

# The Influence of Kenyan Presidential Debate on Voter's Choice: A Case Study of 2013 General Election

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## Abstract

One of the main functions of the mass media is to inform and educate citizenry about all aspects of human undertaking which includes their political life. Hence, in most democracies, political communication, which utilizes the media, has become indisputably relevant. In Kenya also, where the mass media is used in creating political awareness among electorate, politicians continually use it for similar purpose. For the first time in history, Kenya staged two live televised presidential debates on 11<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2013. On this basis, the study sought to establish the impact of Kenyan presidential debates during 2013 election on voter's choice. The significant concern of this research was that the Kenyan television news, including the presidential debate, had not been sufficiently objective and balanced in dissemination of election information, which contributed to poor voting decisions. The study aimed at describing the role played by the Kenyan Presidential debates in changing voter's choice. The study targeted media consumers who are also registered voters consisting of individuals drawn from Nairobi County. The researcher used multi-stage sampling in selecting the respondents. Telephone-based interview was used as a data collection tool. Quantitative data was analyzed through the use of descriptive statistics. The study findings revealed that Kenyan Presidential debate played a role by changing the voter's choice and that the presidential debate served as a source of civic education. Concerning the results of the first and second presidential debates, the research concluded that voters already had predetermined choices and most of them believed their preferred candidates had won the debate.

## Introduction

The relationship between mass media and political participation, especially electoral activities, has attracted much concern in political science and in mass communication. The news media play a central role in the functioning of modern democracies. (Miller and Shanks, 1996). Presidential debates are a less formal means of civic education, and there is some evidence that informal participation in extracurricular political activities are correlated with increased interest and political participation levels (Mike, 2002). Even though evidence shows that debates rarely changes a voter's choice directly, many studies find that watching the

debates facilitates viewers' knowledge of issues (Benoit, McKinney, and Stephenson 2002). Other studies claim debates may have a big influence on those who do not identify with major parties and claim that viewers are unable to avoid exposure to viewpoints that clash with their own worldview (Kenski and Stroud 2005). In 1966, the debates between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole seemed to have little impact on voter choice. In 2008, surveys consistently found that Barack Obama was perceived as the winner in his debates with John McCain. Obama maintained a clear lead in the polls throughout the campaign and went on to win the election (Dominick, 2011).

Kenya held its first ever historical televised Presidential Debate on 11<sup>th</sup> February 2013 and second on 25<sup>th</sup> of the same month. The debate provided the Kenyan population an opportunity to watch the eight presidential candidates (Uhuru Kenyatta, Raila Odinga, Musalia Mudavadi, Peter Kenneth, Martha Karua, Prof James ole Kiyiapi, Mohammed Dida and Paul Muite) engage as they sought to convince the over 14 million voters that they were the best man or woman to succeed President Kibaki after March 4<sup>th</sup> 2013. Considering that potential voters receive most of their information about politics from the news media, the study sought to examine whether the Presidential debates influenced voter's decision-making in March 2013.

### **Objective**

To describe the role played by the Kenyan Presidential debate in changing voter's choice.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Role of presidential debates**

Many Americans watch the series of televised presidential and vice presidential debates a little more closely than other election year content. One reason is that the debates serve as a purportedly neutral source for reliable information (Abramowitz, 1978). Additionally, debates offer voters the opportunity to hear and see candidates' comments in their entirety and live from their own lips. Ideally, the debate represents the most "unbiased" type of political content because it is not edited by any third parties and it allows all candidates to address questions posed to them at the same time and under the same circumstances (Salant, 1970). As Salant writes after the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates, "[Television and radio] have provided a direct link between politician and public; they have permitted voters to see and hear for themselves first-hand, without having to rely on the filter of a newspaper reporter whose selection of what and how to report, whose impressions and choice of words are necessarily his own" (Salant, 1970).

### **Kenya's Presidential debate influence on viewer's preferred candidates**

For the first time in history, Kenyans had the opportunity to see their preferred presidential candidate take the podium apart from the campaign to discuss real issues affecting people's lives. They were broadcast live on eight Kenyan televisions and in 32 radio stations. It was moderated by Julie Gichuru of Citizen Television and Linus Kaikai of NTV. The second and final presidential debate was moderated by Citizen TV's Uduak Amimo and KTN's Joe Ageyo. The organizers of the event were Kenyan media executives.

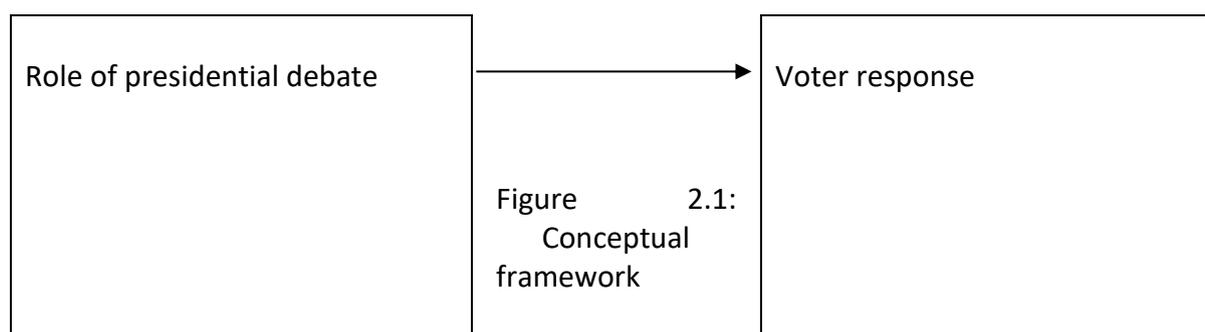
After the coverage of the first presidential debate, different opinion polls conducted research to find out the debate influence on viewer's preferred candidates. According to an opinion poll done by Consumer Insight, many of those who watched the debate said it was "very

useful” with a full 92% saying it helped them understand the candidates better. In telephone interviews of 328 TV viewers conducted immediately after the debate, also ranked the candidates on how they performed in specific issues (Mayoyo and Muindi, Daily Nation, February 13, 2013). “Indeed 34% of the TV viewers said the debate had influenced them to change their choice of presidential candidate,” said Mr. Ndirangu Maina, the Managing Director of Consumer Insight. According to an opinion poll carried out by Ipsos Synovate, 40% of those interviewed say they would vote for Mr. Kenyatta if elections were held then with Cord candidate Raila Odinga trailing him by 7% points.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

**Independent variable**

**Dependent variable**



The framework in figure 2.1 illustrates the relationship between the presidential debate and voting choices. Independent variables act as the "cause" in that they precede, influence, and predict the dependent variable. Media is one of the most common channels of communication to voters as it allows political parties and candidates to reach wide audiences. The figures show that presidential debate which are aired by news media serve a role which influences the voters to make informed voting choice thereby turning out to vote. Presidential debates, which are part of news, contribute into influencing of voter’s electoral preferences.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

**Research Design**

The researcher employed exploratory research design in carrying out the study. Exploratory research is conducted into an issue or problem where there are few or no earlier studies to refer to for information about the problem. Exploratory design was used since few studies have been carried on how Kenyan presidential debates shape people’s electoral preferences.

**Target population**

The population of interest in this study was Nairobi county media consumers who are also registered voters. The research was conducted in Nairobi because it’s a cosmopolitan city since it embraces multicultural demographics and it also consists of the highest media consumers and registered voters. According to Independent Electoral Boundaries Commission (IEBC), Nairobi recorded the highest number (1,378,668) of the votes that were cast in the presidential election, resulting to 81.6% of the voter turnout. This enriched the diversity of the responses from the respondents.

**Sampling procedure**

This entails selecting a few individuals from a target population. The researcher conducted telephone-based interviews. Once the list of the Nairobi residents was obtained, multistage sampling design was employed to select the respondents. Multistage sampling refers to

sampling plans where sampling is carried out in stages using smaller and smaller sampling units at each stage (Singh, 2006). As such, the first stage was to select the large primary sampling units, which were the constituencies, and thereafter respondents were selected from each County ward. This led to a two-stage sampling design with the ultimate sampling units being constituencies in Nairobi County.

Respondents from secondary units were selected from the list at random and then every  $k^{\text{th}}$  element in the frame is selected, where  $k$ , the sampling interval. This is calculated as:

$$k = \frac{N}{n}$$

Where  $n$  is the sample size, and  $N$  is the population size.

The sampling interval was therefore 4,997 after dividing the entire population (1,778,903) from the sample size (356). Therefore, a particular subject was taken at random and then every 4997<sup>th</sup> individual in the frame was taken. When the sample was selected, it represented the entire population, since multistage sampling falls under the probability sampling.

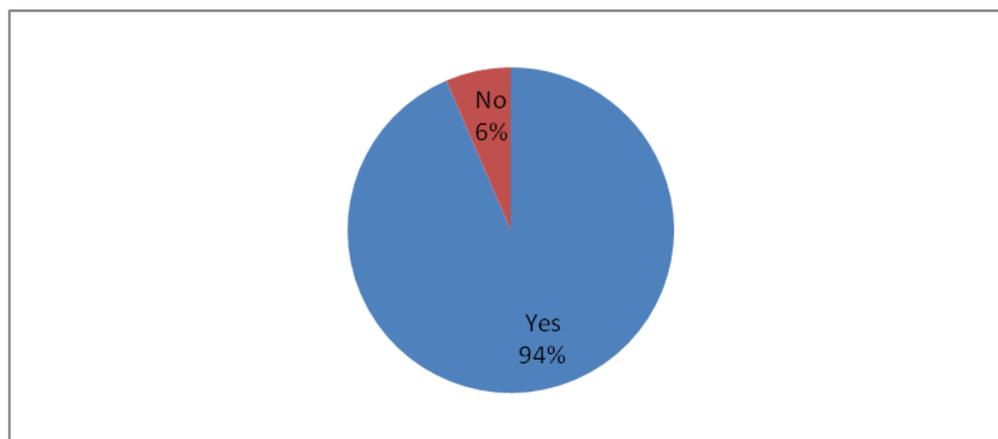
#### **Sample size**

A sample size needed to be representative of the views of an entire population. Gallup, which is a leading pollster in the United States, a sample size of 1,000 representatives always yields acceptable results when representing a population of over 5,000,000 people. In line with the suggestions made by Gallup, a leading pollster in the United States, this research interviewed the target population using the ratio of one person represents 5,000 individuals as derived from their analysis. According to IEBC, Nairobi had 1,778,903 registered voters during the 2013 general election. The researcher used a sample size consisting of 356 randomly selected individuals from all the constituencies in Nairobi County.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### ***Watching of the live Kenyan Presidential debates held in February***

Here, the researcher sought to know whether the respondents watched the 2013 presidential debate held in February. The figure below shows the results obtained



**Figure 4.1 Watching of the live Kenyan Presidential debates**

Figure 4.1 above, shows that 94% of the respondents watched live the Kenyan presidential debates while 6% of the respondents did not watch. Those who failed to watch said that there were busy elsewhere and others complained of electricity black out

#### **Role played by presidential debate**

On this question, the respondents responded to different statements to the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each of the statements. The results were as follows.

**Table 4.1 Role played by presidential debate in changing voters' decision-making**

	SA	A	D	SD
Frequency/(Percentage) Statement	F / (%)	F / (%)	F / (%)	F / (%)
Provision of knowledge of the policy positions of the candidates	106 (29.73%)	193 (54.21%)	39 (10.96%)	18 (5.06%)
Form of civic education	83 (23.31%)	187 (52.53%)	69 (13.38%)	17 (4.78%)
Form of entertainment; political advertisement	36 (10.11%)	94 (26.40%)	153 (42.98%)	73 (20.51%)
Reassuring tool to voter's about candidates commitment of serving the public	81 (22.75%)	172 (48.21%)	69 (19.38%)	34 (9.55%)
A forum of political campaign to popularize their manifestos	134 (37.64%)	188 (52.81%)	21 (5.90%)	13 (3.65%)

On the provision of knowledge of the policy positions of the candidates, 29.73% of the respondents strongly agreed, 54.21%, 10.96% and 5.06% agreed, disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. Typically, the results indicate that the presidential debate played a role in the provision of knowledge of the policy position of the candidates.

On whether it is a form of civic education, 23.31% strongly agreed while 52.53% agreed. On the other hand, 13.38% disagreed while 4.78% strongly disagreed as to whether the presidential debate was a form of civic education. On average, a good number of the respondents agreed that the presidential debate served as a source of civic education.

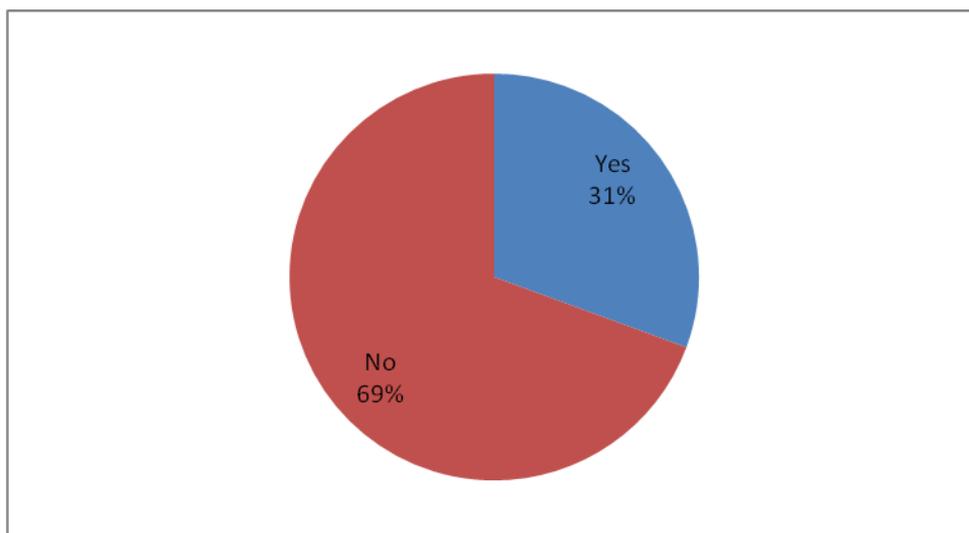
On the whether the debate was a form of entertainment and political advertisement, 10.11% of the respondents strongly agreed, 26.40% agreed while 42.98% and 20.51% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. On average, most of the respondents disagreed that the presidential debate was a form of entertainment even though some of the respondents agreed it was entertaining to some extent.

With regards as to whether the debate was a reassuring tool about the candidate's commitment of serving the public, 22.75% of the respondents strongly agreed, 48.21% agreed while 19.38% and 9.55% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. On the average, a good number of the respondents agreed that the presidential debate was a reassuring tool about the candidate's commitment to serving the public.

As to whether the debate was a forum of political campaign to popularize their manifestos, 37.64% of the respondents strongly agreed while 52.81% agreed. 5.90% and 3.65 disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. Typically, majority of the respondents agreed that the presidential debate served as a forum of political campaign to popularize their manifestos.

### ***Influence of voting preferences***

On these, the research sought to establish whether the respondents voting preferences were influenced after watching the presidential debate. The results obtained are presented by the figure below,



**Figure 4.2 Influence of voting preferences after watching the presidential debate**

As to whether the presidential debate influenced the voters voting preferences, 69% were of the contra opinion while 31% agree to the fact that the debate influenced their voting preferences. Characteristically, a majority of the respondents voting preferences were not influenced after watching the presidential debate.

**Reasons for influence of voting preference**

Here, the researcher sought to establish the reasons behind the change of the respondents voting preference. The respondents were allowed to answer to the several questions thereof. The results were as follows,

**Table 4.2 Reasons for influence of the respondents voting preference**

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Pre-debate attitudes toward the candidates influenced your debate evaluations	141	39.61%
Your evaluations regarding the debate was affected by general campaign involvement	275	77.24%

Watching a primary debate enhanced your knowledge of the policy positions of the candidates	313	87.92%
Watching the debate changed the confidence level in vote preference	104	29.52%
Debate conversations affected your debate evaluations	137	38.48%

According to table 4.9, 87.92% of the respondents believed that watching a primary debate enhanced your knowledge of the policy positions of the candidates, 77.24% believed that their evaluations regarding the debate was affected by general campaign involvement. Additionally, 39.61% were of the opinion that pre-debate attitudes toward the candidates influenced your debate evaluations. Further, 38.48% held that debate conversations affected debate evaluations while 29.52% said that watching the debate changed the confidence level in vote preference. Typically, this results show that watching a primary debate enhanced respondents knowledge of the policy positions of the candidates and their evaluations regarding the debate was affected by general campaign involvement, which had the highest percentages respectively. The results also indicated that pre-debate attitudes toward the candidates influenced debate evaluations and watching the debate changed the confidence level of the voters' preference.

### Conclusions

On the implications of the study, the researcher concludes that the research will add more to the existing knowledge. The researcher noted that little knowledge existed concerning presidential debates mostly in the Kenyan context, as the phenomenon was new. As such, much information on the Kenyan presidential debate was sourced from newspapers; media prints individual opinion pages and opinion poll analysis. The major implication and significance of this study is that it form a basis for other researchers who are interested in the study topic. Based on the study findings the researcher concludes that the study results matches with other study findings. In this regard, the study matches with individual expert opinion, media reports and opinion polls like Ipsos Synovate, Consumer Insight.

On the role played by the Kenyan presidential debate in changing voter's choice the researcher concludes that the presidential debate played different roles ranging from education, knowledge provision and other important aspects about the presidential candidates but on overage it did not influence the voters choice of candidates. However, its marginal impact cannot be fully ignored as it had a little impact on a few who claimed to be influenced. On average, the researcher concludes that in Kenya the presidential debate was more of an educative tool but not an influential factor.

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