each state of the federation;
- b. Register political parties under the provisions of this constitution and the Act of the National Assembly;
- c. Monitor the organization and operation of the political parties, including their finances;
- d. Arrange for the annual examination and auditing of the funds and accounts of political parties, and publish a report on such examination and audit for public information;
- e. Arrange and conduct the registration of persons qualified to vote as well as prepare, maintain, and revise the register of voters for any election under the constitution;
- f. Monitor political campaigns, and provide rules and regulations, which shall govern the political parties;
- g. Ensure that all electoral commissioners, electoral and returning officers take and subscribe to the oath of office prescribed by law;
- h. Delegate any of its powers to any resident electoral commissioner; and
- i. Carry out such other functions as may be conferred upon it by an Act of the National Assembly.

While inaugurating INEC on August 12, 1998, General Abdulsalami Abubakar reaffirmed the commitment of his administration to allow the electoral umpire to operate independently; so did President Goodluck Jonathan while appointing the INEC Chairman Professor Attahiru Jega in 2011. As a neutral, non-partisan electoral agency, INEC is expected to exhibit unalloyed impartiality and transparency in its conduct of elections in Nigeria. Since its inception, INEC has conducted many general elections in the country.

The fundamental challenge facing Nigeria's electoral process is that the voters' register is complete, votes are recorded as cast, and tabulated accurately.

Recording and tabulating the votes accurately is certainly a challenge in the conduct of elections in Nigeria. The quality of any election is determined by the appropriateness of the overall electoral process, the electoral law, and the practical mechanisms for the election, which include the voters' register, a free, fair, and credible voting system. The electoral process is the ultimate underpinning of the legitimacy of viable democratic governments.

### **Concept of National Unity**

Unity is a state of being one, single, or a condition of agreement. It also means unification (Taiwo, 2005). Unity is one of the major factors that determines the development of any society. Without peaceful coexistence among members of society, its progress will be a mirage. The United Nations recognized the importance of unity as a driving factor for national and international development as early as 1998, in its declaration of human rights aimed at bringing harmony among people.

The objective of establishing the African Union, as in the African Union Document, is to achieve greater unity and solidarity among the African countries and the people of Africa. This has been evident in the incorporation of peace and Security Council established in Cairo, Egypt by its predecessor Organisation of Africa Unity, in 1993; establishment of mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution in 2011 at Lusaka, Zambia, as well as declaration of the Peace, Security Solidarity in Africa on the 8th November, 2012 at the third high-level retreat of special envoy and representatives of member states (African Union Commission, 2012).

The Federal Government of Nigeria has considered unity as a factor in development, as in its national objectives (FRN, 2004). This is a clear indication that unity is a prerequisite for the progress and development of any society; hence, every society strives to achieve greater unity for its progress (Torper, 2013).

National unity, simply, means a country remaining as one political entity. There is a minimum in national unity but virtually no maximum. At a minimum, the political entity remains one. Different levels of unitary may exist. For example, in a country where different parts of the country operate different and often conflicting laws over time, they may evolve a reconciled single law. For those who have studied Nigeria's political history or have paid attention to developments in Nigeria from colonial times till date, the challenges and prospects are numerous, well known, and may no longer be issues. What appear to be less well-known and deserve attention here are: 1. the fundamental basis of the challenges and prospects of social unity, including national unity, and 2. Why are these challenges not often effectively and easily met, while the prospects are not effectively and efficiently utilized in Nigeria?



In other words, the questions that one wishes to address are: What is the fundamental basis of interpersonal unity? Why have the challenges of Nigeria's national unity not been readily and efficiently met? Why have the prospects of Nigeria's national unity not been easily and readily utilized? A theoretical perspective of social unity is therefore employed to help address these questions. The guess is that the social production and reproduction system of Nigeria has not been made consonant with its challenges and prospects.

In fact, national unity generates notions of oneness in a nation, notwithstanding all types of multiformity inside a nation, such as multi-culture, multilingualism, and multi-religion. It fosters a sense of shared purpose, identity, nationhood, unity, and patriotism among a country's citizens (Ejiroghene, 2021). As a result, promoting national unity is critical because a house divided against itself cannot stand. Furthermore, the phrase "One People, One Nation, One Destiny cannot be accomplished without encouraging national unity, as Viera (2019) remarked that, "without unity, there is no growth, freedom, and most importantly, no patriotism." National Unity is an essential component of any country's stability and development, and Nigeria is no exception.

National unity is an important subject for any country seeking progress and advancement. Any society that wishes to progress and thrive must accept the notion of national unity. The concept of national unity is synonymous with terms like national integration, national cohesion, and nation building. However, all of these terms are used to depict a point of convergence among different groups of people in a society. One thing that exists within a society is multiformity, and this is made manifest with reference to multi-lingual, multi-culture, multi-value, multi-ethics, and so on. Therefore, to minimize or silence the voices of multiformity within a society and reach a point of uniformity is a sure way of initiating national unity. Caplan (2019) describes national unity as a political construct that reflects the collective spirit and will of a group of people who agree to be part of a particular geographical area as a unit, for the purpose of governance and action on behalf of all.

Zamare and Karofi (2015) described national unity as a process that produce an omnibus of initiatives put in place by a state, its representative or institution guided by respect for the unique traditions and cultural background of ethnicities sharing the same polity with the goal of harmonizing all interest through a form of dialogue and representation and addressing differences that may be divisive and conflictual using the instrument of fairness, justice and equity in the sharing of resources, benefits, opportunities and responsibilities in order to guarantee stability, longevity and prosperity of the polity as long as the inhabitants decide to remain in the polity. Echem, Pokubo, and Ejuh (2018) expressed the view that national unity is

the development of any meaningful nation. For any society to advance and flourish, it must embrace national unity. The idea behind national unity is uniformity, oneness as a people.

In other words, it is unity in diversity (Alabi, Zabairu & Onuoha, 2019). Ambali (2019) further opined that national unity is the brick and capstone of any meaningful development a nation could record because it revolves around a society with unity of purpose and togetherness, not minding the differences in terms of political affiliation, religion, tribe, culture, and every other peculiarity that alienates us from one another.

## METHOD

The research method adopted Content Analysis in generating data for the study was with a coding sheet as its main tool. The reason for the choice of content analysis is that the subject matter requires analysis of the manifest content of the press, and the content analysis technique is the most appropriate. Six national newspapers, namely: The Guardian, Vanguard, Punch, The Nation, Sun, and Daily Trust, were content analyzed to find out how the print media stories influence Nigeria's national unity during the 2023 presidential election. Sixty-six newspaper editions form the population of the study, while 30 newspaper editions eventually form the sample size. This means 5 editions for each of the six newspapers. Only the newspaper editions that carried stories on the 2023 presidential election were sampled using the purposive sampling technique. The analysis of data is shown below.

**Table 1:** Newspaper Reports Published During the 2023 Presidential Election

Types of reports	Newspapers						Total
	The Guardian	The Nation	Vanguard	Sun	Punch	Daily Trust	
News stories	10	12	8	6	6	5	47
Features	3	5	6	5	5	4	28
Opinion columns	2	4	3	2	2	3	16
Editorials	1	2	1	-	-	-	4

**Source:** Content Analysis 2025

Table 1 shows the various reports published by some newspapers during the 2023 presidential election. News stories led with 47, followed by features 28, opinion columns 16, and editorials 4. The implication of this data is that the newspapers published more news stories than any other type of report.

**Table 2:** Distribution of Newspaper Reports on Positive or Negative Influence on Nigeria's National Unity during the 2023 Presidential Election.

	Newspapers						
Influence	The Guardian	The Nation	Vanguard	Sun	Punch	Daily Trust	Total
Positive	9	10	9	9	9	9	55
Negative	5	4	6	5	3	7	30

Source: Content Analysis 2025

Table 2 shows that positive items are 55 (64.7%) while negative items are 30 (35.3%). In the publication of positive items for national unity. The Nation newspaper led the pack, followed by other newspapers. Daily Trust led the pack with the highest negative items (7) in publication. The Punch published the fewest negative items (3) that affect national unity. The data imply that the Nation published more positive items that contributed to national unity, while Daily Trust led the pack in negative items publication that affected national unity.

**Table 3:** Newspaper Published Reports influence on the Nation's Unity in the 2023 Presidential Election

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	55	57.9
Negative	30	31.6
Neutral	10	10.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Content Analysis 2025

The data in Table 3 show that the newspaper reports that influence the national unity of Nigeria positively are 55 (57.9%), negative reports are 30 (31.6%), while neutral items are 10 (10.5%). The data imply that more published reports contributed positively to the Nigerian unity.

### Discussion of findings

Table 1 shows the various types of reports published by some newspapers during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. The reports are news stories (47), features (28), opinion columns (16), and editorials (4). Table 2 shows the newspapers that focus more on reports that negatively or positively influence national unity during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. The Nation newspaper published more

positive reports that contributed to Nigerian unity, while the Daily Trust published more negative reports. Similarly, The Punch newspaper published the fewest negative reports. Table 3 indicates that some newspapers published more reports that positively influence the nation's unity. Some of the reports were negative, while others were neutral. The above findings were validated by Ikpe (2022).

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study was conceived to determine the influence of newspaper reports on Nigeria's national unity during the 2023 presidential election. Most often, during electioneering, newspaper reports can either reflect the unity or disunity of a country, and the 2023 presidential election was no exception. Although most reports portray Nigeria's unity in a positive light, some reports also reflect Nigeria's national unity negatively.

Based on the findings and the conclusion reached, the following recommendations are hereby put forward:

- i. Newspaper organizations should endeavour to publish more types of reports, especially during the electioneering period.
- ii. Newspapers should give wide publicity and prominence to elections in a diverse society like Nigeria, where the unity of the country is fragile and usually at stake.
- iii. Newspapers should give more space to election reports to enable readers to have accurate knowledge about the event and make more informed decisions.
- iv. Newspapers should use their reports often to keep Nigeria's unity together and portray it in a positive light.

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