

# **MEDIA COVERAGE OF NIGERIA’S 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGNS: ANALYSES OF GUARDIAN, VANGUARD AND SUN**

**NORBERT KPOMIOSE CHIAZOR**  
DEPARTMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATION  
UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA, NIGERIA

## **Abstract**

This study examined the content characteristics of newspaper coverage of the 2023 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria. Anchored on Agenda-Setting and Framing theories, it adopted a quantitative content analysis design. Three national newspapers—The Guardian, Vanguard, and The Sun—were selected through simple random sampling from a population of 25 dailies published between 2022 and 2023. Using the composite week sampling technique, 105 editions were drawn from a population of 453 editions. Data were collated using content categories including story frequency, prominence, tone, and media frames. The study revealed variations in story count, depth, and space devoted to parties across newspapers. Coverage was largely neutral, with positive stories trailing and negative coverage representing the smallest proportion. Competence and credibility frames dominated candidate portrayal. Individual candidates were emphasized more than parties, showing personalization. Chi-square analysis revealed significant associations between media frames and tonal direction. The study concludes that Nigerian newspapers performed a critical agenda-setting and framing function during the 2023 election campaigns. It recommends strengthening issue-based coverage to enhance democratic deliberation and electoral accountability.

**Key words:** Media coverage. Election Campaigns. Nigerian Newspapers . Agenda Setting. Framing.

## **Introduction**

Political campaigns constitute a central pillar of democracy, influencing political participation and shaping electoral outcomes. The success and legitimacy of electoral processes depend significantly on how

effectively political parties employ campaign strategies. Burton, Miller, and Shea (2015) note that under democratic systems, which are people-oriented, campaigns enable political parties to create public awareness, articulate their manifestoes and mobilize support from the electorate. Voters, in turn, require adequate and reliable information to make informed political choices (Feyipitan, 2015).

Election-related activities encompass a broad range of engagements such as campaigns, rallies, town hall meetings, debates, fundraising efforts, and courtesy visits, all organized by political parties and associations (Olujide, Adeyemi, & Gboyega, 2010; Iyengar & Simon, 2000). In this regard, the mass media become indispensable to modern democratic practice. As purveyors of information, the press plays a pivotal role in voter education and political sensitization (Daniel, 2021; Ochonogor & Fyनेface, 2016). Political parties and actors use radio, television, newspapers, magazines, billboards, flyers, digital platforms, and mobile public address systems to reach voters (Nworah, 2011).

Through the electoral process, voters choose their representatives and those to govern them, which is fundamental to democratic legitimacy (Jega, 2017). Similarly, Johari (2011, p. 17) views election as “a process of choosing leaders in a democratic system.” Contrary to popular assumption, elections comprise much more than voting on a given day. Scholars such as Aniekwe and Kushie (2011) describe election as a complex set of activities encompassing all institutional processes, including campaigns, declaration of results, announcement of winners, and post-election events.

As Kuye, Nwachukwu, and Adeoye (2013) observe, democracy derives its legitimacy from credible elections. When there is no electoral integrity or transparency, democratic practice becomes fragile, eroding public trust and accountability.

The mass media play a crucial role in democratic electioneering campaigns. Globally, the press projects political candidates and their manifestoes to voters, thereby contributing to the shaping of public opinion. Conventional political news has dominated election coverage in many democratic systems around the world. However, despite documented patterns of personalization, negativity, and convergence in established democracies, it remains theoretically uncertain whether these trends manifest in the same manner within emerging democracies characterized by distinct political cultures, media systems, and

institutional dynamics. Nigeria presents a particularly compelling case in this regard.

The presidential election is among the most significant events in Nigerian politics. Nigeria introduced an American-style presidential system in 1979, replacing the earlier British parliamentary model. Since the restoration of civil rule in 1999, after a series of military coups, Nigeria has held seven general elections (2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023), each witnessing intense competition among political parties seeking power.

The study focused on examining the content characteristics of election campaign stories in Nigerian newspapers regarding coverage of the 2023 presidential election campaigns. The work is necessary to understand how content characteristics of election reports are projected in the Nigerian dailies. According to official statistics from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2023), the number of registered voters for the 2023 presidential election was 93,469,008. In 2015, INEC registered 68,833,476 voters, while in 2019, the register stood at 82,344,107. The then Senior Special Assistant to the President on Media and Publicity, Garba Shehu, described the 2023 presidential election as the “biggest and the most competitive presidential election in the history of Nigeria” (Voice of Nigeria Bulletin, 2023, March 13).

The 2023 presidential election campaigns witnessed some of the most contentious scenarios in Nigeria’s multi-party politics. First, the election followed the end of Buhari’s eight-year tenure—a politically delicate transition (Abdullahi, 2015). Second, the contest was dense and extremely competitive, with eighteen political parties fielding candidates; however, campaigns centered on three frontline candidates—Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Atiku Abubakar of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), and Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP). Third, the signing of the 2022 Electoral Act included the deployment of technology by INEC—the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), designed to read Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and authenticate voters using fingerprints. Fourth, prevailing national challenges—including economic difficulties, heightened insecurity, corruption, leadership deficits, unemployment, and infrastructure decay—made the election particularly significant for Nigerians, who viewed it as an opportunity for democratic change.

Consequently, the build-up to the elections was filled with mixed feelings of anxiety, apprehension, and hope. The campaigns unfolded against these highly contentious issues. Given the unprecedented competitiveness of the 2023 presidential election and the pivotal role of media in shaping political narratives, it became necessary to interrogate how Nigerian newspapers, specifically *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, and *The Sun*, reported the content characteristics of these campaigns. This study therefore investigated the thematic emphases, frequency, prominence, tone, and framing patterns evident in newspaper coverage during this decisive electoral period.

### **Objectives of the study**

The study aimed to determine the frequency and magnitude of coverage given to the three major parties (APC, PDP, LP), examine the tone of coverage, assess the prominence accorded to each candidate and identify the predominant media frames employed in newspaper reporting.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Mass communication plays an important role in information dissemination and social mobilization in a democracy. Agenda-setting and framing functions of the media help citizens gain access to news and shape their perception during electoral campaigns.

#### **Agenda-Setting Theory**

Agenda-setting theory describes the manner in which the mass media set the order of significance of news and other current issues. The posits that the mass media influence the salience of issues in public discourse (Watson & Hill, 2009). Lippmann (1922) argued that media create “pictures in our heads,” and Cohen (1963) suggested media may not tell people what to think, but what to think about. McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) study of the 1968 U.S. election empirically confirmed the media-public agenda relationship. In elections, repeated coverage of issues like economic downturn, corruption or insecurity increases public attention to these themes (McQuail, 2005; Dominick, 2009).

The agenda-setting theory and its elements are relevant to the study, which examined frequency, prominence, subject matter, and tone in newspaper coverage of the 2023 presidential election campaigns.

## **Framing Theory**

Framing guides how events are interpreted (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993). Tuchman (1978) and Gitlin (1980) emphasized that journalists organize reality through routine practices and selective emphasis. Political frames include:

1. Issue Frame: Emphasizes policies and manifestos.
2. Personality Frame: Focuses on character, competence, and reputation.
3. Strategic/Horse-Race Frame: Highlights competition, polls, and outcomes.
4. Episodic Frame: Focuses on specific incidents and conflicts.

Framing in Nigerian newspapers shapes candidate perception and public interpretation of the election campaigns.

## **Hypotheses**

Drawing on the theoretical assumptions of Agenda -Setting Theory and Framing Theory, the study tested the following hypotheses:

H1: Newspaper coverage of the APC, PDP, and LP campaigns differed significantly in tone (favourable, neutral, unfavourable) according to the predominant subject-matter themes and media frames employed.

H2: The predominant subject-matter themes (policy, personality, conflict) used in newspaper coverage differed significantly across the APC, PDP, and LP campaigns during the 2023 presidential election.

H3: The media frames (reformer, establishment, underdog) used to portray presidential candidates differed significantly across the APC, PDP, and LP campaigns and influenced the tone of coverage.

## **Methodology**

This study adopted the content analysis method to examine press coverage of the 2023 presidential election campaigns by The Guardian, Vanguard and The Sun newspapers.

## **Sampling Technique**

The population comprised 453 editions of the three newspapers published from October 2022 to February 2023. Using composite week sampling, 105 editions (35 per newspaper) were drawn, representing each day of the week over five months.

## Content Categories

Analysis focused on:

- Subject focus: conflict, policy, personality, ethnicity, religion
- Tone: positive, negative, neutral
- Media frames: establishment, reformer, underdog, spoiler
- Placement: front page, inside page, back page, editorial
- Story enhancement: pictures, tables, charts, cartoons, pull-out quotes
- Depth: full page, half page, quarter page

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) and Chi-square tests determined relationships among coverage, tone, and frames.

## Data presentation

### Frequency

Table 1 shows Frequency and Percentage of Campaign Coverage of Party by Newspaper during the 2023 presidential election campaigns.

Newspaper	APC	PDP	LP	Total
Guardian	37 (28.7%)	53 (41.1%)	39 (30.2%)	129
Vanguard	58 (33.5%)	49 (28.3%)	66 (38.2%)	173
The Sun	45 (32.1%)	46 (32.9%)	49 (35.0%)	140
Total	140	148	154	442

Chi-square Test:  $\chi^2(4, N=442) = 6.54, p = 0.162$

**Magnitude**

Table 2 demonstrates the distribution of coverage by story size (full-page, half-page, quarter-page) across parties and newspapers.

Newspaper / Candidate	Full Page	Half Page	Quarter Page	Total
Guardian – APC	6 (16.2%)	17 (45.9%)	14 (37.8%)	37
Guardian – PDP	13 (24.5%)	29 (54.7%)	11 (20.7%)	53
Guardian – LP	9 (23.1%)	5 (12.8%)	25 (64.1%)	39
Vanguard – APC	18 (31.0%)	28 (48.3%)	12 (20.7%)	58
Vanguard – PDP	13 (26.5%)	22 (44.9%)	14 (28.6%)	49
Vanguard – LP	3 (4.5%)	40 (60.6%)	23 (34.0%)	66
The Sun – APC	17 (37.8%)	15 (33.3%)	13 (28.9%)	45
The Sun – PDP	8 (17.4%)	10 (21.7%)	28 (60.9%)	46
The Sun – LP	12 (24.5%)	17 (34.7%)	20 (40.8%)	49

**Direction (Tone)**

Table 3 portrays the direction (tone) of newspaper coverage (positive, negative, neutral) for each candidate across the three newspapers.

Newspaper / Candidate	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Guardian – APC	13 (35.1%)	9 (24.3%)	15 (40.6%)	37
Guardian – PDP	27 (50.9%)	7 (13.2%)	19 (35.8%)	53
Guardian – LP	9 (23.1%)	13 (33.3%)	17 (43.6%)	39
Vanguard – APC	22 (37.9%)	10 (17.2%)	26 (44.8%)	58
Vanguard – PDP	15 (30.6%)	8 (16.3%)	26 (53.1%)	49
Vanguard – LP	33 (50.0%)	16 (24.4%)	17 (25.8%)	66
The Sun – APC	18 (40.0%)	8 (17.8%)	19 (42.2%)	45

The Sun – PDP	11 (23.9%)	11 (23.9%)	24 (52.1%)	46
The Sun – LP	23 (46.9%)	5 (10.2%)	21 (42.9%)	49
Chi-square Test: $\chi^2(8, N=442) = 12.45, p = 0.131$				

### Placement and Enhancement

Table 4 shows placement and enhancement (pictures, headlines, tables, charts, cartoons, pull-out quotes) in The Guardian, Vanguard, and The Sun.

Newspaper	Candidate	Total Stories (Placement)	Total Enhancements
The Guardian	Bola Tinubu (APC)	37	42
The Guardian	Atiku Abubakar (PDP)	53	76
The Guardian	Peter Obi (LP)	39	46
Vanguard	Bola Tinubu (APC)	58	71
Vanguard	Atiku Abubakar (PDP)	49	81
Vanguard	Peter Obi (LP)	66	37
The Sun	Bola Tinubu (APC)	45	44
The Sun	Atiku Abubakar (PDP)	46	43
The Sun	Peter Obi (LP)	49	32

### Discussion of Findings

The distribution of campaign coverage indicates that the Labour Party received the highest level of media attention among the three major parties during the period under study. This was followed by the PDP and APC respectively. Although the margin of difference between the parties is relatively small, the pattern suggests that newspapers devoted slightly more attention to the activities of the Labour Party during the campaign period.



Individual newspapers, however, demonstrated distinct editorial preferences. The Guardian favoured the PDP, giving Atiku Abubakar 41.1% of its coverage. Vanguard emphasized the LP, dedicating 38.2% of coverage to Peter Obi. The Sun presented relatively balanced coverage among the three parties (LP 35%, PDP 32.9%, APC 32.1%). This indicates that while the LP dominated the overall story count, the narrative trajectory differed by newspaper, reflecting editorial orientation. These patterns are consistent with literature on political alignment in media coverage (Macias, 2012; Blankenship & Vargo, 2021). Aggregate LP coverage reflected public engagement, illustrating reciprocal agenda-setting influenced by digital discourse (Faith & Ijeoma, 2016; Nkrumah & Hassan, 2021).

The magnitude of coverage highlights differences in visual prominence beyond story count.

In The Guardian, PDP's Atiku Abubakar received the largest share of full- and half-page stories, emphasizing prominence, while LP's Peter Obi appeared mostly in quarter-page coverage. APC's Bola Tinubu occupied a middle ground between the two candidates.

In Vanguard, APC's Tinubu received the highest number of full-page stories, while LP's Obi dominated half-page coverage but had relatively few full-page stories. PDP's coverage was moderate, with some emphasis on larger formats.

In The Sun, Tinubu was framed as the front-runner with the highest number of full-page stories. Atiku received predominantly quarter-page coverage, while Obi's stories were distributed across the different formats.

These patterns suggest that high frequency of coverage did not always translate into high prominence. Newspapers strategically allocated space to shape candidate narratives, reinforcing editorial preferences observed in frequency counts. The chi-square test ( $\chi^2(8, N=442) = 12.45, p = 0.131$ ) further indicates that the differences in tone across newspapers are not statistically significant.

Analysis of tonal direction also revealed variations in candidate portrayal across newspapers.

In *The Guardian*, Atiku Abubakar recorded the highest positive coverage (50.9%), while Peter Obi received the highest negative coverage (33.3%). Tinubu's coverage was largely neutral.

In *Vanguard*, Tinubu received the highest proportion of positive coverage (37.9%) but also notable negative coverage (17.2%). Obi recorded strong positive coverage (50%), indicating a mixed editorial stance.

In *The Sun*, Obi received the highest positive coverage (46.9%) and the lowest negative coverage (10.2%), while Atiku's coverage was predominantly neutral (52.1%). Tinubu's portrayal was generally positive.

Taken together, the findings indicate that each newspaper curated a distinct narrative tone, reinforcing the fragmented nature of the media landscape. Consequently, readers' perceptions of candidates were shaped by newspaper-specific editorial orientations.

Further analysis of placement and visual enhancement shows how newspapers constructed candidate prominence.

*The Guardian* exhibited a clear editorial preference for Atiku Abubakar by maximizing his visibility through strategic placement and visual enhancements. Atiku dominated both front- and back-page coverage, while Peter Obi appeared mainly on inside pages. In terms of visual emphasis, Atiku received the highest number of pictures and screaming headlines, creating strong visual and textual prominence. Tinubu's coverage was moderate, whereas Obi's stories relied more on tables, charts, and pull-out quotes, indicating a more analytical presentation but with less visual emphasis.

In *Vanguard*, Peter Obi led in total story count, although most of these stories appeared on inside pages, reflecting high-frequency but less visually prominent coverage. Tinubu maintained strong front- and back-page visibility and received substantial visual enhancements such as pictures, screaming headlines, and cartoons, emphasizing personality-driven prominence. Atiku's coverage, though smaller in volume, was often highlighted through screaming headlines, reinforcing narrative impact.

In *The Sun*, Peter Obi recorded the highest number of stories but most were placed on inside pages, limiting immediate visibility. Atiku dominated front-page placement, framing him as highly newsworthy. Tinubu's coverage was visually prominent through the use of pictures and cartoons, emphasizing personality appeal. Atiku's use of screaming headlines amplified campaign drama, while Obi's enhancements focused more on pull-out quotes, suggesting a more analytical presentation.

Across the three newspapers, straight news dominated coverage for all candidates, while feature, opinion, and editorial stories occurred less frequently. In *The Guardian*, between 67% and 84% of the stories were straight news. *Vanguard* recorded between 79% and 86% straight news stories, while *The Sun* ranged from 77.6% to 87%. Feature stories, opinion pieces, and editorials accounted for smaller proportions, generally below 15% per candidate in each newspaper.

Analysis of media framing further showed that each candidate was associated with a dominant interpretive frame. In *The Guardian*, Tinubu was framed as "Establishment and System," Atiku as a "Policy-focused Reformer," and Obi as a "Populist Underdog." In *Vanguard*, Tinubu appeared as a "Controversial Establishment" figure, Atiku as a "Weakened Challenger," and Obi as a "Competent Change Agent." In *The Sun*, Tinubu was portrayed as the "Front-runner," Atiku as the "Fitting Challenger," and Obi as an "Optimistic Reformer."

## **Conclusion**

Nigerian newspapers played a significant role in covering the 2023 presidential election campaigns by reporting major political themes and issues associated with the democratic process, including party campaigns, manifestos, INEC activities, polling issues, and post-election disputes.

Coverage was predominantly neutral in tone, relying on competence and credibility frames to portray presidential candidates. Individual candidates received greater emphasis than political parties, suggesting personalization of election coverage. Editorials were generally neutral and non-partisan but limited in number and depth.

Despite the centrality of election campaigns, newspapers did not consistently prioritize election stories through front-page placement or

full-page coverage, indicating gaps in prominence, editorial engagement, and balanced framing.

**Recommendations:** Media establishments should institutionalize issue-based journalism, accord greater prominence to election stories, establish monitoring mechanisms to review tonal and framing patterns, address security issues, and expand the use of editorials for public education. Journalists and editors should receive continuous training in reporting, framing, and page placement.

The study was limited to three privately owned national newspapers, which may not fully represent the diversity of newspaper ownership in Nigeria.

Future research should compare private and government-owned media, adopt mixed-method approaches, conduct longitudinal studies across multiple election cycles, explore audience responses to framing, and examine multi-platform coverage and the role of the judiciary in electoral outcomes.

## References

- Abdullahi, M. (2015). *Political transitions and democratic consolidation in Nigeria*. Lagos: Nigerian Political Studies Press.
- Aniekwe, C., & Kushie, J. (2011). *Understanding the electoral process in Nigeria: Institutional and societal perspectives*. Enugu: University Press.
- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Blankenship, B. T., & Vargo, C. J. (2021). Partisan media and political coverage: Understanding alignment and bias in contemporary news reporting. *International Journal of Communication Studies*, 15(1), 45–60.
- Burton, S., Miller, K., & Shea, T. (2015). *Campaign strategies and voter mobilization in democratic systems*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cohen, B. (1963). *The press and foreign policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Daniel, O. (2021). *Media influence on political participation in Africa*. Abuja: Media and Society Publications.
- Dominick, J. R. (2009). *The dynamics of mass communication: Media in the digital age* (11th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Faith, C.N., & Ijeoma, O. (2016). New media influence on traditional press election coverage in West Africa. *African Journal of Media Studies*, 8(4), 77–95.
- Feyipitan, O. (2015). *Voter information and democratic participation in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Independent National Electoral Commission. (2023). Registered voters for the 2023 general elections. <https://www.inecnigeria.org>
- Independent National Electoral Commission. (2023). Registered voters for the 2023 general elections. <https://www.inecnigeria.org>
- Iyengar, S., & Simon, A. (2000). *New perspectives on political communication and media effects*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Jega, A. (2017). *Electoral integrity and democratic governance in Nigeria*. Abuja: National Electoral Studies Institute.
- Johari, J. C. (2011). *Comparative politics*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.
- Kevin, M., & Abiodun, S. (2020). Ownership and editorial bias in Nigerian newspapers: A study of election coverage. *Nigerian Journal of Media Practice*, 6(3), 88–104.
- Kuye, O., Nwachukwu, P., & Adeoye, A. (2013). Democracy and electoral integrity in emerging nations. *Journal of African Political Studies*, 8(2), 45–63.
- Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public opinion*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & Company.
- Macias, J. (2012). *Media and political alignment in election reporting: A comparative study*. Lagos: Media Research Centre Press.
- McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187. <https://doi.org/10.1086/267990>
- McQuail, D. (2005). *McQuail's mass communication theory (5th ed.)*. London: Sage.
- Nkrumah, E., & Hassan, A. (2021). Digital activism and news agenda: The case of Ghana's media landscape. *Journal of African Media Research*, 13(2), 102–120.
- Nworah, U. (2011). *Political communication in Nigeria: Media and elections*. Enugu: Academic Press.
- Ochonogor, L., & Fyeface, O. (2016). *Media framing and political accountability in Nigeria*. Port Harcourt: Rivers Press.

- Olujide, O., Adeyemi, T., & Gboyega, O. (2010). Political campaigns and media coverage in Nigeria. *African Journal of Political Science*, 5(1), 12–29.
- Onyebadi, U., & Alajmi, R. (2023). *Challenges in election reporting: Journalist perspectives from Nigeria*. Port Harcourt: Centre for Media Studies.
- Shukurat, A. (2021). *Structural influences on journalism practice in Nigeria*. Abuja: Press Freedom Network.
- Tuchman, G. (1978). *Making news: A study in the construction of reality*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Voice of Nigeria Bulletin. (2023, March 13). Garba Shehu: 2023 presidential election the biggest and most competitive in Nigerian history. <https://www.von.gov.ng>
- Watson, J., & Hill, A. (2009). *A dictionary of communication and media studies* (8th ed.). London: Bloomsbury.
- Wimmer, R. D., & Dominick, J. R. (2005). *Mass media research: An introduction* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.