

## Newspaper Coverage of Voter Safety during the 2019 General Election in Nigeria

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### Abstract

*This study investigated newspaper coverage of voter safety during the 2019 general election in Nigeria. A total of four newspapers were studied. They are Punch, The Guardian, Leadership and Daily Trust. The duration of this study was November 2018 to April 2019. The study was guided by five objectives, five research questions and four hypotheses. Content analysis was used for the study with the code sheet as the instrument for data collection. Simple percentages were used to answer the research questions while the chi-square test of independence was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The newspapers examined gave less frequency to the issue of voter safety during the 2019 general election. This is because only 21% of the issues had stories on voter safety. It was also found that most of the key actors mentioned in newspaper stories related to voter safety were politicians or government officials. The prominence of coverage was also found to be poor with only 29% of the stories found on the front page. Volume of coverage was also found to be poor as 52.2% of the stories were on half page while only 19% were on full page. In view of the findings, the researcher recommends that newspapers should improve in their coverage of voter safety during elections.*

**Keywords:** coverage; election, newspaper, Nigeria; voter; safety

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### Introduction

The campaign period is a very sensitive one in election coverage because the voters need to have full information of the different political candidates. Min (2004) says that media coverage of political campaigns play essential roles in influencing voter behaviour. Min adds, however, that voters usually prefer issue-based coverage to personality centred coverage. Mondak (1995) avers that most of what voters know about political candidates during elections are dependent on media coverage. During electioneering campaigns, political parties make efforts to communicate their policies and programmes to the voters. Magaloni (2006) opines that political parties in democracies across the world put much effort and resources into election campaigns. It is the views of politicians that election campaigns plays essential role in determining their performance at the polls. In representative democracies, the voter is at the centre of almost all election-related activities. However, considering the volatile nature of electioneering campaigns, safety is often a critical concern of voters. Nigeria as a country has a history of violence in its electoral process. Onwudiweand Berwind-Dart (2010) note that there are varying degrees of electoral violence in each election year in Nigeria. Verjee, Kwaja, and Onubogu (2018) say that in Nigeria, all of the elements of Timothy Sisk's

expansive definition of electoral-related violence have occurred. These elements that make election unsafe include acts or threats of coercion, intimidation, or physical harm perpetrated to affect an electoral process or that arise in the context of electoral competition. Birch and Muchlinski (2017) opine that when violence is carried out to affect an electoral process, it may be employed to influence the process of elections—such as efforts to delay, disrupt, or derail a poll—and to influence the outcomes: the determining of winners in competitive races for political office. Verjee, *et al* add that Nigeria's history of electoral violence is, an unfortunately accepted fact of life, and cannot be viewed in isolation from the many social and economic inequalities, ethnic and religious divisions, and structural weaknesses such as corruption and weak state capacity. They further reveal that while many conventional risks of election violence endure, including the willingness (or not) of candidates to accept the results, the use and abuse of state power to unfairly favour incumbents, and the ease with which young people can be mobilized toward violence, a simplistic narrative that violence is ever present and inevitable obscures important contextual changes in Nigeria since 2015 and up to 2019.

The 2019 general elections did not fair better, as the major contenders and their parties employed violence as a strategy to influence the outcome of the election. Many lives were lost and property were destroyed. It follows from the above that in almost every election year, since independence, electoral violence has become part and parcel of the Nigerian electoral process. Scores of people have lost their lives to electoral violence, and property worth millions of naira have been destroyed (CLEEN 2019).

Electoral violence have negative implications on the electoral system. It discourages voters from going out to cast their vote while also impacting negatively on the credibility of election results. Systematic studies of the impact of electoral violence on electoral participation show a negative association between the two. A cross-sectional study revealed that voters who have experienced threats of election violence at the polls were less likely to vote in Nigeria (Bratton, 2013, p. 129). A cross-national study also found the same globally (Norris, 2014, p. 143). In this case, it can be argued that electoral violence is used by the incumbent to prevent the opposition supporters from turning out (Hafner-Burton *et al.*, 2014). The critical point to note here is that electoral violence has a significant negative impact on democracy. Nigeria's electoral act recognizes the centrality of voters in the election process. Nigeria's electoral Act 2018 (as amended) also stipulates that the safety of voters is essential and should be guaranteed. It is based on the above background that the current study sought to examine newspaper coverage of issues related to the safety of 2019 general elections in Nigeria.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Nigeria faces the problem of ensuring peaceful conducts of elections. As a result, during each election year, cases of violent attacks come up. Although literature exists on media coverage of elections, such studies do not pay attention to safety. The 2019 general election is of particular interest because of the type of conflict that the electioneering campaigns generated. During the elections, tension rose and some areas were even identified as flashpoint. A study of media coverage voter safety during the 2019 general election is essential because it will provide empirical evidence regarding the contribution of the media in creating awareness on the importance of voter safety during an election. It will also provide empirical evidence that may be useful to journalists and media practitioners alike. Hence the need for the current study.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of this study was to determine newspaper coverage of voter safety during the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. The specific objectives were to:

- determine the frequency of newspaper coverage of voter safety during the 2019 general elections.
- ascertain the prominence newspapers gave to stories on voter safety during the 2019 general elections.

- determine the volume of newspaper stories on voter safety during the 2019 general elections.
- ascertain the main actors in newspaper stories on voter safety during the 2019 general elections in Nigeria
- examine the tone of newspaper coverage of voter safety during the 2019 general election in Nigeria.

## Literature review

### The Media and election Coverage

Elections have been seen as the major feature of democracy to the extent that not only is it impossible to imagine a democratic regime without elections (Nnadozie, 2007) but also there is now a real risk of confusing the holding of regular, reasonably competitive and transparent elections with democracy (Hounkpe&Gueye, 2010). Oyesomi and Oyero (2012, p. 137) opine that an election is a formal decision-making process by which a population chooses an individual to hold public office. Elections have been the usual mechanism by which modern representative democracies operate since the 17th Century (Oyesomi&Oyero 2012).

An election is a cardinal ingredient of democracy. It offers the electorate the opportunity to decide those that will govern them. Election has been defined by Oyesomi and Oyero 2012(2012) as a process through which the people choose their leaders and indicate their policies and programme preference and consequently invest a government with authority to rule. They see election as one of the means by which a society may organize itself and make specified formal decisions, adding that where voting is free, it acts simultaneously as a system for making certain decisions regarding the power relations in a society, and a method for seeking political obedience with a minimum of sacrifice of the individual's freedom. Eya (2003) however, sees election as the selection of a person or persons for office as by ballot and making choice as between alternatives. Ozor (2009) succinctly gives a more encompassing and comprehensive definition of election when he noted that the term connotes the procedure through which qualified adult voters elect their politically preferred representatives to parliament legislature of a county (or any other public positions) for the purpose of forming and running the government of the country. Elections, according to him extend and enhance the amount of popular participation in the political system. The simple implication here is that, the nature of journalist's coverage of election is thus, a subject of interest to the general public and indeed, scholars. It is not a misplaced expectation since the media is expected to disseminate truthful, factual and accurate information on the election process in line with its responsibility as the watch dog of the society." Nigerian journalists have a responsibility to cover elections in such a way that the general public will be properly guided in their decision making process. Journalists need to educate Nigerians on the manifestos of the various candidates and their political parties. The public need to know what the politicians have for the electorates. United Nations Development Programme (2014, p.11) summarizes the role of the media in election thus:

The media has a very influential role in the conduct of elections and its outcome. In addition to providing information to the voters needed for them to make an informed choice and providing a platform for candidates to reach the public, the media can set the agenda for the process through the topics it covers, questions it asks and tone of its coverage. In addition, many electoral campaigns are often won or lost in the media through the way the candidate or issue is portrayed and the volume of increasingly expensive political advertisements.

The submission above provides insight power of the media during elections.

### Challenges to Journalists' coverage of elections

Journalists often face many challenges in a bid to cover elections. Odio and Muhammed-Nasiru (2010) outline the challenges faced by journalists in election coverage as follows: lack of will power to free

themselves from partisan politics during political process. This happens even in government owned media as they cannot be exonerated from this issue of bias reporting during election, because as the saying, goes, 'he who pays the piper dictates the tune.'

Another major challenge that confronts journalists is self - serving politicians that want to use media stations such as radio or television to stir political friction. Some media owners sometimes violate the rules of political broadcast by denying others access to their air waves. These are some of the problems the journalists may grapple with in the execution of their duties. Good example are the documentaries of character assassination against the then presidential candidate of the all Progressives Congress (now president) Mohammendu Buhari by the African Independent Television during the 2011 presidential election campaign. The incidence of the African Independent Television (AIT) goes to show that media ownership could also interfere with the activities of journalists.

Media ownership has had some considerable number of influences on the operation of media organizations in Nigeria. Olijó (2015) found that media ownership and political affiliation influence media contents. Even when there are competent media professionals, they are never given free hands to operate because of the monopolistic nature of such a media by the owners. Udeajah (2004,p.301) emphasized that "this perhaps explains such" incident of October, 7,1994 when two television journalists, EmekaObinwa and Charles Igboamah of the NTA, Enugu were sacked for asking Chukwumerije, the former information secretary, what was termed an embarrassing question in an interview. This is one out of the numerous problems and persecutions faced by journalists and media workers from the ownership spectrum.

Another vital area of the challenges of the media in electron coverage is lack of freedom of access to vital information. Upholding this view, Udeajah (2004, p.30) observes that "at times, the ruling class limited the information flow and this prevented journalists from accessing the information". But as it is, this is contrary to the ethics of the profession as journalists who are representatives of the people are always poised not only to report issues but to expose government's hidden agenda which may be of public interest.

Apart from the above enumerated problems which tend to hinder media practitioners from performing their constitutional role, the most challenging problem for the journalist is how to manage the influence of money. Keghku (2003, p.40) frowns at the corruption which seems to have marred the journalist from objective reporting when he writes that: "The brown envelope syndrome is perhaps the most eloquent evidence that journalists accept gratification in the course of their duties." Also important is the safety of journalists on election duty Arogundade, Gaber and Oakeshott (2001) aver that safety is one of the challenges that journalists face in a bid to discharge their duties creditably. The 2015 general election witnessed a fierce competition more than ever before. The fierce competition was more pronounced in the presidential contest

The fierce contest by the PDP and the APC alone was enough to exert pressure on the journalists as both political parties greatly used the media to achieve their political goals. This is not to talk of other political parties like Hope Party, KOWA party, All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) among others that also featured candidates. This study therefore seeks to investigate obstacles to journalists' objectivity in the coverage of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria.

### **Theoretical framework**

Agenda setting theory was used in this study. The theory originated from a 1922 book written by Walter Lippmann with the title *Public Opinion*. Lippmann in the opening of the book had painted a picture of a 1914 scenario in which a few Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans lived in an Island with no cable access, but got to know of a British mail steamer that usually circulated once in every sixty days. However, it happened that in the month of September, the mail steamer was yet to visit, but the islanders were still discussing the latest newspaper which its content was about the forth coming trial of Madame Caillaux for the shooting of Gaston Calmette. Lippmann narrated further that the people conglomerated with high expectations on a

day in mid-September to know from the captain what the judgment had been. They realized that for over six weeks, those of them who were English and those of them who were French had been fighting on behalf of the sanctity of treaties against those of them who were Germans. Lippmann then asserted that for six consecutive weeks, they had behaved as though they were friends, when they were not. By this explanation, Lippmann had painted a picture of the power of the media in setting agenda for the public. The inhabitants of the island did not act as enemies because of their ignorance of what was happening. Although Lippmann did not specifically mention agenda setting power of the media, he provided a sketch in this regards. Lippmann had attributed the images in the minds of the public to media contents (Gever& Coleman, 2017; Gever, 2015;McCombs, Maxwell & Shaw, Donald 1974; McCombs, 1993; McGrawHill& McCombs, 2005). Also, Cohen (1963, p.13) avers that “the media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.” Soroka (2003) posits that Cohen’s assertion remains the clearest and most frequently cited annunciation of the public agenda-setting hypothesis. A clear postulation of the agenda setting theory was done by McCombs and Shaw after a 1972 study among 100 undecided voters in Chapel Hill to determine the correlation between voters’ agenda and media agenda. The result showed a significant correlation between media content and issue agenda. This theory was used in this study because it offers a framework for understanding the role of the media in setting agenda on voter safety.

## **Methodology**

In this study, the researcher made use of quantitative content analysis. The choice of content analysis was because the aim of the study required that the researcher examined media contents on the 2019 general elections.

## **Population of the Study**

The population for the study was made up of all the newspapers in Nigeria. The International Media Newspapers (2016) says there are a total of 28 national dailies in Nigeria.

## **Sample size**

The sample size for the study was made up of 724 issues of the selected newspapers. The newspapers are *Punch*, *Leadership*, *Daily Trust* and *The Guardian*. These newspapers were selected to ensure a balance between the north and the South. While the first two are owned by people from Southern Nigeria, the latter two are owned by their counterparts from the North. The duration of this study was 1 November 2018 to 30April 2019. This leads to 181 issues per newspaper. This period was chosen because it marked the time when INEC officially lifted ban on campaigns in Nigeria. This means the duration for the study was 6 months.

## **Sampling Technique**

Hence the duration is short, the researcher made use of census sampling to select all the newspaper stories that related to safety of the 2019 general election. The unit of analysis will be the article, which included news, editorials, columns, opinions, and letters.

The elements below under contents category was coded as follows:

### **1. Media**

The newspapers that were analysed were coded thus:

A.(1) *The Punch*

A (2) *Guardian*

A (3) *Leadership*

A (4) *Daily Trust*

2. Frequency This looked at how often or regularity of appearance of the stories in the newspapers

### 3. Actors in media stories on the safety of 2019 general elections

In this category, the researcher determined the actors that are reported in the media on stories related to the safety of 2019 general elections

**Politicians:** These are people who are career politicians.

**Government officials:** These are people who are political office holders.

**Voters:** These are people who qualify to vote during an election

**Political analysts:** These are people who analyse political issues.

**Others:** Actors that did not belong to any of the above categories.

#### 1. Prominence

Here, the researcher determined the importance attached to stories on the safety of voters as shown below:

E. (1) Front page

E(2) Back page

E(3) Centre spread

E(4) Inside page

#### Volume of coverage

The essence here was to determine amount of space accorded to stories on the safety of voters. Therefore, the following categorization was used:

**Full page:** Stories that begin and end on a whole page.

**Half page:** Stories that occupy half of the page.

**Quarter page:** Stories that occupy quarter of the page.

#### Tone of the stories

Here, the focus is to determine the tone that newspapers utilize to report issues related to the safety of voters during the 2019 general elections. Therefore, the following were used:

**Negative tone:** These are stories express condemnation regarding violent electioneering.

**Positive tone:** These are stories that support violent electioneering.

**Neutral tone:** These are stories that were neither positive nor negative.

### 3.5 Instrument for data collection

The instrument for data collection was a code. The instrument was subjected to a reliability test. Therefore, the inter-coder reliability was used. In doing so, two coders were trained and given the code sheet to code. Therefore, the inter-coder reliability for this study was carried out by randomly selecting 10% of the news items. Using Holsti's formula (cited in Wimmer & Dominick, 2006), as shown below:

$$R = \frac{2M}{N1 + N2}$$

Where:

M = The number of coding decisions which two coders agree.

N1 & N2 – The number of coding decisions by the first and second coder respectively.

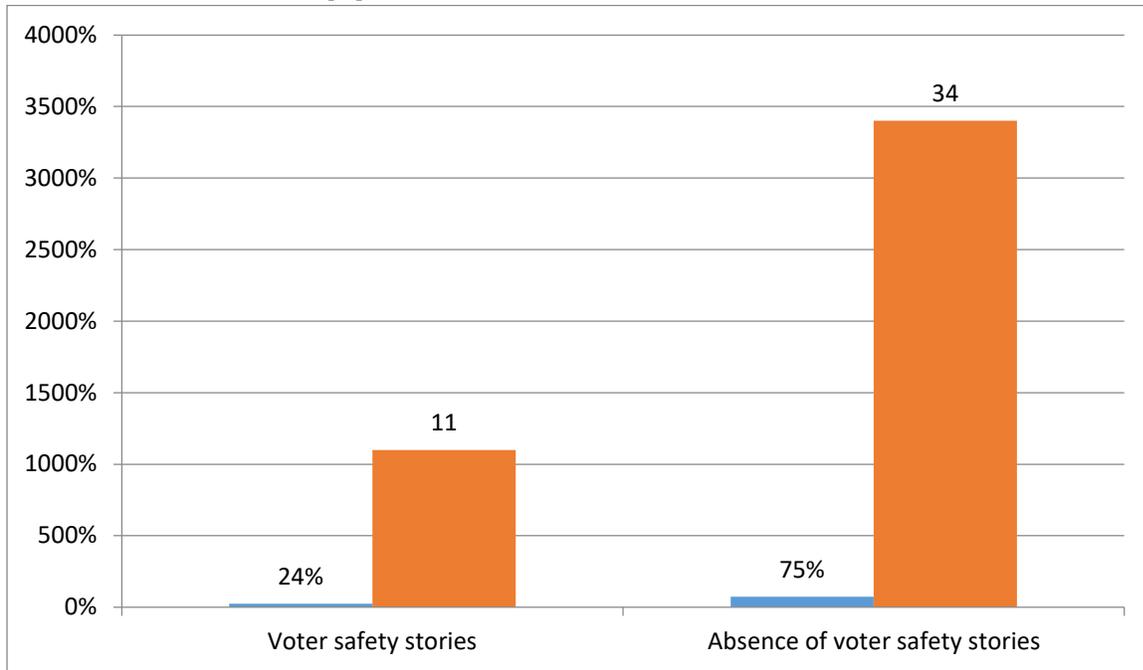
The calculation yielded inter coder reliability of 0.77, which was regarded as high.

**Method of data collection**

The researcher made use of both descriptive and inferential statistics for the analysis of data for this study. In doing so, simple percentage, mean and standard deviation were used. Therefore, descriptive statistics were used to answer the research questions.

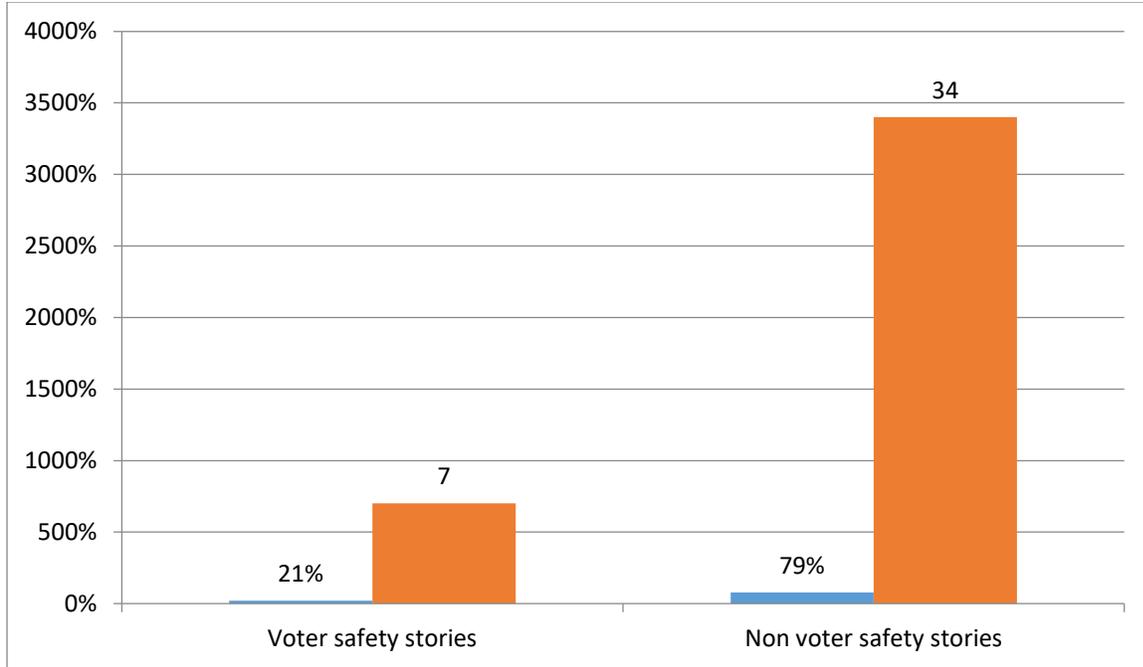
**Data presentation, Analysis and Interpretation**

The researcher examined 181 editions from each of the sampled newspapers bringing a total of 724 editions. The chart below presents the results of the study based on the availability of stories on the 2019 general election in the selected newspapers.



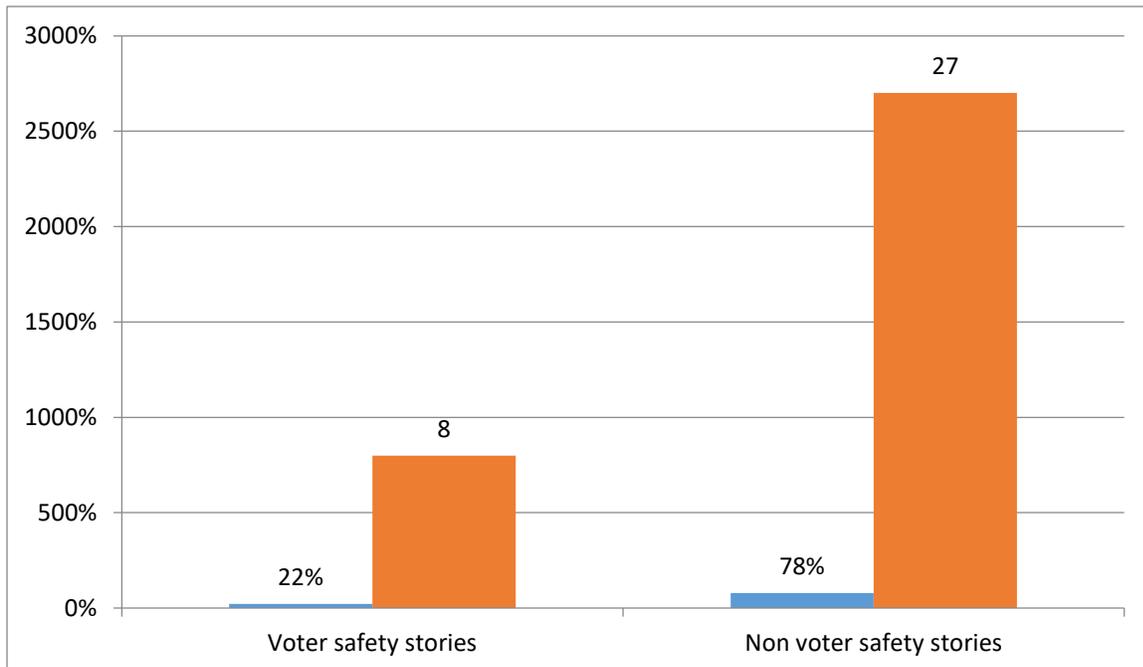
**Figure 1** Punch newspaper editions with stories on voter safety

The chart above shows the distribution of *Punch* newspaper editions with stories on voter safety and those without stories on voter safety. The result of the study as shown above showed that *Punch* newspaper had only 24% of its stories on the 2019 elections that had stories related to the safety of voters. The implications is that the newspaper paid less attention to issues related to the safety of voters during the 2019 general elections.



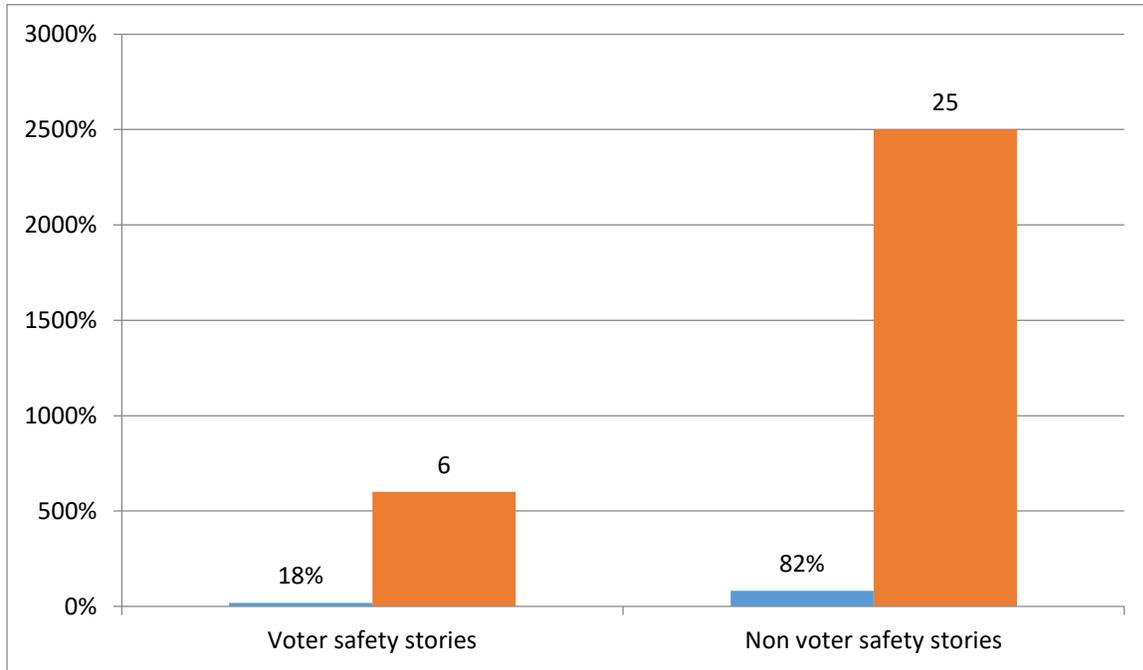
**Figure 2** Guardian newspaper stories on voter safety

In figure 2 above, the researchers determined the coverage of voter safety in the *Guardian* newspaper. It was found that only 21% of the stories in the *Guardian* newspaper within the time frame were related to the safety of voters. The remaining 79% were not related whatsoever. This implies that *The Guardian* newspaper paid less attention to issues related to the safety of voters.



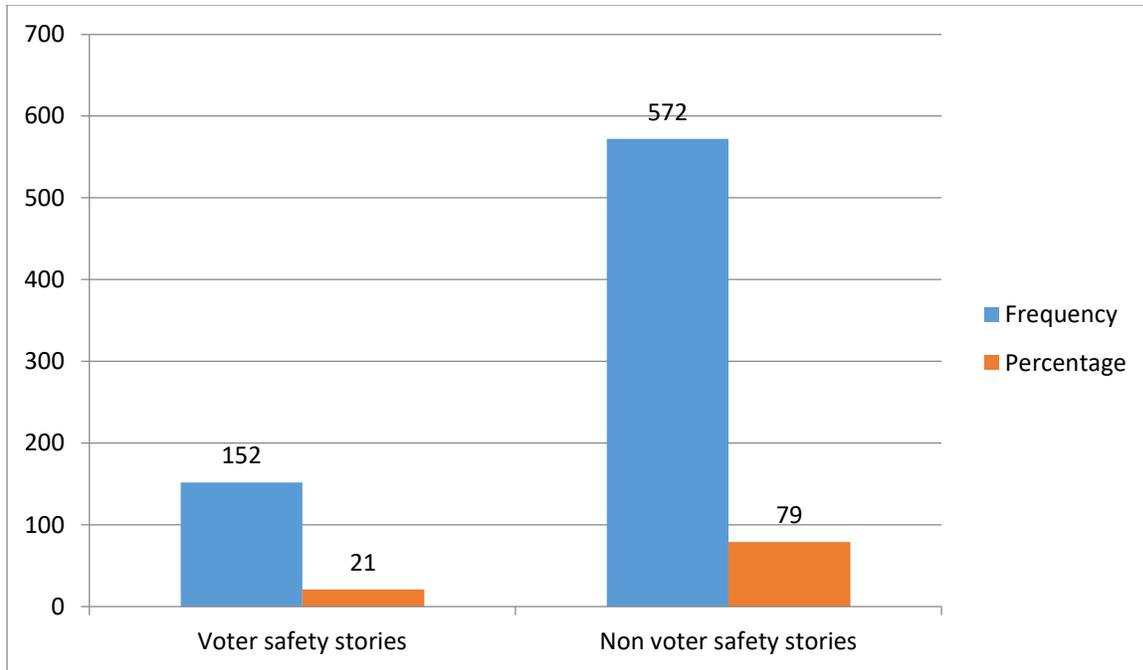
**Figure 3** Leadership newspaper coverage of voter safety

In the chart above, the researcher examined the coverage of voter safety in the *Leadership* newspaper. It was found that only 22% of the stories in the leadership newspaper were related to voter safety while the remaining 78% were not. The implication is that the newspaper did not give significant coverage to issues related to the safety of voters.



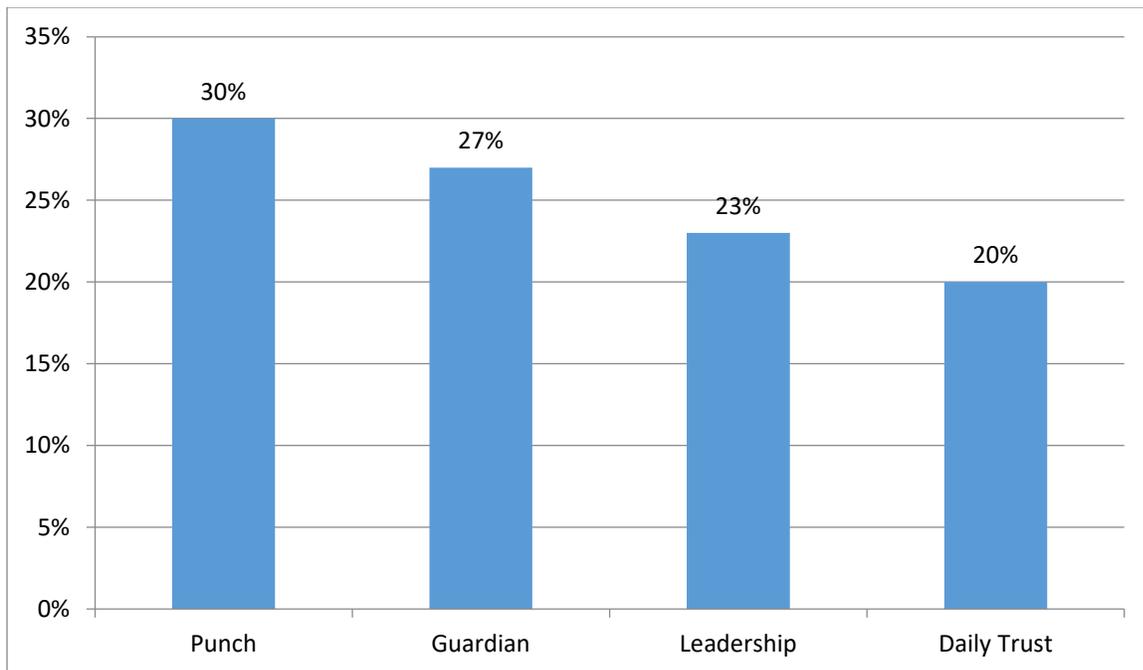
**Figure 4** Daily Trust newspaper coverage of voter safety

The figure above determined *Daily Trust* newspaper coverage of voter safety. The result of the study showed that only 18% of the stories were related to voter safety. The remaining 82% were not. The implication is that *Daily Trust* newspaper paid gave less frequency to issues related to the safety of voters. The following chart shows the frequency of coverage voter safety among the four newspapers examined:

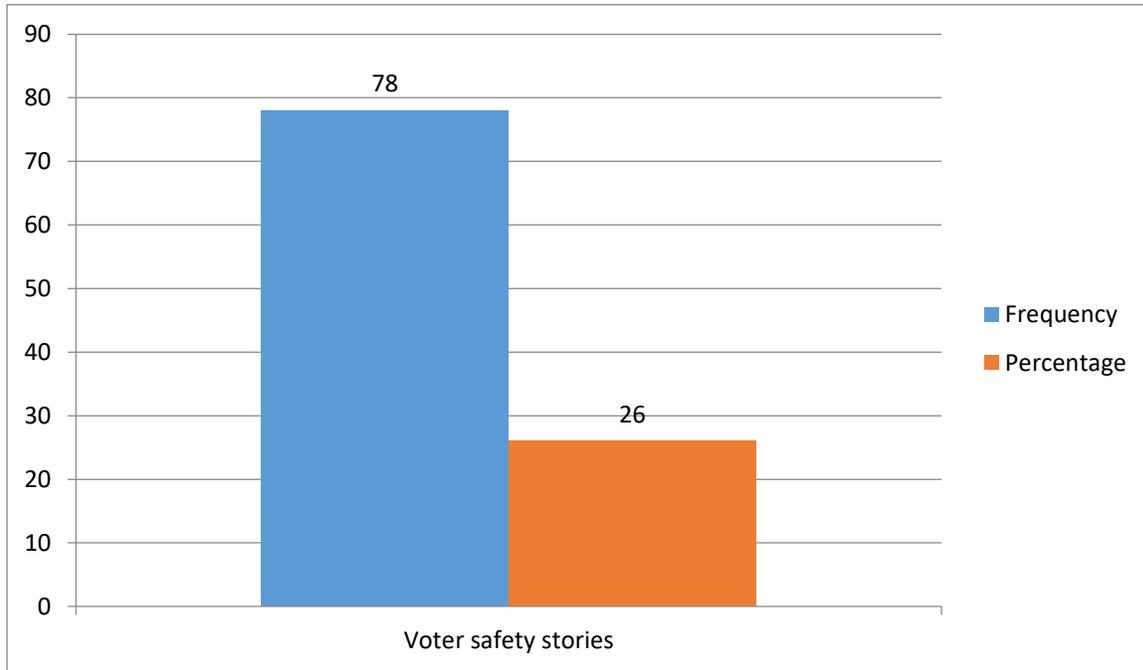


**Figure 5 Frequency of newspaper coverage of voter safety in the four newspapers**

The aim of plotting the chart above was to determine the frequency of newspaper coverage of voter safety during the 2019 general election in Nigeria. The result of the study showed that only 21% of the editions had stories on voter safety. It is essential to add here that 21% of the stories translate to 152 stories. These 152 editions were examined were spread across the four newspapers as show below:

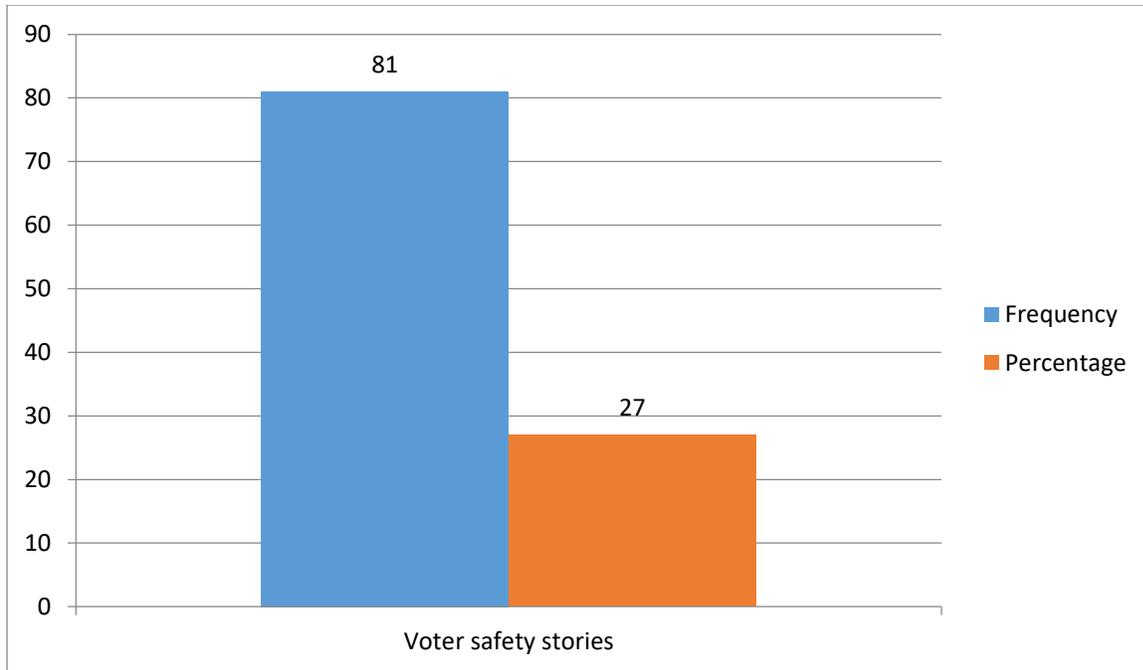


The chart above examined the distribution of editions among the four newspapers regarding the presence of stories on voter safety. The result of the study showed that *Punch* newspaper had more editions that contained stories on voter safety. The researcher took another step by examining the number stories on voter safety in all the newspapers. Overall, there were 301 stories on voter safety. The distribution of the stories across the newspapers is presented below:



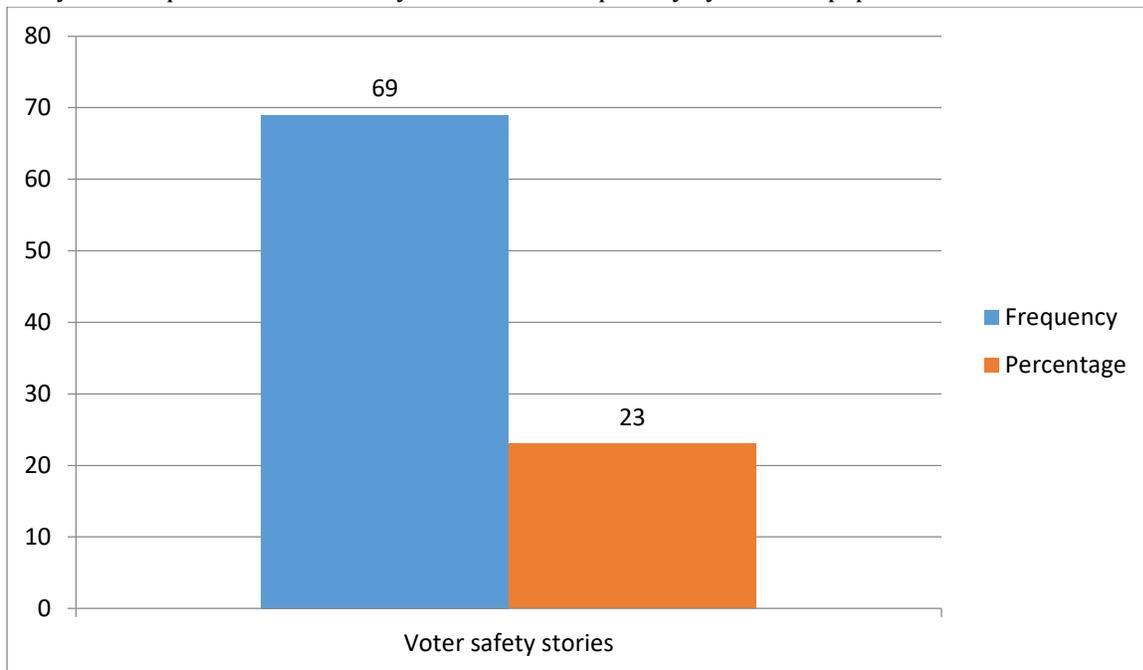
**Figure 6** *Punch* newspaper stories on voter safety

The goal of the figure above was to determine the number of stories which *Punch* newspaper had on voter safety. The result of the study showed that *Punch* newspaper contributed 26% of stories on voter safety. This results implies low frequency to stories related to voter safety.



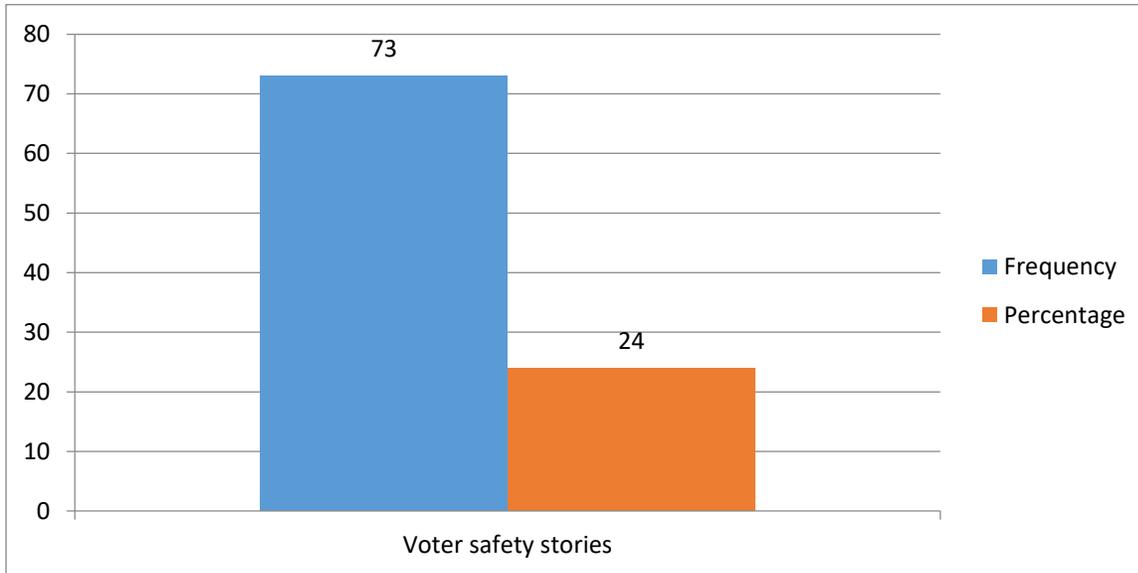
**Figure 7** *Guardian* newspaper stories on voter safety

The researcher plotted the chart above to determine *Guardian* newspaper stories on voter safety. The result of the showed that only 27% of the stories in the newspapers on 2019 general election were related to voter safety. This implies that voter safety was not made a priority by the newspaper.



**Figure 8** *Leadership* newspaper stories on voter safety

In the chart above, the researcher examined *Leadership* coverage of voter safety. The result of the study showed that only 19% of the stories on the 2019 general election were related to voter safety. This means that the *Leadership* newspaper contributed only 19% of the stories on voter safety. The implication is that the newspaper did not make voter safety its priority.



**Figure 9** *Daily Trust* newspaper stories on voter safety

In Figure 9 above, the researcher examined *Daily Trust* newspaper coverage of voter safety. The result of the study showed that only 24% of the stories were related to voter safety. This implies that *Daily Trust* only contributed 24% stories.

**Table 1: Cross tabulation of newspaper and actors in newspaper coverage of voter safety in 2019 general election**

|           |             |                    | Actors      |                      |        |                    |        | Total  |
|-----------|-------------|--------------------|-------------|----------------------|--------|--------------------|--------|--------|
|           |             |                    | politicians | Government Officials | Voters | Political analysts | Others |        |
| Newspaper | Punch       | Count              | 22          | 30                   | 10     | 9                  | 7      | 78     |
|           |             | % within Newspaper | 28.2%       | 38.5%                | 12.8%  | 11.5%              | 9.0%   | 100.0% |
|           | Guardian    | Count              | 30          | 28                   | 12     | 6                  | 5      | 81     |
|           |             | % within Newspaper | 37.0%       | 34.6%                | 14.8%  | 7.4%               | 6.2%   | 100.0% |
|           | Leadership  | Count              | 25          | 16                   | 12     | 10                 | 6      | 69     |
|           |             | % within Newspaper | 36.2%       | 23.2%                | 17.4%  | 14.5%              | 8.7%   | 100.0% |
|           | Daily Trust | Count              | 26          | 22                   | 15     | 6                  | 4      | 73     |
|           |             | % within Newspaper | 35.6%       | 30.1%                | 20.5%  | 8.2%               | 5.5%   | 100.0% |
|           | Total       | Count              | 103         | 96                   | 49     | 31                 | 22     | 301    |
|           |             | % within Newspaper | 34.2%       | 31.9%                | 16.3%  | 10.3%              | 7.3%   | 100.0% |

The aim of computing the table above was to determine the actors highlighted in newspaper coverage of the 2019 general election in Nigeria. The result of the study showed that politicians were mentioned more than any other group. Put together, politicians and government officials received more mention than all the other categories put together because they constituted 65% of the mention in the newspapers examined. Voters received insignificant mention in the stories.

| <b>Newspaper * Prominence Crosstabulation</b> |             |                    |            |           |               |             |        |
|---|-------------|--------------------|------------|-----------|---------------|-------------|--------|
|   |             |                    | Prominence |           |               |             | Total  |
|   |             |                    | Front page | Back page | Centre spread | Inside page |        |
| Newspaper                                     | Punch       | Count              | 25         | 12        | 13            | 28          | 78     |
|   |             | % within Newspaper | 32.1%      | 15.4%     | 16.7%         | 35.9%       | 100.0% |
|   | Guardian    | Count              | 19         | 17        | 19            | 26          | 81     |
|   |             | % within Newspaper | 23.5%      | 21.0%     | 23.5%         | 32.1%       | 100.0% |
|   | Leadership  | Count              | 12         | 24        | 10            | 23          | 69     |
|   |             | % within Newspaper | 17.4%      | 34.8%     | 14.5%         | 33.3%       | 100.0% |
|   | Daily Trust | Count              | 32         | 5         | 13            | 23          | 73     |
|   |             | % within Newspaper | 43.8%      | 6.8%      | 17.8%         | 31.5%       | 100.0% |
| Total   |             | Count              | 88         | 58        | 55            | 100         | 301    |
|   |             | % within Newspaper | 29.2%      | 19.3%     | 18.3%         | 33.2%       | 100.0% |

In the table above, the researcher examined the prominence newspapers accorded issues related to voter safety. The result of the study showed that 33.2% of the stories were on the inside page while 29% percent were on the front page. Centre spread had the least number of stories of 18.3%. Put together, front page and back page had 48% of the stories while inside page and centre spread had 52%.

| <b>Table Newspaper Volume of coverage of voter safety</b> |             |                    |           |           |              |        |
|---|-------------|--------------------|-----------|-----------|--------------|--------|
|   |             |                    | Volume    |           |              | Total  |
|   |             |                    | Full page | Half page | Quarter page |        |
| Newspaper   | Punch       | Count              | 14        | 34        | 30           | 78     |
|   |             | % within Newspaper | 17.9%     | 43.6%     | 38.5%        | 100.0% |
|   | Guardian    | Count              | 23        | 46        | 12           | 81     |
|   |             | % within Newspaper | 28.4%     | 56.8%     | 14.8%        | 100.0% |
|   | Leadership  | Count              | 18        | 40        | 11           | 69     |
|   |             | % within Newspaper | 26.1%     | 58.0%     | 15.9%        | 100.0% |
|   | Daily Trust | Count              | 5         | 37        | 31           | 73     |
|   |             | % within Newspaper | 6.8%      | 50.7%     | 42.5%        | 100.0% |
| Total   |             | Count              | 60        | 157       | 84           | 301    |
|   |             | % within Newspaper | 19.9%     | 52.2%     | 27.9%        | 100.0% |

The table above determined the volume of newspaper coverage of voter safety in the 2019 general election. The result of the study showed that more than half of the stories were on the inside page. Full page had the least percentage of 19.9%. In terms of newspaper analysis, the *Guardian* newspaper had the highest number of full page while *Daily Trust* had the highest number of quarter page.

| <b>Table: Newspaper tone of coverage of 2019 general election</b> |             |                    |          |          |         |        |
|---|-------------|--------------------|----------|----------|---------|--------|
|   |             |                    | Tone     |          |         | Total  |
|   |             |                    | Negative | Positive | Neutral |        |
| Newspaper   | Punch       | Count              | 18       | 26       | 34      | 78     |
|   |             | % within Newspaper | 23.1%    | 33.3%    | 43.6%   | 100.0% |
|   | Guardian    | Count              | 11       | 26       | 44      | 81     |
|   |             | % within Newspaper | 13.6%    | 32.1%    | 54.3%   | 100.0% |
|   | Leadership  | Count              | 14       | 35       | 20      | 69     |
|   |             | % within Newspaper | 20.3%    | 50.7%    | 29.0%   | 100.0% |
|   | Daily Trust | Count              | 16       | 17       | 40      | 73     |
|   |             | % within Newspaper | 21.9%    | 23.3%    | 54.8%   | 100.0% |
| Total   |             | Count              | 59       | 104      | 138     | 301    |
|   |             | % within Newspaper | 19.6%    | 34.6%    | 45.8%   | 100.0% |

In the table above, the researcher determined the tone of newspaper coverage of voter safety during the 2019 general election. The result of the study showed that the newspapers were largely neutral in their coverage of issues related to the safety of voters.

**Discussion of Findings**

This study examined newspaper coverage of voter safety during the 2019 general election in Nigeria. The study was guided by five objectives were formulated to provide direction for the study. The objectives were converted to research questions. The result of the study showed that the newspapers examined gave less frequency to issues related to the issue of voter safety in their coverage. The result of this study suggests that the newspapers examined did not sufficiently set agenda on the issue of voter safety during the 2019 general election. One of the ways through which the media can set agenda on an issue as frequency of coverage. This is because the more the media frequently mention an issue, the chances that the issue will be regarded as important. This assumption is supported by evidence in literature (Cohen, 1963; Cohen *et al.*, 2008; Gentzkow *et al.*, 2011) because researchers have shown that when an issue is frequently mentioned in the media, it has the possibility of affecting policy formulation and advocacy. Within the content of voter safety, it can be argued that if the media features the issue of voter safety in their content often, it will attract the attention of stakeholders such as security personnel, public affairs analysts, government officials, among others. It will also affect the thinking of the international community to impress on the Nigerian government to take every step necessary to protect Nigerian voters. On the other hand, where the media in Nigeria pay less frequency to the issue of voter safety, it will be assumed that all is well regarding the safety of voters when in actual sense, Nigerian voters face serious safety concerns.

The researcher also examined the key actors that are highlighted in newspaper stories on voter safety. The result of the study points to the fact that most of the newspapers highlighted politicians in the stories related to voter safety followed by government officials. Therefore, put together, politicians and

government officials were highlighted more in stories on voter safety than even the voters themselves. This is not a good development because voters should be at the heart of reports on their safety.

Another aspect of the result of the study relates to the prominence which the newspapers examined accorded to stories related to the safety of voters. The result of this study showed that the newspapers examined gave less prominence to issues related to the safety of journalists. This is because majority of the stories related to the safety of voters were located on the inside page. Stories that highlight important safety issues related to the voters during the 2019 general elections were not accorded sufficient prominence. This aspect of the result has extended those of previous scholars (Oboh, 2016; Odio, & Muhammed-Nasiru, 2010) who examined issues related to general elections without looking at the safety of voters. Examining the prominence newspapers accord to voter safety is important because in representative democracies, voters are at the centre of electioneering campaigns. Legitimacy belongs to the people and they exercise this through the ballot. Therefore, in the process of exercising this civic responsibility, voters must be provided with an environment that is conducive enough so that they will be able to fulfill this function without fear. The media as the watchdog of the society have a responsibility of ensuring that the media voters' safety is guaranteed when they are performing this function. This is important because it is the media's way of contributing to the political process of Nigeria. It is also the media's way of promoting political participation, which is a critical condiment in democracies.

The result of this study also revealed that the tone of newspaper coverage of voter safety is largely neutral. This is because in most of the instance, the newspapers examined provided stories on voter safety in tone neutral. This is not a good outcome because voter safety is a serious issue that concerns the lives of voters. It will be better for newspapers to highlight such issues in a tone that suggest condemnation. See an example below:

Elections in Nigeria, just like any other part of the world are highly competitive and characterized by character assassination, name calling, accusations and counter accusations, threats and counter threats. There is usually a display of desperation on the part of politicians and their supporters, the voters become the most wanted bride and where their safety is threatened, newspapers will have to state clearly in a tone that clearly condemn such act. Sitting on the fence with a neutral tone is runs contrary to the postulation of social responsibility which demands that the media should promote positive development (McQuail, 2005). Promoting voter safety is a positive development because when voters are sure of their safety, they are more likely to participate in an election through massive turnout than when they are not. This assumption is confirmed by the study of Mapuva (2013) who reported that safety is one of the factors that influences voter turnout.

Finally, the result of this study showed that the newspapers examined gave less volume to issues related to the safety of voters. This is because it was found that most of the stories on voter safety were on the quarter page. This means that the newspapers examined did not consider issues concerning the safety of voters important enough for them to accord large volume of space. Giving large volume of space to issues is a critical way for newspapers to influence public opinion. This is because the more space that newspaper dedicate to an issue, the more likelihood that the issue will attract public attention.

The results of this study have implications on social responsibility and agenda setting theory. Concerning the social responsibility theory, the result of this study showed that the newspapers examined did not perform their social responsibility enough vis-à-vis voter safety during the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. To perform their social responsibility to the Nigerian society within the context of election coverage, the media will have to pay close attention to all issues including that of voter safety. However, this was not the case in this particular instance. Concerning the agenda setting theory, the result of this study showed that the media in Nigeria did not set sufficient agenda on the issue of voter safety during the 2019 general election in Nigeria.

### Conclusion

This study concludes that newspaper coverage of voter safety during the 2019 general election in Nigeria was poor. This is the newspapers examined paid less attention to issues related to the safety of voters. Paying greater attention to the safety of voters is important because in voter-centred democracies such that of Nigeria, it is essential to ensure that voters' safety is guaranteed so that they can come out and vote. Another conclusion of this study is that the newspapers examined paid more attention to official sources like government officials, thus paying less attention to non-official sources like voters. Voters are important during election seasons and media stories regarding their safety should also reflect their views. This is important so that the general public can have information regarding the true views of voters vis-a-vis their safety.

### Contribution to Knowledge

The basic contribution of this study is that it has provided empirical evidence for assessing the performance of journalists in the coverage of general elections. This information may also be useful to journalists as well as other researchers who may be interested in examining the contribution of the media in electioneering campaigns. The current study has examined an aspect that has been barely considered in literature. Most of the previous studies on media and election coverage concentrate on other issues like impact of ownership, godfatherism, among others. However, the issue of voter safety is hardly examined in literature. Therefore, it is hoped that the current study will be beneficial in extending discussion on the media and election coverage.

### Recommendations

Based on the results of study, the researcher makes the following recommendations:

- Training sessions should be organized by media organizations to train journalists on the need to pay greater attention to issues of voter safety. This is important because the result of the current study showed that less attention is paid to issues of voter safety in the media.
- The Nigerian Union of Journalists should create awareness among its members on the need to pay greater attention to issues related to voter safety in their coverage of elections.
- Electoral empires should also organize special counseling services for journalists with a view to encouraging them to pay greater and better attention to issues related to voter safety.
- Journalists, when exercising their gate-keeping should also select stories that are related to voter safety.

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