

POLITICAL ADVERT CAMPAIGNS AND VOTING BEHAVIOUR:

Akinwunmi Ambode's 2015 Election Campaign in Lagos State

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ABSTRACT

In recent times, the use of political ad campaigns has become increasingly popular, as was evident in the 2015 gubernatorial elections in Lagos State. Advert campaigns of several candidates filled the media, which seemed to be a clear distinction from election campaigns in the past, in which the focus was mainly on political rallies and speeches. This led me to seek to understand the effectiveness of political ad campaigns in shaping the voting behaviour of Nigerian voters. Specifically, I examined political ad campaigns of the All Progressive Congress gubernatorial candidate in Lagos State, Akinwunmi Ambode. A field survey of eligible voters in Lagos State was carried out to further ascertain the efficacy of political ad campaigns on the electorate. From the field survey, results were collated, analysed and summarised using frequency tables. Findings from the study showed that political ad campaigns do not have a strong effect on the electorate's voting behaviour but still play a role in the electoral process. I concluded that political candidates and parties should concentrate on other election campaign strategies. I also recommend that further studies be conducted to better understand other factors that influence voting behaviour.

Keywords: electorate, political theme songs, campaign strategies

INTRODUCTION

For any democratic system to thrive, it is vital that political parties and candidates provide the voters with adequate information on party policies, clear-cut vision as

well as their political agendas to enable the electorate to choose their candidates based on full information. To achieve this, political parties use the mass media during campaigns. The media plays a major role in keeping the citizenry abreast of current events and raising awareness of various issues in any society. It also has an extremely important influence on the public's views and way of thinking. The media is the primary means through which public opinion is shaped and at times manipulated (CIHRS 2011). Simply put, for an election to be considered free and fair, the electorate must have adequate knowledge of the candidates, political parties and election policies.

In the past, election campaign strategies focused mainly on personal contact and political rallies. However, since Nigeria's transition from military rule to a democratic dispensation the use of political ad campaigns has become increasingly popular, which is probably a result of the awareness of the power of the media. Hence, political parties and candidates all around the world devote a lot of financial resources to political ad campaigns to sell themselves as the preferred brand to the electorate. Interestingly, most questions raised in elections are concerned with voting behaviour, that is, why voters voted for one candidate over others, and the implication of their choice.

Communication experts argue that when a politician crafts his or her campaign messages to reflect the fight to improve voters' lives, and if the messages have a good measure of integrity, voters are more likely to believe that politician (Feyipitan 2015). In other words, voters are most likely to trust candidates whose political ad campaigns offer to satisfy their basic needs, as opposed to those who dwell on their personal achievements. However, the same experts also argue that personality, appearance and language use do play crucial roles in political ad campaigns. The efficacy of political ad campaigns in persuading the electorate to vote in a candidate's favour is still questioned.

The 2015 gubernatorial elections in Lagos State witnessed political parties and candidates load various forms of media with ad campaigns, all struggling to win votes from voters. In the end Akinwunmi Ambode, who was the candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC), emerged as the governor of Lagos State. Before the elections, his ad campaigns had filled media airwaves, social media and billboards with messages for every class of people who made up the electorate. His jingles played on radio and television stations as well as social media sites, while his messages filled the print and outdoor media with promises to deliver. What role did these campaign strategies play in Ambode becoming governor?

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

In light of the increasing use of political ad campaigns in elections, especially in Nigeria, the aim of this research was to examine the efficacy of political ad

campaign use in elections in Nigeria. It also sought to understand the extent to which voters' choices in Lagos State were influenced by Akinwunmi Ambode's ad campaigns, and the most effective campaign strategy used by the gubernatorial candidate. This research also adds to the body of literature on the effectiveness of political advertising and voting behaviour in Nigeria.

Research questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1) To what extent were the voters in Lagos influenced by Ambode's ad campaigns?
- 2) What was the most effective strategy employed in Ambode's ad campaigns?
- 3) To what extent did exposure to Ambode's ad campaigns facilitate his win in the 2015 Lagos State gubernatorial elections?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political advertising campaigns in Nigeria

That the mass media pervades our daily lives, including through advertising, has been well established by various scholars and communication experts. In politics, ad campaigns have become an essential tool used by candidates contesting for various positions, to persuade people to vote for them. Advertising and public relations occupy the centre stage of promotion of political candidates and parties vying for different political positions during campaigns. In recent decades, political advertising has changed significantly. Iyenga and Simon (2000) state that political advertising is increasingly the main element in political campaigns, rendering party machines and grass-root organisations less important than they were in the past. Diamond and Bates (1992) similarly posited that unlike political campaigns in the past, advances in media technology have streamlined the process, giving candidates more options to reach larger groups of constituents with little effort. According to boundless.com (2015) the growth of political advertising – especially in the United States – can be attributed to cable television networks and the internet. The boundless.com website states that

The growth of cable television networks heavily influenced political advertising in the 1992 election between incumbent President George H.W. Bush and Governor Bill Clinton, particularly in reaching new target demographics such as women and young voters. The

2004 election saw yet another, and possibly the biggest, change yet in political advertising—the growth of the Internet. Web-based advertising was easily distributed by both incumbent President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry’s campaigns, and both campaigns hired firms who specialized in the accumulation of personal data. This resulted in advertisements which were tailored to target specific audiences for the first time (a process known as narrowcasting).

In Nigeria, political advertising has grown immensely in the past two decades. This is probably a result of the growing awareness by political parties and their candidates of the usefulness of advertising to educate the electorate about a candidate as a ‘better brand’, and to communicate their offerings in form of manifestos to the electorate. Olujide (2010) notes that advertising has become the most commonly used technique to create a favourable image for the candidate and a negative image for the opponent. Before now, political parties and candidates channelled most of their resources into political rallies, speeches and direct contact to gather the support of electorates, as noted by Opeibi (2004).

Between the 2007, 2011 and most recently the 2015 elections in Nigeria, the use of political ad campaigns has expanded with regard to mode of delivery, type of language used, and forms of media used to communicate these messages. The 2007 gubernatorial elections in Lagos State saw the overflow of both traditional and new media with media campaigns of the three strongest contenders, who were Babatunde Fashola (AD), Musuliu Obanikoro (PDP) and a new face, Jimi Agbaje (DPA). Because of the popularity of these three candidates amongst the electorate, campaigns became highly competitive. Each candidate tried to outdo the other using political ad campaigns. They came up with various jingles, such as ‘everybody loves Jimi Agbaje’, and slogans such as ‘Ekoonibaje o’. According to Nworah (2011), the 2011 presidential election between former president Goodluck Ebele Jonathan of the PDP and General Muhammadu Buhari of the CPC had its peculiarities. Because Goodluck Jonathan had not been elected president during his first term, he was saddled with the responsibility of convincing the electorate that he was a better choice than his strongest opponent. This he did by investing a lot of funds into media campaigns, which included traditional media and the new media.

Although some scholars agree that political advertising is important to every election campaign, certain political consultants remain divided on the extent to which political advertising influences voting behaviour. In the past, political campaign researchers such as Iyenga agreed that political media campaigns had a great effect on voting behaviour. However, recent studies have shown a better

understanding of the effectiveness of political advertising communication in elections. Holbrook (1996) concluded that 'variations in candidate support during the campaign season are largely attributable to the occurrence of campaign events.' Iyenga stated that political advertising is persuasive rather than manipulative, and its messages inform voters about the candidates' positions and allow voters to develop differentiated images of the candidates.

Interestingly, Nigerian voters are becoming ever more exposed to political advertising – a lot more than in the past, which in turn raises awareness about political decisions before they are taken. Voters are becoming more aware about political information, including information on candidates and their manifestos, party policies and election guidelines, through the continual use of political advertising in election campaigns in Nigeria.

Lagos political landscape

Lagos State, Nigeria was created on 27 May 1967 by virtue of State (Creation and Transitional Provisions) Decree No. 14 of 1967. The state took off as an administrative entity on 11 April 1968, with Lagos Island serving a dual role as both state and federal capital. However, with the creation of the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja in 1976, Lagos ceased to be the capital of the state, which was moved to Ikeja. Similarly, with the formal relocation of the seat of the Federal Government to Abuja on 12 December 1991, Lagos ceased to be Nigeria's political capital. Nevertheless, Lagos remains the nation's economic and commercial capital. According to extant political records, 'Lagos is to the people of Nigeria, what the head is to the body of an individual' (www.ekoclubhouston.com).

Lagos State is the smallest state in Nigeria yet it has the largest population, relatively speaking, at more than 5% of the estimated national population. According to the 2006 national census, the state has a population of over 9 million people out of a national estimate of 150 000 000. However, based on a United Nations study and the State Regional Master Plan, Lagos State is estimated to have more than 12 million inhabitants. Lagos is the largest city in Nigeria and arguably the most populous city in Africa.

Lagos State operates a multi-party political system (Adisa 2015; Ladigbolu 2000). The politics of Lagos State have been dominated by the APC since 1999 when Bola Tinubu became the first democratically elected governor of Lagos State, followed closely by the PDP (Olaiya 2015). Tinubu was succeeded by Babatunde Raji Fashola (SAN), closely followed by the candidate of the PDP, Senator Musilu Obanikoro. The issue of the next occupant of the Lagos House in Alausa has been a twisted one. According to Olaiya (2015), from the thorny issue of preparing the grounds for the emergence of a Christian governor to satisfying agitators from

the Lagos East Senatorial district, who were yet to be represented at the Lagos 'Oval Office', and finally managing the combustible reactions of losers – who had desperately eyed to be on the party's ticket – it was not a 100-metres dash race. If the APC thought they were nearing the finish line when against all odds they shrugged off internal schisms to sell Ambode's candidacy to Lagosians, the party sooner than expected woke up to the reality that there were many hurdles to cross. Their main challenger, the PDP, dug deep to present a formidable match in Jimi Kolawole Agbaje.

AKINWUNMI AMBODE'S AD CAMPAIGNS IN LAGOS STATE

The 2015 general elections in Nigeria, especially in Lagos State, witnessed massive use of both traditional media and new media in election campaigns. It was apparent that candidates and political parties devoted a fortune to media ad campaigns to inform, educate and gather support from the electorate. In Lagos State, the gubernatorial candidate of the APC, Akinwunmi Ambode, used widespread and consistent media ad campaigns. His campaigns were on radio stations, television stations, social media, newspapers, billboards and posters. He also used celebrity endorsements and representations by people from different social classes, from the elite to the common trader. Most popular in his campaign were his theme songs 'I believe' and 'Gbabe', which were both studded with Nigerian celebrities such as Banky W. and Ice Prince. These campaigns explored celebrity endorsements and emotions to appeal specifically to the younger voters. In the 'I believe' video, every social class and ethnic background was represented. They all chorused 'I believe' in unity, with a few people stating why they each believed in Lagos and the Ambode dream. Ambode, who was the character in focus, ended the campaign with 'I believe together we can build the Lagos of our dreams'. In an article in *The Nation Newspapers* (2015), Ambode was described as a core democrat who rallied people in the 'I believe' video, singing 'I believe in the power of you and I. I believe together, we'll fly. I believe in the power that comes from a world brought together as one.'

However, a survey showed that the Gbabe theme song seemed to feature more consistently than the 'I believe' on radio and television stations. This was probably because Gbabe was a much more catchy song with danceable beat. Daily, between radio or television commercials, 'Ambo oooo Ambo, Ekosese bereni o Ambo, GBABE' – which can be translated as 'Ambo ooooo Ambo, Eko is just starting o Ambo, GET IT' – was played constantly. The song was sung by almost everyone, whether supporters or not, young or old, elite or not, in most parts of Lagos. It was very pervasive.

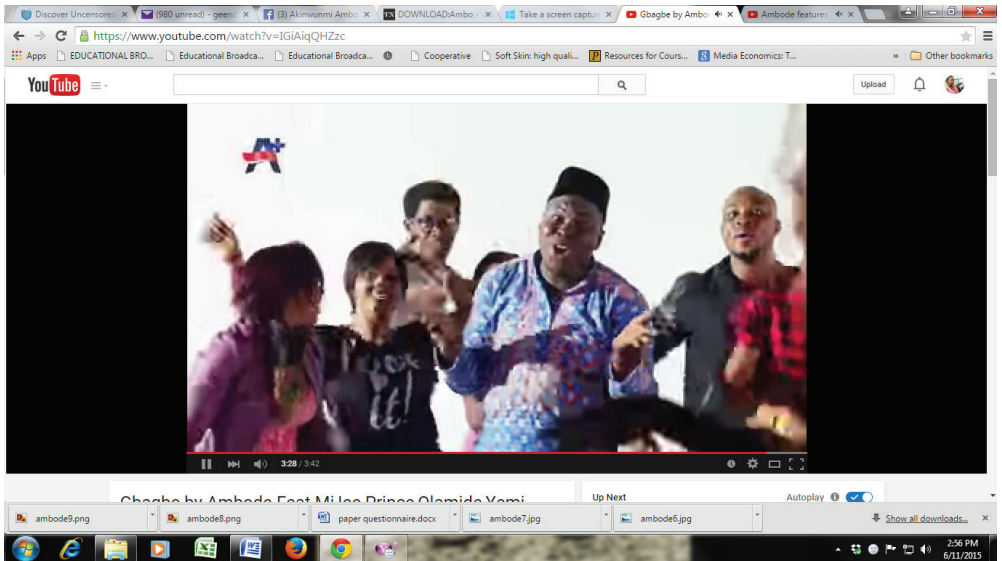


Figure 1: 'Gbabe' video

Source: YouTube, accessed 11 June, 2015.

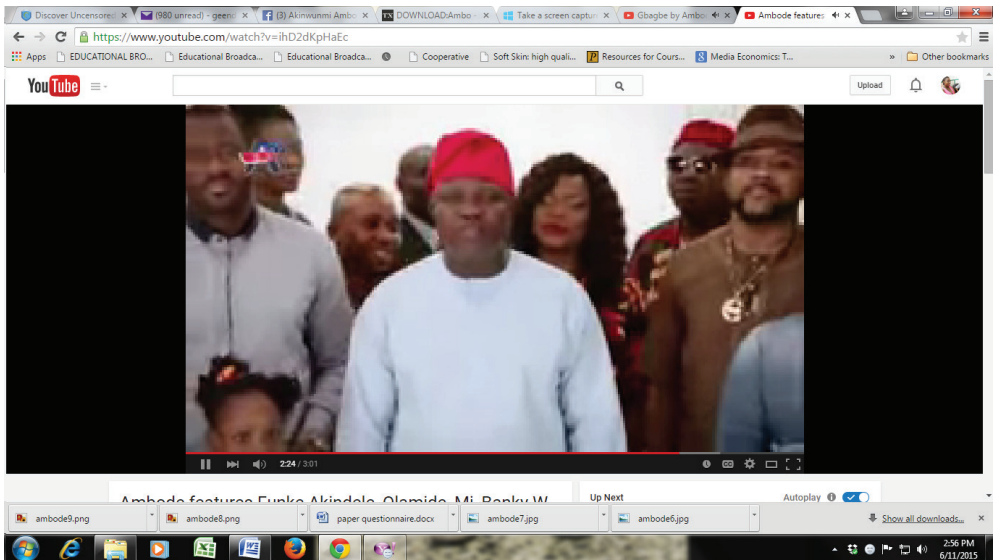


Figure 2: 'I believe' video

Source: YouTube, accessed 11 June, 2015.

Ambode’s ad campaigns not only featured in broadcast media: the print media, outdoor media and new media were equally employed. He appeared in different outfits and had several messages, which appealed to different types of audiences but were prominently youth focused. His ad campaigns and messages were drawn to suit a specific crowd. For example, he was dressed as an Igbo man, a sports man, wore a suit and tie, and addressed Christians and Muslims. To emphasise his love for children, his ad campaigns were highly focused on children. However, awash with different messages across the board, Ambode’s unique selling point was clear: he promised competence and continuity. In addition to celebrity endorsements, a challenge was extended, linked to his theme song. Members of the public were asked to send their versions of the theme song in exchange for a music deal with one of the celebrities who endorsed Ambode, and a grand prize to shoot the musical video. The combination of posters, billboard ads and his theme song – which rocked every radio and television – made it a tough race for Ambode’s opponents.



Figure 3: Ambode’s poster and billboard ads

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The scientific study of voting behaviour can be classified into three research schools. These are the sociological model, which focuses on influences of social factors; the psychosocial model, which posits that party identification is the major factor behind voting behaviour; and rational choice theory, which is also referred to as a model of economic voting. This study was underpinned by the sociological model of voting behaviour proposed by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944).

The theoretical assumptions of the sociological model are identified in three works, namely *The people's choice* (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944), *Voting* (Lazarsfeld and colleagues), and *Personal influence* (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955). Research conducted by Lazarsfeld in 1944 used a questionnaire for the first time in studying the US presidential elections. According to Rossi (1964), Lazarsfeld had two main objectives in this research: firstly, to study the effects of exposure to the media – that is, how voters arrive at their decisions and the role of media in this process; and secondly, to test a new methodology of successive interviews with a panel of subjects and a control group. Lazarsfeld's previous interests were the study of psychological mechanisms involved in the processes of choice, and the effects of publicity, advertising and mass media on consumer behaviour.

The 1944 study began by characterising the supporters of two main political parties in the US, using a panel of 600 subjects who were interviewed seven times over the seven months of the campaign. The researchers then identified voters who changed their position during the campaign period, and compared three groups: those who decided their vote before the campaign began, those whose decision was taken during the party convention, and those who decided their vote only at an advanced stage of the campaign (Antunes 2010).

The premise of the theory by Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) centred on the fact that voting is an individual choice that is largely affected by the voter's personality and the voter's exposure to the media. That is, voters' choice of candidates is greatly influenced by the amount of media they are exposed to and the kind of persons they are. In the case of Akinwunmi Ambode, this explains his immense use of political ad campaigns to influence voters' choice in his favour. It is common knowledge that both media and advertising are pervasive in nature, and influence their audience to behave in a certain way.

METHOD

To gain a better understanding of how political ad campaigns influence voting behaviour, I used a survey questionnaire with a simple randomised selection of the sample. A random sample means every member of the population has an equal

opportunity to be chosen. I used this technique because a study sample should be an unbiased representation of the population under study. Hence every class, age group and gender had an equal chance of being represented in the sample. Because the study was an assessment of Akinwunmi Ambode's ad campaigns in the 2015 Lagos State gubernatorial elections, the sample was drawn from all eligible voters in the state. Bulk emails were sent to people aged 18 and older, who were eligible voters, inviting them to participate.

The research instrument was a 12-item questionnaire which was distributed online using Google Forms, an easy-to-use online survey platform. Google Forms made it easy to reach respondents in different locations of Lagos State, which in turn made a fair representation of eligible voters all around the state. From the online survey, 180 respondents correctly filled and submitted the questionnaire.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows that respondents who were between the ages of 18 and 27 comprised 14.6% of the sample; those aged 28 to 37 comprised 56.9%, those aged 38 to 47 comprised 17.1%, those aged 48 to 57 comprised 8.9%, and respondents who were 58 or older comprised 2.4% of the sample.

Table 1
Survey responses (n=180)

Variables	No of Respondents	Percentage % (n=180)
Age:		
18-27	27	14.6
28-37	103	56.9
38-47	31	17.1
48-57	16	8.9
58 and older	3	2.4
Gender:		
Male	86	47.6
Female	94	52.4
Active in the 2015 Lagos State gubernatorial elections?		
Yes	94	52.4
No	86	47.6

How involved?		
Very active	23	13.1
Active	61	33.6
Passive	64	35.2
Indifferent	32	18
Exposure to Ambode's ad campaigns		
Yes	159	88.3
No	21	11.7
Medium of exposure:		
Billboards	72	59.5
Posters	76	62.8
Radio adverts	73	60.3
Television adverts	72	59.5
Newspaper adverts	41	33.9
Social media adverts	54	44.6
Ads remembered, whether heard or seen:		
Billboards	46	37.7
Posters	41	33.6
Radio adverts	65	53.3
Television adverts	53	43.4
Newspaper adverts	9	7.4
Social media adverts	28	23
Reason for remembering ads:		
They were interesting	27	22.3
His appearance appealed to me	17	14
You believed his promises	12	9.9
They were everywhere, I got used to them	53	43.8
His theme song stuck in my head	73	60.3
Indifferent	3	2.5
Influence in voting for Ambode:		
Yes	38	21.1
No	86	48
Indifferent	56	30.9

Were Ambode's ad campaigns better than that of his opponents?		
Yes	68	37.7
No	63	35.2
Not sure	38	21.3
Other	11	5.7
Did campaigns foster his victory?		
Yes	40	22.3
No	99	54.5
Not sure	41	23.1

Out of the 180 questionnaires, 47.6% respondents were male and 52.4% female. When asked whether they were active in the gubernatorial elections, 52.4% said yes and 47.6% said no. In terms of how involved they were, 13.1% were very active, 33.6% percent were active, 35.2% were passive, and 18% were indifferent. When asked whether they had been exposed to Ambode's ad campaigns, most respondents (88.3%) affirmed they had been and 11.7% said they were not. Table 2 shows that 59.5% of the respondents were exposed to billboard adverts, 62.8% to posters, 60.3% to radio adverts, 59.5% to television adverts, 33.9% to newspaper adverts, and 44.6% to social media adverts. With regard to adverts that were always remembered by respondents, 37.7% chose billboards, 33.6% chose posters, 53.3% chose radio adverts, 43.4% chose television adverts, 7.4% chose newspaper adverts and 23% chose social media adverts. When asked why they remembered Ambode's ad campaign, 22.3% of respondents said they were interesting, 14% that his appearance was appealing, 9.9% that they believed his promises, 43.8% that they grew used to them because the adverts were everywhere, 60.3% that his theme song stuck in their heads, and 2.5% were indifferent.

Regarding the question of whether their choice to vote for or against Ambode was influenced by the adverts, 21.1% of respondents said they were influenced, 48% were not influenced and 30.9% were indifferent. When asked if Ambode's ad campaign was better than that of his opponents, 37.7% said yes, 35.2% said no, 21.3% were not sure and 5.7% chose the 'other' response. When asked if Ambode's win was fostered by his ad campaign, 22.3% said yes, 54.5% said no and 23.1% were not sure.

To what extent was the electorate influenced by Ambode's ad campaigns?

A large number of respondents (48%) said they were not influenced by Ambode's ad campaign, and another large group (30.9%) was indifferent, leaving 21.1% who said they had been influenced by the ad campaign. This finding suggests the

electorate was not largely influenced by Ambode's ad campaign, which in turn suggests that all political ad campaigns might have little effect on an electorate's voting behaviour. If that is the case, irrespective of whether political candidates advertise or not, the electorates have a preconceived choice of candidate and exposure to ad campaigns of other contestants does little to change that choice. Such convictions could be a result of party affiliation, word of mouth, strong opinion leaders, simple personal appeal or many other unknown factors. This would seem to contradict the sociological model of voting behaviour (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944), which states that the electorate is influenced by exposure to the media.

What was the most effective strategy in Ambode's ad campaign?

Although a large percentage of respondents said they were not influenced by Ambode's ad campaigns, a whopping 60.3% of them said Ambode's theme song was stuck in their heads. (This could have been 'I believe' or 'Gbabe' or both.) This finding suggests that political advertising must still play some role in voting behaviour. It further emphasises that the effect of political advertising could be subliminal, without the receiving electorate being aware of its effect, or that it could be conscious, with the electorate being fully aware of the effect. Nearly half (43.8%) of respondents stated that Ambode's ad campaign was everywhere, so they had no choice but to get used to the songs. This also emphasises the pervasive nature of advertising: whether an audience is interested in a message or not, they receive it anyway.

Interestingly, this finding also suggests that radio and television are still very powerful media of advertising. Ambode's theme songs were very popular because they were played on both radio and television stations. According to respondents, the use of theme songs in political ad campaigns is an excellent strategy that Ambode made use of.

To what extent did exposure to Ambode's ad campaigns facilitate his win?

Also interesting is that 48% respondents were of the opinion that Ambode's ad campaign did not foster his victory in the 2015 Lagos State gubernatorial elections. A further 21.1% believed his ad campaign did foster his win, while 30.9% were indifferent. Given the finding about the effect of Ambode's ad campaign on voting behaviour – that is, it has a modest to weak effect on voting behaviour, it seems safe to say Ambode's ad campaigns did not foster his win. This means the choice of candidate was based on other factors independent of political ad campaigns. In this study some respondents chose reasons such as continuity, political pedigree, party affiliation, and experience to explain why Ambode was the preferred candidate, whereas other respondents were of the belief that he was the wrong choice of candidate, citing reasons such as plain preference of opponent, and dissatisfaction with party affiliation.

CONCLUSION

In this study I aimed to deepen understanding of political ad campaigns and voting behaviour. I also wanted to evaluate the effect of Akinwunmi Ambode's political ad campaigns on voters' behaviour in the 2015 gubernatorial elections in Nigeria. An online survey was carried out using a simple questionnaire to gather opinions of eligible voters in Lagos State.

Results from the survey showed that political advertising almost certainly plays some role in influencing the electorate. However, this effect is weak and could be a conscious effect or subliminal effect. From this, it is inferred that political ad campaigns have little effect on voting behaviour. In addition political ad campaigns remain pervasive, which means they are still useful in the election campaign process; radio and television remain the most effective means of advertising. The findings also show that the use of theme songs in political ad campaigns is effective in seizing the electorate's attention, which could in turn mean a change of choice of candidate.

Based on these findings, I would recommend that political candidates should invest more on other election campaign strategies rather than spending huge funds on political ad campaigns. This does not mean political candidates should ignore ad campaigns totally. However, it is important that candidates use the most effective means possible to influence voting behaviour. In addition, after political candidates and parties have chosen the best media to reach out to the electorate – which are most likely radio and television, they should also consider using a theme song strategy such as that of Ambode, to gain measurable popularity. Further studies should be carried out to understand other factors that influenced Nigerian's voting behaviour.

Finally, electorates should be open to receiving political advertising information so they can make better informed choices. Sticking to a party or candidate they have chosen from the start might mean they turn down the opportunity to understand the strengths of other candidates – who might actually be better options.

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