The Unheard Third: Ghana's Newspaper Coverage of Voter Apathy and its Implications for Participatory Democracy

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Abstract

Political actors decry low voter turnout during elections, emphasizing their impact on democratic participation. The media's role in focusing on the phenomenon of triggering behavioral change cannot be overemphasized. Although scholarly interest in election coverage is growing, little is known about the salience of the media's coverage of voter apathy, especially in emerging democracies such as Ghana. Through qualitative content analysis and the prism of media salience in agenda-setting, this study analyzed news stories published by two leading Ghanaian newspapers during the 2020 presidential election in Ghana. The study found that the media hardly attaches attention and prominence to voters' apathy in their electoral coverage, and the valence (tone) is somewhat negative. Much of the media's focus is on presidential candidates, at the expense of a phenomenon that threatens participatory democracy. The practical and theoretical implications of this study are discussed.

Introduction

Although there are only a few, some countries in sub-Saharan Africa have experienced relatively stable democracy and a smooth transition of power from one political party to another. For instance, in Ghana, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) have been the two major political parties that have dominated the political scene since the inception

of the Fourth Republican Constitution, otherwise known as the 1992 Constitution. These two political parties engaged in fiercely contested elections, leading to a change in the government in 2001, 2009, and 2017 (Dzisah, 2018). Undoubtedly, print media has played an integral role in elections (Osei-Appiah, 2019), especially in terms of the media frames adopted in churning out political stories and how those frames shape voter behavior toward elections (Araújo & Prior, 2020; Canella & Ferrucci, 2020). As Temin and Smith (2002) corroborated, Ghana's electoral process would not have progressed without media contribution. Again, even though the 1992 constitution of Ghana tasked the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) to, among other things, educate the citizenry on their civic rights to vote (NCCE n.d.), the Ghanaian media has often been used as a conduit to educate citizens about the entire electoral process and what to do to maintain peace and order.

Moreover, the media's role in deepening the democratic gains that some African countries have chalked is not limited to mere coverage of elections. It is also about engendering higher forms of participatory democracy to alleviate democratic deficits arising from low patronage during elections (Mouiche, 2011). This means that political actors, civil society organizations, and the media should be concerned about the dwindling number of voter turnouts in African elections, as this phenomenon threatens participatory democracy.

Previous scholars have decried citizens' unwillingness to actively participate in elections because of factors such as poor socioeconomic living conditions, corruption in the entire political setup, political system failure, and the non-freeness and non-fairness of electoral processes, among others (Dahlberg & Solevid, 2016; Oyedemi & Mahlatji, 2016; Piccolino, 2016). In Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, the case is not as different as voter apathy, which has been on the rise since 2003 and is mainly blamable on the government's inability to motivate eligible voters (Taiwo & Ahmed, 2015).

This phenomenon has given birth to a concept called the 'unheard third' because largely, media coverage of elections has primarily focused on those who voted for the winner of the elections (the heard first) and those who voted for the closest contender (the heard second), especially in jurisdictions where two political parties dominate the elections. Thorson et al. (2017) argued that if the media focused more energy on reporting on the phenomenon of voter apathy and its negative effects on the outcome of an election, especially prior to elections, it would positively result in higher electoral participation. Even though scholars such as Avery (2015) and Dassonneville et al. (2017) have argued the importance of compulsory voting to curb voter apathy, the media plays an important role in motivating registered voters to turn out during elections. This is why media coverage of voter apathy is key.

However, there is a scarcity of published research on how the media report issues of low voter turnout in major African elections. The chorus of studies available on the media's coverage of elections has predominantly focused on the coverage of political campaigns towards elections, candidates' promises, presidential debates, the gender of candidates, and the media setting the

agenda and shaping the outcome of elections (Dumouchel, 2023; Gondwe, 2021; Ralph-Morrow et al., 2021; Tromble & Koole, 2020; Visser et al., 2020). Few studies available on the media's ability to predict positive political behavior and interest in electoral participation have been conducted in the Western context (Dahmen, 2020; Martin, 2015), leaving the developing context largely untapped. For developing countries to chart their path toward enhanced democratic participation, scholars must undertake context-specific studies to inform policy changes in the media. This study explores the importance placed on voter apathy in print media during the 2020 general elections in Ghana and its implications for media policy shifts and participatory democracy. Using the concept of media salience in agenda-setting theory as a lens, this study poses the following research questions:

1. What sort of attention has been given to the issue of voter apathy in Ghana's print media?
2. What level of prominence is given to the issue of voter apathy in Ghana's print media?
3. What is the valence (tone) of voter apathy stories in Ghana's media?

Elections coverage and electoral participation in Africa

Elections serve as a fundamental component of democratic regimes, and the media play a crucial role in enhancing such regimes by offering balanced and accurate coverage of electoral processes (Ugangu, 2020). In light of the foregoing, there has been divergent research on the role of the media in elections, most importantly on the African continent. For instance, Akoh and Ahiabenu (2012) examined the election news coverage practices of the African Elections Project (AEP), a project dedicated to providing timely and relevant election stories by journalists and citizen journalists on the continent. Using the coverage of elections across ten African countries, including Ghana, the study discovered that the project contributes to election coverage on the continent. Some of these contributions are the training of journalists on election coverage, the creation of election guides for journalists, and the deployment of technologies for the coverage and collection of election content, among others.

Jones (2019) examined the news sources used in the television coverage of five democratic elections in South Africa from 1994 to 2014 to provide insights into the nature of mediatised political reporting within a non-Western context. The research revealed a notable shift in the composition of news sources during elections, with a growing prevalence of pundits and diminishing presence of political actors and citizens. Jones (2019) argues that establishing a strong connection between journalists and politicians, as well as between journalists and citizens, is of utmost importance in effectively disseminating the essential information required to fulfil the democratic responsibility of the media in the electoral participation puzzle.

Ezinwa (2015) investigated how voters' exposure to electoral issues and their perceptions of the media coverage of the 2011 general elections in Enugu State, Nigeria influenced their electoral participation. The study observed that electorates, chiefly radio news consumers, perceived media coverage of the elections as credible, fair, and enlightening, thus informing their attention to the media and their active participation in general elections. The electorates, out of the high media

coverage of the elections, could easily recall key campaign messages and main contenders, among other things, which led to the erosion of the lack of trust and confidence in the media as it existed in the past.

Matingwina (2019) analyzed the news coverage of the 2018 Zimbabwean general elections in two major national newspapers and found that the conflict frame was the most dominant frame used to draw partisan political lines between the two leading political parties. This study argues that this can lead to entrenched political divisions and deepen the crack of election violence.

Undoubtedly, the media has an immense influence on voters' electoral decisions based on the content they disseminate throughout election periods (Larsson, 2020). Hence, the focus on many aspects of elections, including candidates' credentials, the freeness and fairness of the electoral process, the distinctiveness of policies, and incidents of violence during election periods, among others, will determine whether voters will vote or choose to abstain (Graham & Schwanholz, 2020; Munoriyarwa, 2020; Ohme et al., 2017). To affirm this standpoint and confirm its feasibility in African electoral contexts, van Baalen (2023) conducted a study in Cote D' Ivoire to examine the consequences of electoral violence on voter turnouts. Conforming to a catalogue of studies on the intersection between electoral violence and voter turnout (Staniland, 2014; von Borzyskowski et al., 2022; Young, 2020), the researcher posits that incidents of electoral violence have an adverse effect on voter turnout, particularly in jurisdictions where the incumbent government holds a stronger position prior to the election. This is due to the minimal motivation for such voters to vote compared to voters in jurisdictions where the opposition enjoys a stronger presence.

The question of how the media covers issues of voter apathy (the unheard third) has been largely marginalized in the literature. Specifically, the kind of coverage Ghanaian media has given to the 2020 general elections and the specific salience it has placed on the unheard third in that election remains primarily unknown. As such, we undertake this study to explore the kind of coverage and the level of salience the print media in Ghana gave to the phenomenon of voter apathy in the 2020 elections to inform media policy direction towards enhanced democratic participation.

Media salience in agenda-setting
Our study analyzes media coverage of voter apathy through the prism of media salience in an agenda-setting. Salience, synonymously referred to in the literature as "importance," has many connections to other fields (Kiousis, 2004). In cognitive psychology, for instance, it is understood as 'the extent to which a stimulus, or referent object in the surrounding situation, stands out from other stimuli, or other aspects of the situation' (Augoustinos et al. 2014: 86). From this perspective, salience is viewed as how an object is depicted as the most important or standing out of other objects in the same stimuli (Kiousis, 2004). In electoral news coverage as a news category (stimuli), one or more news issues (objects), such as voter apathy, rejected ballots, or major and minor political candidates, are emphasized over others.

In agenda-setting literature, three dimensions of media salience are examined: *attention*, *prominence,* and *valence* (Kiousis, 2004). *Attention* is defined as the media's awareness of an

object (news issue), which is gauged through the volume of stories written about that object or the space given to it by the media (Kiousis, 2004; 2011). The sheer number of news stories relative to other media agenda topics is sufficient to determine the salience. *Prominence*, the other determinant of media salience, is defined by the media placement of stories, images, size, pull quotes, and other aesthetic devices (Kiousis, 2004; 2011). In this dimension, position and placement rather than volume determine salience. *Valence* is defined as the affective or emotional attributes of news stories (Kiousis, 2004; 2011). According to Kiousis (2004), researchers look at the amount of conflict in the story, the tone of the story (positive, negative, or neutral), or a combination of all in gauging valence.

Focusing on the salience or importance of newspapers in voter apathy, our study adopted all three dimensions to explore the phenomenon within Ghana's political landscape. For the valence dimension, the study focused on tone rather than conflict. We contend that employing tone in analyzing valence can inform our analysis of media's effectiveness in addressing voter apathy and its potential to influence actual changes in voter behavior, far outweighing the mere reporting of conflicts.

Methodology

Qualitative content analysis was the most suitable research strategy according to the nature of what the researchers set out to know. This design was adopted to analyze news stories beyond the manifest and explore the latent meanings derived from the published news content (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). As argued by Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative designs allow for in-depth and interpretive analysis of content. Data were collected from two major national newspapers in Ghana: The Daily Graphic (state-owned) and Daily Guide (privately owned). The publications examined were from November 7, 2020, to January 7, 2021. Print media was chosen over broadcast media due to the ease and accessibility of the archived data needed for the analysis.

Thus, the researchers visited the Ghana Institutes of Journalism's Richard McMillan Library for all editions of newspapers published within the period. This period was selected because elections were held on December 7th. Therefore, the researchers chose a month before and one month after the elections to understand the intensity of the coverage of the unheard third. These newspapers were selected because they are the two most widely circulated and read in Ghana (Elliott, 2018). The unit of analysis was news articles that focused on presidential elections. Specifically, for a story to be selected for analysis, at least one-third of it must be devoted to election topics. This ensured that the stories were not only fleeting allusions to subject matter.

The data were analyzed using a self-developed coding sheet to manage coding categories. Numerous codes were generated and developed into themes such as free, fair, successful elections, election observation, Presidential inauguration, electoral violence, peace, unity, and stability, John Mahama and the NDC, and Nana Akufo-Addo and the NPP. The remaining themes include minority parties, gratulations and thanksgiving, election petitions, electoral commissions, election results, other dynamics, and the focus of this research, Voter Apathy.

Authenticity and trustworthiness of the study

To guarantee authenticity and trustworthiness, we limited the excess categories coded as 'other dynamics' and changed the coding scheme appropriately in the coding's earliest stages. Before the main analysis, the codebook was shown to the two faculty members at our university. This external authenticity was fulfilled by the degree of coder training and representativeness of the sample data, which is in line with the proposition of Merrigan and Huston (2015). Merrigan and Huston (2015) assert that for researchers to achieve inter-coder trustworthiness, which is the degree to which the findings of a study are replicable by different coders, it is critical to clearly define the units of analysis in that study. An intercoder trustworthiness examination was conducted to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. The colleagues were given a sample of the data (approximately 25%) to code after being taken through the coding guide with the researchers and agreeing on the meaning of each code. The researchers and their colleagues agreed to the subject before the analysis commenced.

Findings

Attention to objects within the stimuli of electoral coverage

Even though the study did not seek to conduct a quantitative analysis of the phenomenon, it was important to present numerical data on the frequency of stories published under the various election-related themes, as presented in *Table 1* below, to answer the attention dimension of the notion of media salience in an agenda-setting. Whereas Kiousis (2004) postulates that *attention* is merely determined by the volume or space given to news issues in the same stimuli (category), our attempt aligns with the position of Kuckartz and Rädiker (2023), who proposed a statistical representation of themes in qualitative content analysis, even though the study may not seek to analyze the content quantitatively. It is important to note that the frequency of a theme is not necessarily equivalent to the number of stories published under the theme but signifies the dominance of that theme in a particular paragraph. In other words, a theme was generated considering the 'focus' of a particular paragraph in a story. This means that more than one theme was likely to be generated from a single news story.

Table 1: Electoral coverage themes generated out of data collected from the Daily Graphic and the Daily Guide newspapers (Authors' creation**).**

Major Themes Generated	Daily Graphic	Daily Guide	Total
John Mahama and the NDC	57	87	144
Nana Akufo-Addo and the NPP	69	67	136
Electoral Commission	30	40	70
Election Results	23	32	55
Other Dynamics	20	30	50
Peace, Unity & Stability	30	12	42
Congratulations & Thanksgiving	22	19	41
Election Petition	22	16	38
Electoral Violence	16	20	36
Presidential Inauguration	15	15	30
Minority Parties	15	9	24
Election Observation	11	3	14
Free, Fair, Successful Elections	7	2	9
Voter Apathy	1	2	3
TOTAL	**338**	**354**	**692**

Table 1 indicates the number of times different objects (news issues) in the electoral coverage stimuli (category) were featured in the two newspapers examined. Collectively, there were 14 objects that featured 692 times within the period analyzed. The most dominant objects were two major political parties and candidates. However, the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) and its candidate John Mahama dominated coverage, followed by the incumbent New Patriotic Party (NPP). Stories about the major political parties and candidates comprised policies, promises, rallies, candidate character and background, endorsements, and controversies, among others. Stories concerning the object of the 'Electoral Commission' also followed suit as one of the subjects that received adequate media attention. The newspapers disseminated information

obtained from the commission's outfit, including press releases, electoral information, polling station conduct, and rejoinders from the commission.

On the object of the 'election results,' the newspapers covered stories about the presidential election results at the constituency, regional, and national levels. This was anticipated since the results of all polls must be made public for the citizenry to examine and evaluate. The object 'other dynamics' refers to stories about election observers, polling agents, ballot snatching attempts, and the pace of the voting process. Stories about the object of 'peace, unity, and stability' during and after the elections, as well as the object of 'congratulations and thanksgiving, ' which entails stories congratulating President-elect Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo on his victory and/or the president-elect thanking the people for his re-election, were all objects under the stimuli of electoral coverage.

Other objects include 'election petitions,' 'electoral violence,' 'presidential inauguration,' 'minority parties,' and 'election observation.' Election petition stories were generally stimulated by the opposition NDC's intention to resolve election grievances through the Ghana Supreme Court. The stories on electoral violence concentrated on election unrest and tensions at some voting centers. The newspapers also paid average attention to the comments of candidates from minority parties. Even so, most of these stories centered on their congratulatory messages to the winner of the election, especially in the Daily Guide. The newspapers also included reports and press statements from election observers and their general election observations.

Nevertheless, stories emphasizing the 'success, freeness, and fairness of the elections' and 'voter apathy' had the lowest attention and completed the last two objects. Voter apathy, the main focus of this study, appeared only three times in the Daily Graphic and Daily Guide reports, with the former recording one and the latter recording two.

Attention to the object of voter apathy
As mentioned above, the two national newspapers did not write extensively about voter apathy. The only story published by Daily Graphic was on the day of the election under the headline "Electoral offences attract up to two years in jail', as depicted in *Figure 1* below. This report, which sought to educate and prepare voters for the election, had a sub-section headlined 'Civic Duty.' This subsection is organized as follows:

> Mrs. Joyce Afutu, the Director of Public Affairs of the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE), encouraged all eligible voters to vote today because of their civic duty. "Your vote is your right, your vote is your power, your vote is secret, she said." (*Daily Graphic story, 07 December 2020*)

Figure 1: Electoral offences attract up to two years in jail (Source: Daily Graphic)

This story emphasized the pronouncements of the Director of Public Affairs of the NCCE, encouraging the citizenry to step out and vote. In other words, the news story conveyed the opposite of voter apathy by encouraging voter turnout.

Although the Daily Guide did not write extensively on voter apathy, it performed relatively better than the Daily Graphic. The newspaper did not cover the problem of voter apathy at the constituency, regional, or national level. However, it published two stories from two polling stations that suggested that about 40% of voters were disinterested in the election and, as such, did not come to vote. Even though the Daily Guide has made an effort to report on voter apathy, the magnitude of the problem of voter apathy should have received more significant attention than published and must not be emphasized only at the level of a polling station. As depicted in Figures 3 and 4 below, both stories were published on election day with the headlines "Residents Boycott Election at Bimbagu South over Lack of Development" and "Low Turnout At My Redeemer School Centre".

Figure 2: Residents Boycott Election At Bimbagu South over Lack of Development (Source: Daily Guide)

Figure 3: Low Turnout At My Redeemer School Centre (Source: Daily Guide)

Prominence of the object of voter apathy

According to Kiousis (2004), a story's prominence as a news value in newspapers is influenced by its placement, size, type, pictures, and other aesthetic tools. For the purposes of this study, we employed these elements in our analysis. We found that the prominence of the object of voter apathy in the two newspapers was low across all elements.

With regard to placement, Daily Graphic gave voters apathy a low level of *prominence* in their only report on the phenomenon. First, as previously mentioned, the news report did not explicitly address voter apathy but its inverse voter turnout. Moreover, the inferred report was only placed under a sub-section of a major news story that addressed the dos and don'ts of electorates. The main story encapsulating the object of voter apathy in Daily Graphic's coverage was also not placed on the pages regarded as the most important in newspaper terms. While pages such as the front page, second page, center page/center-spread, and back page carry the most significant and impactful stories, the story published by the newspaper was situated in other news holes within the newspaper that did not wield relative significance. The situation is not very different in the Daily Guide report. Even though the stories explicitly and wholistically addressed voter apathy, they were placed on pages that wielded less prominence.

The element of size is equally important in a prominent conversation. In most instances, specifically within the Ghanaian newspaper landscape, the body of the news stories is written in the same font size across all stories. However, the size of the headlines differs depending on the level of importance the newspaper may give to the story. Hence, the size of news headlines is best suited for determining prominence. The size of a story's headline is crucial because it directly affects the visibility and perceived significance of the story to readers. Important stories, such as those dominating the front or back pages or prominently featured in a section, are more likely to capture the interest of readers than stories hidden deep within the newspaper. Beyond the page's importance, the headlines of stories featured in such prominent pages are usually written in larger font sizes than those written deep within the newspaper. In the context of the object of voter apathy examined, all stories were written in the least size for a headline, since they were featured on less prominent pages of both newspapers, signifying a low level of prominence.

Pictures, another element that determines prominence, can greatly influence a story's visibility by capturing readers' interests and offering a visual depiction of the news, which can enhance the reader's engagement and recollection of the story as a whole. Undoubtedly, a captivating picture may capture readers' attention towards a certain story, regardless of their level of interest in the topic. All three stories of voter apathy were accompanied by pictures, indicating a certain degree of prominence attributed to this criterion. Thus, the analysis focused on whether the pictures accurately conveyed the story. The pictures accompanying the topic of voter apathy in the two newspapers were indeterminate depictions of the situation, signifying a neutral degree of prominence using this criterion. In the Daily Graphic, the story was accompanied by a picture of the Director of the NCCE. While the picture accompanying a story on voter apathy would naturally

portray individuals not casting ballots, the situation in Daily Graphic can be justified because the story's focus was on the NCCE's efforts to promote voter turnout. In the case of the Daily Guide, the first story addressed the residents' decision to abstain from participating in the election, as shown by the accompanying picture of an unused ballot box bereft of any electorate. The second story focused on low voter participation at a polling centre and included a picture as evidence of a few voters showing up to cast their votes.

Under the story-type criterion, the findings indicate that both news portals accorded voter apathy less prominence because the stories were straight news and sub-sections under straight news. Amanor-Ofori's (2019) findings argued that stories in the category of straight news are regarded as less prominent, given that straight news is mostly gathered from routine sources. Amanor-Ofori (2019) posited that features and other analytical stories require journalists to use their enterprising skills to develop the story and, therefore, show a keener interest in covering an issue, making those stories highly prominent.

Valence (tone) of the object of voter apathy

The third dimension of salience is *valence*, which refers to the emotive or affective aspects of a news story and may be assessed by analyzing the story's positive, negative, or neutral tone (Kiousis, 2004; 2011). In reporting on voter apathy, a positive approach might emphasize the media's strategies, such as voter education features, that encourage voter participation. The purpose of this tone of media reportage is to encourage and stimulate readers to engage in the democratic process, presenting voting as a significant and powerful civic obligation. This was the scenario in the Daily Graphic, to a certain degree. Despite the newspaper's failure to implement measures to decrease voter apathy, its coverage focused only on the NCCE's call for voter participation.

Conversely, a neutral tone may objectively provide facts and figures about voter participation, without using excessively positive or negative language. The purpose of this tone may be to provide readers with information regarding the subject of voter apathy without any intention to influence or change their beliefs or attitudes, such as the examination of historical patterns in voter turnout, the comparative evaluation of voter participation rates across various regions, and the solicitation of insights from experts in voting behavior via interviews. In this study, we found that the coverage of the two newspapers did not align with their tone of neutrality.

Finally, a negative tone may underscore the challenges and barriers associated with low voter participation. The purpose of this tone may be to highlight the gravity of the situation and encourage readers to reflect on the consequences of widespread voter apathy. Negative reporting may include stories about the causes and impact of voter apathy on the democratic process and appeals for proactive measures to tackle them. Both stories of the Daily Guide can be classified in this category. Although the Daily Guide was not too critical or overly negative, it emphasized the gravity of voter apathy at the electoral area level. It described the situation in two voting centers, discussing the factors contributing to it, and projecting how it would impact the candidates' results.

Beyond the mere encouragement of the citizenry to exercise their civic rights in the case of the Daily Graphic and the somewhat negative reportage of voter apathy at the electoral level, print media outlets did not direct their focus on the effects of voter apathy on the general outcome of elections, especially how the phenomenon can contribute to lower levels of participatory democracy.

Discussions

The main aim of this study was to determine the salience of Ghanaian print media on the object of voter apathy (unheard third) in the 2020 presidential election compared to all other election-related topics. Media salience in agenda-setting theory and its dimensions of attention, prominence, and valence aided this analysis. Regarding the dimension of attention, we found that the most prevailing stories focused on two major political parties and their candidates. This finding is unsurprising because the focus on political parties or candidates in media coverage of elections cannot be ignored (Araújo & Prior, 2020; Dahmen, 2020; Scott, 2023). We discovered a minimal degree of print media attention across both newspapers on the object of voter apathy in the 2020 presidential elections in Ghana. While the state-owned Daily Graphic did not write extensively on voter apathy, the privately owned Daily Guide published two stories from two electoral areas on the unheard third. The phenomenon was also not prominently featured in any of the two newspapers in the criteria of story placement, story size, and story type. The only high degree of prominence was determined by the pictures accompanying the stories. In terms of tone, the state-owned print media Daily Graphic was somewhat positive in their language, while the privately owned Daily Guide was quite negative. The Daily Guide's negative tone may not be surprising, since voter apathy carries negative connotations.

Our findings indicate that the vibrancy of print media in Ghana during elections gives little salience to efforts to increase democratic participation through voting. Although Vergne (2011) argues that newspaper circulation and television ownership have little positive effect on voter turnout because radio set ownership reduces the cost of acquiring and processing information, researchers believe that the justification for newspapers to ignore voter apathy is not overly strong. This is supported by the argument that news information can be transferred across various forms of media (Al-Rawi & Groshek, 2023; Sikanku, 2014) and that in the Ghanaian mediascape, broadcast media rely heavily on print for daily morning and evening discussions (Thompson & Yeboah, 2013). Similarly, the minimal salience to voter apathy contrasts with the assertion of Devor and Smith (2020), who suggest that the media, politicians, and activists gaslight the citizenry by talking about the phenomenon of voter apathy over the decades and attributing it to people who do not understand the value of their individual electoral participation. Devor and Smith (2020) argue that the phrase voter apathy overlooks more than 200 years of voter suppression and places responsibility on individuals rather than institutions, politicians, and an electoral process that makes voting difficult and, for some, meaningless.

Moreover, the overly emphasized media freedom in Ghana and the trumpeted ability of the citizenry to access information from the media (Diedong, 2020) did not substantially change the

immense voter apathy situation and its reportage, as argued by Vergne (2011). In Vergne's (2011) argument, the freedom, penetration, and accessibility of the media foster voter turnout. Similarly, Leeson (2008) and Lee (2017) suggested that a lack of media freedom is significantly associated with poor political knowledge, low political engagement, and low voter turnout.

Conclusion

Media plays an important role in the democratic framework of every country, and this includes strategically focusing on stories and framing them in a manner that induces positive voter behavior and participatory democracy. This was not the case in Ghana, as our findings revealed that two of the major national newspapers gave minimal salience to the phenomenon of voter apathy and rather largely concentrated on other objects within the electoral reporting stimuli or category.

We argue that African democratic regimes have disadvantageous dynamics such as high illiteracy rates, high dependency ratios, volatile political landscapes, and monopoly or duopoly in governance. Therefore, the need to strengthen democratic participation should not be less privileged. A lack of media attention to voter apathy only entrenches the deprivation of information and a lack of motivation for citizenry during elections. The implication is that only a few will be empowered to make voting decisions on behalf of marginalized masses, negating the essence of democracy. Furthermore, the desired media attention to voter apathy may eradicate the dominance of single or dual political parties and reduce the autocratic nature of democratic regimes in Africa.

Given the above assertions, there is an urgent need for managers and editors of media houses in Ghana and Africa to revise their election coverage policies to ensure equitable coverage of all issues of public concern during elections. In particular, attention and prominence should be given to voter apathy, given its significant influence on positive electoral behavior and the outcome of elections in general. Beyond the call for significant coverage of voter apathy, the media is responsible for educating citizens extensively on the value of voting in an election and how their participation can heavily shape the outcome of the elections. This is because previous studies have shown that when electorates do not understand the value of voting, they refuse to turn out and vote (Oyedemi & Mahlatji, 2016).

Limitations and recommendations for future research

As with every scientific endeavor, this study is not a bereft of limitations. The most prominent limitation of this study is its focus on print news outfits as opposed to broadcasting news outfits. As these two outfits vary in terms of the frequency of news bulletins and width of news coverage, future studies may focus on broadcasting media to see if they present different dynamics from our findings.

Again, the study period, which was a month before and after the elections, may serve as a limitation to this study. Although this period was chosen because it presents the period for the highest media coverage intensity, future studies may focus on some months before the election for a more protracted analysis.

Moreover, the findings of this study indicate that the media has been overtly apathetic towards stories of voter apathy. Although this is a sufficient finding for the parameters of this study, future studies can explore why journalists have given less salience to the phenomenon in the coverage of election issues. Future studies can also focus on the factors influencing story choice.

Finally, future studies can consider expanding this study to other jurisdictions that may pose different socio-cultural and socio-political dynamics from those of Ghana to see if the phenomenon is handled differently by the media.

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