

The New Electoral Marketplace and Voting: Conceptual and Empirical Insights

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Abstract

This paper sets out to ascertain new electoral market for votes in the emerging democracies. It builds on earlier studies that tried howbeit in a limited way to explain the activities of political parties' in African elections by extending the analysis to party identity, party branding and voting interface in Ghana. It interrogates the question: how does political brand identity influence voting behaviour? Drawing on in-depth interviews data and multiple strands of documentary analysis, it was established that political party identity and branding have little considerable influence on voting choices in Ghanaian elections. The results, show very little evidence to conceptually and empirically support the claim that party identity and branding have the propensity to influence voter choice from the perspective of the study participants. Based on the results, the paper concludes that voting behaviour in Ghana vary with policy choices, and more associated with mounting electoral-economic disequilibrium, given socio-economic constraints such as fluctuations in the market price of goods and services. Therefore, political parties should adopt appropriate policies and strategies, producing electorally competitive electoral market. This will seemingly produce a party identity, branding and voting during elections with the demand and supply voters.

Keywords: democracy, political parties, branding, election, Ghana

1. Introduction

The clamour for democracy and good governance coincided with the political and economic fallouts, and governance challenges from the 1970s, and the early 1980s. The political and economic governance challenges were seemingly associated with military regimes and the autocratic political systems (Salim, 2001; Gyimah-Boadi, 2001a). The reintroduction of democracy and elections in the 1990s has ostensibly established multi-party systems, and electoral competition across the globe. Yet, Dix (1992) proclaimed that the degree of democracy and elections would largely depend on the institutionalisation of political parties. Similarly, Ware (1996) pointed out that in the neo-liberal political order, it would be difficult for competitive democratic elections to be organised without active political parties. This notion gave birth and credence to the proliferation of political parties in the new democratic era.

Arguably, political parties resurrected at the dawn of 'Third Wave' of democratisation (Huntington, 1991). Large numbers of new political parties emerged with relatively similar campaign strategies, and general promises for a better future (Bob-Milliar, 2019). Though, many of the political parties formed vanished over time, others have become institutionalised. Besides, elections are the core of democratic politics; political parties are traditionally viewed as the appropriate vehicles to political power to steer the affairs of a democratic state (Duverger, 1954; Mainwaring & Scully, 1995; Salim, 2001; Randal & Svasand, 2002).

However, scholars have argued that electoral politics raised cross-cutting issues on the nature of power, the socio-cultural issue and narratives of political and economic nationalism and political history. Also, scholars have emphasised aspects like informality, political clientelism, weak party organizations, and weak programmatic appeals of political parties during elections. Political parties need to take the preferences of the electorate into account to build successful campaigns, and voters' choice from the menu of existing political options (Erdmann, 2004; Osei, 2012; Bob-Milliar, 2019).

In this paper, we argue that political party branding and voters' behaviour are contingent on each other in elections. Some scholars have attempted to interrogate this issue, but many of the available scholarly works with exception of few such as Tweneboah-Koduah et al. (2010), Mensah (2017) and Nartey et al. (2017) have focused on explaining political party campaign strategies during elections. Though a lot of lessons can be drawn from these useful studies, they tended to be more on party identification and voting with relatively little information on clarification of party brand identity issues and voter choice nexus. This research gap underpins both conceptual and the empirical relevance, and thus form the investigative context and analytical framework of this paper. We seek an alternative variable of voter choice, and thus interrogate how party brand identity has become a new marketplace for political transaction for votes. The paper builds on the earlier studies that tried, howbeit in a limited way, to explain party brand identity and voting nexus. It seeks empirically-based answers by interrogating the conceptual question: How does political party brand identity become a new marketplace for votes? This conceptual research question is mirrored by a complementary major empirical inquiry that asks a conventional question: Does political brand identity influence voting behaviour?

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. The next section is the conceptual issues underpinning the study. This is followed by the methodology, results and discussion, concluding remarks and references.

2. Conceptual Issues

2.1 Political Party Identity

Basically, a political party is a group of people who are organised for the purpose of winning power to form a government by electoral or other means (Heywood, 2007). In this context, a political party can be described as an organised group of citizens who share similar views on the running of the state and who act with the main objective of capturing political power through elections in order to control personnel of government, and to implement their programmes or ideologies.

Political parties are generally identified based on their ideologies. These ideological strands can be clearly identified in the global sense and are reflected in the political landscape. Political thinking could be located on a scale running from one end to another. For the *extreme right* (capitalists), the market system based on the free choices of individuals in production, exchange and distribution of goods and services underlie the basic mode for organising society (Barnes, Jennings, Inglehart, & Farah, 1988; Heywood, 2007). For the *extreme left* (socialists), society is organised around public ownership and state regulation of the economy to ensure the welfare of all people in the community (Barnes, Jennings, Inglehart, & Farah, 1988; Heywood, 2007).

People are generally not satisfied with the power structure of society based on free markets (Barnes, Jennings, Inglehart, & Farah, 1988; Heywood, 2007). Based on the leanings of political parties in terms of the degree of use of the market mechanisms and government regulations and ownership, political parties are often defined as *centre-left*, *centre* or *centre-right*. The *centre-left* parties accept the market-based economic system as a core part of society (Anaman & Bukari, 2019a). The *centre-right* parties also generally agree to the principle of a certain minimum role of government in terms of regulations to improve the working of the economy to deal with market failure (Mensah, 2017; Anaman & Bukari, 2019a; Bukari, 2022; Bukari, Eliasu, & Adam, 2024). However, the *centrist parties* tend to have considerable mixture of market-based mechanisms and government-driven programmes in their manifestos and plans (Mensah, 2017). Generally, political party brand identity is conceptualised at the level of ideology, party, candidate and policies (French & Smith, 2010; Mensah, 2017).

2.2 Political Branding

In contemporary electoral politics, political branding has received much scholarly attention and discussions (French & Smith, 2010; Mensah, 2017). Political branding is considered to comprise of 'Party Leader', 'Political Party' and 'Party Policy' (Mensah, 2016, 2017; Nartey et al., 2017). Generally, brand is a unique attribute of something that identifies it and differentiates it from other things that are similar to it (Keller, 1993). In business and marketing industries, "branding enables customers to make product and service choices using attributes that differentiate and identify them" (de Chernatony & McDonald, 1998, p.28).

In modern electoral politics, "electorate vote for political parties by evaluating their identity, candidates and policies" (Mensah, 2016, p.122; Nielsen, 2013). That is, brand which is normally associated with marketing products has now been subtle to socio-political issues (Mensah, 2009; Marsh & Fawcett, 2011). Consequently, political branding has become an important determinant of electoral behaviour (Phipps et al., 2010; Tweneboah-Koduah et al., 2010; Mensah, 2016; Nartey et al., 2017). Thus, political party brand creates opportunity for people to choose between alternative political parties (Keller, 1993; Mensah, 2015). The recent voter volatility in democracies has also contributed to the surge of political branding as voter mobilisation strategy (Nielsen, 2012;

Mensah, 2016).

2.3 Voting Behaviour

Political brand is conceptually different from the social cleavage, party identification and issue-ownership variables or issues as related to voting in an election. Certainly, cleavage voting relates much to the tendency of citizens or the voting population to consider ethnic, class, religion, sex, age and other social related issues in voting decision (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Berelson et al., 1954; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Anaman & Bukari, 2019b; Alidu & Bukari, 2020; Aidoo & Botchway, 2021). The party identification voting is also conceptualised in terms of voters or the voting public giving premium to affiliation or loyalty to a particular party during voting in an election (Campbell et al., 1960). Some voters are also interested in issues related to their socio-economic development. Such voters could be retrospective or prospective voters, or socio-tropic or ego-tropic (pocket) voters in an election (Dawns, 1957). These variables are clearly distinct from political brand voter, which is generally based on comparison in terms of the political branding.

3. Design and Methodology

The study was conducted in the Tamale Central Constituency in the Northern Region of Ghana. The study constituency was purposively selected because of its high level of political socialisation and voter turn-out in all the eight (8) general elections conducted under the Fourth Republic of Ghana beginning in 1992.

In this paper, we employed qualitative approach because it offers opportunity to interact directly with the stakeholders or participants in the study (Silverman, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Botchway, 2018b). We also relied on the interpretivism paradigm because, events and situations are often understood through the process of interpretation. Arguably, interpretivists are of the view that the meaning of reality is socially constructed through the experiences of social narrators, which might reduce to resonate the occurrences that are situated socially (Silverman, 2000; Creswell, 2007).

We employed an exploratory case study design, which is often designed to bring out details from the viewpoint of the participants and achieve new insights (Silverman, 2000; Creswell, 2007). We garnered data from both primary and secondary sources. For the primary data collection, some purposively selected key informants were interviewed with the use of interview guide. The primary data complemented review of academic journal papers, published books, policy reports, and other relevant documents. With a wide range of empirical evidence from the secondary and primary data sources, relevant information was gathered for the analysis.

4. The New Electoral Marketplace: Empirical Insights

We interrogated how party brand identity has become a new electoral market for votes. In democracies, elections have raised cross-cutting parties that cannot be aligned with the left-right continuum of political ideologies. Arguably, it is very difficult to identify citizens with a defined political philosophy or ideology, especially within emerging democracies. Yet, political parties are formed on ideologies or philosophies and receive support, and even do quite well in elections. To this end, we ask "how does political brand identity influence voting behaviour?"

In order to provide answers to the question, we hypothesize that party branding identity is a new electoral market for votes. It depicts electoral arena as a "market place" (Evans, 2004, p.70). In the electoral market, we argue that that voters are on the 'demand side' and the political parties are on the 'supply side.' In a response to this claim, a study participant indicated that in electoral politics;

voting behaviour is determined by the preferences of voters on a variety of issues brought about by the few political parties which dominate the market. The few political parties represent an oligopolistic market structure.... The aim of any political party in election is to maximise the number of votes with the aim of winning a national election. Each voter engages in a cost-benefit analysis in which he or she calculates the payoffs in terms of the costs and benefits of the various electoral choices presented by the political parties and independent candidates (Participant Interview, 2024).

The above statement suggests that political parties engage in actions to attract voters that can be analysed by models such as the kinked demand curve (Sweezy, 1939) and game theory (von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944). The kinked demand curve suggests that a political party may undercut its rival with respect to a particular issue by promising to do more than what its rival has proposed in terms of benefits and costs to the electorate (Downs, 1957). Consequently, taking the rational choice theory into consideration (as far as voting is concerned), it is assumed that the individual voter and his or her electoral choices constitute the principal influence on the fate of parties in one election after other. The individual voter is considered sovereign and determines what political parties and politicians should do to earn his or her vote (Bukari, 2022; Bukari, Adua, & Alhassan, 2023; Bukari, Eliasu, & Adam, 2024). The individual voter thus accordingly casts his or her vote in favour of the party or

candidate who best approximates his or her political expectations and interests.

Another participant asserted that:

The political arena is perceived as a reflection of the individual voter's electoral choices and preferences in the same way that the market is a reflection of the individual consumer's preferences.... Hence it is the voter participating in an election and choosing a party and its candidate of his/her choice that influences the political process and the socio-economic development... and that non-participation in the electoral process has no effect on socio-economic development.... (Participant Interview, 2024).

It is against this background we argue that party brand identity (ideology, party, candidate and the policies) and voters' behaviour are contingent on each other. Parties need to take the preferences of the electorate into account to build successful campaigns, and voters choose from the menu of existing political options (Bukari, 2022; Bukari, Adua, & Alhassan, 2023; Bukari, Eliasu, & Adam, 2024).

Also, given the nature of electoral politics, a participant indicated that:

In Ghana we do rely much on party colour and symbols, and choose to only vote for them during elections.... Many Ghanaians do not consider issues. The only issue they consider in elections is the NDC and NPP. I can say that many people are identified with NDC as 'Akamanso' literally meaning 'Cover the Nation' as the brand name, and some also identified with NPP as 'Osono' literally meaning 'Elephant' as the brand name and always vote for the party. I heard many say this in Ghana, and it is true....my friend, we don't vote for development issues in Ghana, rather political parties.... (Participant Interview, 2024).

This finding, as captured from the study, collaborated well with scholarly works on the determinants of voting behaviour in Africa and Ghana (Botchway, 2018a; Anaman & Bukari, 2019b, 2021; Seidu & Bukari, 2020; Aidoo & Botchway, 2021; Bukari, 2022; Bukari, Mbowura, & Arah, 2022a; Bukari, Eliasu, & Adam, 2024). One participant also indicated that "politics is very dirty, we insult and do religious and ethnic identity politics" (Participant Interview, 2024).

On the issue of voting behaviour, a participant indicated that:

Ethnicity and economy are the most influencing issues that drive electoral politics.... but sometimes, people tend to vote in election due to poverty and not party colours or ideology.... I really didn't see how people vote based on their identification with parties ... and that few people do so now (Participant interview, 2024).

These results also support the works of Bukari (2017; 2022) and Bukari, Adua and Alhassan (2023), as well as Bukari, Eliasu and Adam (2024).

Another participant stated that:

The importance of party brand identity in elections lies in how the party is able to fashion out its policies and programmes. The ability of the party to push its agenda and this should resonate with the voting population and that the importance of party branding and voting is further emphasized by the country's socio-economic experience of the voter (Participant Interview, 2023).

This finding collaborates well with the electoral economics literature. This is because, in a democracy, economic conditions largely determine vote choice rather than other structural variables (Youde, 2005; Nugent, 2009; Whitfield, 2009). A key informant's assertion of Ghana's electoral landscape also collaborates with the existing literature. According to this particular interviewee:

The elections of 1992 were followed by the economic structural adjustment started in 1983. The pattern of economic conditions and voting since 1992 under the Fourth Republic of Ghana following the democratic process differ from election to election ... and that the conditions are not same, though economic issues largely play out in all the eight elections (Participant Interview, 2023).

The findings reflect the impact of economic issues on voting behaviour in democracies. Thus, the voting public respond to the prevailing policies and socio-economic issues during elections. On this view, a study participant stated that:

The pattern of other economic indicators in the country shows that where the economic policy

was not depoliticized, elections shaped macroeconomic performance, albeit in contradictory ways... (Participant Interview, 2023).

According to this same interviewee:

One set of electorally related results approximates the hypothesized political business cycle in the sense that economic performance improved before or during elections and /or declined in their wake.... Truly, the cyclical effects are evident, for instance, where the rate of inflation and exchange rate depreciation dropped going into an election in response to the economic policies and socio-economic conditions, the impact of economic performance on election outcome is consistently symmetrical (Participant Interview, 2023).

Given the nature of electoral politics, it would be very difficult if not perverse to dismiss the existence of a relationship between party brand identity and voting behaviour. The electoral effect may be underestimated by the exclusion of party brand identity issues, which may play a role and affect election outcome. The data also reveals that political parties' strategies and policies after each election in Ghana have contributed to each electoral outcome and fortunes of the political parties. For instance, one expert interviewee indicated that:

...party strategies and clear identity issues also suggest that voting behaviour cannot be simply ascribed to the uncertainties of economic conditions. The electoral outcome, therefore, can be attributed to the ability of parties branding issues as well as economic problems bedevilling the country (Participant Interview, 2024).

Also, the electoral outcome often reflects the divergent sets of policy choices by the various governments in Ghana. Thus, it is established that in Ghana, voting choice and party branding are adequately linked with relative sets of policy initiatives; including public sector wage control, exchange rate, and other notable deviations from market mechanisms (Anaman & Bukari, 2019a; Bukari, 2022). Economic instability under the circumstances provides a strong indication of the importance of election on the economy on one side and party branding identity on the other side in an electoral choice set. In supporting the proposition, a participant stated that "party branding is arguably driven by elections and not economic problems" and that the "party's capacity to introduce innovative strategies could attract political support" (Participant Interview, 2024).

From the above information, it is evident that economic conditions have varied significance on voting behaviour and electoral outcome over-time. Consequently, the electorally driven strategies of a political party produces a competitive electoral market. However, this can be linked to a broader electoral cycle involving the alternation of political power and economic policy formulation. As suggested in the traditional electoral literature, elections mark the point of power alternation and for that matter policy alteration (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Berelson et al., 1954; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Campbell et al. 1960; Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997).

5. Conclusion

In electoral politics, the hypothetical agreement is that political parties are what they are, and that all political parties are the same (they all have the intension of capturing political power that will enable them to run the affairs of the state). Political parties have been described as the same in terms of what they (parties) say and do, both in government and in opposition. This postulation has largely been created in the minds of citizens in democracy, and particularly well resonated with the voting public in democracies.

In order to disentangle this supposition in the minds of the voting public, the paper set out to conceptually support the model, and empirically validate the claim that party brand identity has an influence on voter choice. Essentially, political branding identity influences electoral choice of hardcore independent voters in an election in all democracies. However, in the electoral market, poor party branding diminishes the selling points of the party, and ultimately affects its electoral fortunes. Also, analysis of the link between party brand identity and voting election buttresses scholarly discussion (Bob-Milliar, 2019; Bukari, 2022). Moreover, the impact of party branding on voting behaviour vary with policy choices. Given the economic constraints such as fluctuations in the market price of goods and services, voter choice is more associated with mounting electoral-economic disequilibrium.

Based on the results, there is very little evidence to conceptually and empirically support the claim that party identity and party branding have the propensity to influence voter choice from the perspective of the study participants. Therefore, the results demonstrate minimal relationship between party branding identity and voting behaviour. Consequently, the paper concludes that voting behaviour in Ghana vary with policy choices, and more associated with mounting electoral-economic disequilibrium, given socio-economic constraints such as fluctuations in the market price of goods and services. Therefore, political parties should adopt appropriate policies and strategies, producing electorally competitive electoral market. This will seemingly produce party identity,

branding and voting during elections with the demand and supply voters.

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