

Negativity Coverage Matters: Media Framing of Intraparty conflicts and opposition in the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Electoral Campaigns

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Abstract:

This study is concerned with how negative media framing of intraparty conflicts defined political discourse during the 2023 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria. Analysing front-page stories in *The Punch* and the *Daily Trust* newspapers from September 2022 to February 2023, the research showed that conflict-focused reporting dominated campaign coverage. Using a qualitative framing approach, the study looks at the depiction of these conflicts in depth and findings showed that negative media narratives contribute to heightening pre-election tensions. Furthermore, the inflammatory rhetoric and actions of politicians can foist a zero-sum mindset, which in turn produces a polarised political landscape, wherein, sensationalised reporting of internal party disputes overshadow meaningful political debates. To strengthen the country's democratic process, media organisations and practitioners are enjoined to prioritise policy discussions which promote national cohesion rather than emphasis on political conflicts.

Keywords: Electoral campaigns, framing, intraparty conflicts, Negativity, Nigerian media, Presidential elections, political discourse

1. Introduction

There has been extensive research by scholars which demonstrates the importance of negativity in electoral campaigns. From a political theory perspective, negativity in political news reflects a psychological tendency to focus on threats and deviations that undermine political support of the targeted politician or party, enlist the support of voters, and persuade those that are undecided to vote for the 'lesser evil' (Haselmayer, Meyer & Wagner, 2019, p.412). The 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria marked the first time in the nation's history that a formidable third-party candidate would emerge, and ethnic and religious tensions were at an all-time high (Ekpo, 2023). Against the traditionally dominant two-party system, was the Labour Party (LP), supported by a

broad 'assemblage of disaffected urban youth, students, trade union elements, celebrities and entertainers, and the rump of demonstrators' (Obadare, 2023). This rump of demonstrators captured the world's attention during the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria in 2020. The Labour Party (LP) represented a *viable* alternative to the two mainstream political parties, the ruling party, All Progressives' Congress (APC) and the main opposition, the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), which had ruled Nigeria from 1999-2015, in the buildup to the polls. Nevertheless, there were criticisms of this energetic and social media-savvy group for alienating moderates by dismissing constructive criticisms as personal attacks on Peter Obi, the LP presidential flagbearer.

There were also tensions underlying Obi's campaigns across the country related to ethno-regional and religious cleavages. Aspirations for an Igbo executive president, a position which was fueled by his Igbo ethnicity which have not been occupied hitherto by an Igbo nationality the presidency position since Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999. Moreso, Obi's Christian faith challenged the perceived power-sharing agreement between the predominantly Muslim North and the largely Christian South. Thus, in addition to being characterised as a third force movement, the LP campaign also exhibited tribal and religious tendencies. These factors have contributed to a highly charged news environment, replete with negativity.

This said, the media play an integral role in shaping social dynamics, with the nature of their involvement varying along the endogenous-exogenous continuum. The profile of involvement can span from active to passive, and from critical to noncritical, depending on the specific context and circumstance (Lohmus, 2001, p.188). In coverage and selection of news, studies have shown that the media are not conveying objective reality that is value-free or free of ideology. Instead, they play an active role in the construction and reconstruction of social reality by presenting a particular news frame (Tuchman, 1978; Lecheler, & de Vreese, 2019). The strategy used by the media in selecting and interpreting events, what they focus on and what they omit, plays an important role in defining and

constructing public knowledge (Entman, 2004; Bruggeman, 2014).

Since mainstream media affects audience perceptions of politicians, this study utilises qualitative content analysis to examine how the mainstream Press in Nigeria frame negativity in their coverage of the presidential electoral campaigns. It looks at the manifestation of negativity in the news coverage received by candidates during the 2023 Nigerian presidential electoral campaigns. The central research question which guides this study is: How does the framing of negativity during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election campaigns manifest in political discourse?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In existing literature, there are several approaches to understanding negativity in the political sphere, whereby scholars and policymakers generally endorse the popular perception that negativity poisons political discourse and undermines democracy. However, an alternative scholarly perspective contends that if candidates and their political parties supply voters with substantive and informative content, the emphasis should not merely be on the tone of the information provided, but should also focus on fostering a deliberative process necessary to advance democratic ideals (Geer, 2006). The use of negative campaigning in elections can have a dual effect. While some scholars argue that it can be effective due to journalists' tendency to prioritise its 'newsworthiness' (Walter & Nai, 2015), others, like

Agbibo and Okem (2011) warn that this can undermine the promotion of a shared national identity. This said, scholars have noted that campaign messages are more likely to make the news if they address issues owned by rival political parties, affirming the fact that conflicts and negativity are major news determinants, regardless of the fact that journalists tend to be interested in most messages from elite politicians. An important aspect of this study is that it can provide insight into democratic discourse, public opinion formation and political engagement in relation to the 2023 elections, as this can assist us in understanding the underlying issues and dynamics at play, as well as how negativity may shape voters' perceptions of politics and political actors.

When analysing the prevalence of negativity in political news, Lengauer, Esser & Berganza (2011) argue that it is important to establish clear conceptual clarity and standardized operational measures. Accordingly, the scholars distinguish between exogenous negativity which originates from outside sources, and endogenous negativity, which is imposed on the news by journalists themselves. The former has to do with negativity that is inherent to the issue being covered, that is, issue-related negativity such as corrupt practices, crime, war, etc., arising from the reality of the subject matter and is not imposed by journalists. Yet, it is still possible for journalism professionals to amplify this inherent negativity when they engage in sensationalised reporting.

On the other hand, endogenous negativity which comes from the journalists can be triggered by various factors including adversarial norm, personal biases, or framing devices. This form manifests in narrative structures, tone (optimistic/pessimistic) and portrayals of political actors. Kuypers (2014) argues that a substantial majority of journalists allow their personal ideologies to influence their reportage, potentially shaping the frame-building process (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). In content selection, it is possible for journalists with specific values or beliefs to unconsciously or deliberately emphasize or deemphasize certain aspects of events in order to create a negative tone or impression of certain candidates or political party. Thus, their partisan lens could lead them to potentially portray some candidates as 'lesser evil' or more credible than others.

It should also be noted that in this digital age, news outlets may prioritise negativity in order to attract larger audiences (Harcup, 2020) based on commercial interests rather than civic obligations. Certain campaign coverage elements like controversy and conflict naturally align with news values, making them more attractive to media outlets. Politicians, aware of these properties, may deliberately frame their messages to generate attention, even if it means courting negative coverage. Moreover, the utilization of negative campaign coverage by journalists not only helps them to establish professional autonomy and project an image of independence, but it also perpetuates the prominence of negative narratives in the news

media. This said, research has shown a structural negativity bias in media gatekeeping which points to the fact that the media typically focuses on more negative campaigns than positive ones; hence, conflict-centred negativity is more readily accepted than positive news since it adds drama, stimulates interest, and is easy to understand.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in framing theory which looks at how media representation relates to interpretation by the audience. A standard definition of framing was provided by Entman (2004, p.5), who described it as ‘selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution.’ A key part of electoral campaigns is mobilising people to action, where political news often focuses on the game of politics—who is winning and who is losing. Where political campaigns are marked by conflict, competition and crises, especially in a context where socio-ethnic and social-religious identities matter to political engagement, the strategic use of negativity usually aligns with framing’s premise of emphasis on those elements that are most likely to resonate with the expectation of the audience in deference to editorial considerations. Among such considerations may include exclusivity, conflict or shareability (Harcup & O’Neill, 2016).

Hence, here, the choice of sources consulted by journalists plays an important role in the outlook of the final news product. Studies on negativity and media representations are often connected by the concept of framing, thus, media representations of negativity should not be ignored, given that a significant foundation for framing research lies in sociology and psychology (Goffman, 1974; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; Noakes & Johnston, 2005; Baden, 2020). When negative framing is employed, certain aspects of reality and specific problem definitions are promoted, through editorial decisions about what to cover and what to exclude. In this sense, frames function as cognitive filters that determine the way in which the recipients of media messages understand and interpret the complex world we live in (Lippmann, 1922), identifying the perspective that represents a shared understanding of the situation or an issue.

Frames or framing is certainly not a given; it is a contested phenomenon that operates at different levels in a political system, as politicians, media organisations and other stakeholders use negative framing to highlight problems, to assign blame and mobilise support by appealing to the emotions and biases of the audience. For instance, politicians may frame their opponents as corrupt or incompetent to sway public opinion, while journalists may amplify these narratives to align with their editorial priorities and sustain the interests of their audiences. Moreover, as Dimitrova and Connelly-Ahern (2007) noted ‘framing has implications for the worldview of those exposed to it’ (p.155). Thus, negative

frames can reinforce perspectives that promote conflict over consensus and foster skepticism about political institutions and processes. Framing processes, can therefore modify, enable, or disable the agency of others (Chadwick, 2013), as negativity can delegitimise certain actors while empowering others, thereby affecting public perceptions and discourse. Thus, negativity in political coverage becomes a critical mechanism through which actors in a political system compete for the right to define issues and influence public agenda.

In news reports about electoral issues, a form of non-directional negativity may manifest as evidenced by the concerns expressed by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) regarding the preparations for the 2023 elections. These concerns covered a variety of issues such as the adverse effects of natural disasters like flooding, and targeted attacks on INEC infrastructure (Olorok, Baiyewu, Omogbolagun & Odeniyi, 2022). This sort of negativity can lead to a state of uncertainty and skepticism regarding the electoral process. Further, in a context where socio-ethnic and social-religious concerns are central to winning votes, framing allows us to examine how these dimensions manifest in media narratives, especially in a non-western environment. Therefore, to shape public understanding of electoral issues, it is important to examine the language, terminologies and stereotypes used in news coverage of election matters.

IV. METHOD

For this study, two prominent Nigerian newspapers, The Punch and Daily Trust were chosen for their national spread and established reputation. Front-page lead stories from the two papers were analysed during the campaign period, (September 28, 2022, to February 21, 2023), resulting in a sample of 335 articles. The interpretive analysis began with reading all 335 articles from both newspapers. Thematic analysis revealed four dominant themes: intraparty conflicts (n=133; 39.9%), electoral issues (focusing on INEC preparations, n= 101; 30.1%), security concerns (n=71; 21.1%) and the naira crisis (n=30; 8.9%).

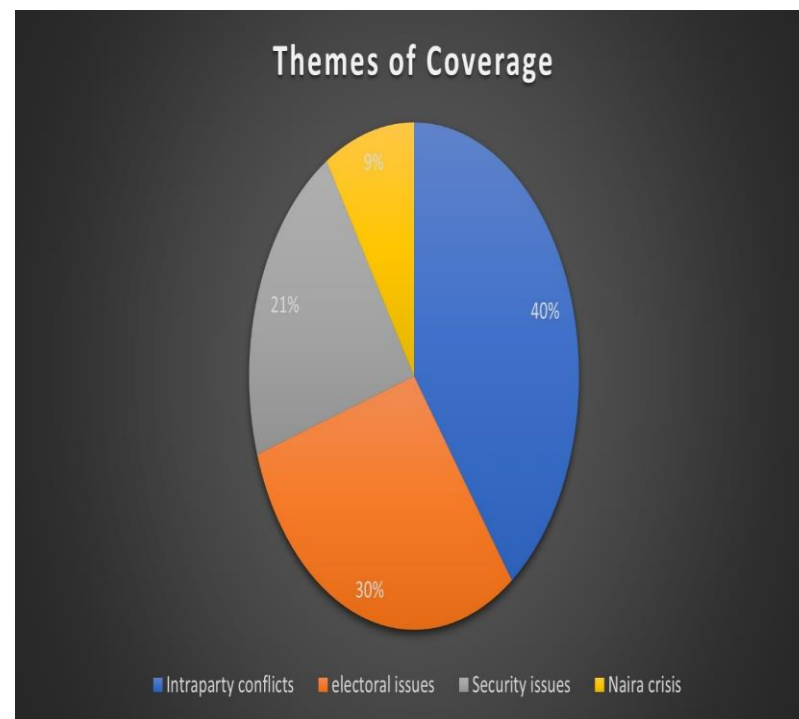


Figure 1: Themes of Coverage

This study specifically focuses on the largest theme of intraparty conflicts because of its prominence (approximately, forty percent) on the front pages. It

is also the largest theme addressed in the coverage by the two publications. After isolating articles focused on intraparty conflicts, a detailed analysis was conducted on a final refined sample of 79 articles (46 from *The Punch* and 33 from *Daily Trust*) for further analysis. An inductive approach to framing was employed in the qualitative content analysis of media text. As Brennen (2017) explained, the subject matter of qualitative research is not objective data to be quantified, but meaningful relations to be interpreted, since reality is socially constructed.

Qualitative content analysis arose as a more flexible alternative to the rigidity associated with quantitative content analysis in media research (Schreier, 2013, p.196). Indeed, Siegfried Kracauer (1952) was among the first to critique the limitations of quantitative content analysis, when he argued that excessive focus on numbers could hinder accurate analysis and precision. He advocated for combining both methods, noting that quantitative work involves qualitative elements and vice versa (p.637).

This research followed Kracauer's advice, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyse patterns of negativity in election coverage across the selected newspapers. In examining intraparty conflicts, the importance of comparative analysis in identifying media frames is acknowledged. As Entman (1991) observed, unless media narratives are 'compared, frames are difficult to detect fully and reliably' (p.6), because media frames can often appear as 'natural' or

unremarkable choices of language or imagery. Without comparative analysis, these framing devices may go unnoticed, and therefore, it is by comparing different narratives between the two dailies that researchers can reveal how these seemingly 'natural' choices are strategically employed to shape what becomes the widely accepted interpretation of events or the 'common sense' understanding (p.6).

V. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The objective of this study was to examine how the framing of negativity during the 2023 Nigerian presidential elections manifested in political discourse. Findings show that negative framing was particularly evident when internal party divisions are covered. Making use of qualitative framing analysis of front-page reports about intraparty conflicts from *The Punch* and the *Daily Trust* newspapers, we identify distinct patterns in how intraparty conflicts were presented to the public. In the analysis, three broad themes were categorised and are described as follows: 'factionalism, power struggles and regional grievances', 'shifting power and moral appeals', and the 'portrayal of key political actors.'

Factionalism, power struggle and regional grievances

This theme was characterised by the significant division or divergence of interest which exists within the main opposition PDP, between the

aspirations of its presidential flagbearer, Atiku Abubakar's camp and the interests of a subgroup of the five dissenting PDP governors led by Nyesom Wike who were absent from the launch of the Atiku campaign¹. Also, it focused on power struggle- the competition for control within the party particularly around the Chairmanship of the party and the upcoming presidential election. It emphasized the dissatisfaction of southern governors with a perceived 'Northern agenda' within the party.

Focusing on the actions and statements of Atiku's camp, the official inauguration of the PDP campaign council suggests that the party is moving forward despite the absence of some its governors.

The narrative in the Punch newspaper conveyed a negative sentiment towards the boycotting governors, employing the use of phrases such as 'vehicle has taken off', 'they would learn their lesson the hard way' and 'we are okay' to downplay the significance of their absence and present it as a minor hurdle.

In defining the issue, top hierarchy of the party consistently emphasized party supremacy by stating that party constitution is supreme and therefore requires all party members to exercise 'a little bit of sacrifice and understanding'. There's emphasis on looking at 'the bigger picture' whereby a conciliatory tone was also adopted in trying to placate the factional group led by former Rivers State governor Nyesom Wike. This strategic

framing serves to maintain the perception of unity within the party and highlight their resistance against falsehoods and personal attacks, thus, the party conflict is dismissed as a mere 'artificiality'. This is encapsulated by this statement published in the Punch:

I wouldn't want to say that the meeting was defined by members shouting at the top of their voices. The meeting was about selling the ideals of the party with the members being frank with themselves. We are calling facts as they are. What is more important is that the party remains unsinkable by lies and vendetta.

In contrast, the Daily Trust reported Wike's camp from a position of strength as seen in its headline on the cover page: '*Wike's Camp's Silence After Enugu Meeting Unsettles PDP Leaders.*' The use of the term 'unsettles' suggests that the lack of response from the camp of Wike is causing unease among the party's leaders, which portrays Wike and his allies as possessing considerable influence to wield control over the party. Another cover page headline in the same paper emphasized this perspective, saying: '*PDP crisis: Atiku sends new emissaries to Wike*'. It is important to recognise that this form of negativity can negatively impact public discourse in some ways, such as undermining the credibility and effectiveness of the PDP campaign activities, and potentially contributing to a culture of confrontation and conflict which can diminish the party's chances of success. Essentially, this phenomenon can be used to judge the relative

¹ The origin of this feud stems from the PDP presidential primary held in June 2022, after Mr Wike lost the presidential ticket to Atiku Abubakar. Mr Wike and members of his camp believed that this occurred due to Aminu Tambuwal, Sokoto state governor decision of stepping down late in the race, causing Wike's loss to Atiku Abubakar. The party was also accused of undermining its Constitution.

strength of the party among its supporters, and a sense of a foregone conclusion is created among the electorate. This contributes to perceptions of a less competitive elections where the outcome seems predetermined.

Shifting power and moral appeals

In relation to regional differences, two key framing strategies were employed by political actors: regional balance and reciprocal morality. Regional balance predominantly reflects the political ideology that power must shift to the south which is in line with the clamour by the southern governors and references. The latent argument suggests the notion of the South being historically underrepresented in leadership positions in the country. Hence, references to '*treat the South as equal partners in this project*' demand reflect this sentiment. This is a narrative that has continued to gain strength in southern-owned media outlets like The Punch.

Reciprocal morality leverages ethical considerations to justify a southern presidency as it highlights past support extended by southern politicians to northern candidates. The 'open backing' of Governor Nyesom Wike for Aminu Tambuwal during the PDP primaries of 2019 suggests a moral obligation to return power to the South. This framing transcends party lines, as evidenced by the 'payback time' narrative within the ruling APC, wherein moral appeal is employed as a productive tool. Within these frames, further analysis indicates the interplay between individual and collective levels. A challenge to the PDP Chairman's insistence on

retaining his position is made due to his previous commitment to resign after a Northern candidate has emerged in the aftermath of the PDP primaries and having a moral responsibility to therefore resign.

Similarly, Wike's support for the North in 2019 is framed as an act of interpersonal loyalty that warrants reciprocation. However, these individual narratives seamlessly merge into a collective moral argument that underscores regional equity as a matter of justice and fairness. A prominent South-south ethnic leader, Edwin Clark, expressed his disapproval of the Vice-Presidential candidate of the PDP for accepting the position of running mate to Atiku Abubakar, the Presidential flagbearer of the party who is from the North. Clark was quoted as stating that the former had '*deliberately and immorally*' betrayed his Southern colleagues and their constituents for his own self-serving aspirations, thus invoking divine intervention to thwart his ambitions, saying: '*Perhaps, you have forgotten the gravity of the offence you have committed against the people of Southern Nigeria.*'

The portrayal of betrayal carries a strong negative connotation which emphasizes a breach of trust. This context makes use of moral appeal as a divisive strategy which can be consequential for voter participation.

Finally, the argument against another northern or Fulani candidate directly addresses concerns of ethnic dominance as the framing suggests a collective moral stance against the perpetuation of any single group's hegemonic control. This is

illustrated by the following statement by a PDP chieftain:

What do they expect us to go home and tell our people? Are they saying ‘vote for us first and we will give you the chairmanship of the party?’ What crap! If the reverse was the case and the North is in our position, having nothing to take home, will they be happy? What you cannot accept, don’t do to other people.

With headlines such as ‘*Presidency: North cant dictate to others’ says Adebajo*’, the Punch buttressed this frame of mind. This stands in stark contrast to the position taken by Northern APC governors, who exhibited a degree of dedication to the principle of power rotation aimed at ensuring a fair distribution of power (Ahmadu-Suka, 2023).

This said, within this context, the formidable third-party Labour Party (LP) adopted a non-directional negativity approach as a means to depoliticise and downplay regional divisions in the sense that this issue is ‘not about the North or South,’ but rather the potential consequences of ‘*missing it*’, even as the LP presidential candidate, Peter Obi attempts to distance himself from tribal and religious affiliations as captured in his statement in the build up to the electoral campaigns that: “*Nobody should vote for me because I’m an Ibo man, southerner or because of my religion. There is no tribe where people are eating free food, buying bread cheaper or exempted from the excruciating hardship currently being experienced in the land.*”

While this form of negativity exhibited by Peter Obi did not explicitly target specific political actors for

criticism, his statement conveys a sense of urgency aimed at addressing important societal concerns with calls for action from his intended audience (Nigerian youths) to make informed decisions in choosing the right leader. As we also discovered in our analysis, Labour Party and its presidential candidate had a sparse presence in the two newspapers, not receiving as much press coverage as the other two major political parties, the APC, and the PDP. Although, the Labour Party has had much resonance in the online digital sphere, its presidential candidate, Obi has been accused of fostering ethnic and religious divisions, as illustrated in the following comment: ‘*Peter Obi told the church to wake up and take back their country, we thought he was joking until the Labour Party Presidential Campaign Council list came out and 96% of the members are Christians and Igbos*’ Emeakayi (2022).

Portrayal of key political actors

How Wike was treated

Wike is portrayed as a malevolent force sabotaging the PDP even though he is an aggrieved member who has legitimate grievances. This representation seeks to delegitimise Wike’s opposition to the party while simultaneously aiming to win sympathy for the party hierarchy. There is a focus on Wike’s character as he is dismissed as an ‘attention seeker’ and is also blamed for Obi’s departure from the party (‘*frustrated Mr Peter Obi out*’). This portrayal deflects responsibility for the party’s internal issues and paints Wike as the sole obstacle to the PDP’s

unity. Wike is framed as an isolated minority and his actions are viewed as a misuse of power against the party, as can be seen from the following quotes:

'...as all entreaties made to Wike so far have fallen on deaf ears.'

'When Wike keeps saying "I have the G-5," it is a mind game. I want to say clearly to the people that there is no G-5. What we have is a one G.'

'Once upon a time, we had governors who are former governors now and there are governors now after them. Life never stops. Some prophets passed on and life continued. Only God is permanent and continuous.'

'Have we said we will do something and we are unable to do it because Wike stopped us? Buhari won elections twice without winning Rivers.'

The narratives consistently reinforce the notion of party supremacy and downplays the agency of Wike while his allies are viewed as mere pawns who were being teleguided at the press of 'a remote button' by the man from Port Harcourt. The PDP presents itself as the victim of Wike's actions, using phrases like *'bite the finger that fed them'* to evoke sympathy and justify their position. This said, *The Punch* newspaper subtly attributes blame to Iyorchia Ayu, the party Chairman by highlighting his promise to step down from his position if a northerner emerged as the party's presidential candidate. This suggests that the newspaper sees his actions as the catalyst for the current situation faced

by the pro-Wike group. Now, an interesting observation is that *The Punch*, while not overtly sympathetic to Wike's cause, refrained from undermining it. This was achieved by incorporating sources who tried to project the South as an equal partner in the Nigerian political landscape. This subtle framing insinuates that even in the absence of direct support for Wike there exists an underlying fidelity to ethnic alliances, which is consequential for identity politics in framing media discourse.

How Atiku was treated

Atiku's perceived inequity over power rotation and his role as a pivotal figure have engendered negative perceptions about his leadership capabilities. This is because he is seen as lacking the ability to bring the party together, and by extension, foster national cohesion in the country. Atiku is viewed as the pivotal figure holding the metaphorical 'yam and the knife.' In other words, he is believed to be responsible for both the problem and its resolution. Upon closer analysis, Atiku enjoyed favourable coverage in news reports anchored on strong personal connections and loyalty, in terms of sentiments and endorsements expressed such as:

'...That is why we visited our principal (Atiku) on Sunday; He is our President in waiting.'

'This is a project backed by God and Nigerians. People are tired of APC misrule, and they are working for Atiku and that is what will happen. Go and write it down.'

'I have known him (Atiku) for many years. Me and his children have lived together and shared the same bed. When I did not have anywhere to go, he took me in. He has also taken care of me to an extent. That is the true definition of family.'

It was this pattern of kinship that was on display during the presidential debate organized by Arise TV news outfit, in which Atiku supported a position put forward by the LP candidate, referring to him by his first name, Peter. While these exemplars point to the depth of support for his candidacy, the doubts about his ability to unite the party underscored the challenges he faced in gaining widespread support and trust during the presidential elections, particularly in the five states where the dissenting governors were not aligned with the party, captured in Table 1.

Table 1: Presidential poll results in PDP-led States where the governors dissented with the party.

| State | APC | PDP | LP | NNPP |
|--------|---------|---------|---------|-------|
| Oyo | 449,884 | 182,977 | 99,110 | 4,095 |
| Enugu | 4,772 | 15,749 | 428,640 | 1,808 |
| Benue | 310,468 | 130,081 | 308,372 | 4,740 |
| Rivers | 231,591 | 88,468 | 360,495 | 1,552 |
| Abia | 8,914 | 22,676 | 327,095 | 1,239 |

It can be seen from the Table, that in states where the PDP governors withdrew their support from

Atiku's presidential bid, the PDP's electoral performance was notably weakened, which benefitted either the APC or Labour Party, depending on the region. This said, as the chosen presidential candidate for the PDP in the 2023 elections, Atiku also employed a strategy of actor-related negativity wherein he depicted the ruling government in an unfavourable manner, using rhetoric such as: *'our dear country has witnessed a frightening descent into anarchy'*, *'Our economy is in shambles'*, *'Our security challenges are legion'*, *'Our people are facing massive existential challenges daily'*, *'Hunger is the norm today in our country'* to underscore the severity of challenges facing the nation and rally public support for his own candidacy.

Corruption allegations

The direct accusations of corruption and bribery targeting the PDP national chairman over payment of housing allowances to some members of the party executive, contributes to a sense institutional sense of distrust against the main opposition political party, triggering lots of actor-related negativity. For instance, Omoyele Sowore, the presidential candidate of the African Action Congress (AAC), attributed the conflict to the inability to 'agree on a sharing formula' for the collective patrimony of the Nigerian people. The spokesperson for the ruling party APC campaign council, described the PDP as a 'leopard that could not change its spot', adding that, 'the party remains

a clear and present danger or threat to Nigeria's treasury and equity.'

In a similar vein, the Northern States Christian Elders Forum had accused the ruling APC of employing financial incentives to recruit and sow discord among Christians, especially in the North. In a statement, the body claimed the '*APC has resorted to clandestine ways of causing division in the body of Christ by recruiting hitherto unknown bodies in the body of Christ to counter decisions taken by the umbrella body, CAN and its various organs.*'

VI. DISCUSSIONS

During the 2023 Nigerian presidential election campaigns, the framing of negativity manifested itself in political discourse through the amplification of intraparty conflicts, the strategic use of moral and regional appeals and the polarised portrayal of key political actors. This was very clear in how the People's Democratic Party (PDP) was covered, where the power struggle between the presidential candidate Atiku Abubakar and some governors within his political party were opposed to his nomination to be the presidential flagbearer of the party in 2023 election. The five PDP governors led by Nyesom Wike, dominated the headlines.

Newspaper narratives avoided discussions of policy or campaign promises. Front page headlines zeroed in on the drama of party infighting. Internal party disagreements were portrayed as major political crises which transcended simple party politics to show deeper national cleavages along ethnic and

regional lines. The divisions between Atiku Abubakar's camp and the opposing governors were framed as an existential crisis, while *The Punch* in spite of, probably because of the reputation of the paper as often prone to propagating anti-government discourses, diminished the dissenters' importance, framing their absence as inconsequential to the PDP's winning the election. The leadership of the PDP itself called for 'party supremacy' and urged 'sacrifice and understanding' for unity. This conciliatory tone here tried to suggest that this crisis was trivial, and that the party was, in fact, strong despite its internal wrangling.

While *The Punch* sought to sustain an impression of stability in the party, the *Daily Trust* on its part, exposed the weaknesses of the party by emphasizing how the splinter group caused instability. These conflicting narratives, beyond amplifying negativity and assailing the credibility of the PDP, raise a larger concern of electoral competitiveness. There were also regional and moral appeals as politicians used past injustices to help shape the conversation (Isenyo, 2022). They tend to weaponise historical injustices and moral obligations to justify their stance. In this regard, the media is seen as an invaluable ally for the politicians and their parties who seek positive publicity and negative coverage of their opponents. The infighting in political parties have also been attributed to the great benefits associated with political office, which leads to difficult primaries and contentious candidate selections.

Traditionally, political parties in the country have been formed through regional ties with the struggle for power manifested in changes in political alliances and the redistribution of resources. The competitive nature of elections therefore requires that various sections of the population be mobilised along ethnic and even, religious lines in capturing political power, especially at the federal level. As a result of the drive for power, politicians seek to convince the media to be on their side, to cooperate with them and even to control them, thus ensuring a say in the media's coverage of politics.

This said, journalists themselves are guided by a set of criteria of news values which are relative and may change over time. By appealing to audience expectations and preferences through the inclusion of prominent figures like Atiku Abubakar or Nyesom Wike for instance, and whose actions and statements are sure to capture the attention of the public, journalists strategically employ negativism during political coverage. What is the bone of contention? Simply put, is the fact that Wike who was a major financier of the party and who comes from the South, sees himself along with his supporters among the governors that he was more suited to be the flagbearer of the PDP to fight it out with the APC candidate also from the South. Aside from this conclusion, is the insensitivity of Atiku and his supporters that given the fact that President Buhari from the North leaving the office after eight years rule to hand over to another Northerner seems immoral. The emphasis on negativism is not merely coincidental; research has shown that negativism

during election campaigns serves as useful strategy for attracting and sustaining media attention (Haselmayer, 2019).

Tuchman (1978) nonetheless argues that journalists often cite official sources as a means of protecting themselves from criticism, thus allowing them to say, 'I followed the rules' even when their stories carry implicit biases. This practice enables them to maintain 'a preferred or delimited range of meanings in the dominant systems of communication' (Hall, 1982, pp.67-68). However, the nature of political power and media in Africa is a complex one as the centralisation of power in presidential systems like Nigeria also influences its media landscape. Political figures often own media houses, which helps align journalistic content with their own interests as well as curbing dissent (Hadland, 2015). The media representation of powerful political figures like Wike and Atiku, also shows how negativity personalise political conflict. While Wike, on one hand was represented as a menace to party cohesion, Atiku on the other hand was portrayed as both a unifying figure and a harbinger of unresolved leadership struggles.

Similar internal battles plagued the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) and its disagreements over the constitution of its presidential campaign council (Adebayo & Aina, 2022). Some APC governors also accused senior government officials and then-President Buhari of secretly working for Atiku Abubakar, a co-ethnic and fellow Northerner. Negativism here was manifested in terms of anti-hegemonic sentiments, particularly against the

Fulani as an ethnic group and the possibility of another Northern president. These issues demonstrate concerns about ethnic dominance and the need for fairer representation. To counter such narratives, the PDP chairman for instance, cited examples of Fulani leaders who had been inclusive and supportive of other ethnic groups. The divisions within both major parties presents party unity as one of the most fragile dynamics of Nigerian elections, and with the zero-sum coverage of the intraparty conflicts in the mainstream Press, there was little room to find resolution to the conflicts. Besides underlining the fragility of party unity in Nigerian elections, these factionalisms prevented the parties from presenting a coherent vision to the electorate.

While historically, clientelistic networks have been at the core of strategic political alliances in the country, they in turn, influence the composition, visibility, and influence of political organisations. Since independence, presidential hopefuls struggle to bridge the gaps between different ethnic and regional groups in the country. According to Daloz (2005, p.157), this leads to an ever-present state of negotiation where ‘loyalties are constantly called into question.’ Politicians, then, exploit moral arguments as a strategy to acquire support across regional lines.

In an environment where citizens may rely more on patronage networks for protection and access to resources rather than traditional institutions due to a general distrust of them, is particularly critical because they can become discouraged from participating in the electoral process. Oftentimes,

this manifests itself in terms of ethnocentric bias and ingroup favouritism where individuals may show preference towards members of their own ethnic group, attributing positive traits and characteristics to ingroup members while overlooking or downplaying the qualities of outgroup members (Olonisakin, 2021). In extreme cases, ethnocentric bias can lead to voter suppression tactics targeting specific ethnic groups as witnessed in the 2023 general elections, to limit their participation in elections, intimidation and discrimination (Oluwafemi, 2023).

This study further extends the application of the framing theory as it shows how news narratives can amplify existing socio-political divides in a non-western context. Few examples will suffice here: occasionally, when discussing the farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, media and politicians often reduce it to a Muslim-Christian conflict, when in actuality, there are a variety of factors involved, including land rights, climate change and local governance considerations. During the 2023 elections, some politicians promote narratives about how certain ethnic groups ‘deserve their turn’ at the presidency or suggest that one ethnic group cannot be trusted to represent other’s interests. All of these fit into patterns of negativity which manifests in different forms, from personal attacks and character assassination to the deliberate amplification of ethnoreligious or regional differences. Essentially, the findings of this study underscore that negative media coverage of intraparty conflicts can

contribute to the escalation of pre-election tensions, while the inflammatory rhetoric and actions of political leaders can foist a zero-sum mindset, resulting in a highly polarised political landscape.

VII. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine negativity coverage during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election campaigns and how it manifested itself in political discourse. The findings of the research showed that framing of negativity by the two newspapers analysed, *The Punch* and the *Daily Trust*, was dominated by conflict-focused narratives which amplified internal party disputes especially within the main opposition PDP. While conflict-narratives may serve to engage audiences, through the strategic use of moral and regional appeals and the polarised portrayal of key political actors, their dominance in media coverage comes at the expense of more meaningful discussions about how our country should be run.

Journalistic partisanship also contributes to this same phenomenon when they subtly support or oppose certain politicians or parties, which draws attention away from important issues within politicians' manifestos and their plans for governance. Therefore, the Nigerian Press, as fourth estate, in their reportage of political campaigns needs to do more than just highlighting conflicts; it should contribute to the promotion of good governance by paying attention to what politicians and their parties actually promised in their party manifestos.

This study also points us to some substantial problems within political parties. Party primaries are meant to build consensus and put up for the public candidates that will actually represent the values of such parties. Instead, party primaries in Nigeria political space have turned out to be battlefields because of the high stakes of political offices. This underscores the need for urgent electoral reforms. Against these, the study recommends:

1. There is a need for media outfits to prioritise governance and policy -related issues to educate voters and foster national cohesion.
2. Fair and balanced reporting by journalists in a multiethnic and multicultural society like Nigeria; they should avoid partisanship that amplifies divisions or unfairly supports one side.
3. There should be a reform of electoral laws to ensure free and transparent primaries, check excesses and promote decorum in candidate selection.

As the findings of this study bear significance beyond the 2023 election cycle, it underscores the need to critically examine the adverse sentiments surrounding intraparty conflicts. This is so given the potential for media framing to exacerbate societal divisions as well as pave the way for a more substantive political discourse in future elections to maintain a flourishing democratic environment. In terms of how media influences public perception of opposition political parties, what it focuses on and what it omits, is significant. Where it prioritises conflicts and personalities, such as in the present

study, it may raise the perception that opposition parties are dysfunctional and not capable of being a viable alternative to the ruling party.

Presently, the PDP is the main opposition party checking on the government's activities to encourage competitiveness and improve governance as is the case in all modern democracies. And when the PDP is unable to fulfil its role as the main opposition party, it weakens the checks and balances in the political system, whereby there is potential imbalance of power that can lead to unchecked actions and policies which may not align with the best interests of the people. In sum, examining patterns of negativity within the context of intraparty conflicts has allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how internal party dynamics can affect elections.

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