



## Public Perception on the Role of the Media in Nigeria's Electoral Reforms in South-South Nigeria

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### KEY WORDS

Electoral Reforms, Media Coverage, Public Perception, Democracy, South-South Nigeria.

### ABSTRACT

This study examined public perception of media coverage of electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria. Elections in Nigeria have historically been characterized by electoral malpractice, violence, rigging, and political manipulation, thereby necessitating continuous electoral reforms to strengthen democratic governance. The study specifically investigated the level of media attention to electoral reform issues, public perception of media contents on electoral reforms, public perception of media contributions to electoral reforms, and the level of public acceptance of media contents on electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria. The study adopted the Rational Choice Theory and Media Framing Theory as its theoretical foundations. A cross-sectional survey research design was employed, while the Krejcie and Morgan table was used to determine a sample size of 384 respondents through a multi-stage sampling procedure. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including percentages, tables, and regression analysis. Findings revealed that the public in South-South Nigeria has a high level of confidence in media coverage of electoral reforms. The study further showed that media coverage has significantly increased public interest in political issues and intensified public calls for reforms in Nigeria's electoral system. It was also found that the public perceives media contributions to electoral reforms positively and generally accepts media contents relating to electoral reforms. The study concluded that the media play a vital role in promoting awareness, political participation, and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. It therefore recommended that media practitioners sustain objective, credible, and consistent reportage of electoral reform issues to strengthen public trust and democratic development in Nigeria.

## 1. Introduction

Historically, elections in Nigeria have been characterized by conflicting situations. There was therefore need for electoral reforms to improve on the election systems. However, in every electoral reform in Nigeria, there are tendencies for unfavourable outcomes. Each time electoral reforms are to be carried out, politics, controversies, disagreements and suspicions trail the entire process (Shehu, Othman & Osman, 2017). This is because Nigeria is heterogeneous in nature with varied and sometimes conflicting interests over political, economic and socio-cultural values, multi-party system that affects the electoral and democratic processes. Many factors can occasion the need for electoral reform. One of such is faulty electoral system. It has been argued that most controversy about elections in Nigeria centred on electoral system (Jibrin, 2010). Electoral system is a complex set of rules and regulations that govern the selection of office holders in a democratic context. The choice of a particular electoral system does not only have a profound effect on the political life of a country; it also distributes costs and benefits to political actors i.e. political parties and candidates. Electoral system also encompasses procedures, rules and regulations for the electorate to exercise their right to vote and determines how elected political officers occupy their allocated seats in the legislature (Obah-

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Akpowoghaha, 2013). The emphasis is that procedures, rules and regulations governing elections are defined by both national constitutions and specific electoral laws.

In any country, political structures like political parties, election umpires, the civil societies, interest groups, labour unions, human rights groups, professional bodies and the media cannot be left out in any exercise or political processes, development, restructuring and electoral reforms (Osinakachukwu & Jawan, 2011). The media has been performing the role of watchdog since the colonial period till date and have been in the fore front on the struggle for good democratic government in Nigeria. This is why the media is imperatives in electoral reforms and, by extension political development of the nation. When the political structures that are instruments for election in a country are weak, it invariably affects other institutions. This forms the need for electoral reform to strengthen the process to power. Electoral reforms and electoral processes are so much contingent upon a virile political structure. As it were, a weak political structure affects electoral process and structures. Political structure refers to the institutions, groups and interests with political inclinations and their inter-relationships in any given political system. It also refers to laws and legitimate expectations that regulate such inter-relationships (Cox & McCubbins, 2007). Nigeria political structure takes a framework of a federal government modelled after America presidential system, and bicameral legislative system called the National Assembly (Senate and House of Representatives). The executive power is exercised by the central or federal government while the legislative power is vested in the Senate and House of Representatives. The judicial arm of the government has the Supreme Court as the highest court in the country; but unlike the United State of America, the central or federal government of Nigeria wields so much political and economic powers such that the state and the local governments are like appendages of the federal government (Brown, 2013, Crawfordsworld, 2021).

Many media practitioners and political communication experts in Nigeria and beyond have focused research attention on the interplay of the mass media and political processes, decisions and behaviours. In a study on mass media contributions to the political awareness and capacity to make political choices among Nigerians, Ibagere, (2020) point out that political awareness and capacity for political decisions among the study population were low. He also reports that the mass media has been unable to significantly improve these low areas among the populace. On their part, Adegbola & Greathart, (2019) examined the relationship between using the media and political engagements, and report that the use of social media and other new media online platforms for political news sourcing and sharing was directly related to high level participation in political matters across the countries covered by the study. Olaniru, Olatunji, Ayandele & Popoola, (2020) focused on how the media influence political knowledge among Nigerians and observe that awareness on politics and the activities of government was significantly increased by mass media enlightenment and socialisation functions, especially radio, which turned out to be the most popular mass medium for political knowledge acquisition among the study population. They however stressed the need for media practitioners and politicians to take advantage of the benefits of social media to further increase public knowledge on politics and governance. In another study on the interplay among Nigerian mass media, elections and the concept of democracy in Africa, Oboh, (2016) points out that although the mass media in Nigeria give adequate publicity to elections in the country, they appear not to be objective when they project such elections as credible to the disappointment of the general public.

While we agree that prior studies were able to provide invaluable insights into media impact on political processes, decisions and actions, it was observed that much concern may not have been given to the perceptions of members of the public in South-South Nigeria on the contributions of the media to political electoral reforms in the country. More so, research outcomes have not indicated whether or not significant differences exist on the perception of members of the public on the role of the media in Nigeria, and the South-South in particular. How much attention do the media give to issues of electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria? How do the public in South-South Nigeria perceive the nature of media content on the electoral

reforms and the contributions of these media content to electoral reforms? What is the level of public acceptability of media contents on electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria? These questions and the absence of ready answers indicate obvious gaps in knowledge that this study on public perception on the role of the media in South-South Nigeria electoral reforms seeks to fill. The objectives of this study are to:

1. Find out the level of attention the media give to issues of electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria;
2. Examine how the public perceive media contents on electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria;
3. Find out how members of the public perceive the contributions of the media to electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria and
4. Find out the public acceptance of the media content on electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria.

Based on the specific objectives of this study, the following hypothesis were formulated and tested:

- H<sub>01</sub>:** The media did not give attention to issues of electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria
- H<sub>02</sub>:** The public do not have good perception on media contents on electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria
- H<sub>03</sub>:** Members of the public do not have a good perception on the contributions of the media to electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria
- H<sub>04</sub>:** The public has low level of acceptability of the media content in electoral reforms in South-south Nigeria.

## **Literature Review**

It is clear that the media pay appreciable attention to issues of socio-political reforms (electoral reforms inclusive). It is therefore difficult for members of the public to be oblivious of Media coverage of electoral Reforms. That being the case, it is necessary to examine the public's perceptions on media coverage of electoral reforms. Discussion on how people perceive media coverage of political issues generally, which can be applied to electoral reforms fall under two broad categories: positive perception and negative perceptions. People may perceive media coverage of electoral Reforms positively as part of the democratisation process, mass media promotion of democracy and mass media public policy enlightenment activity (Isma'ila & Othman, 2015, Garba, 2016, Adeagbo, et al, 2019, Ojo and Adebayo, 2013). On the other hand, media coverage of electoral reform may be perceived negatively as interfering with media provision of entertainment, promotion of proprietors' interest and unwholesome use of the media by unpopular government and the political class (OluriruOlatunji, Ayandele & Popoola, 2020, Aghamelu, 2013, Garba, 2016, Ojo & Adebayo, 2013, Santas & Ogoshi, 2016).

Media coverage of electoral reforms may be perceived by members of the public as being a wholesome reflection of the democratisation processes in the society (Isma'ila & Othman, 2015). Democratisation here refers to any socio-political initiative that is geared towards promoting democracy in the interest of society. Electoral reforms are initiated to correct observed lapses in the electoral process and by so doing, further democratizing the society.

Closely related to the above is the perception that the media coverage of electoral Reforms, through the different concerted and coordinated dimensions and avenues is actually promotion of democracy and good governance in the society (Garba, 2016, Santas & Ogoshi, 2016). The media are credited for being in the forefront in the campaign for the institution and sustenance of democracy as a system of government in many countries including Nigeria. Their effective coverage of electoral reform is therefore perceived as a continuation of their role in the promotion of democracy in the society.

The mass media are regarded as viable channels for socio-political enlightenment in any society. Their coverage of electoral reforms is also perceived as part of this socio-political enlightenment on public policy formation and implementation in the interest of the society. The

mass media are seen as being effective in moulding people's opinions on political issues that are at the front burner of the society at any time (Ojo & Adebayo, 2013). Electoral reforms have always been issues of public policies that the media help to guide public opinions on through adequate enlightenment and engagement. Media coverage of electoral reforms provides the much needed education on public policy which helps to achieve political consolidation and deepen of democratic culture (Ojo, 2003, Adebayo et al., 2019).

On the other hand, there is evidence that some members of the public prefer entertainment contents on the media to political contents (Olamiru et al., 2020). This perception is probably borne out of the fact that the media devote lot of effort, media space/ airtime and resources to their coverage of electoral reforms. This may therefore compel them to reduce their effort, media space/air time as well as resources devoted to entertainment to the disappointment of some members of the public who prefer entertaining media contents to political messages.

Some members of the public tend to perceive the mass media as always playing scripts written by their proprietors in line with the dictum: "He who pays the piper dictates the tune". It is believed in some quarters that mass media coverage of any political issues is seriously influenced by the interest of Media proprietors (Aghamelu, 2013). This situation is likely to be more pronounced where such media proprietors are politicians or cronies of politicians who held unpopular views about the electoral reform. In these circumstances, media coverage of electoral reforms may be perceived as haven been pressured to take sides with the owner(s) of the mass media channel(s) in which case objectivity and public interests are perceived as compromised (Santos & Ogoshi, 2016).

Politicians are usually at the center of any political issue in the society and they are sometimes accused of unwholesome use of the media to serve their selfish interest (Aghamelu, 2013). This has equally resulted in the perception of mass media coverage of electoral reforms as mere manipulation by politicians. Some members of the public suspect relationship and collaboration between politicians and the mass media especially when media coverage of socio-political issues (including electoral reforms) are involved. Politicians are suspected of inducing media workers with promise and/or offers of money ("brown envelopes") contracts, gifts items, appointment into offices and sundry favours to project their biased political interest

### **Contributions of the Media to Agitations for Electoral Reforms**

The media has played crucial role in elections and electoral reforms since independence and till now. Specifically, the media has contributed immensely towards the enthronement of democracy. The role of the media in shaping public perceptions and opinions about significant political and social issues has long been the subject of much speculation and debate (Wilson & Wilson, 2001, Wimmer & Dominick, 1991). It is widely accepted that what we know about, think about and believe about what happens in the world, outside of personal first-hand experience, is shaped, and some would say orchestrated, by how these events are reported in newspapers and communicated through the medium of radio and television (Fields, 2005).

The media demonstrates appreciable abilities to significantly contribute to the success of electoral reforms through the coverage they provide. These contributions are borne out of the media ability to influence people in the area of any political process through adequate provision of relevant information and education (Garba, 2016). Media contribute to the success of electoral reforms through agenda setting provision of adequate information and education to build public knowledge as well as shaping of public views. They also contribute to successful electoral reforms by promoting public participation and monitoring the entire process of the policy formulation and implementation.

The media are very good at setting societal agenda, especially on a socio- politico issues such as electoral reform. This is possible because the media to a considerable extent can determine what issues to cover, how to report them and when to do so (Adebayo et al, 2019). With this, the media can actually set the agenda for electoral reform by deliberately focusing attention on the need for it through intensive and extensive coverage of political and/or electoral

issues. The more the media draws public attention to the need or the process of electoral reforms, the more likely it will be that the political actors and the general public become interested and begin to think and talk about such issues, form opinions on them and eventually take actions. By this, the media can actually trigger of the initiation of electoral reform by shaping political agenda for the society (Ojo, 2003 Santos & Ogoshi, 2016).

The success of electoral reform requires favourable public opinion since elections are political processes that involve the general public. The views of the public on the reform can lead to public acceptance or rejection. Just like every public policy, the media can mould public opinion towards its acceptance or rejection (Santos & Ogoshi, 2016). In this regard, media coverage of electoral reform can contribute to its success by helping to rally public opinion in its favour just as in all other democratic practices (Garba, 2016).

Closely related to the issue of shaping public views on electoral reforms through Mass media coverage is the promotion of public participation. The Media mobilizes public participation in the process of electoral reform by providing adequate coverage. Electoral reform just like other public -oriented political policy required a great deal of public participation to succeed and the media is credited with abilities to promote public deliberations and participation on political issues (Adegbola & Gearhart, 2019). Media coverage of electoral reforms helps to mobilize public participation in the policy formulation process as it does for all political processes targeted at national political goal (Aghamelu, 2013). This mobilization of public participation in a democratic process is said to help achieve political cohesion and integration on a national scale. This public participation is visible at both the levels of debates, decisions and actions which add up to enhanced public participation in governance in line with democratic principles (Garba, 2016, Ojo & Adebayo, 2013, Santos & Ogoshi, 2016).

Another vital contribution of media coverage to the success of electoral reform is the monitoring of public policy formulation and implementation. Without adequate monitoring of public policy formulation (especially with regards to election), desperate politicians may manipulate the political process to their advantage at the expense of national interest. Media coverage keeps the entire process in the limelight and makes it easy to detect any attempt to derail it at the stages of policy formulation and implementation (Aghamelu, 2013).

### **Electoral Malpractice as a Constraint to Media Role in Agitations for Electoral Reform in Nigeria**

Elections in Nigeria are marked by negative incidents and abuses such as illegal printing of voters' cards; multiple registration of voters, illegal compilation of fictitious names to be used during elections; registration of under-aged and unqualified voters, stuffing and snatching of ballot boxes; deliberate refusal to supply election materials; multiple and underage voting; unauthorized and fake declaration of results; and harassment of candidates, party agents and/or the electorate, among others. Negative features of elections fall under the problems of election administration. Therefore, elections and electoral activities have become the symbol of the problems of democracy in Nigeria.

In the present democratic dispensation of Nigeria, events have shown that the electoral body is not independent of the party in power. This has been defined in relation to the manner of which the electoral body had conducted elections in a way that advantaged the party in power through poor planning, the device of excluding electorates from voting materials, or late arrival of voting materials and electoral officers to polling stations (Ojo, Adewunmi, & Oluwole, 2013). In addition, there have been cases in which candidate that won electoral primaries were replaced by candidates that either never contested or by candidates that were defeated during the exercise which was observed by the electoral body. As regard to this aspect, the case of Rotimi Amaechi that was substituted by Celestin Omehia for the PDP 2007 Gubernatorial Election in Rivers State comes to mind.

The Judiciary under the present democratic dispensation could be said to be a major improvement from what was obtainable in the past unlike what was obtained in the aborted

Third Republic where the Judiciary served as a tool for creating political tension that undermined the democratic process

While in some cases the judiciary has served as a tool for upholding democratic decisions with such cases as the judicial pronouncement of Peter Obi of All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) as the duly elected governor of Anambra State rather than Dr. Chris Ngige of PDP, and the further judgment that the tenure of the administration would end in 2010 rather than 2007. This is coupled with several judicial judgments that led to the re-run of elections in States like Kogi, Adamawa, Sokoto among others. According to Ojo, Adewunmi, & Oluwole, (2013) the simplest and most common malpractice is an illegal or wrong behaviour in a professional job. For the purpose of this study, this could range from pre-electoral malpractice/manipulation or post-electoral malpractice or election manipulation; falsification of results, to violence, snatching of ballot boxes, multiple voting, illegal voters list register, impersonation, purported switching of votes or among the wrong winner in an election by an electoral officer etc. Tella, (2002) conceptualises electoral malpractice as fraudulent activities related to the electoral process in any society, which is aimed at manipulating the political process to favour a particular interest to the exclusion of others, without due regard for equity, fairness and legitimacy. He further classifies electoral malpractice as Pre-Election manipulations, Election Manipulations and Post-Election manipulations.

**(a) Pre-Election Manipulations**

1. Tailoring of electoral regulation, to de-enfranchise candidates or groups of people.
2. Technical disqualifications of candidates through arm stringing the electoral body by the attempt to establish stringent rules.
3. Ethnic – cultural and religious manipulations of the selection process.
4. Deliberate prevention of independent candidates from contesting.
5. Monetization of the electoral procedure before selection of candidates at party and electoral commission level.
6. Snatching/stealing of ballot boxes, including the delivering of electoral materials etc.

**(b) Election Manipulation**

1. Stuffing of ballot boxes with legal and illegal ballot papers
2. Starving of opposition strong hold with electoral materials with a view to disfranchising them their right to choose.
3. Under-age voting, encouraging toddler voting.
4. Multiple-voting, some as many as six to seven times
5. Deliberate omission of candidates' photograph/ names, etc.

**(c) Post – Election Manipulations**

1. Deliberate refusal to count ballot boxes/papers from the opposition strongholds
2. Doctoring of results between the voting centres and collation centres
3. Outright theft of ballot boxes after voting or stuffing of empty ballot boxes with stolen ballot papers.
4. Declaration of result before the arrival of ballot boxes papers from the polling centres.
5. Outright cancellation of election result or total annulment of election result as witnessed in June 12, 1993 presidential election in Nigeria.

**(d) Other forms of electoral Fraud:**

1. Appointment or selection of partisan electoral officials.
2. Declaration of winner where no candidate was fielded.
3. Inflation of electoral register in order result.
4. Disqualification of candidates envisaged to be a threat to a favoured candidate

5. Using of the apparatus of state media, logistic, personnel in favour of the incumbent, particularly at re-election periods.
6. Intimidation and harassment of voters by thugs and police to discourage people from exercising their voting rights.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Study of this kind in analysing public perception on the role of the media in electoral reforms in Nigeria is best anchored on the theories of Rational Choice and Media Framing Theories. The rational choice theory relates to electoral reforms while media framing theory is associates with media imperatives

### **Rational Choice Theory**

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) originated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the work of Cesare Beccaria but the work was not popular. The theory was later developed by Anthony Downs in 1957 as an economic theory of democracy in explaining how individual decision-making or behaviour forms the basis for microeconomic models and analysis. Later, Gary Becker became the early proponent of applying this theory to political science and sociology. The basic premise of this theory, according to Hazan and Lenaar (2012), is that aggregate social behaviour results from the behaviour of individual actors, each of whom makes individual decision. The theory also focuses on the determinants of the individual choices. It explains the process of deciding what options are available for an individual and then choosing the most preferred one or option. In true sense, this is optimization-based approach.

This theory as described by Hazan and Lenaar (2012), who maintain that changes in electoral reforms are made as a result of the deliberately planned forecasts of elites to make and implement regulations and rules concerning elections in order to secure future elections, consolidate power and optimise political and electoral benefits. Shehu et. al. (2017) posit that elites and politicians are fully aware of the electoral reforms and their outcomes whenever made, although individuals and parties who lose power control or are in opposition are more likely to promote reforms in elections (Hazan & Lenaar). The practice of democracy in most developing states is delicate for the fact that the institutions associated with it in such political systems are not very trustworthy (Marx & Suri, 2016). Since most of Nigeria's elections have been associated with violence, rigging or other related irregularities, it calls for review or changes to meet the best practices trends in electoral laws, elections and democracy. At the same time, state authorities, ruling party and those in power accept or propose the idea of electoral reforms mostly when they know that the outcomes of such reforms will favour or at least not jeopardise their future electoral victories. They also succumb to pressure when there is the outcry from the public or the opposition to amend or reform the laws for better performance of the electoral system. Where the electoral reforms threaten the electoral chances of the status quo, various delay tactics, delayed legislative approval, poor execution of the laws may likely follow.

In the view of Díez (2001), rational choice deals with preferences at the level of assumptions, by considering them as exogenous, and therefore largely ignoring the issue of preference formation; actors are rational and will invariably act to maximize their self-interest. More often than not, politicians are assumed to be not only rational thinkers but also short-term thinkers. For example, the electorates make choices based on immediate electoral calculations with little regard for, or understanding of, their probable long-term effects as in many cases in Nigeria when politicians will no longer keep to their promises. This is a situation called Promise and Performance Paradigm (PPP) or gap. This is a gap or shift from what politician promised during campaigns and performance when voted into power.

In relation to this study, rational choice theory makes individual electorate to make rational or calculated choice based on the promise and performance paradigm. Within rational choice analysis, explanatory arguments will differ depending on what the particular goals of political

actors are assumed to be, and on the number and rigidity with which rational choice assumptions are made. The rational choice postulation gives ‘power’ to the electorates by reforming political arrangements that preserve the executive and legislative branches of government. The rational choice postulation can force those in power to accept unpalatable institutional changes.

### **Media Framing Theory**

The concept of framing was first posited by Gregory Bateson in 1972 (Arowolo, 2017) and later by Goffman in 1974, as ‘Frame Analysis’ (Dorfman, & Krasnow, 2014). According to Arowolo (2017), framing describes the practice of thinking about news items and story content within familiar context. Framing is related to the agenda-setting tradition but expands the research by focusing on the essence of the issues at hand rather than on a particular topic. In fact, media framing is an extension of agenda-setting theory. While agenda-setting deals with what the reporter and editor should gate-keep, consider or present as news, media framing looks at all the angles of the news presented, time of the news, the degree of discussion given to the news, small salient areas could be invoked, and the prominence given to the news. It is indeed, how the news is framed. The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. It deals with how the media packages and presents information to the audience. According to Dorfman and Krasnow (2014), framing is the process of reconciling new information with one’s existing understanding. In an unconscious and automatic process, people weigh new information against well-formed ideas that have been reinforced in their thinking overtime. Journalists in media framing must decide which facts, values and perspectives will be given prominence. This means that reporters certainly apply their own perspectives and interpretative frames when packaging news.

### **Principles/Assumptions of Framing Theory**

The theory holds among other things that:

- The media present something to the audience or called ‘the frame’ and it influences the choices people make about how to process that information. It deals with how the media formed ideas or issues to the audience by the way or manner the news or message is presented.
- Media framing draws audience attention to certain attributes of the objects or issues of the news coverage.
- Journalists select the topics they will present and decide how they will be presented.
- Media framing helps individuals interpret data so that their experiences can be understood in a wider social context
- Frame building is a systematic process that occurs over time
- Media framing works to organize or structure message meaning or by helping audience make meaning from media message.
- Frames are reinforced every time they are evoked, whether positive or negative (Arowolo, 2017).

Media framing is also a key component of media advocacy (Dorfman & Krasnow, 2014). Media Advocacy is a strategy to influence public debate by engaging with and putting pressure on the media to focus on specific social issues (Fayoyin, 2014). In this respect, media advocacy is expected to help the electorates to change their attitude or conducts that do not conform to the electoral laws and practice and to have an active turnout in the election. In the context of this study, while media framing deals with the process by which the electorates extract meaning from content of all kinds, including words, pictures, or interactions from political discourse like electoral reforms, media advocacy calls for social and political change on the electorates.

Media framing and advocacy are strategic use of media to advance public concerns, debates and policy on national issues like electoral reforms, which became a national issue in 2010

during the formulation of the Electoral Acts. Electoral issues can be framed by the media for public discourse, which, when consistently and persistently discussed it can become a working tool or framework for public policy. The basis of framing theory is that the media focused attention on certain issues and places importance on them. Peaceful, free and fair elections as well as violent free elections can also be tied to media framing. Media framing must be consistent to gain public acceptance. Consistent and persistent advocacy by media framing are capable of influencing or inducing positive electoral change. Dorfman and Krasnow (2014) reasoned that media framing can be directed towards the behaviour of the electorates to achieve free and fair elections.

### **Justification of the Theories**

Rational choice theory starts with the idea that the electorates have preferences and choose according to those preferred choices. By advocating for electoral reforms, the electorate can employ the theory of rational choice to effect change or choose a political candidate in the next election. Rational choice theory gives the electorate the mandate to choose the opposition party if the incumbents do not perform the expectations. This was the case in Nigeria in the 2015 general elections when the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) was defeated by the main opposition, the All Progressive Congress (APC).

However, it was argued that electoral reform is a popular issue depending on position as those in status quo may not favour electoral reforms for the fact that they are in power courtesy of the existing system which additionally protects and promotes their interests while those who are not in power and have not succeeded with the current system and therefore want reforms for their advantages too or for the good of all (Hazan and Lennar, (2012). The theory of rational choice makes an electoral system to be subjected to changes through several means, modes and by many different factors and circumstances just as there are many stakeholders to the changes or reform processes. Most of electoral reforms involve are influenced by politicians (Shehu et.al., 2017).

The rational choice approach lays much emphasis on voters' choice of their candidates in an election based on issues and policy design of the political parties. The choice here is rational. This situation is found among elites who chose their party or candidates due to the economic or political benefits they will gain from voting such candidates. Voters in Nigerian democracy have no rationality in choice as they tend to vote according to sentiments (Sule & Tai, 2018). In Nigeria, electoral reform has become a tool for making appointments and providing access to state resources. In as most of the electoral reforms are influenced by politicians, the electorates' power lies on their votes. This is where the rational choice postulation is imperative to electoral reform. In this wise, the rational choice theory in analysing electoral reform holds that the electorates are part of the reform processes even if the process to some extent is influence by politicians, the electorates' decision determine the choice of a candidate in a best practice.

For the media framing theory, and in the light of this study, members of political parties for example, in the course of electoral reforms attempt to frame issues in a way that makes a solution favouring their own political interest as it appears as the most appropriate course of action for the situation at hand (Van der Pas (2014). Framing deals with how the media packages and presents politics to the audience. CHANNEL NEWS for example is good at framing news on political issues in their political programme called 'Politics Today'. Framing enables the presenter of politic and electoral issues to look at it from different angle. In political framing, political parties compete to successfully harness its power of persuasion over the electorates through the news media. Because framing has the ability to alter the public's perception, politicians engage in battles to determine how issues are framed. The essence is to make the electorates see things with them. Hence, the ways the issues are framed or interpreted in the media reflect to some extent, who is winning the battle. When the news media focuses attention on electoral reform, media set agenda for public discourse. The framing

(interpretations and simplifications) a news media gives to electoral reform, for instance, the attention the public will give to the report. Media framing is about interpretation by the media. The way the reporter interprets political issues the way the audience will see it. By this to some extent, the electorates can make their decisions based on the framing from the news media.

The theories of rational choice and that of media framing adopted for this study could be connected to the main objective of the study. The main objective centred on how the media are imperatives for electoral reforms in Nigeria. In the rational choice postulations, electorates make choice of political candidate to vote for, choice of political party or choice of the contents of the electoral reforms and so on. As such, media framing influence the electorates' choice. Media framing not only interprets but help the electorates to see things the way they are. For example, when media reports on the legislatives, especially when they have conflict interests in the House like bills raised or sponsored, the judiciary on series of electoral cases and the executives displayed of supremacy, they make the audience to have a mind-set of the kind of people in power. By consistently reporting on such issues the media give framing, and the audience sees and accepts the framing the way the media presented them. Over time, media framing builds up beliefs, perception and attitude. This is in the light of the postulation that regular and consistent exposure to the media influences audiences' attitude, choice and perception. Media framing to some extent influence not only our perceptions but also choice in electoral reforms and other national matters.

Interpretation or media framing influence people's decisions and choice on national issues, because in the view of McQuail (2010), the public holds the media in high esteem in terms of information and enlightenment. McQuail believes that whenever the media exert influence they also cause change. Media framing, therefore, can be a potent force to influence public perceptions on various political issues. It implies that attitudes, predispositions and rational choice are at work during exposure to media news framing. In other words, media framing affect our thoughts and beliefs formation as it makes us to make choice during elections or for electoral reforms. Although, the media may not change existing deep rooted attitudes but may rather help us to make choice. The above explains the choice and justification of the adoption of the two theories—rational choice theory and media framing theory for this study.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts the cross-sectional design. The cross-section is a type of design that analyses data from a population or a representative subset at a specific point in time. It involves using different groups of people (in this case the electorates and political scholars/analysts) who differ in the variable of interest but share other characteristics. Under this design the study adopts the survey research method. The survey research method is structured for collecting data for the purpose of describing a population too large to be observed directly (Babbie, 2007). The purpose of adopting the survey research method is that it enables the researcher to determine from the targeted respondents how the media are imperative for electoral reforms. The research method enabled the researcher to elicit views or opinions from the target respondents.

### **Population of the Study**

The population of the study is 12,841,279 persons made up of the registered and eligible voters in the six states that make up the South-South Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria as at the 2019 General Elections in the country. The nature of the study requires inputs from only the politically active and conscious members of the public.

**Table 1: States of South – South Nigeria**

| S/N          | STATE             | REGISTERED VOTERS |
|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1            | Akwa Ibom State   | 2,119,727         |
| 2            | Bayelsa State     | 923,182           |
| 3            | Cross River State | 1,527,289         |
| 4            | Delta State       | 2,845,274         |
| 5            | Edo State         | 2,210,534         |
| 6            | Rivers State      | 3,215,273         |
| <b>TOTAL</b> |                   | <b>12,841,279</b> |

**Source:** Authors' Fieldwork, 2026

### Sample Size

The sample size for this study is 384. The Krejcie and Morgan formula was used to explain how the sample size was obtained. This sample size is only used for target population that is above 10,000. This sample size has been used by researchers all over the world. The sample size is obtained as follows:

$$n = \frac{x^2 NP(1-P)}{e^2(N-1) + x^2 P(1-P)}$$

Where:

S = Sample

$x^2$  = Chi-square table value of 0.05 confidence level on degree of freedom of 1=3.841

n = population of the study = 12,841,279

Z = standard normal deviate at the required confidence level (1.96) at 0.05

P = population proportion of .50 = 12,841,279 x .50 = 6,420,639.5

$$n = \frac{3.841 \times 12,841,279 \times .50 \times .50}{.05^2 \times 12,841,279 + 3.841 \times .50 \times .50}$$

$$n = \frac{3.841 \times 12,841,279 \times .50 \times .50}{32,103.198 + 0.96025}$$

$$n = \frac{12,330,838.16}{32,104.158}$$

$$n = 384$$

### Instrument for Data Collection

The study adopted two instruments (a questionnaire and an interview guide) for data collection. Study of this nature needs the opinions of politically active members of the public and professionals in elections and electoral processes. Accordingly, a questionnaire targeting registered voters who are politically active and conscious was used in the study. The questionnaire had two sections. Section A of the questionnaire was aimed at gathering the demographic data of the respondents while section B was to elicit data relevant to the objectives of the study. The questionnaire contained open ended items as well as structured items which included 5-point Likert scale (See appendix 2). In order to elicit qualitative data from professionals such as political scholars and analysts, the study also adopted an interview guide targeting university lecturers in Political Science, election monitors, journalists, public analysts with bias in electoral matters and politically-oriented lawyers (See appendix 3). The researcher also interviewed 10 participants who were randomly selected from different cities. (See appendix 4 for interview questions and answers).

## **Method of Data Analysis**

The data that were gathered in the course of this study were analysed using relevant descriptive statistics which included frequency counts, simple percentages, mean, and standard deviation. In order to test the relevant hypotheses of the study, the F-Statistics was obtained from the simple regression estimation which was conducted alongside the descriptive statistics. The results from both the descriptive and inferential statistics were however presented by means of relevant tables.

## **Results and Discussion**

Three hundred and eighty-Five (385) copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the respondents in this study; of which, three hundred and seventy (370) were duly returned. Out of the 370 questionnaire that were returned, twenty-five (25) were not completely filled thus rendering them unusable in this study. In all, a total of three hundred and forty-five (345) copies of the questionnaire were duly filled and found usable for analysis. Table 2 contains information on the demographic variables of the respondents. Male respondents accounted for 144(41.74%) of the total, while female respondents accounted for 201(58.26%). This indicates that the majority of the responses were females. This could be due to the recent surge on interests relating to gender equity and women emancipation in Nigeria. Also, having more women as respondents could be attributable to their willingness to participate in a study that is targeted at electoral reforms in Nigeria. In terms of age distribution, we found that three (0.87%) respondents were below 20 years of age; whereas, 180(52.17%) of the respondents were between the ages of 20 and 30 years. In addition, we observed that 110(31.88%) and 50(14.50%) respondents were respectively in the age ranges of 30 – 40 years and 40-50 years. We also discovered that respondents that were above the age of 50 were just two, accounting for only 0.58% of the total respondents.

In terms of educational attainment, we found that the majority of respondents (80.87%) have at least undergone tertiary education, while sixty-six (19.13%) had secondary school education as their highest educational attainment. As observed, none of the respondents fell under the category of primary education or no formal education. The above indicates that the majority of the respondents are well educated and presumably knowledgeable of the subject matter of the current study.

With reference to the nature and kind of occupation of the respondents, we discovered that 25 (7.25%) of the total respondents were unemployed, while 10 (2.90%) were petty traders. Also, we observed that 85 (25.51%) were public/civil servants whereas, 59 (17.10%) were private office workers. Academic and non-academic staff that took part in the study were four (1.16%) and eight (2.32%) respectively. Noteworthy, a total of 19 (5.50%) media practitioners took part in this study while artisans were 5 (1.45%). The data in Table 4.1 also indicated that two medical practitioners who accounted for approximately 0.58% also took part in the study. Overall, we observed that a total of 118 respondents (34.20%) were also participants in this study. Succinctly, none of the respondents indicated whether they were politicians, election observers, transporters, farmer, mechanic or tailors.

Notably, the above distribution of demographic features of respondents suggests that a significant number of respondents were adults and they all have the necessary knowledge about the subject matter of this study.

**Table 2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

| S/N | Variables                    | Categories            | Frequency<br>(n=345) | Percentage<br>(%) |
|-----|------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| 1.  | Gender                       | Male                  | 144                  | 41.74%            |
|     |                              | Female                | 201                  | 58.26%            |
|     |                              | <b>Total</b>          | <b>345</b>           | <b>100%</b>       |
| 2.  | Age of Respondents           | Below 20 years        | 03                   | 0.87%             |
|     |                              | 20 – 30 years         | 180                  | 52.17%            |
|     |                              | 30 – 40 years         | 110                  | 31.88%            |
|     |                              | 40 – 50 years         | 50                   | 14.50%            |
|     |                              | Above 50years         | 02                   | 0.58%             |
|     |                              | <b>Total</b>          | <b>345</b>           | <b>100%</b>       |
| 3.  | Educational<br>Qualification | No formal Education   | 00                   | 0.00%             |
|     |                              | Primary Education     | 00                   | 0.00%             |
|     |                              | Secondary Education   | 66                   | 19.13%            |
|     |                              | Higher Education      | 279                  | 80.87%            |
|     |                              | <b>Total</b>          | <b>345</b>           | <b>100%</b>       |
| 4.  | Occupation                   | Unemployed            | 25                   | 7.25%             |
|     |                              | Student               | 118                  | 34.20%            |
|     |                              | Trader                | 10                   | 2.90%             |
|     |                              | Public/Civil Servant  | 88                   | 25.51%            |
|     |                              | Private Office Worker | 59                   | 17.10%            |
|     |                              | Businessman/Woman     | 07                   | 2.03%             |
|     |                              | Academic Staff        | 04                   | 1.16%             |
|     |                              | Non-Academic Staff    | 08                   | 2.32%             |
|     |                              | Media Practitioner    | 19                   | 5.50%             |
|     |                              | Medical Worker        | 02                   | 0.58%             |
|     |                              | Politicians           | 00                   | 0.00%             |
|     |                              | Election Observer     | 00                   | 0.00%             |
|     |                              | Transporter           | 00                   | 0.00%             |
|     |                              | Artisan               | 05                   | 1.45%             |
|     |                              | Farmer                | 00                   | 0.00%             |
|     |                              | Mechanic              | 00                   | 0.00%             |
|     |                              | Tailor                | 00                   | 0.00%             |
|     |                              | <b>Total</b>          | <b>345</b>           | <b>100%</b>       |

**Source:** Field Survey, 2022

### Test of Hypotheses

#### Test of Hypotheses I

**H<sub>A1</sub>:** the media gives attention to issues of electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria

**H<sub>01</sub>:** the media do not give attention to issues of electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria

Table 3 presents the result for the test of hypothesis 1 of this study. As observed, the correlation between media content and the attention given to electoral reform is positive (0.1311). The standard error obtained is 0.0517 indicating that the model estimating the extent to which media content gives attention to matters concerning electoral reforms is approximately 99.95% accurate since the distance between data points and fitted values of the regression model was averagely small (0.0517). The result of the t-statistics which was 2.54 with is corresponding p-value of 0.012 suggests that the general belief of the people in the South-South

geopolitical zone of the country was that the media gives attention to issues of electoral reforms in Nigeria. This position was further confirmed by the result of the F-statistics of 6.44 (Prob > F = 0.0116). Overall, going by the result of the F-Statistics, the null hypothesis 1 of this study was rejected. We therefore accept the alternate hypothesis which says that the media gives attention to issues of electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria.

**Table 3: Model Summary for the Attention of Media to Electoral Reforms In Nigeria**

| Electoral Reform | Coeff. | Std. Err. | T     | P >   t | R <sup>2</sup> | Decision    |
|------------------|--------|-----------|-------|---------|----------------|-------------|
| Attention        | 0.1311 | 0.0517    | 2.54  | 0.012   | 0.0184         | Reject Null |
| _cons            | 3.8432 | 0.2286    | 16.81 | 0.000   |                |             |
| F(1, 343)        | 6.44   |           |       |         |                |             |
| Prob > F         | 0.0116 |           |       |         |                |             |
| Obs              | 345    |           |       |         |                |             |

**Source:** Researchers' Computation, 2026

### Test of Hypotheses II

**H<sub>A2</sub>:** the public has good perception of media contents on electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria

**H<sub>02</sub>:** the public do not have good perception on media contents on electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria

**Table 4: Model Summary for the Perception of the Nature of Media Content on Electoral Reforms In Nigeria**

| Electoral Reform        | Coeff. | Std. Err. | T     | P >   t | R <sup>2</sup> | Decision    |
|-------------------------|--------|-----------|-------|---------|----------------|-------------|
| Nature of Media Content | 0.4379 | 0.0333    | 13.16 | 0.000   | 0.3354         | Reject Null |
| _cons                   | 2.4732 | 0.1486    | 16.64 | 0.000   |                |             |
| F(1, 343)               | 173.09 |           |       |         |                |             |
| Prob > F                | 0.0000 |           |       |         |                |             |
| Obs                     | 345    |           |       |         |                |             |

**Source:** Researchers' Computation, 2026

In Table 4, the result for the test of hypothesis 2 of this study was presented. As can be seen, there appears to be a positive statistical association between public perception of the nature of media content and its coverage on electoral reform. The low standard error of 0.4379 was an indication that the model for hypothesis 2 exhibits very low chances of errors. Additionally, the result of the t-statistics which stood at 13.16 with a p-value of 0.000 indicates that the public has good perception on media contents on electoral reforms in Nigeria. This position was further confirmed by the result of the F-statistics of 173.09 (Prob > F = 0.0000). Overall, going by the result of the F-Statistics, the null hypothesis 2 of this study was rejected. We therefore accept the alternate hypothesis, thus suggesting that the public has good perception of media contents on electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria.

### Test of Hypotheses III

**H<sub>A3</sub>:** members of the public have good perception on the contributions of the media to electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria

**H<sub>03</sub>:** members of the public do not have a good perception on the contributions of the media to electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria

**Table 5: Model Summary for the Contribution of Media Content To Electoral Reforms In Nigeria**

| Electoral Reform              | Coeff. | Std. Err. | t     | P >   t | R <sup>2</sup> | Decision    |
|-------------------------------|--------|-----------|-------|---------|----------------|-------------|
| Contribution of Media Content | 0.1127 | 0.0284    | 3.97  | 0.000   | 0.0440         | Reject Null |
| _cons                         | 3.9512 | 0.1194    | 33.10 | 0.000   |                |             |
| F(1, 343)                     | 15.80  |           |       |         |                |             |
| Prob > F                      | 0.0001 |           |       |         |                |             |
| Obs                           | 345    |           |       |         |                |             |

**Source:** Researchers' Computation, 2026

The results of this study's test of hypothesis 3 are reported in Table 5. Noticeably, the coefficient between public perception of the contribution of media content and electoral reforms in Nigeria was positive (coefficient value = 0.1127). The low standard error of 0.0284 was suggestive of the fact that the model accurately measures the estimated statistical association between the variables of interest. Also, with the result of the t-statistics of 3.97 (Prob > t = 0.000), it is evident that the general perception of the public was that media content has significantly contributed to the electoral reform of the country. This position was further confirmed by the result of the F-statistics (F-stat. = 15.80; Prob > F = 0.0000) which showed that overall, the null hypothesis 3 of this study was rejected. We therefore accept the alternate hypothesis, thus suggesting that members of the public have good perception on the contributions of the media to electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria

#### Test of Hypotheses IV

**H<sub>A4</sub>:** the public has high level of acceptability of the media content on electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria

**H<sub>04</sub>:** the public has low level of acceptability of the media content in electoral reforms in South-south Nigeria

Hypothesis 4 was however tested in this study and the result is presented in Table 4.20.

**Table 6 Model Summary for the Acceptability of Media Content to Electoral Reforms In Nigeria**

| Electoral Reform               | Coeff. | Std. Err. | T     | P >   t | R <sup>2</sup> | Decision    |
|--------------------------------|--------|-----------|-------|---------|----------------|-------------|
| Acceptability of Media Content | 0.0781 | 0.0213    | 3.67  | 0.000   | 0.0378         | Reject Null |
| _cons                          | 4.0991 | 0.0892    | 45.95 | 0.000   |                |             |
| F(1, 343)                      | 13.47  |           |       |         |                |             |
| Prob > F                       | 0.0003 |           |       |         |                |             |
| Obs                            | 345    |           |       |         |                |             |

**Source:** Researchers' Computation, 2026

Noticeably, the value for standard error recorded for acceptability of the media content on reportage of electoral reforms in Nigeria stood at 0.0213 (2.13%). Note that the low value for standard error as noted earlier was an indication that the model specified to examine the level of acceptability of media content on electoral reforms in this study alongside the regression outcomes are not only precise, but very reliable. With the aforesaid, the conclusion drawn from the result presented in Table 6 was adjudged reliable. In addition to the above, it was evident that the F<sub>cal</sub> for the overall model was 13.47 with a corresponding p-value of 0.0003 (F<sub>cal</sub> = 13.47; p-value = 0.0003 < 0.05). This result showed that the public has high level of

acceptability of the media content on electoral reforms in Nigeria. With this result, the hypothesis 4 of this study was rejected thereby leading to the conclusion that the public has high level of acceptability of the media content on electoral reforms in Nigeria.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This study seeks to critically examine the perception of the public on the roles of the media in Nigerian Electoral Reforms. In order to achieve this, the study focused on two states of the South-South geopolitical zone of the country. In the course of the study, primary data were obtained through self-structured questionnaire that were distributed to three hundred and eighty-five (385) respondents drawn from six communities each of Edo and Delta States. Out of the 385 copies of the questionnaire that were distributed, a total of three hundred and seventy (370) copies of the questionnaire were retrieved, but twenty-five (25) were found to be unusable, hence, the duly completed and returned questionnaire found to be useful for the purpose of analysis were 345. The analysis in this chapter was therefore based on the responses from the 345 duly completed and returned copies of the questionnaire found to be usable.

Noteworthy, from the responses to the questionnaire items of this study, we observed that the vast majority of the respondents are aware that the electoral process in Nigeria has undergone reforms in recent time. Also, it is evident from the response of the respondents that most people are confident that with electoral reforms, election results will specifically reflect the desires of the electorates since with such reforms, the election systems of the country can be put in the right perspectives. With assurances that the voting systems and rules guiding the activities of political parties can properly be addressed through well thought electoral reform, findings from our study showed that the general perception of the public was that the electoral reform as reported by the media can adequately address issues concerning the safety of voters, election officials and election monitoring by candidates and political parties in Nigeria amongst others. These results are in consonance with the findings of previous studies (Renwick, 2010, Aiyede, 2012, Ogwu, 2016, Shehu, et.al.2017, Botchway & Kwateng, 2018, Sule & tai, 2018).

Notwithstanding, analyses of the responses to the items in the study's questionnaire revealed amongst others that a sizeable number of the people in South-South region of Nigeria strongly believed that media coverage on issues of electoral reforms was targeted at both urban and rural areas in Nigeria. This observation certainly accounts for why the public generally believed that the increased clamour of the public for electoral reforms in Nigeria was as a result of the awareness created by media content alongside its simplified framing pattern in recent time. These observations was as expected in the literature (Ebirim, 2013; Akinwale & Adeleke, 2019)

Furthermore, we assessed the perception of the public on the nature of media content on electoral reforms in Nigeria and found that the general belief was that media content were sincere calls for the improvement of the electoral systems in Nigeria. Also, we noticed that the contents of media reports on electoral reforms in Nigeria were necessary for strengthening democracy, since they have the capacity of setting the agenda and frames for electoral reforms in the country.

In addition to exposing electoral malpractices and irregularities in the electoral system in the country, we also found that most residents of the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria strongly believed that media contents have successfully educated the public on the ideal electoral system acceptable in democratic societies globally and by extension, has created reasonable level of awareness to the defects of the current electoral system in Nigeria. Therefore, media contents on electoral reforms have so far encouraged the public and have increased their involvement in the continuous clamour for electoral reform in the country.

In line with the findings of previous studies (Ashraf, 2014, Oboh, 2016, Suntai & Targena, 2017, Abubakar, 2017), we found that most people in the South-South region of Nigeria implicitly believed that the general public has high level of confidence on media contents especially as it concerns electoral reforms in the country. This was because, the general belief was that media content on electoral reform has not only engendered high interest in political

matters among the general public, but has largely spurred increased clamour for reforms in the electoral system in Nigeria due to the high level of confidence they have in media contents. The results of our findings and test of hypothesis align with the positions of prior studies (see Renwick, 2010; Hazan & Lenaar, 2012; Ogwu, 2016; Jibrin, 2010; Onapojo, 2015; Alahira-David et.al, 2015; Shehu, et.al, 2017).

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Several media practitioners and contemporary political professionals within and outside Nigeria have focused their researches on the relationship between the media and political processes, decisions, and behaviours. No doubt, studies (Ibagere, 2020) have shown that political awareness and capacity for political decisions appeared to be poor in developing countries like Nigeria especially as it relates to media content and the contributions of mass media on political awareness and capacity to make political choices.

While we agree that previous studies have provided vital insights into the impact of the media on political processes, decisions, and actions, it was noted that the public perceptions of the media contributions to electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria may have been overlooked. Furthermore, prior research findings have not shown whether or not there is a substantial difference in public view of the role of the media in Nigerian electoral changes among states or geopolitical zones in Nigeria, particularly in the South-South. This study therefore focuses on providing insights on several issues which include public perception on the nature and contributions of media content on the electoral reforms within the study area. Research questions were raised alongside hypotheses which were tested using relevant statistical tools. Findings indicated that members of the public have good perception on the contributions of the media to electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria. Additionally, the public is believed to have high level of acceptability of the media content on electoral reforms in South-South Nigeria. In the light of the results of this study, we recommend as follows:

- i. Efforts should be made by media practitioners to strengthen the current efforts targeted at creating awareness on issues concerning electoral reforms and other political matters in Nigeria.
- ii. To sustain the present perception of media contents on electoral reforms by the populace, media practitioners and regulators must continuously ensure that media content and reportage must be done regularly, objectively and with high level of credibility.
- iii. The level of acceptability of the media content on electoral reforms and other political matters should be sustained through proactive measures designed to maintain reasonable standard of reportage and media framing in Nigeria

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