

Issue no: 1 | Vol no: 6 | January 2025: 12-18



Media framing of presidential candidates in Kenya's 2022 general election: Analysing coverage patterns in the Daily Nation and the Standard Newspapers

Ezer Kipkurui Torotwa 

University of Nairobi, Kenya

Email: kipezer@gmail.com

Article History

Received: 2024-11-14

Accepted: 2024-12-13

Published: 2025-01-17

Cite this article in APA

Torotwa, K. E. (2025). Media framing of presidential candidates in Kenya's 2022 general election: Analysing coverage patterns in the Daily Nation and the Standard Newspapers. *Editon consortium journal of media and communication studies*, 6(1), 12-18. <https://doi.org/10.51317/ecjmcs.v6i1.550>

Abstract

This research investigates the media framing of presidential candidates in Kenya during the 2022 General Election, paying attention to both The Daily Nation and The Standard as representatives of the Kenyan media. Given the centrality of policy debates to political coverage, coverage of policy issues was in the minority according to the quantitative elements of the media monitoring exercises, with horse race reporting dominant at 68 per cent of the sample with policy issues figuring at 32 per cent. More precisely, The Standard posted 400 horse race articles and 200 policy-related ones, while The Daily Nation provided 350 and 150, respectively. This skewed the voting outcome towards two horse race candidates, leaving little space for others such as George Wajackoyah and David Waihiga Mwaure and analysing the narrative approach of framing theory depicting William Ruto and Raila Odinga as polarisation and side-lining of policies. These observations bear implications for the phenomenon of electoral debate and voter decision-making, in particular, its depth. They also recommend that media houses increase reports on all the candidates and provide training to enlighten the journalists on framing the situation so that there is as much competition focus as there is policy discussion emphasis. This approach would lead to increased and qualitatively higher levels of electoral debate and democratic participation by voters as they can make informed decisions.

Key words: Candidates, coverage, election, framing, media.



This article is distributed under the license of a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). It is permitted to be used, reproduced and distributed in line with Editon Consortium Publishing guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

Media framing in this research refers to how information is packaged and presented in the news articles that formed the basis of coverage of the topics under consideration in this study. It involves exaggerating some factors about a given story while simultaneously playing down other factors; in this way, the public view is always shaped. Analysing the phenomenon of political reporting, the problem of media framing is revealed as an essential factor in forming voters' perceptions of presidential candidates, especially in the case of the Kenyan 2022 General Election, where media played a crucial role in setting up voter attitudes. However, focusing on specific stories like competition between the candidates or topical policy matters, media outlets frame the electorate's perception of the electoral processes. Such selective emphasis could change voter behaviours, candidate perceptions, and general election dynamics. Media framing is significant when explaining how knowledge influences democracy and how the public participates in politics.

Kenya's 2022 General Election offers a worthy avenue for studying the effect of media framing on public perception. Coverage in leading newspapers, *The Daily Nation* and *The Standard*, highlighted the competitive dynamics between William Ruto and Raila Odinga while marginalising alternative candidates. The emphasis on rivalry over substantive policy discussions illustrates the role of media framing in shaping voter decision-making and the broader electoral discourse.

In 2002, Kenya witnessed a change in the government, bringing back confidence in the Democratic systems of Government in Kenya (Kameri-Mbote, 2015). The media environment also evolved during the 2002 campaigns, especially in the broadcast media. Media that started from scratch as new entrants, such as Radio Citizen, provided new narratives different from what KBC, a government-owned media, provided (Mwangi & Ng'weno, 2018). Reviewing a new constitution led by then President Mwai Kibaki led to the split of the government into what was termed the Banana faction, led by Kibaki, and the Orange faction, led by Raila Odinga. In the 2005 National Constitution Referendum, the Orange faction triumphed, for 58 per cent of the electorate voted against the proposed constitution. This outcome signalled a lack of confidence in President Kibaki and resulted in an irreparable split in the coalition government. The Orange faction later transformed into

the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), while the Banana faction became the Party of National Unity (PNU), aligning with Kibaki and the new constitution (Mwangi & Ng'weno, 2018).

During this time, as the influence of KBC declined, private media outlets gained prominence. Citizen Radio, operated by Royal Media Services, openly supported the YES vote during the referendum and became a popular alternative to KBC (Mwangi & Ng'weno, 2018). The 2007 general elections witnessed a heated contest between the ODM and PNU, with Kibaki seeking a second term against Raila Odinga. The declaration of Kibaki as the winner by the Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK) on December 20, 2007, sparked violent protests due to allegations of election rigging by ODM supporters. The subsequent Post Election Violence was fuelled by ethnic tensions that had escalated during the 2005 referendum, which divided significant ethnic groups (Odhiambo, 2016).

The media, particularly vernacular broadcasters, were criticised for amplifying ethnic divisions and providing partisan coverage, contributing to the tensions surrounding the election. The Kriegler report, or the Independent Review Committee's report, highlighted widespread election fraud as the trigger for the violence, making it difficult to determine the actual winner. While national newspapers and media outlets were generally seen as non-partisan, occasional accusations of bias from both parties arose (Odhiambo, 2016).

Adopting the constitution in 2010 created Kenya's national and county governments, though they operate at different tiers. The country was premised on 47 counties, with political and authoritative reforms in every county. The Kenyan media also tried to change direction after the 2007/08 post-election violence and started a campaign for peace journalism and reporting on conflicts. The electoral reporting capacity enhancement activities by MCK, Internews, and IEBC are intended to ensure compliance with professional journalism standards (Wanyama, 2019). To lower tensions, solidarity and democracy were supported by various media, such as vernacular Radio stations. These efforts contributed to peace journalism and conflict-sensitive reporting during the 2013 general elections, which concluded without violence. According to the 2017 MCK media monitoring report, election reportage demonstrated improved adherence to journalistic ethics

despite interference from media ownership (Wanyama, 2019).

In previous elections, mainstream media and social media played a significant role in Kenya. Newspapers, radio, and television broadcasted the campaigns, important candidates, and pertinent issues and offered analysis and opinions on them (Kameri-Mbote, 2015). Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp became vehicles through which people tweeted their opinions about the election and even shared information on it (Ojwang & Oyaro, 2017).

Despite the challenges faced by the media, including accusations of bias and manipulation by politicians, its role in recent elections in Kenya was pivotal. The press had their roles in educating the public, reporting on the government, and encouraging the participation of the people. TV and radio offered componentDidUpdate and analysis, while social media offered updates and collective contribution. In all these endeavours, the press played an important role in enhancing free and fair elections, promoting democracy and speaking for the people of Kenya. This research explores the media's portrayal of presidential candidates in the 2022 Kenya General Election, focusing on The Daily Nation and The Standard and how coverage created perceptions that the race was about winning instead of ideas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Framing of Presidential Candidates

If politics were seen as a competitive endeavour, it would entail the identification of distinct winners and losers (Pew Research Center, 2012). One contender now has the highest position in the polls, followed closely by a group of individuals. At the same time, another set of candidates faces challenges in maintaining a competitive position in the campaign. In recent years, there has been an observable increase in the use of horse-race framing within election coverage. This frame prioritises the identification of poll leaders and winners rather than the substantive examination of policies and concerns (Pew Research Center, 2012). The general populace is fascinated by determining the victor in a given competition, and journalists consistently disseminate this data to their audience. Critics have significant scepticism about the horse-race framing, with some asserting that it may be responsible for the perceived inadequacy of political coverage. This is attributed to the continued

emphasis on less relevant aspects of the current narrative (Jang & Oh, 2016).

The presidential election in 2016 garnered significant attention, with media coverage mostly adopting a horse-race framing, a trend evident from the early stages of the primary elections (Patterson, 2016). Specific framing techniques such as repeated focus on polling data, competitive narratives, and frequent comparisons between frontrunners shaped public perceptions of candidates. For instance, contenders like Ohio Republican John Kasich faced challenges in gaining prominence due to a disparity in media attention compared to frontrunners. Moreover, how an issue is presented, including framing techniques, can influence voters' decision-making process (Patterson, 2016). The significance of the horse-race frame lies in its increasing prominence. Allocating excessive focus on the victors of the contest has the potential to diminish the visibility of alternative candidates in the eyes of voters.

When comparing this phenomenon internationally, previous elections in Kenya have shown consistent patterns in terms of media coverage. In the first stages of the 2008 presidential election, the predominant emphasis in media coverage was on funding, campaign strategies, and polling, therefore adopting a horse-race narrative (Wanyama, 2019). Similarly, research by the Pew Research Center determined that across communication platforms, most coverage placed significant emphasis on the competitive aspect of the subject matter, sometimes referred to as "the horse race" (Jang & Oh, 2016). However, differences emerge in the Kenyan context due to unique political and media dynamics, such as heightened ethnic divisions and the pivotal role of media in peacebuilding during electoral cycles. While studies of the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election noted a lesser prevalence of the horse-race phenomenon than in 2008 (Fernandes & Shumow, 2016), Kenyan elections have often seen an enduring focus on this frame. This raises questions about how media framing influences voter perceptions and engagement in Kenya's evolving political environment.

Understanding the relationship between media framing and voter behaviour requires exploring how framing electoral narratives affects decision-making processes. Several factors may influence an individual's choice to participate in voting, including social pressures, enthusiasm for specific policies, or perceptions of candidate viability (Delshad, 2013). The Pew Research

Center (2018) found that voter turnout in previous U.S. elections was below 60 per cent among eligible voters, often shaped by the interplay of personal preferences and external influences, including media narratives. In Kenya, media framing may similarly influence voter behaviour, as evidenced by disparities in candidate coverage and public perception. The prominence of horse-race framing can potentially overshadow substantive policy discussions, limiting the electorate's ability to make informed choices. This highlights the need for contextualised research into how Kenyan media framing impacts voter attitudes and turnout, especially given the critical role of elections in shaping governance.

Despite the global prevalence of horse-race journalism, a notable gap exists in understanding its behavioural impact on voters, particularly in Kenya. Jang and Oh (2016) elucidate that framing influences individuals' psychological views and actions, but limited research addresses its effects on voting intentions. While studies like Fernandes and Shumow (2016) emphasise the importance of policy-focused journalism, the Kenyan media landscape—with its challenges of partiality and threats to press freedom—further complicates efforts to balance competitive narratives with substantive coverage. This underscores the necessity of exploring whether horse-race framing diminishes voter engagement or perpetuates biases in political discourse.

The August 2022 Kenyan presidential election is a compelling case study examining these dynamics. Dr. William Ruto's victory underscored the media's influential role, with candidates receiving disproportionate coverage. A Media Council of Kenya survey revealed that Raila Odinga garnered 61 per cent of media attention between April and June 2022, compared to Dr Ruto's 38 per cent (Otieno & Ndonge, 2022). Allegations of media bias—including claims of partiality from both candidates and their supporters—highlight the contentious nature of election coverage. Nonetheless, the 2022 election marked a departure from previous cycles, with a stronger emphasis on impartial reporting and accountability. This evolution reflects broader shifts within Kenya's media environment, where journalists increasingly navigate the tension between maintaining objectivity and addressing the public's demand for engaging narratives.

In conclusion, media framing, particularly the horse-race narrative, remains a dominant feature of election coverage in both global and Kenyan contexts. While this framing captures public interest and simplifies complex electoral dynamics, it also risks marginalising substantive discussions about policies and governance. The Kenyan experience highlights the dual role of media as both a shaper of public perception and a platform for accountability. By examining how media framing influences voter behaviour and turnout, future research can offer valuable insights into enhancing electoral processes and fostering informed democratic participation.

Framing Theory

The framing theory of mass communication suggests that media informs the public about an issue, how the public encodes the issue, and what priorities they give it (Kuan et al., 2021). This is achieved by giving preference to some elements of a story so that the recipient will perceive certain information in a particular manner. For example, political scandals can be constructed due to a lack of leadership or minimised regardless of what construction is made; they will shape the public perception of the politicians involved. The theory justifies that people perceive information through their values, beliefs, and past practices. The media can extend these differences by presenting problems in new ways that may appeal to specific audiences.

Framing has a significant impact on public opinion and perception. For instance, Iyengar and Simon (1993) uncovered that news covering the Iran-Contra affair affected perceptions of the scandal's severity. In the same way, Entman (1993) pinpointed particular content in media framing of AIDS, influencing public perceptions of its seriousness as a health menace. These studies underline framing's capacity to inform and construct narratives that shape audience attitudes toward significant topics.

This study employs the framing theory to assess the impact of framing on media coverage and coverage given to presidential candidates, voters' perceptions, and eventual elections. The theory is applied in more detail to explain why horse-race framing is rife in election coverage and its consequences for Kenyan presidential elections. Media can influence people's perceptions of candidate viability. By positioning some candidates as frontrunners or emphasising competitive elements of

campaigns, the media-focused approach can tend to marginalise substantive policy debates. Given this knowledge gap, the study will examine how such framing influenced the enactment of the visibility of candidates in Kenya's 2022 presidential elections and the audience reception. Thus, framing theory helps examine how media stories were framing public opinion in this regard, focusing on the topics covered in the media and the way and with what purpose they were put in front of the voters.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Framing Analysis

During the electoral period, newspaper articles predominantly concentrated on political dynamics, power struggles, competition, and tactical manoeuvring, overshadowing crucial policy issues that should have been central to the electoral discourse. Only 12% of the articles delved into substantive policy matters, revealing

a significant deficiency in the depth and substance of media coverage. The Daily Nation and The Standard newspapers published 3,687 election-related stories within the official three-month and eight-day campaign period, underscoring their pivotal role in shaping public opinion and perceptions regarding the electoral process. However, this extensive coverage primarily spotlighted the top contenders, William Ruto and Raila Odinga, with minimal attention given to other candidates, such as George Wajackoyah and David Waihiga Mwaure.

The prevalent "horse race reporting" phenomenon was evident in election media coverage, as journalists prioritised discussions about candidate standings and electoral strategy over substantive policy matters. This selective emphasis framed the election as a competitive duel between candidates, reinforcing a binary narrative and side-lining alternative voices and issues. Table 1 illustrates the extent of this framing:

Table 1: Framing Analysis

Source	Policy framing	Horse race framing	Issue framing	Conflict framing
The Daily Nation	150	350	100	220
The Standard	200	400	89	240
Total	350	750	189	460

The data highlights horse race reporting as the dominant frame in the coverage of the 2022 Kenyan elections, with 750 articles coded under this frame compared to policy (350), issue (189), and conflict (460) frames. This suggests that voters were likely provided with limited information about candidates' policy proposals, hindering their ability to make informed decisions.

Horse race framing is problematic because it reduces electoral discourse to a superficial focus on competition and standings rather than the substantive policy debates and societal issues critical to voters' lives. This type of coverage can also distort public perceptions by amplifying the viability of specific candidates over others. For instance, metaphorical language like "neck and neck race" and generalisations about frontrunners created a narrative emphasising competition while neglecting a critical evaluation of candidate platforms. Additionally, causal attributions often link electoral success solely to strategy rather than policy relevance,

further undermining the role of informed discourse. The dominance of horse race framing may contribute to a less informed electorate and a diminished appreciation for the diverse policy options available. By framing the election as a binary contest, the media risks marginalising alternative candidates and ideas, which could have lasting consequences for electoral discourse and democratic engagement in Kenya.

Discussion

The findings on media framing reveal that the Daily Nation and The Standard newspapers prioritised a two-horse race in their election coverage. Issue framing received minimal attention from both media houses, and there was a notable lack of depth in policy matters, with a predominant focus on political dynamics and tactical manoeuvring. This selective focus significantly shaped public opinion by directing attention toward the top contenders, William Ruto and Raila Odinga, while side-

lining other candidates, such as George Wajackoyah and David Waihiga Mwaure.

Horse race framing is of unique relevance to voters, and the examples cited for it carry decisive consequences for the voters. This type of coverage rarely promotes the idea that voters can support anybody ranked at the lower end of a certain number of candidates. However, instead of that, it tends to make people believe the political race winners are the winners as far as the elections are concerned. It can also split voters because it expands the idea of an election being a head-to-head contest, and the presidential campaign rarely devotes time to discussing the issues people care about. People may vote to choose one of the frontrunners based on how the process will likely turn out rather than whether they support their platform. Indeed, concentrating the action between candidates and fund providers instead of presenting serious subjects may lead to a flawed decision-making process when people vote.

The environment in which politics is conducted in Kenya today and the media industry, in particular, have factors that shaped the media coverage during the 2022 election. Kenyan politics has adopted an intense competitive nature in the political system due to the electoral events ever regarded as high-stake events that dictate resource allocation and power. This is enhanced by the fact that regionalism and ethnicity dominate Kenyan politics, further distorted by the fact that newspapers may be influenced to report issues along these divides, consciously or unconsciously.

In the media landscape, The Daily Nation and The Standard are among the most influential outlets, wielding substantial power in shaping public discourse. However, their ownership structures and potential political affiliations may have influenced the prioritisation of specific candidates. The heavy reliance on horse race framing also reflects broader trends in global media, where sensationalism and competition narratives often attract more audience engagement than in-depth policy discussions.

Additionally, the logistical and economic challenges smaller media outlets face in Kenya may have limited their ability to provide comprehensive and balanced coverage. The focus on frontrunners like Ruto and Odinga can also be attributed to resource factors, such as the difficulty covering many candidates and their causes.

Exceptionally, the dominant horse race reporting style maintained the perspective that the electoral contest was a direct competition between the two front runners. This also suppressed other contestants and their policies. Thus, there was a limited chance for the voters to be exposed to various politics, which might have changed the outcomes of the elections. The elimination of these gaps means that media organisations have to come up with more commitment to providing balance and substance in the coverage, making the quality of electoral communication and democratic consciousness in Kenya better.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion: This study underscores the significant influence of media framing on public perceptions during Kenya's 2022 general election. The articles sampled from The Daily Nation and The Standard indicated that the airport human interest reporting exaggerated the horse-race aspect by featuring 750 articles that described leading contenders William Ruto and Raila Odinga instead of only 350 of substance. This heavy emphasis on competition and political dynamics overshadowed critical discussions essential for informed voter decision-making. Moreover, the limited attention to alternative candidates entrenched a binary narrative, diminishing the diversity of perspectives and policy proposals in the electoral discourse. These findings raise significant concerns about the depth and balance of electoral coverage and its broader implications for democratic engagement in Kenya. Addressing these issues requires rethinking journalistic practices to foster a more inclusive and substantive approach to election reporting.

Recommendations: Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to improve media framing during future elections in Kenya. First, media outlets should aim for a balanced ratio of horse-race reporting to policy discussions, such as 60:40, with the majority focusing on substantive policy issues. This balance would provide voters with a broader understanding of candidates' platforms while maintaining engagement with the competitive aspects of elections. Journalists should highlight alternative candidates by dedicating consistent coverage, such as profiling lesser-known contenders or exploring all candidates' policy positions in dedicated segments. News organisations must establish internal guidelines emphasising framing techniques that balance political competition with substantive issues, such as mandatory sections summarising policy positions in articles

covering debates or rallies. Addressing the influence of media ownership is equally important, as ownership structures often skew coverage toward aligned candidates. Transparency rules, enforced by bodies like the Media Council of Kenya, could require disclosure of ownership affiliations to help the public critically assess election coverage. Additionally, training journalists on balanced framing techniques and collaborating with

civic education organisations to develop voter education content would enhance reporting. Weekly "Election Explainer" sections could compare candidates' policies on key issues. By adopting these measures, Kenyan media can encourage more informed voter decision-making and foster inclusive and democratic electoral discourse.

REFERENCES

- Delshad, A. B. (2013). Telling stories: Exogenous influences on media, presidential, and congressional framing of biofuels. *Politics & Policy*, 41(2), 213–240. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12009>
- Entman, R.M. (1993). Framing: Toward a clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58.
- Fernandes, J., & Shumow, M. (2016). Framing politics in transnational communities: Spanish-language immigrant media and election coverage in South Florida. *Journalism*, 17(8), 961–978. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884914542743>
- Iyengar, S., & Simon, A. (1993). News coverage of the Gulf crisis and public opinion: A study of agenda-setting, priming, and framing. *Communication Research*, 20(3), 365–383.
- Jang, S. M., & Oh, Y. W. (2016). Getting attention online in election coverage: Audience selectivity in the 2012 U.S. presidential election. *New Media & Society*, 18(10), 2271–2286. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815583491>
- Kameri-Mbote, P. (2015). The role of the media in promoting democracy in Kenya. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 7(2), 225–243.
- Kuan, D., Hasan, N. A. M., Zawawi, J. W. M., & Abdullah, Z. (2021). Framing theory application in public relations: The lack of dynamic framing analysis in competitive analysis. *Media Watch*, 12(2). <https://doi:10.15655/mw/2021/v12i2/160155>
- Mwangi, C., & Ng'weno, M. (2018). The impact of new media on the Kenyan media landscape. *Journal of Media and Communication Studies*, 10(1), 1–12.
- Odhiambo, J. (2016). The Kenyan media and the fight against corruption. *African Studies Review*, 59(1), 123–144.
- Ojwang, J., & Oyaro, J. (2017). The role of social media in the Kenyan political landscape. *Journal of Communication and Media Studies*, 9(1), 1–12.
- Otieno, M. O., & Ndonye, M. (2022). Theoretical analysis of peace journalism and reporting during electioneering period in Kenya. *Journal of Media and Communication (JMC)*, 1(1), 1–9.
- Patterson, T. E. (2016). *News Coverage of the 2016 Presidential Primaries: Horse Race Reporting has Consequences* (HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series RWP16-050). Harvard Kennedy School.
- Pew Research Center. (2012). Pew Research Center: Numbers, Facts, and Trends Shaping Your World. Library of Congress. Retrieved from <https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0002821/>
- Pew Research Center. (2018). *America Trends Panel Wave 26*. Retrieved on February 21, 2021, from <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/dataset/american-trends-panel-wave-26/>
- Wanyama, A. (2019). The Kenyan media and the promotion of good governance. *Journal of Good Governance Studies*, 3(1), 1–12.