Voters' Perception of Cultural Elements in Political Advertising for the April 2011 General Elections in Nigeria

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Abstract: Popular appeals explored by political advertisers for elections include showing a clear understanding of pressing societal issues and demonstrating the possession of appropriate responses to them as well as emphasis on experience relevant to the position being sought or one's track records in other spheres of human endeavour. In addition to the aforementioned appeals, this study observes that some political advertisers for the April 2011 general elections in Nigeria incorporated cultural elements such as native languages; cultural dressing; emphasis on candidates' cultural affinities by birth, history, marriage and chieftaincy titles; cultural music and dances; cultural norms, values and ideologies; as well as visits to and endorsements of candidates by traditional rulers. Voters perceived this in good light and majority indicated that they were attracted by these cultural elements to the political advertisements and learnt about the candidates from them. However, a minority of them indicated that these incorporated cultural elements actually influenced their voting decisions. These findings, emanating from a content analysis of selected political advertisements for the elections, tally with the notion of agenda setting theory of mass communication that the media can tell people what to think about but never what to think.

Keywords: electioneering campaign; culture; candidate

1. Introduction

Political advertising is believed to be a social phenomenon that will always be associated with other social phenomena. It cannot stand on an island of its own. One social phenomenon that appears to be inseparable from the practice of political advertising is culture. Political advertising, as is the case with all other mass communication processes, must be carried out within a cultural milieu. It is widely believed that communication (including political advertising) and culture are axiomatically inseparable (Semiu, 2010; Baran, 2004).

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Political advertising can be defined simply as the application of the principles of advertising to serve political interest and as Jamieson and Campbell (2002) point out, it has become the primary means through which candidates for general elections communicate to the citizenry. This is not to suggest that political advertising is exclusive to electioneering campaigns. Bovee and Arens (1986) make it clear that political campaigns for elections are not the only places we see political advertising and that politicians are not the only commodities projected by it. In actual sense, we are said to be daily exposed to forms of political advertising that do not directly relate at all to political electioneering campaigns, and many of them are so subtle that we may not discern their political orientations.

Nevertheless, the resort to political advertising during campaigns for general elections is very obvious in Nigeria. The contemporary media of advertising in the country during the April 2011 general elections were awash with political advertisements urging the electorate to vote in certain ways at the polls. No doubt, political advertising is seen as a prime tool in reaching voters by many politicians. This may not be unconnected from the observation by Joslyn (1984) that spot advertising is very attractive to candidates and campaigners for elections because it allows them to communicate directly with target audiences without intrusions from journalists. Political advertising is said to enable them say or do what they want, how they want, and to a certain extent, to whom they want.

Political advertising for the April 2011 general elections explored several appeals to woo voters to either vote or refrain from voting for a particular political party and/or its candidate(s). Some appeals dwelt on the fact that certain candidates had (or lacked) clear understanding of pressing societal needs and how to deal with them, while others focused on candidates' past experiences or proclivities. A number were observed to have tried to explore cultural appeals evident in the dressing of candidates; use of native languages and dialects; and emphasis on ethnic affinities by birth, history, marriage and holding of chieftaincy titles among others.

2. Statement of the Problem

It is suspected that appealing to the cultural sentiments of voters can influence their voting behaviours. This is against the backdrop of the understanding of culture as a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values and norms which affect the behaviours of a relatively large group of people (Adler and Elmhorst, 2008).

Baran (2004: 16) is more categorical in upholding the view that cultural sentiments can influence behaviours when he avers thus: "Culture is the world made meaningful; it is socially constructed and maintained   through communication. It limits as well as liberates us; it differentiates as well as unites us. It defines our realities and thereby shapes the ways we think, feel and act." Arising from the above, the following questions may agitate the mind with regards to the incorporation of cultural elements in the April 2011 general elections in Nigeria: Were there cultural elements in political advertising for the April 2011 general elections in Nigeria? What were the cultural elements incorporated into political advertising for the April 2011 general elections in Nigeria? How do voters perceive cultural elements in political advertising in the April 2011 general elections? How did the cultural elements incorporated into the political advertising for the April 2011 general elections affect voters? Finding answers to these questions is the main thrust of this paper.

3. Overview of Political Advertising and Culture

Generally, political advertising embraces all forms of government-related propaganda, propagation of political ideologies, political image-laundry communication as well as communication of electioneering campaign messages to attract votes, through relevant media. Political advertising is basically concerned with opinion management since it is a systematic way through which political parties and/or party candidates, and pressure groups sell their programmes, activities and actions to the electorates, members of the public and stakeholders (Biakpara, 2004). In other words, as pointed out earlier, political campaigns are not the only places we see political advertising and politicians are not the only products projected by political advertising.

In the context of this paper however, political advertising will refer to the application of advertising concept and principles to win votes during elections. According to Jamieson and Campbell (2001), it entails the sponsorship of advertisements that argue that we should elect one person rather than another or urge us to vote in specific ways. It therefore entails the formulation of advertising theme, identification of target audiences, design of most appropriate advertising messages, and selection of most appropriate advertising channels and the most appropriate dosage of dissemination of the advertising messages for the purpose of attracting the most votes in a general election.

The justification for political advertising in elections rests in the age-long realization that it influences voting decisions. Warren, Leinenweber and Anderson (1963: 72) pointed this out long ago when they observed that:

For several weeks before the date of general elections, rival candidates and

political parties engage in a campaign to attract voters. Some party members

are not very strong in their loyalties, and an opposing candidate and party may

induce them to swing to their side. There are also many voters who do not

belong to any party. Attracting this 'independent' vote may make the

difference between winning and losing an election

In the same vein, Cummings and Wise (1981) point out that for every candidate for election, between nomination and election stood the campaign which is a battle ground and that victory sometimes depend on how well the battle is fought, as many voters (up to 35% of voters or more) decide how to vote during the campaigns. In this scenario, the place of effective political advertising cannot be overemphasized since winning or losing 35% or more of voters can determine success or otherwise.   No wonder Ezeudu (2003) avers that political advertising has been found to be indispensable as a key element in political campaign marketing as it is being relied on extensively to contend with the ever-mercurial and changing citizenry's political behaviours, attitudes and demands in the complex and dynamic environment of politics.

The end result of political advertising, unlike the normal advertising of goods and services, is not to promote sales or patronage but opinion management. This follows from the concession that since political advertising is a systematic way through which political parties and/or candidates for elections sell their manifestos, programmes, activities, actions and views to the electorate, it is a process to sway the opinion of the electorate to their favour (Biakpara, 2004). It is believed that voting decisions, which are highly individualistic, are products of individual opinions and to woo an individual's favourable opinion successfully is a ticket to securing that individual's votes. No wonder Abrahamson, Arterton and Orren (1988: 86) describe political advertising as "an attempt to seduce voters" to vote in a particular way or for a particular candidate or party in a general election. This view is supported by Wells, Burnett and Moriarty (1995) in their submission that political advertising is used by politicians to persuade people to vote for them. It therefore serves as an important source of communication between candidates for

elections and voters thereby making it an important part of the political process in any society.

Expectedly, present day politicians continually fine-tune their strategies to create more comprehensive media mixes intended to give them the edge in the competition for voters' acceptance and support. This is in line with the notions of Prof Ikenna Nzimiro recapitulated by Biakpara (2005) and that of Ezeudu (2003) that the concept of political advertising is a positioning technique to show how one politician or political party is different from another and to build massive support for the politician or political party. This is because politicians are primarily trying to persuade audience members to adopt a certain view of themselves, or of their parties or factions, and what they are trying to achieve in politics. In this direction, political advertising positions politicians and political parties in the minds of the electorate and helps them sell their manifestoes to the public (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Adum, 2007). Notable among the strategies suspected to have been adopted by political advertisers for the April 2011 general elections is the appeals to cultures of voters. What then is culture?

Culture refers to the total way of life of people and societies which guides their social interactions. It is perceived as consisting of a system of knowledge, belief, values, customs, behaviours and artifacts that are acquired, shared and used by members of a society in their daily living (Gamble and Gamble, 2002). On their part, Pearson, Nelson, Titsworth and Harter (2003) see culture as a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and rituals that the members of a society use to cope with one another and with their world. The above definitions point out some basic features of culture among which are fact that it is composed of ideas, behaviours and artifacts (material possessions). Another is that culture does not thrive in individualism: It must be shared and practiced by the society as a whole otherwise it would be unpopular and extinction-bound. Culture is also acquired through the process of socialization: It is not genetically transmitted (Acholonu, 2010; Okumagba and Ogege, 2009).

Culture differs from society to society and these differences are visible in cultural compositions. In a multicultural society like Nigeria, cultural differences are visible in cultural compositions such as language, dressing, food, marriage customs, political structure, environmental practices, economic system, festivals, religion, inter-personal relationships, and tribal markings on the body, among others (Kombol, 2010; Okumagba and Ogege, 2009). As noted earlier, these cultural compositions give the members of a particular society sense of belonging. They

either differentiate or unite people in the context of cultural identities and by so doing, define realities and ultimately shape the way affected people think, feel and act. This is because people with a specific culture want to conform to their popular culture in order to be accepted among their people. In the same way, people tend to be more comfortable with others who show signs of sharing their culture with them. Little wonder then that candidates and campaigners for general elections try to appeal to the cultural sentiments of the electorate.

4. Theoretical Framework (Agenda Setting Theory)

The theoretical framework for this study is built around agenda setting theory of mass communication. McComb and Shaw (1995) are unequivocal in identifying agenda setting as a function of the mass media. They submit that while the mass media may have little influence on the direction or intensity of attitudes, they set the agenda in the political sphere by influencing the salience of attitudes towards political issues. To buttress their point, they quote Lang and Lang thus: "The mass media force attention to certain issues. They build up public images of political figures. They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, and have feelings about".

This notion is upheld by Cohen, one of the propounders of the agenda setting theory of mass communication, who postulates that the mass media may not be particularly successful in telling people what to think but they are stunningly successful in telling them what to think about (Okigbo, 1990). Lending credence to this notion, Daramola (2003) points out that the basic idea of the agenda setting theory is that there is a close relationship between the manner in which the mass media present issues and the order of importance assigned to those issues by those exposed to them.

The dominant idea of the agenda setting theory of the media flows from the realization that the media succeed in determining the degree of importance consumers of the media contents attach to issues. This is what McCombs and Shaw point out in their submission that the "audience not only learn about public issues through the media, they also learn how much importance to attach to an issue or topic from the emphasis the mass media place upon it" (Ojobor, 2002: 21).

The power of the press to influence the human society (a phenomenon from which the agenda setting paradigm originated) is recognized by the Vatican. Bishop

Michael Elue of the Issele-Uku Diocese of the Catholic Church recaps this in his message on the occasion of the celebration of the 2006 World Communication Day by Catholic Media Workers in Asaba, the Delta State capital. In his words: "In the wake of the fortieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, I am happy to recall its Decree on the Means of Social Communication, Inter Mirifica, which in particular recognized the power of the media to influence the whole of human society" (Elue, 2006: 19). This confirms that the power of the media to set social agenda that influence the human society is not solely the postulations of media professionals.

In political advertising for elections, agenda setting begins with what issues political advertisers decide to present to the public and this they do very well. Akinfele (2006) upholds this view when he avers that the mass media are powerful in determining what the public should read in newspapers and magazines; watch on television and listen to on radio. In the same line of reasoning, Uwakwe, Amadi and Emejulu, (2003) point out that scholars agree that the audience attach importance to an issue in the domain of public discussion because the mass media have effectively brought them to public focus, and that this ability of the mass media to establish salient issues or images in the mind of the public sets the agenda for the society. In other words, political advertisements for election can force attention to certain issues and build up public images of political figures. They can constantly present objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, have feelings about. In the context of this study, these objects include cultural element incorporated into political advertisements for the April 2011 general elections in Nigeria.

Political advertising sets the agenda for electioneering campaigns by awakening the consciousness of the public, political parties and candidates for elections to both the realities of the time and what issues should form the nuclei of the electioneering campaign messages. Bittner (1989) paints the picture clearer in his submission that the concept of the agenda setting function of the mass media (include political advertising) confirms that they not only inform us but also influence us as to what is important to know. According to him, they create agenda for our thoughts and influence us in what seems important. Specifically, political advertisements of issues, such as culture, in a political campaign may help us to perceive certain issues as being more important than others and consequently influence our decisions about candidates based on how they address themselves to those issues in their political advertising.

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As far as agenda setting goes, many communication scholars hold the press entirely responsible for what it selects to present to the public in addition to how it positions and emphasizes the matter to strike the reading public as important. The press is assumed to have the power to decide, determine and initiate what members of the public can see, know about and consider as important in the society (Akinfele, 2006). This may not be very correct in the area of political advertising during electioneering campaigns. This is because political advertising, like most advertising campaigns, is not determined and initiated by the press but by the sponsoring politicians, political parties or their cronies. In order words, the contents of political advertisements during electioneering campaigns are entirely products of the judgment of the sponsors who must have completed the packaging of the advertisements before presenting them for placement in the relevant media of mass communication. Similarly, the frequency of exposure of the political advertisement in the mass media, the positioning, forms and manner of presentation, to a very large extent, depends on what the sponsors are willing to pay for. In the case of a newspaper medium, the page size (full page; half page; quarter page etc); the page location (front page, back page, center-spread, inside front cover, inside back cover etc); the number of pages in each issue; the number of issues of the newspaper; the particular issues of the newspaper as well as whether the advertisement will be in colour or black and white, depend on the sponsors' choices and financial muscles. Same applies to duration of political advertisements and number of slots in the broadcast media. These, no doubt, go a long way to affect how members of the reading public will perceive the subject of the political advertisement. No wonder Joslyn (1984: 86) says that political advertising is attractive to candidates for elections because it allows them to communicate directly with target audience without the intrusion of journalists. In this way, they are able to say or do what they want and, to a certain extent, to whom they want.

5. Methodology

This study adopted a combination of content analysis and survey for data generation. Content analysis as a research design, allows for the systematic examination of the contents of recorded information to ascertain content composition as well as mass media time, space and frequency devoted to such media content, while survey entails studying a group of people by collecting and analyzing data from only a few of them (sample) considered sufficiently representative of the group (Okoro, 2001; Nworgu, 1991). These research methods

are appropriate as content analysis allows researchers to make replicable and valid inferences from data to their content while survey has remained the best method available to social researchers interested in collecting data to describe phenomena in a population too large to observe directly (Fawole, Egbokhare, Itiola, Odejide and Olayinka, 2006; Babbie, 1975).

The research population in this study is made up of all the political advertisements and voters for the April 2011 general elections in Delta State. The sample is made up of 20 political advertisements (for content analysis) and 72 voters (for survey) for the general elections. The political advertisements were randomly selected from newspaper, radio, television, billboards, posters and handbills while the sample for the survey was based on as many people who were willing to respond to the questionnaire within the period of the study. The scope of the study was limited to Delta State because the state can be described as a miniature Nigeria as a result of its multicultural composition.

## 6. Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Data emanating from the study in relation to the first research question reveals that there was an appreciable presence of cultural elements in the political advertisements targeted at voters in Delta State during the electioneering campaign for the April 2011 general elections. This is because out of the 17 content categories observed in the content analyzed political advertisements, 8 (47.1%) qualify as cultural elements. This is shown in the pie chart below:

Figure 1. Pie Chart Showing Presence of Cultural Elements in Political Advertisements for the April 2011 General Elections in Delta State

The second research question inquired into what specific cultural elements were contained in the political advertisements in Delta State during the campaigns for the April 2011 poll. A total of 10 cultural elements were discovered through both

the content analysis and survey as presented in the histogram below:
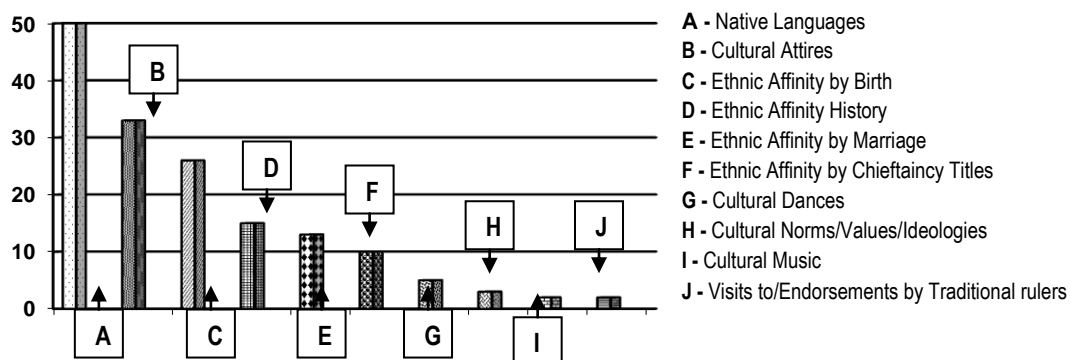
Figure 2. Histogram Showing Cultural Elements Incorporated in Political Advertisements for the April 2011 General Elections in Delta State

From the histogram above, the use of native languages topped the list with 31.4%, followed by the wearing of cultural attires by candidates with 20.8%. These are followed by emphasis on ethnic affinity by birth of candidates being projected (16.3%); emphasis on ethnic affinity of candidates by history (9.4%); emphasis on ethnic affinity of candidates by marriage (8.2%); and emphasis on ethnic affinity by candidates' chieftaincy titles (6.3%). The incorporation of cultural dances got 3.1%; cultural norms/values/ideologies got 1.9%; while the use of cultural music and visits to/endorsements by traditional rulers each got 1.3%.

The next research question for this study is concerned with ascertaining voters' perception of the incorporation of cultural elements in political advertisements in Delta State during the April 2011 general elections. Data emanating from this response category show that majority of the respondents (63.9%) perceive the incorporation of cultural elements as good for both the candidates and voters while 33.3% of them perceive the incorporation of cultural elements in the political advertisements as bad. The remaining 2.8% is undecided on the issue. The data is presented in the pie chart below:

Positive Perception of Cultural Elements in the Political Advertisements

Negative Perception of Cultural Elements in the Political Advertisements

Undecided
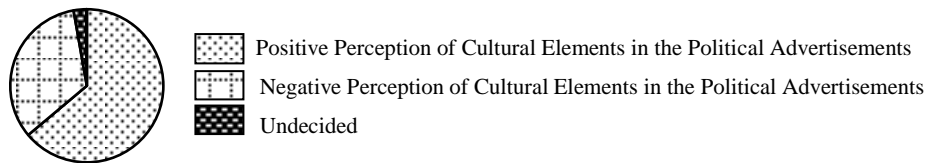
Figure 3. Pie Chart Showing Voters' Perception of the Incorporation of Cultural Elements in Political Advertisements for the April 2011 General Elections in Delta State

With this, one can infer that voters in Delta State perceive the use of cultural elements in political advertisements in the April 2011 general elections in good light. The reasons adduced for the positive perception of the incorporation of cultural elements in political advertising include that it enhanced the effectiveness of the political advertisements by bringing the campaigns to the grass roots thereby reaching the uneducated and otherwise unreachable members of the electorate. In addition, it was seen as a form of cultural recognition which helped to create a sense of belonging, boost confidence and engender conducive environment for electioneering campaigns. On the other hand, it was argued that the incorporation of cultural elements in political advertising is capable of promoting ethnocentrism and inter-ethnic tensions which can degenerate into chaos. It was also seen as a mirage/deception and disguised propaganda since the electorate's ethnic sentiments and not reason is appealed to.

The last research question in this study sought to measure the effects of the use of cultural elements in political advertising on the voters. 72.2% of respondents agreed that their attention was drawn to political advertisements by the cultural elements incorporated. This is against 16.7 who said they were not attracted to the political advertisements because of the cultural elements incorporated and another 11.1% who were undecided on the issue (Figure 4). 83.3% say they learnt something from the cultural elements incorporated in the political advertisements as opposed to 11.1% who said that they did not learn anything from the cultural elements in the political advertisements and another 5.6% who remained undecided on the issue (Figure 4).

However, in spite of majority of the respondents being attracted to political advertisements by the cultural elements used and also learning from such political advertisements, only 44.4% said their voting behaviours were influenced by cultural elements in the political advertisements for the April 2011 general elections in Delta State. This is against the 40.3% who said the cultural elements

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used in the political advertisements failed to influence their voting decisions and another 15.3% who were undecided (Figure 4). This suggests that the incorporation of cultural elements in political advertisements had limited effects. The data is presented in the composite histogram below:
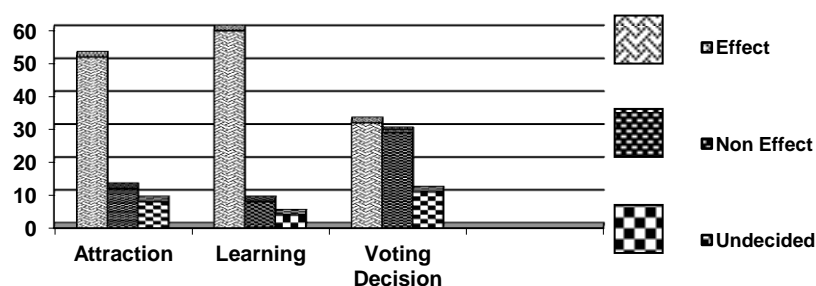
Figure 4. Composite Histogram Showing Effects of Cultural Elements Incorporated into Political Advertisements for the April 2011 General Elections in Delta State

Based on the answers to the research questions for this study, it is clear that cultural elements such as native languages; cultural dressing; emphasis on candidates' cultural affinities by birth, history, marriage and chieftaincy titles; cultural music and dances; cultural norms, values and ideologies; as well as visits to and endorsements of candidates by traditional rulers were incorporated into political advertisements for the April 2011 general elections in Delta State. This, in line with the agenda setting theory, attracted voters' attention to the extent that they learnt from such political advertisements. Nevertheless, the primary motive for the incorporation of cultural elements in the political advertisements which is to appeal to the cultural sentiments of voters in a bid to secure their votes was not actualized.

As Kemp and Dayton (1985) point out, skillful combination of pictures, sounds and words have the power to evoke emotions, change attitudes and motivate actions especially in political advertisements where the motive is to sway voters' choice of candidates. This power is even boosted by the incorporation of cultural elements in the political advertisements because as revealed by the literature review in this study, people tend to be more comfortable with others who show signs of sharing their culture with them. What therefore could have been responsible for this inability of political advertisements with appeals to cultural sentiments of voters to influence the voting decisions?

The answer may not be unconnected from the basic assumption of the agenda setting theory which holds that the media can be successful in telling members of the audience "what to think about" but can never tell them "what to think". This is played out in the findings of this study which show that the incorporation of cultural elements in the political advertisements for the April 2011 general elections in Delta State succeeded in attracting voters' attention and stimulating them in the cognitive domain by helping them learn more about the candidates. That is telling them "what to think about". The cultural elements and appeals however failed to stimulate voters in the affective and psychomotor domains since the voters' attitudes towards the candidates and actual voting were not influenced by the political advertisement. That is failing to tell voters "what to think".

7. Conclusion

Political advertising will remain a social phenomenon that will always be associated with other social phenomena including culture. These two are believed to have strong influence on voting behaviours during elections. Perhaps this is the reason for the incorporation of cultural elements such as native languages; cultural dressing; emphasis on candidates' cultural affinities by birth, history, marriage and chieftaincy titles; cultural music and dances; cultural norms, values and ideologies; as well as visits to and endorsements of candidates by traditional rulers into the political advertisements for the April 2011 general elections in Delta State.

However, in spite of this fusion of two powerful influencers (political advertising and cultural sentiments) for electioneering campaigns in the April 2011 general elections in Delta State, the effect on voters was limited to the cognitive domain. Majority of the respondents in this study indicated that they were attracted to the political advertisements by the cultural elements incorporated and even learnt from them (cognitive impact) but minority reported that their voting behaviours were influenced by same (affective and psychomotor impacts).

These findings tally with the emergent theme from the literature review which holds that people are influenced by cultural issues and tend to be more comfortable with others who show signs of sharing their culture with them. This is in the fact that voters were attracted to political advertisements by the cultural elements incorporated. Nevertheless, the basic postulation of the agenda setting theory that mass media contents (including political advertisements) can be very successful in telling the audience "what to think about" but never "what to think" is also upheld

in this study to the extent that though the cultural elements incorporated in the political advertisements attracted majority of the voters' attention, they failed to influence all of them in their voting decisions.

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