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Rethinking the Influence of Agenda Setting Theory: An Assessment of the Influence of Agenda Setting Theory in the Voting Decisions during the 2020 General Election in Tanzania

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The purpose of this research was to evaluate the agenda setting theory's ability to affect and impact voters voting decisions during the 2020 Presidential election in Tanzania. The research specifically aimed to ascertain the agenda setting theory's dominance on the voting decisions in comparison to other dominant third party factors such as prior knowledge, political affiliations and emotions amongst prospective voters. The research used FGD to collect the qualitative data while a survey procedure was used to gather the quantitative data. A total of five FGD were conducted which comprised of between six to nine informants whereas 478 questionnaires were successful returned and used in the analysis. A purposive sampling procedure was used to identify and select participants for the FGD whereas a simple random sampling technique was used for the survey. The participants for both FGD and survey were gotten from the Voter's Registration Books (VRB) from each wards. The data collection was conducted between December 2020 and January 2021 in the five wards of Nyamagana district in Mwanza, Tanzania. After data collection, the data were coded and cleaned using the Scientific Package for Social Solutions (SPSS) version 20 before analysis. The frequency count, tables, descriptions, explanations, and simple percentage were used to present the research findings. The findings show that Agenda Setting Theory has slightly lost its power, it has been superseded by pre-existing knowledge (52%) and political party affiliations (27%).

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines the contemporary influence of agenda setting theory in the voting decisions as previously been proclaimed by earlier intellectuals. Particularly the study thought to reassess and explore if the power of agenda setting theory is still valid considering the numerous transformations that have occurred since the theory was first brought to light by McCombs (2005) in 1972. The study was carried out in Tanzania during the 2020 general election. The Tanzania Presidential election of 2020 marked the six election to be conducted in the country since the inception of multiparty election in Tanzania in 1992. The other elections were conducted in 1995, 2000, 2005, and 2025.

The main Presidential incumbents in that election were Dr. John Pombe Magufuli of Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) and Tundu Lisu of Chama Cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo (CHADEMA). There have been numerous studies which have confirmed that agenda setting theory has a credible and dominant influence in the voting decisions of voters as well as in predicting winners in a political election.

This study poses a number of questions regarding this paradigm. The posed questions alternate around the facts that there have been significant transformations amongst human beings since the inception of agenda setting theory, such transformation includes; the mushrooming of social networks and academic innovations which have caused credible impacts on the human thinking.

Considering the aforementioned transformation, this study attempts to consider other variables such as pre-existing knowledge, political affiliations and emotion referred in this study as third parties' factors to determine their influence in the voting decisions against the proclaimed power of agenda setting theory. Specifically the study endeavours to evaluate whether agenda setting theory is still a determinant of winning an election despite of other existing third party factors.

As previously stated, agenda setting theory has generally lost ground to pre-existing knowledge among potential voters; in other words, the media's role and influence during an election has diminished. Thus, it is expected that political players would rethink and change their minds set on the reliance and usage of media during election campaigns and that they would invest in fulfilling their political pledges and manifestos.

Research Question

To what extent has the agenda setting maintained its influence on audiences against other third-party factors?

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Agenda Setting Theory

Researchers have been interested in learning about the influence that the media has on people and society for many years (McCombs & Shaw, 1995). This study draws its theoretical foundation from agenda setting, one of the many theories of media

effect, which focuses on how the media shapes public opinion by highlighting particular subjects.

Agenda setting theory has attracted diverse definitions; this study has provided some of the propounded definitions. McCombs and Shaw (1995), Sabir (2012) define agenda-setting theory as the process whereby the mass media determine what people think and worry about. People tend to view certain concerns as more important than others when they see those issues in the media because it is a phenomenon whereby the media chooses specific topics and presents them frequently and prominently (Denis & Renita, 2009; Domitrova, 2005). Establishing an agenda is also linked to the news media's capacity to concentrate public attention on a small number of important items, such as national concerns, political candidates, or other items (Gennadity, Sebastian & McCombs, 2011). The agenda setting idea was first presented

by Muin (2011) and McCombs and Shaw (1995) in their investigations on the ways in which the media influenced public opinion during the 1968 US presidential campaign. They discovered that individuals who ingested the news took an interest in the stories that the media delivered.

Furthermore, their study showed that the public also assigned a story, topic, or issue a higher priority based on how much attention it received from the media.

In addition to McCombs and Shaw, who are regarded as the pioneers and advocates of the agenda setting theory, Walter Lippmann is regarded as one of the founders of the theory as well, having made a similar observation in the 1920s when he noted that the media has a dominant role in the formation of mental images in people (Muin, 2011). Lippmann believed that people would respond to mental images rather than real occurrences, as explained by Muin (2011) and McCombs (2005). As a result, researchers McCombs and Shaw have continued this line of thinking.

This piece of writing also highlights the various ways in which agenda setting theory hypothesis affects and influence the audiences via the media. For example, agenda setting is typically used by media practitioners as presented by McCombs and Shaw (1972, 1995, & 1995).

This commonly occurs during political campaigns when individuals are looking for political information. It is said that journalists have a significant influence on the political realities that are created when they select and present news stories. This is due to the fact that during that time, voters not only become familiar with the problems being discussed in the campaign, but they also determine how much weight to give those concerns based on the facts presented in each news piece and its perspective.

However, Puglisi (2007) and Du (2008) assert that the media shapes the political campaign's agenda by summarizing the statements made by candidates and by highlighting the key issues for viewers to see. They contend that since politicians no longer address the public face-to-face but rather through the media, many people's only exposure to politics comes from the information found in the media. A large portion of the information used to determine voting preferences is contained in the statements, vows, and speeches that are condensed into news articles.

Similarly, Du (2008) and Lee (2004) assert that voters learn about issues during a political campaign from the vast amount of information the media provides, and that the media typically draws attention to particular issues and enhances public perceptions of political figures. However, during this procedures, the media continuously offers items that imply what people should consider, be aware of, and feel about in relation to the mass media (Du, 2008).

Furthermore, Puglisi (2007) explains that, in political campaigns' coverage, people might be willing to vote for a given candidate if they are

convinced that the most relevant problems pertaining to issues on which they perceive that such candidate is more competent, thus, an increased salience of a given issue by the media will interact with the prior assessment on the comparative competence of candidates and that fuelling such an individual to make a decision.

Second Level Agenda Setting Theory

According to Reese (2008), the agenda setting theory has been around for more than 20 years (since 1968). In 1995, McCombs and Shaw reviewed the theory and established the second level of agenda setting theory. The idea that the media could instruct people on how to think about issues in addition to what to think about was the primary driver behind the second level agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1995, Ghanem, 1997).

The second level of effects, which looks at how media coverage affects both what and how the public thinks, is now described in detail in the second level of agenda setting theory. In the second level of agenda setting, the emphasis is on how the media describes issues or objects rather than what they emphasize, which the focus of the first level agenda is setting (Freeland, 2012). The second level of agenda setting theory went beyond the first level in that it was believed that the media could inform people about both what and how to think through media framing, or the simple framing of issues and salience. This is the main distinction between the two levels of agenda setting theory.

Additionally, it is stated (Denis & Renita, 2009) that the affective and substantive dimensions of attributes can be examined in relation to the second level of agenda-setting theory. The affective dimension focuses on the emotional aspects of those attributes, such as whether the tone of those substantive attributes is positive, negative, or neutral. In contrast, the substantive dimensions are concerned with things like personality, which is any individual's way of behaving, and ideology, which

is a coherent set of ideas, doctrine, myth, or beliefs that guide an individual (Denis & Renita, 2009).

The Agenda-Setting Theory's Weakness

Since McCombs & Shaw established the agenda setting theory in 1968, there have been nearly 68 years (1968-2016) of research and developments in this area. Prior research has mostly focused on the idea that the media shapes people's thoughts and how to think about things. It accomplishes this by influencing attribute agendas, which inform people of which agendas and issues are important and which are not.

Despite of the numerous studies, there are still some questions which seem to have not been clearly answered by the agenda setting team in relation to their claims of the media influence. Du (2008) and Reese (1990) have identified several questions that pertain to the agenda setting effect. For instance, what is the true nature of the audience-news relationship? Is it possible that the public or audience sets the media's agenda, which the media then only serves to reinforce? Maybe the media is just reacting to what their audience is saying? These are some of the questions which the agenda setting team has not given authenticated answers, but this is not the focus of this study to answer these questions. It is in compliance of such questions which leads this study to revisit the agenda setting theory and determine if it still holder, particularly in the African contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Third Party Factors

In this study, third party factors are the factors which are directly connected with audience framing. According to this study, audience framing is a process by which viewers take in, analyze, and ultimately create their own meanings from the information they are presented with (Rasul, 2011). It typically happens when the public gets news from the media (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). People carefully evaluate, filter, and interpret information they receive from the media during audience framing

depending on their emotions, background in ethnicity, and prior knowledge (pre-existing knowledge) (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). People employ a range of strategies to define their audience framing during election campaigns, including prior knowledge, feelings, political discourse, party affiliations, and many more (Wang et al., 2000).

Pre-Existing Knowledge

Voter preferences are heavily influenced by pre-existing knowledge, or simply prior knowledge, about candidates and/or political parties. Voters' future voting preferences may be influenced by their prior experiences with candidates or political parties, particularly during election seasons and the voting process.

Juliussen, Karlsson, and Garling (2005) demonstrated that people's decisions in subsequent elections are typically influenced by their past choices. It makes sense that people are more likely to make the same decision in a similar circumstance when their decision has a positive outcome. However, people avoid rehashing their past mistakes (Sagi & Friedland, 2007). This is important because judgments made in the future based on the past are not always the best ones (David, 2013; Scheufle, 2001). This suggests that voters typically assess candidates based on their prior leadership or career experiences during election seasons, and that if a candidate demonstrates a strong track record, such a candidate is likely to receive support from the public.

Previous assessments of the candidates appear to sway the evaluation of fresh data, leading to an incorrect updating of the prior effect. As a result, discovering something negative about a preferred alternative frequently results in a stronger preference for the alternative than there was previously (David, 2013; Reese & Grandy, 2008). Voters may eventually change their overall assessments to more accurately reflect reality if they are exposed to sufficient negative information about a candidate they had previously supported or

positive information about one they had previously disliked (Sagi & Friedland, 2007).

Research indicates that voters stick to their current opinions during elections, at least temporarily (David, 2013). This behavior is consistent with motivated reasoning, which holds that once a candidate's initial assessment is formed, it serves as an anchor against which subsequent information must struggle to be appropriately taken into account. Voters therefore seem to assess the candidates based on previous information rather than being unwilling to accept any new information about the candidates or political parties. One's own experience is thought to be more significant than other people's. People frequently assume that their own perception of politics is primarily based on personal experience, while the opinions of others regarding politics are primarily influenced by the media or others in their social circles (Scheufle, 2001).

Emotions

According to West (2007), emotions are the affective states of consciousness that include happiness, sadness, fear, hate, and similar experiences. It can also refer to any intense agitation of emotions brought on by experiencing fear, hate, or love. It is frequently accompanied by overt manifestations like crying or shaking, as well as psychological changes like elevated heartbeat or respirations. Prior research (Marcus, 2007; Christopher, 2013) has uncovered a wide range of studies that demonstrate how people's behavior is impacted by the emotions they encounter throughout their lives. The 1980s saw the publication of some of the first research suggesting that emotions such as pride and hope, or rage and anxiety, influenced people's decisions.

Emotions have a big influence on how people vote during elections (Christopher, 2013). Some voters base their choices for political parties or candidates on their feelings of love, hate, or other strong emotions. One way to characterize campaign emotions is a candidate's relationship with voters,

particularly during the campaign trail (Marcus, 2007). Voters organize and successfully streamline their judgment tasks during the voting process by tacitly using their feelings toward candidates (Christopher, 2013).

Influential campaigns may lead to increased political participation in terms of behavior. Alternatively, campaigns that incite depressing thoughts, terror, or threats will inevitably discourage participation, particularly during the voting process (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). Lee (2000) and Wang & Atkin (2014) both state that emotions influence voters' decisions directly and by directing the thought process that results in voting preferences. There are situations when a voter's choice of vote is greatly influenced by their feelings of love for a candidate, pride, dislike, rage, or sadness. Positive emotions that carry the aspect of enthusiasm have a dual effect on electoral decisions. Firstly, they directly affect citizens' feelings about the candidates in question, which in turn influences how they vote (Marcus & MacKuen, 1993, Marcus et al. The authors refer to this second approach as the anxiety dimension of emotion, and it is this dimension that determines the degree to which citizens rely on habitual behaviour. Less politically and/or emotionally sophisticated voters mainly rely on emotional reactions to process cognitive information when making voting decisions. According to Weber (2008), the emotions stirred up during an election campaign have a big impact on people's perceptions of the candidates and the issues at stake, which may have an effect on how they vote.

Party Affiliation

Being a member or supporter of a particular political party is known as party affiliation. Political affiliation, according to Rebecca (2005), is a person's belief that they are a member of a particular political party. People who belong to or are associated with a political party, or who strongly endorse a particular political party, are said to have a tendency to remain faithful to that party. Citizens' political behavior in progressive democracies is

greatly influenced by their party affiliations. People's voting and governmental evaluations are frequently shaped by their party affiliations (Bartels 2000). It has been observed that party affiliation is one of the key elements influencing.

Chiu (2002) asserts that a significant portion of American voters are party loyalists in American politics. Partisan identifications are among the most reliable indicators of voter preferences and election results during elections. It is observed that the majority of American voters identify as Democrats or Republicans, and the majority of them consistently support the presidential candidates of their respective parties (Chiu, 2002). The impact of party affiliation on American politics is also summed up by Bartels (2000), who shows that, while party affiliation voting was lower in the 2008 presidential election than it was in 2000, 2004, and 1996, it was still 4% higher in 2004. As per Bartels (2000), the presidential election of 2004 and the congressional election of 2006 have emerged as the new high points in American voters' party affiliation voting preferences.

Generally speaking, one of the things that influences voters' voting preferences is their party affiliation. The extant literature has observed that party affiliation can occasionally shift from an individual to an institutional level. Institutionally, there are media outlets whose founders are politicians or political parties; typically, the party to which they belong controls the coverage that these outlets publish. For instance, in Tanzania, the main opposition figure owns Tanzania Times, the ruling party owns Uhuru Publication House, politicians own Sahara Media, and Habari Cooperations is owned by Habari. The literature that is currently in publication presents this kind of party affiliation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. As such, the data were gathered through survey and focus group discussions (FGD). Agenda setting in this study was

measured by examining the extent through which media used the substantive attributes during the reporting of the election campaigns. It also included at looking at the tones (affective dimensions: *negative, positive, or neutral*) used by the media in reporting the two presidential candidates. The research was conducted in December, 2020 immediately after the 2020 general elections in Tanzania. The study utilized a total of 478 sample size whereby a total of 600 questionnaires were distributed but only 478 were successful filled, returned and considered in the analysis. The study used a simple random sampling procedures to get the respondents for this study.

On the other hand, four focus group discussions (FGD) were organized and conducted. A purposive sampling procedure was used to detect and obtain informants for the focus group discussions from the Voters Registration Books (VRB). The scope of the study was in the four Wards of Mkolani, Luchehe, Mkuyuni, and Buhongwa, all located in Nyamagana District, Mwanza. Cronbach's Alpha test was used to test for the internal consistency of the questionnaires with the score of 0.805.

The data were coded and cleaned using the Scientific Package for Social Solutions (SPSS) version 20 before analysis. The frequency count, descriptions, explanations, and simple percentage were used to present the findings of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings imply that agenda-setting theory is no longer effective in guiding the audience's thoughts, particularly when it comes to voting. This goes against what McCombs & Shaw (1995) had previously proposed. Stated differently, the legitimacy of the media's ability to dictate the thoughts of the audience—both on the first and second levels of the Agenda setting theory—has been undermined.

Table 1 presents the summary of the results gotten from both the distributed questionnaires and FGD. The results indicate that during the 2020 general

elections in Tanzania, voters cast their votes on the presidential candidate whom they had known for a long time. In other words, they reached their voting decisions basing on the pre-existing knowledge of the candidates, thus the candidate who had a good track record had a greater probability of being voted for against candidate who had a weak track record who had a greater probability of not being voted for. The findings suggest that pre-existing knowledge of voters on the candidates determined their decisions with 52%.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that political affiliation amongst voters was the second factor which influenced their voting decisions with 27% whereas agenda setting scored 20%. In other words, voters who were affiliated with the ruling party CCM remained loyal to their party and that casted their votes to the CCM candidates, this was likewise to the opposition party of CHADEMA.

The findings also suggest that the media (agenda setting) moderately influenced voters' voting decisions during the 2020 general elections. It was revealed that about 20% of respondents admitted to have been cast their votes based on the media coverage and how the media described the candidates and their political parties.

The findings also shows that some few voters (1%) cast their votes basing on the emotional attributes (love for the candidates and political party), in other words, there were some voters who were merely in love with either the presidential candidates or the political parties and this determined their voting decisions.

The results the influence of the of the media in informing the audiences on what to think about (*first level of agenda setting theory*) and how to think about (*second level of agenda setting theory*) has significantly lost its supremacy. The results further suggest that pre-existing knowledge among individuals has a very strong impact when making decisions over a subject matter. The practical implication of these results is that the power of the

media in causing effects in the minds of individuals has gradually lessened, this creates an impression that human beings are no longer detainees of the media, as such, they can now receive and interpret the media messages and eventually filter all incoming information from the through audience framing before they make decisions. According to Pan and Kosicki (1993), during the audience

framing process, people do receive information from the media, which they carefully evaluate, filter, and interpret based on their emotions, ethnic background, and prior knowledge (pre-existing knowledge). This assumption is consistent with their findings.

Table 1: Summary of the Results

Influencing factor	Respondents	Percentage
Agenda Setting (Media Framing)	97	20%
Pre-existing knowledge	249	52%
Emotions	7	1%
Party affiliation	127	27%
	478	100%

Furthermore, it is not very surprising to find that pre-existing knowledge amongst voters significantly influences their voting decisions. This fact is supported by the fact that Dr. John Pombe Magufuli, who won the 2020 general election, is a renowned politician who is very well-known for his hard work. Until the 2020 general election, Dr. Magufuli had served the country at different high-level positions in the country. Between 1995 and 2015, he was the minister in different ministries and between 2015 to 2020, he was the president of the United Republic of Tanzania. In all his tenures, Dr. Magufuli performed credible works which helped him gain Tanzanians' trust through his good track records. On the other hand, Mr. Tundu Lisu (the opposition candidate) is also a renowned politician who is a well-known critique to the government. He has served for ten years as Member of Parliament. During his tenure, he has survived several attempts of assassination because of what seems to be notorious and anti-government. Thus, when compared, Dr. John Pombe Magufuli had a very good track records of performance compared to his counterparty Mr. Tundu Lisu. Hence, it is not very surprising to find out that majority of the voters voted for Dr. Magufuli, this is because voters had gotten prior-knowledge about his past performance

in the positions that he had held compared to his counterpart.

What is interesting in this study is that majority (97%) of the respondents from both FGD and survey admitted to have used the media during the 2020 election campaign but it hardly had any influence in their voting process. They also confirmed to have witnessed how the media were framing the presidential candidates; including the positive and negative framings, but despite such framing, they said they were not taken away by such framing. The words of an old woman (67) from one of the FGD represents the words of other respondents:

“Most of the private Television during the election campaigns were writing negative stories about Dr. Magufuli, but since I knew his hardworking and good track records, I was always ignoring such news items and that my voting decision was not affected”

Moreover, political party affiliation amongst voters was another factor which determined their voting decisions; in other words, candidates who had more voters who were affiliated to his political party had an assurance of getting more votes. These results practically present the nature of political situations and behaviour in Tanzanian politics. The ruling

party (CCM) has been in existence for almost 43 years since its inception in 1977 whereas the opposition party (CHADEMA) has hardly been in existence for 29 years since it was established in 1992. For the last past 43 years, the ruling party has garnered many supporters who are affiliated with the party, it is estimated that majority (75%) of people in the rural Tanzania areas are affiliated with CCM whereas about (80%) of the aged people in the country are also affiliated with the ruling party. Using that advantage party affiliation also played a credible role in influencing the voting decisions amongst voters in the 2020 general election. The words of participant X (77) from one of the FGD represents the words of other respondents:

“I have been an active member and supporter of Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) for over 40 years, this political party has helped me to take my children to schools, I trust it and I will not betray it by voting to a political party which I do not know much”

Likewise, because of several diversities and changes taking place in the socio-political arena, human beings are also adapting with such changes and diversities. Human beings are now conscious beings who effectively use their cognitive dimensions to debate with all incoming information from the media, as such, they use other dimensions of their cognitive aspects to filter all news items from the media and eventually end up creating their own meanings from the news items. In these circumstances, it is no longer easy for the -setting theory to significantly influence such changing audiences.

Generally, the findings from this study have significantly showed to retaliate and differ with what other renowned scholars in this field such as McCombs & Shaw (1972), McCombs (1993; 2003 & 2005) who had previously proclaimed for the power of the media through agenda setting theory with its influence in the voting decisions amongst voters.

In summary, two lessons can be learnt from these findings, the first lesson is that politicians should learn that because of the mushrooming of education and wakefulness amongst individuals their ability and level of understanding has also changed abruptly. For example, by 2003 the percentage of students who joined secondary schools in Tanzania was only 30% but until 2015 the percentage had risen to 71%. This is an indication that the more individuals attend secondary schools the better they become in their cognitive aspects and inquisitive abilities. Thus, in such a community there is a significant probability that individuals will always question and debate with all incoming information from the media and they are more likely to create their meaning than what it was expected from the second level of agenda setting theory (tell the audience how to think about issues).

The second lesson is that it is now time for the politicians to change their mind-sets. They should be accountable to the people who elected them, they should as well concentrate on fulfilling their promises, pledges and make sure that their manifestos are fully achieved. The practical implication here is that by fulfilling their pledges, people will build trust and establish a strong track record which eventually will help them or their political parties get trusted by the voters. Thus, in such a situation, it is hardly easy for the media to change the mind-sets or directions of such individuals during the voting process.

The last lesson from these findings is that politicians should invest much in branding their political parties. The branding of political parties significantly impacts gaining popularity and harvesting more supporters. In Tanzania, the ruling party CCM from 2015 conducted a credible branding strategy nationwide. The party re-branding team was led by the then party General Secretary Mr. Abdulrahman Kinana. This helped to get quite several people who became affiliated with the party and this spearheaded the victory of the party in 2015 and 2020 general election in Tanzania.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to determine whether agenda-setting, particularly during election season, significantly influences what and how the audience thinks. The results indicate that agenda setting has considerably diminished influence over potential voters (audience) in Tanzania's 2020 presidential election.

The overall findings of this study suggest that the pre-existing knowledge of the audiences has superseded the influence of agenda setting. This is due to the fact that audiences seem to no longer depend on the media as the only source of information for them to make a decision in voting. They rather search and use other third-party factors to evaluate the political aspirants. The findings suggest that prospective voters in Tanzania voted to the candidate basing on his past records and performance in the previous regimes (pre-existing knowledge) regardless of media agenda setting functions. Political affiliation amongst voters in Tanzania also superseded the power of agenda setting.

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