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## The Role of Individual Differences Theory in an Election: A Study of 2011 General Election in Enugu and Cross River States

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### Abstract

*Most political scientists agree that the mass media have a profound impact on voting behavior. One author asserts that few would argue with the notion that the institution of the mass media is important to contemporary politics and in the transition to liberal democratic politics that the media is the key battleground. In the 2011 general election in Nigeria especially that of the presidential election: the mass media played a wonderful role in sensitizing and mobilizing the electorates. The study of Enugu in Enugu State and Calabar in Cross River State showed that among the cross section of voters in these two states interviewed and mail questionnaires administered on 80 participants (40 interviewees and 40 respondents) to solicit information on their feelings and what actually made them to come out enmasse to vote and on the influence of social relationships and other factors on voters' choice. It was discovered that the media alone was the significant and determining factor in the choice of candidate especially that of the president during the April 16 election. It was discovered that other factors, both social and psychological also influenced voters' choice. Among them include long and short term influences on political orientation and influence of social groups on political outcomes which include the effects of ethnic groups, religious and gender influences.*

Keywords: *ethnicity, gender, politics, religion, voting behaviour*

### Introduction

Theory is a necessary ingredient in the social sciences. Unlike philosophical works, scientific theories are abstractions representing certain aspects of the empirical world; they are concerned with the how and why of empirical phenomena. There is no simple definitions of theory that would be agreed upon by all social scientists. This is so because there are many different kinds of theories serving different purposes.

A sound theory is to conceptualize foundation for reliable knowledge; theories help to explain and predict phenomena of interest to us and therefore to make well-funded practical decisions. A theoretical system is one that provides a structure for a complete explanation of empirical phenomena. Mass media research have concentrated efforts on the effects of a message and audience members especially in the early 40s and 50s.

Cassata and Asante (1979, p.84) states that the individual difference perspective which was among reasons responsible for the death of the bullet theory emerged after much

experimentation and research in learning theories that had their roots in classical conditioning theory and individual motivation; it became obvious to many scholars and researchers that individual psychological characteristics determine how audience members react to communication messages, it was held that differences in personality traits and attitudes accounted for differences in human preferences and actions. These postulations became widely accepted as summarized by Defleur (1966, p. 121).

- Human beings vary greatly in their personal psychological organization.
- Biological endowment and differential learning contributed to individual differences.
- The individual's psychological make-up that sets him or her apart from others grows out of a set of attitudes, values and beliefs acquired from him or her learning, environments.
- Personality variables acquired from the social environment provide for the individual's perception of events, which differs from someone else.
- An important product of human learning is the acquiring of stable predispositions concerning one's perception of events.

Moreover, individual differences theory is a product or a relation to the limited effects theory (Lazarsfeld (1969)). The theory, has four postulations on the effects of the media to the audience:

- (i) the theory states that the media rarely directly influence individuals
- (ii) that there is a two-step-flow of media influence
- (iii) that by the time most people become adults, they have developed strongly held group commitments such as political party and religious affiliations that individual media messages are powerless to overcome; and that
- (iv) when media effects do occur, they will be modest and isolated.

Also findings of effects research were enormously varied and even contradictor), and this led to the emergence of two interrelated empirical generalizations; (1) the influence of mass media is rarely direct because it is almost always mediated by individual differences, and (2) the influence of mass media is rarely direct because it is almost always mediated by group membership of relationships.

These two factors normally serve as effective barriers to media influence. Both generalizations are consistent with the limited effect perspectives outlined earlier and thus serve to buttress it. Study after study confirmed their existence and expanded our understanding of how they

operate. It could be true that individual differences theory tries to make us believe that we are all reasoning beings with our different psychological make up; most people still allow others to 'Think' for them and depend on these people for almost all their decisions.

In summary, the individual differences believes that because people vary greatly in their psychological makeup and because they have different perceptions of things, media influence differs from person to person. More specifically, the media messages contain particular stimulus that have differential interaction with personality characteristics of members of the audience Defleur (1970, p. 122).

### **Factors that Provide Bearings for this Study:**

- 1) On the Technological Plane: (a) the advent of printing technology; and (b) the development of electromagnetic theory and its early translation into electronic technology.
- 2) On the intellectual Plane: (a) the predominance of the stimulus-response (S-R) Theory in Mass Communication's parent disciplines of sociology and psychology, a theory which hold that to every given stimulus, there was an instinctive response; (b) the contemporary assumption that a person's behavior was governed by hereditary forces which intervened between stimulus and response; and that these forces were fairly uniform in all human beings; and (c) the emerging concepts of society as a mass of isolated, anonymous, helpless human beings - a concept which emanated from a hodge-podge of social analysis by pioneer sociologists: Comte, Spencer, Tonnies, and Durkheim.
- 3) On the Pragmatic Plane: (a) The success of wartime propaganda with the emerging mass media as its com eyor belts; and (b) The equally remarkable success of mass advertising which was analogous to wartime propaganda in its own impact on the commercial field.

This complex combination of facts gave rise to the first concrete theory of media effect, the instinctive S-R Media Theory. It held the mass media to be supremely effective, mind controlling agents and assumed that all human beings responded inescapably and uniformly to the powerful stimuli from the media. Moreover, since individuals were seen as isolated members of the mass audience, there could be no social controls or lies to counter the powerful

influence of the media. It was ultimately assumed therefore that media handlers could greatly influence and sway peoples' minds, especially with the use of emotional appeals.

Such a theory - later nicknamed the "magic bullet" or "hypodermic needle" or "transmission belt" theory - was of course absolutely consistent with the direction of contemporary scholarship with peoples recent experience of wartime propaganda, as well as with current success of mass advertising through the media. This was the "all powerful media" stage of mass communication theory development.

The years immediately following the predominance of fall of instinctive S-R Theory saw the emergence of three major perspectives, the Individual Differences, Social Categories and Social Relations Perspectives which emanated from different disciplinary sources but nevertheless constitute a coherent sequence of "Post Instinctive S-R Theory."

From expositions and laboratory experiments on Individual Differences Theory on behaviorism, classical conditioning, learning differences and attitude formation in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it became increasingly clear that individuals differ in their personal psychological organisation, just as studies in the natural sciences had also revealed differential biological endowments. It was discovered that attitude, values and beliefs were learnt in the context of experience and this resulted in differences in cognition and perception. The principle of selective attention and perception, which holds that people pay attention to messages and interpret them in line with their interests, beliefs, values and experiences, dealt initial blow to the instinctive S-R Theory in the field of mass communication.

The social categories perspective on assumption that members of a given social category, determined by age, sex, socio-economic status, etc. will seek out similar communication messages, which they will also respond to more or less similarly, other things being equal eg. teenagers and adolescents compared with their parents, or women compared with men, in their TV programme preferences. The social categories perspective is' derived from general sociology whereas the individual differences perspective is derived from general psychology.

## **Relating Individual Differences Theory to Voters' Choice in the 2011 General**

### **Elections in Nigeria**

A cross section of voters in Calabar and Enugu was interviewed and mail questionnaires administered on 40 interviewers and 40 respondents, i.e. 20 interviewers and 20 respondents

each for Enugu and Calabar respectively. This was to solicit information on their feelings about the influence of social relationships and other factors on voters' choice.

It was discovered that the media alone were not determining factor in the choice of candidates during the April 16<sup>th</sup> 2011 presidential and governorship elections. Other factors, both social and psychological were there as major determinants on voters' choice.

In Nigeria presidential election, a lot of variables played major role in the type of turnout of voters during the election because it was unprecedented in the history of Nigeria the number of people that voted in the 2011 Nigeria presidential elections.

Factors that led to the large turnout of voters drawing from our earlier postulation include the type of personality that was brought to head the electoral body in the person of Prof. Jega. His antecedents made Nigerians to absolutely believe in him. He promised Nigerians that their votes would count this time around.

Another factor was on the yearnings of the people to have a change of government in the person of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan.

Also, religion played a role in the acceptance of the President because the PDP defiled the zoning pattern of the party and nominated the Vice President in the person of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan.

Another major factor was providence because God sanctioned and if our late President Shehu Musa Yar'Adua hadn't died, and Goodluck Jonathan being his Vice, it couldn't have taken place, and the squabble for zoning arrangement that was defiled couldn't have raised its ugly head.

### **Long Term Influences on Political Orientation**

There are three main sources of influence that shape political orientation which creates long-term effects. Generally, the primary influence originates from family. Children will often adopt their parents' ideological values. Theories of political behavior, as an aspect of political science, attempt to quantify and explain the influences of person's political views, ideology, and levels of political participation. Theorists who have had an influence on this field include Karl Deutsch and Theodor Adorno, (www). Some theorists have argued that family tends to be the strongest, most influential force which exists over the lifetime. In Nigeria, I don't think

whether we have, developed such culture because of so many political parties and unstable nature of our political culture.

Secondly, teachers and other educational authority figures have a significant impact on political orientations. From as early as 4 up until 18, children spend about 25% of their time involved in educational processes. Post-secondary education significantly raises the impact of political awareness and orientation.

Thirdly, peers also affect political orientation. Friends often, but not necessarily, have the advantage of being part of the same generation, which collectively develops a unique set of societal issues; Eric L. Bey has argued that "socialization is the process through which individuals acquire knowledge, habits, and value orientations that will be useful in future." The ability to relate on this common level is where lies the means to shape ideological growth.

### **Short-Term Influences on Political Orientation**

Short-term factors also affect voting behavior; the media and the impact of individual election issues are among these factors. These factors differ from long-term factors as they are often short-lived. However, they can be just as crucial on modifying political orientation. The ways in which these two sources are interpreted often relies on the individuals' specific political ideology formed by the long-term factors.

Most political scientists agree that the mass media have a profound impact on voting behavior. One author asserts that few 'would argue with the notion that the institutions of the mass media are important to contemporary politics ... in the transition to liberal democratic politics in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the media was a key battleground'.

Secondly, there are election issues. These include campaign issues, debates and commercials. Election years and political campaign can shift certain political behaviors based on the candidates involved, which have different degrees of effectiveness in influencing voters. This particular point made a lot of differences in the 2011 general election in Nigeria.

In the presidential election, the PDP candidate in the person of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, the sitting Vice President of the country and of the ruling political party made much difference. The circumstances surrounding the death of the President, late Shehu Musa Yar'Adua and the politics behind his succession and the subsequent nomination of his Vice President to vie under the platform of POP helped to make the difference. The personality of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan,

a Southern minority and Niger-Deltan, Christian was so unique that many people did not believe that the status-quo could have been altered.

### **The Influence of Social Groups on Political Outcomes**

Recently, some political scientists have been interested in main studies which aimed to analyze the relation between the behavior of social groups and the political outcomes. Some of the social groups included in their studies have been **age, demographics, gender, and ethnic groupings**, (and religion). For example, in United States **of America** politics, the effect of ethnic groups and gender has a great influence on the political outcomes. Here in Nigeria, the effect of ethnic groupings, religion and gender have great influence on the political outcomes. The 2011 general election is a typical example where ethnic and religion almost marred the election in some parts of the country.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Limited Effects Theory**

Two wars one imaginary, one real helped move mass communication theory away from its belief in powerful and malignant mass media to a more moderate view. What was to become the discipline's long adherence to limited effects theory began on a peaceful evening in late 1938. On that night, many Americans were listening to a ballroom dance music programme on the CBS radio network when the show was interrupted *by* a series of news bulletins. Early announcement told of strange astronomical observations and sighting of lights in the sky. The report grew steadily more ominous. An alien spaceship had landed and was attacking the military forces that surrounded it. Transmissions from the scene ended suddenly and were followed by an appeal from the Secretary of the Interior for calm in the face of the alien threat.

In that year, the medium of radio was still new, but it had become enormously popular. Listeners were starting to rely on the new medium for news, which was free and easily accessible.. People listened to radio for the latest report of bad news.

At Princeton University, a group of social researchers set out to determine why the Welles broadcast had been so influential (Cantril, Gaudet, and Herzog, 1940). Their research found that many people acted too hastily after hearing only the first fragmentary reports of the invasion. The simulated news bullets were trusted without question, especially the eye witness reports. The researchers concluded that these people had one or more psychological traits that



made them especially susceptible to media influence: emotional insecurity, phobic personality, lack of self confidence, and fatalism. The war of the world's researchers led by Hadly Cantril, were part of vanguard of social scientist who solely transformed our view of how media influence society. Within twenty years of that famous broadcast, the way, researchers looked at mass media was radically altered. This helped to bring about paradigm shift.

Indirect effects theory which is part of limited effect theory states that when media do seem to have an effect, that effect is filtered" through other parts of the society, for example, through friends, social groups. Limited effects theory states that media have minimal or limited effects because these effects are mitigated by a variety of mediating or intervening variables.

Then the individual difference theory which is part of the limited effects theory states that Individuals' different psychological make-ups cause media influence to vary from person to person.

## **Discussion**

The individual difference theory as it relates to the just concluded 2011 general election in Nigeria with special focus to Enugu and Cross-River States. Going by the interview and mail questionnaire distributed in Calabar and Enugu as mentioned earlier, it was discovered that the media alone were not determining factor in the choice of candidates during the election.

In Enugu State for instance, the people made tip their minds based on what they saw that were on ground in the state. The Governor, according to them, showed that the government can be mindful of the peoples feelings thereby with the provision of certain infrastructure, roads, electricity, pipe borne water, security of lives and property, regular payment of salaries and pensions, were among the things that made the people of Enugu to have the hope that seeing is believing and that .mad them to do what they did. The Governor did not believe in publicizing his work but rather concentrated in doing more work. The Governor Chime's administration was a direct opposite to what the former administration of Chimaroke Nnamani during the actual voting, people of Enugu State based o what they have seen done by the Governor Sullivan Chime, they voted en-mass. That was why no other political party secured any elective position in the state. PDP won all the seats for both state and national assembly.

The PDP sponsored media campaigns did not have much effect for the people of Enugu State because of their absolute belief in their Governor, Sullivan Chime. His democracy dividends

to the people made them to have absolute belief in him. This actually reflected in their pattern of voting for the President and other elections.

Also, we can say that the individual differences theory is susceptibility to persuasion is not about a person's willingness to be persuaded in a given issue. In persuasion, according to Baran *et al* (2006), individual differences refer to those personality factors that render someone generally susceptible to influence. Intelligence is a good example. It is easy to assume that those who are more intelligent would be less susceptible to persuasive arguments, but this isn't the case. These people are more likely to be persuaded if the message they receive is based on solid logical arguments. Self-esteem, aggressiveness, and social withdrawal were several of the other individual characteristics that were tested. But as with intelligence, each failed to produce the straight forward, unambiguous relationship that might have seemed warranted.

Therefore, in Enugu State, the electorate voted en-masse for the PDP in all the elections and it is believed that the major reasons behind the attitude of the people include, practical demonstration of the provision of democracy dividends roads, electricity, regular payment of salary and pensions and other things like security of life and property, etc. Also, the appointment of the Electoral Officer in the person of Prof. Jega whom had demonstrated strong belief in transparency when he was the ASU - Academic Staff Union of Nigeria Universities as its national president. His assurance to Nigerians that their votes would count this time around appeared to have had a magic wand to the belief of many Nigerians. This was informed by the fact that Nigerians had lost hope in the electoral system going by what happened during the reign of former president, Olusegun Obasanjo.

Equally, in Cross-River State, Calabar, electorates acted on their already informed belief in the leadership of their son, because Goodluck Jonathan, the presidential candidate happens to come from that geo-political zone. What actually informed their voting during the presidential election was sectional sentiment and not actually that they were supporters of Peoples Democratic Party, PDP.

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