

## Voters' Reactions to the 2019 Presidential Debate in Nigeria

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Beatrice Adeyinka Laninhun Ph.D<sup>1</sup>  
Akintayo Enoch Olowojebutu<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Over the years, debate scholarship has interrogated the usefulness or relevance of political debates in the electoral process. While there is an avalanche of debate effect studies in established democracies such as America, scant attention has been paid to presidential debates in Nigeria. Based on the Rational Choice theory and the Uses and Gratifications theory, this study therefore investigated voters' response to the 2019 presidential debate in Nigeria. The study adopted the survey research design and administered questionnaire on 460 voters in Ekiti State, Nigeria. The respondents were selected using the multi-stage sampling technique. Findings revealed that although the 2019 presidential debate had very little influence on voters' voting decisions in the 2019 presidential election, a majority of the voters perceived the presidential debate as relevant to the electoral process as it increased their knowledge of political issues as well as their knowledge of the candidates. Moreover, political affiliation was found to be the most significant factor that influenced voters' choice of candidate. The study therefore recommended that political campaign managers and politicians should leverage the debate platform to promote their candidates but should not assume this would significantly influence voting decisions.

**Keywords:** Presidential debate, election, debate effects, voters' choice, voters' perception.

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Communication and Language Arts, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup>Public Relations Unit, College of Health Sciences and Technology, Ijero-Ekiti, Nigeria.

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### Corresponding author:

Beatrice Adeyinka Laninhun, Department of Communication and Language Arts, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. Email: ba\_laninhun@yahoo.com

### **Introduction**

In many countries of the world, political debate has become one of the key features of the electoral process. It is a platform where candidates for a particular elective position meet to debate on issues identified and it is a channel through which political parties can enlighten the audience about their manifestoes (Iredia, 2011). Debates are an “information-rich” source of campaign communication which facilitates viewers’ acquisition of issue knowledge (McKinney and Carlin, 2004 p. 211). They are considered to be a key platform for political information in democracies, particularly in contexts where voters have limited information about candidates. Political debates can reveal information about candidates’ policy positions and personalities.

The most popular political debate is the presidential debate. The debate features presidential aspirants coming face to face in a bias-free platform to present their proposals on issues that affect the country. These debates are usually guided by rules and are usually broadcast on radio, television and the Internet to reach a wide audience (National Democratic Institute, 2014). They help voters to critically assess the presidential aspirants.

Political debates commenced in the United States of America in 1858. The first recorded political debate was between Abraham Lincoln, a Republican and Stephen Douglas, a Democrat who campaigned for the office of the Senator of Illinois. The seven debates which held between 21 August and 15 October of that year, focused on slavery and the desirability of the union of the United States. From all accounts, Abraham Lincoln lost the debate and subsequently the senatorial seat (Yagboyaju & Salaam 2017; Skoko, 2005).

The introduction of televised general election presidential debates in America in 1960 transformed the history of political communication. Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard M. Nixon had four TV debates that year. It is said that the Kennedy-Nixon exchanges established a “high standard” for presidential debating, and did initiate what has now become an institution in presidential

campaigns (McKinney and Carlin, 2004; Skoko, 2005; Yagboyaju & Salaam, 2017). However, televised general election presidential debates did not become a regular feature of the electoral process in the United States until 1976. Since the Ford-Carter encounter in 1976, presidential debates have continued uninterrupted in America (McKinney and Carlin, 2004 p. 228).

Political debates have over time become an integral part of the global democratic process. Many nations (both established and new democracies) have taken cues from the United States in developing televised debate traditions of their own. Televised political debates were introduced in Nigeria in the 1993 presidential elections. Debates were organised between Moshood K. O. Abiola of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and Bashir Tofa of the National Republican Convention (NRC). “Following in this tradition, televised debates between candidates at the presidential and gubernatorial levels have been held since the return of democracy in 1999” (Olaniyan, 2019, para. 1).

Although political debates have consistently been organised in Nigeria since 1999, they have been characterised by series of boycotts. In 1999, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)’s Olusegun Obasanjo refused to debate his primary opponent, Olu Falae of the now-defunct Alliance for Democracy and the All People’s Party. In 2003, Obasanjo again refused to participate in the presidential debate against Muhammadu Buhari, his main challenger. In 2007, PDP’s Umaru Yar’Adua declined to debate Buhari of Congress for Progressive Change (CPC). While all the major presidential candidates in the 2011 election that is, Buhari (CPC), Ibrahim Shekarau of All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP), and Nuhu Ribadu of Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) turned up for the presidential debate organised by NN24 cable television, the incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP pulled out of the debate in favour of the debate organised by a partnership of the Nigeria Elections Debate Group (NEDG) and Broadcasting Organisations of Nigeria (BON). His opponents also refused to participate in the NEDG-BON organised debate. In 2015, the All Progressives Congress (APC)’s Muhammadu

Buhari did not take part in the NEDG organised debate while the incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan did participate in the debate.

The situation was not different in 2019. Out of the 74 aspirants for the post of president in the country, only five were invited to partake in the NEDG-BON organised debate. Two invited aspirants, the incumbent, Muhammadu Buhari of the APC and his main challenger Atiku Abubakar of the PDP failed to take part in the debate. However, the other three invited candidates participated in the televised presidential debate. They are Oby Ezekwesili of the Allied Congress Party of Nigeria (ACPN), Fela Durotoye of the Alliance for New Nigeria (ANN) and Kingsley Moghalu of the Young Progressives Party (YPP) (Olaniyan, 2019; Omodiagbe, 2020). The presidential debate which held on January 19, 2019, prior to the February 23 presidential election in the country was broadcast on radio and television as well as the new media. It addressed issues related to the economy, electricity supply, corruption, job creation, health, and security, amongst others.

The emerging trend shows that the winners of presidential elections in Nigeria since 1999 have always been candidates who refused to participate in political debates (Olaniyan, 2019). The implication is that although political debates occur in Nigeria, they are yet to be fully integrated into the Nigerian democratic culture.

Taking the flawed history of political debates in Nigeria into consideration, it can be assumed that “a majority of the candidates view the debate process as jejune and inconsequential in the grand scheme of things” (Omodiagbe, 2020). Since despite boycotts of debates, presidential candidates go ahead to win elections, it is not surprising that questions have been raised about the impact of political debates on electoral outcomes in Nigeria. The big question has been “Does political debate really matter in Nigeria”? The current study attempts to interrogate this issue by investigating the role of presidential debates in the electioneering process using the 2019 presidential debate as a study. Specifically, the study explored how voters in Ekiti State, Nigeria reacted to the debate.

The present study will also help to fill the gap in the political debate literature as scant attention has been paid to presidential debates in Nigeria. Many studies have however been conducted on presidential debates in America and other established/emerging democracies around the world. Such studies for America include Benoit & Hansen (2004); Cho and Ha (2012); Jarman (2016); McKinney, Rill, and Thorson (2014); and Schwalbe, Cohen and Ross (2020). Studies in other countries include Cheng, 2016 (Taiwan); Gyampo, 2009 (Ghana); Isotalus, 2011 (Finland); Lee and Lee, 2015 (Korea); Moss and O'Hare, 2014 (Kenya); Skoko, 2005 (Croatia); and Yagboyaju and Salaam, 2017 (Nigeria).

### **Research Questions**

1. What were the voters' motives for watching the 2019 presidential debate?
2. How did voters perceive the 2019 presidential debate?
3. In what ways did the 2019 presidential debate influence voters during the election?

### **Effects of Presidential Debates**

Over the years, debate scholarship has interrogated the usefulness or relevance of political debates in the electoral process. Empirical debate research has indicated varied results on the influence of debate exposure on the audience. While some works affirmed the influence of debate on voting decision, there are others which adduced that political debates do not have any significant impact on voters' behaviour. McKinney and Carlin (2004) however explained that debate effects are dependent largely on the contextual dynamics of a given campaign, the particular candidates engaged in the debate, as well as the disposition of debate viewers. They noted further that "debates work more to reinforce rather than change voters' minds, debates facilitate the acquisition of issue information, and debate viewing influences perceptions of candidates' character or image traits" (p. 210).

In his contribution, Mathews (2012 p. 20) stated that "the effects of debates on eventual votes are likely mild, and, in most cases,

effectively nil. Moreover, the effects that exist are often caused by factors wholly beyond the candidates' control". This position implies that political debates have very little or no effect on the voters. And where they do, they are reinforced by many factors other than the debate.

Scholars have examined the content and effect of political debates but the most popular target of the research concerning television debates has been their effects (Isotalus, 2011). For instance, McKinney, Rill, and Thorson (2014) examined the effects of televised 2012 presidential debate on young citizens' candidate evaluations and normative democratic attitudes, as well as political cynicism and political information efficacy (PIE). A total of 282 undergraduate students from 11 universities across the US participated in the study. This longitudinal study tracked young citizens' democratic attitudes from pre-debate to post-election. Findings indicated that debate viewing decreases young citizens' political cynicism and strengthens political information efficacy.

An earlier study by Benoit, McKinney and Holbert (2001) used a pretest/posttest design to assess more subtle effects of watching a 2000 presidential debate on attitudes and vote intention. The study employed undergraduate students enrolled in various communication classes at a large Midwestern university to investigate the potential effects of debate watching on four potential voting decision factors: policy (issues), character, leadership, and party loyalty. Findings showed that leadership and overall policy stance became more important factors in vote choice after watching the debate. Results suggested that just as watching a debate can increase voters' confidence in their vote choice it can also alter impressions of which candidate is most desirable on the issues. The study indicates that discourse in presidential debates can influence the relative importance of vote decision factors, or serve an agenda setting function.

Jarman (2016) investigated motivated reasoning and viewers' reactions to the first 2012 presidential debate in America. The participants in this study included 175 undergraduate students

enrolled in lower-division communication classes at a Midwestern university. Participants rated the strength of arguments made by Obama and Romney and also determined which candidate won each segment of the debate. Results showed that viewers were driven by partisan interests that led them to believe their candidates made stronger arguments and won the debate. The study provided evidence that motivated reasoning explained viewers' reactions to the debates. It affirmed that political affiliation, prior vote choice, pre-debate attitude toward the candidates and prior attitudes on key issues strongly influence viewers' perceptions of presidential debates.

Similar findings were discovered in the work of Schwalbe, Cohen and Ross (2020). Their study explored the objectivity illusion and voter polarisation in the 2016 presidential election in America. Findings of the three-stage longitudinal study affirmed the tendency for supporters to rate their preferred candidate's debate performances more positively as participants in the study displayed a partisan bias in their assessments of the 2016 presidential debates. On virtually every attribute in both debates, Trump and Clinton supporters rated their candidate more positively. The study participants' political stance thus had a major impact on their perceptions of which candidate "won" the presidential debates.

Benoit and Hansen (2004) investigated the effects of presidential debate watching on voters' issue knowledge, character evaluation, and vote choice. The study utilised the National Election Survey (NES) data in America to contact those who watched and did not watch presidential debates in five presidential campaigns (1976, 1980, 1984, 1996, and 2000). Findings revealed that those who watched the debates had increased knowledge in issues salience more than those who did not watch the debates. However, the study concluded that debates do not automatically affect voters because citizens already know the candidates who are coming to the debate, specifically, the incumbent president who is seeking a rerun, and because it is possible that some debates are more informative than others.

Aside from America, a poll was conducted by Skoko (2005) to ascertain the opinions of respondents about the 2005 pioneering

debates in Croatia. The study employed the telephone automated method to collect data from 600 respondents (older than 18, with the right to vote, who watched at least two of the three debates) from all over Croatia. Results revealed that a majority of the respondents (63.83%) watched the debates because they wanted to be better informed about the candidates and their programmes. The study also showed that as many as 18 percent of the respondents changed their opinion about the candidates after the debates.

Also in Nigeria, Yagboyaju and Salaam (2017) examined the role of election debates and their impact on the Nigerian political culture, using the American experience as a comparison. The paper argued that election debates have become ingrained into the United States democratic culture and are well viewed by large audiences. They have become “so crucial to the electoral process that abstention under any guise by a candidate could be highly inimical to his aspiration” (p.211). However, political debates have not been fully ingrained into the Nigerian democratic culture. In Nigeria, “candidates have taken election debates for granted and are not keen on the platforms which election debates provide and this has been attested to by the culture of boycott of election debates by major candidates, who do not see the debates as having any effects on the process” (p. 211). The paper therefore advocated the institutionalisation of election debates into the Nigerian political culture.

Although studies on the effects of the presidential debate have been conducted in different countries, there are scant studies on the presidential debate in Nigeria as this review has shown. Most of the studies reviewed here were conducted in America. This is because American presidential debates are the most well-known political debates and they have been intensively studied (Isotalus, 2011). Moreover, these studies have affirmed that debates have effects on voters in various countries but to what extent can this be said of Nigeria? Is there any gratification derived from watching/viewing political debates in Nigeria? Do voters respond to debates? How did voters react to the 2019 presidential debate to be precise? These are the issues the present study has set out to address.



### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by the Rationale Choice and Uses and Gratifications theories.

#### **The Rational Choice Theory**

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is an economic theory. It originated during the late 18th century from the work of Cesare Beccaria (Wright, 2009). The theory is used to explain human and consumer behaviour but has been adopted over the years to study elections and how people make decisions in political settings. Anthony Downs cited in Ogu (2013) was the first to apply rational choice theory to study electoral behaviour and party competition and his work has had great impact on the study of elections all over the world.

The theory is based on the assumption that individuals choose a course of action that is most in line with their personal preferences (Amadae 2016). The RCT holds that individuals anticipate the outcomes of alternative courses of action and choose the alternative that is likely to give them the greatest satisfaction. In essence, a rational actor is one who, when confronted with two alternatives which give rise to outcomes, will choose the one which yields the more preferred outcome (Luce & Raiffa as cited in Quackenbush, 2004 p. 95).

Rational choice theory “assumes that an actor chooses an alternative that he/she believes brings about a social outcome that optimizes his/her preference under subjectively conceived constraints” (Sato, 2013 p.1). Hence, a common criticism of RCT is that decision-makers are not rational; “they are constrained by institutions, cultural influences, or psychological, limitations that make the assumption of rationality problematic” (Quackenbush, 2004 p.92). Also, Ogu (2013) submits that rationality is subjective. He notes that decisions taken by individuals are sometimes influenced by certain factors such as the values of the individual or his society, his beliefs, and philosophy. Thus, a voter might vote for a particular candidate, not because that candidate was the best option for him/her or was the candidate that

put up the best performance in a political debate but because of perceived possibility of that candidate winning the election.

Nonetheless, the rational choice theory is relevant to this study as it explicates the influence of the 2019 presidential debate on voting decisions. The present study also takes into consideration the limitation of RCT by investigating factors (other than the presidential debate) which influenced voting choice in the 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria.

### **The Uses and Gratifications Theory**

Uses and gratifications (U&G) is one of the most widely used theoretical underpinnings of communication research (Perse, 2014). The theory which was first introduced in the 1940s has evolved since its expansion by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch in 1974. However, its focus has remained on what the audience/users do with the media. The basic tenet of “U&G theory of audience behavior is that media use is selective and motivated by rational self-awareness of the individual’s own needs and an expectation that those needs will be satisfied by particular types of media and content” (Katz et al. as cited by Ruggiero, 2000 p. 18). The theory asserts that people use media to gratify specific wants and needs.

Lariscy, Tinkham, and Sweetser (2011) aver that the theory has a history of investigating political information-seeking motivations while noting surveillance as the dominant gratification for political information. Moreover, in an earlier study, McKinney and Carlin (2004 p.207) reported the top three motivations that viewers’ cite for watching debates. These include a desire to learn about candidates’ issue positions, to compare candidate personalities, and to gain information that will allow them to make their voting decision.

Based on the U&G theory, the present study examines how voters utilise political debate information. It also investigates gratifications sought by voters for watching the 2019 presidential debate in Nigeria and the extent to which their expectations were met by the debate.

### **Method**

This study employed the descriptive survey design to explore voters' reaction to the 2019 presidential debate. The multi-stage sampling technique was adopted for this study. At each of the stages, appropriate sampling techniques were also used.

In the first stage, Ekiti state was purposively selected because it is regarded as a state with high literate population (Omilusi, 2019). The state is divided into three Senatorial Districts (Ekiti North, Ekiti Central and Ekiti South). Each of these districts has local government areas, totalling sixteen (16) local government areas (LGAs).

In the second stage, the random sampling (balloting) technique was adopted to select one local government area (LGA) from each of the Senatorial Districts. Hence, Oye LGA (Ekiti North), Ado Ekiti LGA (Ekiti Central) and Ikere LGA (Ekiti South) were selected respectively. In the third stage, the headquarters of each of these three local government areas were purposively selected. This is because the three areas share the same characteristics (being the headquarters). Therefore, the selected towns were Oye-Ekiti, Ado-Ekiti and Ikere-Ekiti.

In the fourth stage, the purposive sampling method was used to select respondents from each of these three towns. Only literate residents who watched the presidential debate on January 19 and also voted on February 23, 2019 and were willing to take part in the study were selected.

The population of this study is the 395,741 voters at the presidential poll in Ekiti state (INEC, 2019). Four hundred and sixty (460) voters were purposively drawn from the study population. This sample size was determined using the sample size table developed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). It is indicated on the table that when the size of a study population is above 75,000 and equal to or above 1,000,000, the required sample size is 384. In order to check attrition and unwillingness on the part of the respondents, 20% of the sample size (76) was added to the original size. In total, 460 voters were selected.

The main instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire. The reliability strength of the instrument was determined using Cronbach's Alpha Test. The obtained reliability co-efficient was 0.74, confirming the reliability of the instrument. Three trained research assistants administered copies of the questionnaire on respondents in Oye-Ekiti, Ado-Ekiti and Ikere-Ekiti in their respective homes, offices, shops and higher institutions of learning. Out of the 460 administered questionnaire copies, 414 copies were duly completed and returned, giving a 90% return rate. The data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

### **Demographic Profile of Respondents**

Both male and female genders were adequately represented in the study with female respondents comprising 226(54.6%) and male respondents 118(45.4%). A majority of the respondents 253(61.1%) claimed to be married, 141(34.1%) single, 11(2.7%) had divorced and those separated were 3(0.7%); widowed were 6(1.4%). The modal age group was 31-40 years with the highest frequency of 172 (42.0%) followed by 21-30 years with 109(26.3%). Those above 50 years were next with 35(8.5%) and those under 21 had the least frequency with 31(7.5%). Most of the respondents had gainful employment as more than half of the respondents 227(54.8%) were employed either by government or private organisations while 111(26.8%) were self-employed; only 19(4.6%) were unemployed. Students (n=55; 13.3%) also took part in the study. Considering the level of education of the respondents, 333(80.4%) claimed to have tertiary education, 71(17.1%) have secondary education and 10(2.4%) said they have primary education. By implication, most of the respondents are well educated. Regarding their political affiliation, 142(34.3%) of the respondents said they were PDP supporters, 126(30.4%) were APC supporters, while 47(11.4%) were ACPN supporters. YPP party had the least number of supporters with 4(1.0%). Some of the respondents 80(20.3%) did not indicate support for any political party.

## Results

### **RQ1: What were the voters' motives for watching the 2019 presidential debate?**

**Table 1: Respondents' reasons for watching the 2019 Presidential debate in Nigeria**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Total</b>
To learn more about the debaters	244(58.9)	170(41.1)	414(100%)
Because my party was debating	90(21.7)	324(78.3)	414(100%)
It is always interesting	134(32.4)	280(67.6)	414(100%)
To see who to cast my vote for	125(30.2)	289(69.8)	414(100%)

Table 1 shows the respondents' motives for watching the 2019 presidential debate in Nigeria. More than half of the respondents 244(58.9%) indicated that they watched the 2019 presidential debate in order to know more about the debaters. Some respondents 134(32.4%) watched because they felt that the presidential debate was always interesting and 125(30.2%) watched because they believed that the debate would help them decide on their choice of candidate. Only a few 90(21.7%) watched the debate because their party took part in the debate. This implies that majority of the respondents had positive motives for watching the 2019 presidential debate. This probably explains why most of the respondents 364 (87.9%) indicated that they had quite high expectations of the debate and 342 (84.6%) claimed that their expectations were met.

### **RQ2: How did voters perceive the 2019 presidential debate?**

In order to answer this question, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with certain statements. Findings are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Respondents' Perception of the 2019 Presidential Debate in Nigeria (% in parenthesis)**

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I consider the debate relevant to the election	270(65.2)	94(22.7)	40(9.7)	10(2.4)
The debate was informative	258(62.3)	155(37.5)	1(0.2)	0(0.0)
The debate increased my knowledge about the contestants	295(71.2)	111(26.8)	7(1.8)	1(0.2)
The debate increased my knowledge of political issues in Nigeria	267(64.5)	139(33.6)	8(1.9)	0(0.0)
The debate had influence on my assessment of candidates' competence	290(70.1)	115(27.8)	8(1.9)	1(0.2)

Table 2 shows that almost all the respondents 413(99.8%) perceived the 2019 Presidential debate in Nigeria as informative. An overwhelming majority also believed the debate increased their knowledge of the candidates (98.1%) as well as their knowledge of political issues in Nigeria (98.1%). A majority 405 (97.8%) perceived the debate as influential in their assessment of candidates' competence while 364 (87.9%) considered the debate quite relevant to the election. Moreover, when asked if debate was necessary in Nigeria's future presidential elections, the majority of respondents (n=373; 90.1%) averred that the presidential debate was needed to a large extent. It can therefore be deduced that most of the voters sampled have a positive perception of the 2019 presidential debate in Nigeria.

The study also investigated the perceived performance of the candidates who took part in the debate. Table 3 presents the findings.

**Table 3: Perceived Performance of the Debaters**

Variable	Category	Frequency (n=414)	Percentage
By your assessment, who among the debaters had the best performance?	Oby Ezekwesili	89	21.5
	Kingsley Moghalu	179	43.2
	Fela Durotoye	144	34.8
	No Response	2	0.5

Results in Table 3 indicate that a majority of the respondents 179(43.2%) perceived that Kingsley Moghalu performed better than Fela Durotoye and Oby Ezekwesili.

The study further examined if there is any association between respondents' demographic characteristics and their perception of the 2019 presidential debate in Nigeria. Results are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4: Chi-square test of association between demographic data and perception of the 2019 presidential debate in Nigeria**

Factor	Df	Chi-Square	p-value	Decision
Gender	2	1.252	0.535	Insignificant
Marital Status	8	54.094	0.000	Significant
Age	10	67.962	0.000	Significant
Occupation	10	38.368	0.000	Significant
Level of Education	4	48.749	0.000	Significant
Political Affiliation	10	37.445	0.000	Significant

Table 4 shows that there is a significant association between respondents' marital status, age, occupation, level of education, political affiliation and their perception of the 2019 presidential debate as the p-value is less than the pre-defined level of significance (0.05). However, there is no association between respondents' perception of the debate and their gender. This implies that being either male or female did not influence voters' perceptions of the 2019 presidential debate in Nigeria.

**RQ 3: In what ways did the 2019 presidential debate influence voters during the election?**

Also investigated in this study is the level to which the presidential debate of January 19, 2019 influenced voters' choice of candidates in the February 23, 2019 presidential election. Respondents were first asked to indicate who their preferred candidate was before the 2019 presidential debate and who they voted for in the 2019 presidential election (after the debate). Table 5 presents the results.

**Table 5: Respondents' Choice of Candidates Before and After the Debate**

Respondents' choice of candidates	Preferred candidate BEFORE the 2019 debate	Candidate voted for AFTER the 2019 debate
	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
Oby Ezekwesili	28 (6.8%)	34 (8.2%)
Kingsley Moghalu	13 (3.1%)	28 (6.8%)
Fela Durotoye	42 (10.1%)	41 (9.9%)
Atiku Abubakar	113 (27.4%)	115 (27.8%)
Muhammadu Buhari	196 (47.3%)	170 (41.1%)
Omoyele Sowore	22 (5.3%)	23 (5.6%)
No Response	-	3 (0.7%)

It is necessary to clarify that although Omoyele Sowore was not invited to take part in the debate, his name was mentioned by respondents who preferred him and voted for him. As shown in Table 5, there is a difference in voters' choice before the debate and after the debate. The most notable difference can be seen in the results of two of the candidates who participated in the debate (Kingsley Moghalu and Oby Ezekwesili) and one of the candidates who did not take part in the debate (Muhammadu Buhari). While 13(3.1%) indicated preference for Kingsley Moghalu before the debate, 28 (6.8%) voted for him after the debate. Before the debate, 28 (6.8%) preferred Oby Ezekwesili but 34 (8.2%) voted for her after the debate despite the fact that she had withdrawn from the presidential race. Whereas 196 (47.3%) respondents indicated Muhammadu Buhari (the



incumbent), as their preferred choice before the debate, only 170 (41.1%) voted for him after the debate.

Findings reveal there was a drop in the total number of voters who had earlier planned to cast their votes for President Muhammadu Buhari who boycotted the debate. However, Moghalu and Ezekwesili – who participated in the debate – had increase in preference from the period prior to the debate and after the debate. Markedly, Kingsley Moghalu, who was adjudged as the best performer during the debate by the respondents had the highest increase in voter's choice. Thus, it can be deduced that to a little extent, the 2019 presidential debate influenced the voting choice of voters in Ekiti state in the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria. The few respondents (n= 132; 31.9%) who acknowledged that the debate influenced their voting decision as presented in Table 6 could have accounted for this result.

**Table 6: Influence of the Debate on Voters**

Variable	Category	Frequency n=414	Percentage
Was the debate influential on your voting decision about your candidate?	Yes	132	31.9
	No	281	67.9
	No Response	1	0.2
How much did the presidential debate add to your knowledge about political issues in Nigeria?	Very much	242	58.5
	Much	146	35.3
	Not much	21	5.1
	No Response	5	1.2
How much did the presidential debate add to your knowledge about the contestants?	Very much	229	55.3
	Much	147	35.5
	Not much	19	4.6
	Not at all	8	1.9
	No Response	11	2.7

As depicted in Table 6, the majority of respondents 281(67.9%) stated that the debate did not influence their voting decision about their choice of candidate while some 132 (31.9%) claimed it did.

Nevertheless, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (93.8%) acknowledged that the debate increased their knowledge of political matters with more than half of the respondents 242(58.5%) affirming that the presidential debate added to their knowledge about political issues in Nigeria very much. Similarly, a greater percentage (90.8%) stated that the debate boosted their knowledge of the contestants. Again, with more than half of the respondents 229 (55.3%), claiming that the debate did this very much. This result is consistent with earlier findings on voters' perception of the debate presented in Table 2. It also aligns with findings on the motives for watching the debate presented in Table 1. Some of the voters (30.2%) had said that they watched the debate to know who to vote for in the election. It is possible that these respondents are non-partisans and undecided voters.

It was considered necessary to find out other factors, aside the presidential debate that informed respondents' voting choice in the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria. The major factors mentioned by the respondents are: political affiliation (62.3%), ethnic group (32.9%), family and mass media with 31.2% respectively. Other factors identified include social group (27.8%), peers (26.8%), and religion (22.7%). The Chi-square test result presented in Table 7 further affirms political affiliation as a major factor which influences voting decision.

**Table 7: Chi-square test of association between respondents' demographic data and voting decision in the 2019 presidential election**

Factor	Df	Chi-Square	p-value	Decision
Gender	1	0.224	0.636	Insignificant
Marital Status	4	5.455	0.244	Insignificant
Age	5	5.631	0.344	Insignificant
Occupation	5	8.936	0.112	Insignificant
Level of Education	2	3.574	0.167	Insignificant
Political Affiliation	5	42.380	0.000	Significant

As reflected in Table 7 only the political affiliation of respondents showed significant association with their voting choice in the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria as the p-value is less than the pre-defined level of significance (0.05). This implies that respondents' voting decision during the 2019 presidential election was influenced by the political party they supported not their gender, marital status, age, occupation or level of education.

### **Discussion**

In line with the uses and gratifications theory, the study has revealed gratifications sought by voters for watching the 2019 presidential debate in Nigeria. Findings suggest that voters were prompted by their desire to acquire more knowledge of political matters as well as knowledge of the political aspirants. Analysis also indicates that voters' expectations of the debate were quite high and the expectations were met to a great extent. Results thus lend credence to findings of previous debate studies which reported the motivations that viewers cite for watching debates. These include a desire to learn about candidates' issue positions, to compare candidate personalities, to gain information that will allow them to make their voting decision and to increase their knowledge of political matters (McKinney & Carlin, 2004; Skoko, 2005; Lariscy *et al.*, 2011).

Findings have shown that most of the voters sampled have a positive perception of the 2019 presidential debate in Nigeria. An overwhelming majority (99.8%) perceived the debate as informative, as an avenue to learn more about the contestants (98.1%) and about political issues (98.1%) in the country. This result corroborates previous works (Bidwell, Casey & Glennerster, 2018; Jamieson & Adasiewicz, 2000; Lee & Lee, 2015; ) which revealed that watching debates positively affects learning and significantly increases voters' political knowledge as well as their awareness of candidates' policy stances.

Analysis also indicated that most of the voters perceived the debate as relevant to future presidential elections in Nigeria and also had influence on how they assessed the competence of the contestants.

Furthermore, 30.2% of the voters perceived the debate as an avenue to know who to cast their votes for. This is an indication that some of the voters perceived the debate platform as relevant to their voting choice in the 2019 presidential election. This finding lends credence to the assertion that voters who are not partisans are likely to make voting choice after watching the debate (Benoit & Hansen, 2004; Hillygus & Jackman, 2003).

Moreover, political affiliation was found to have significantly influenced the voters' perception of the debate. This is consistent with the findings of Jarman (2016) that political affiliation is one of the major factors that influence viewers' perceptions of presidential debates. The result is also in tandem with that of Schwalbe, *et al.*'s (2020) study which revealed that voters' political stance had a major impact on their perceptions of debate performances.

Findings suggest that although the 2019 presidential debate appeared to have little influence on voters' choice it did increase their knowledge of political matters and contestants to a great extent. A majority admitted that they were better informed about the candidates and became more knowledgeable about political issues in the country. This is consistent with the deduction that debates may provide voters with more or better information on which to base their decision without necessarily changing their vote choices (Benoit, *et al.*, 2001; Benoit & Hansen 2004; Hillygus & Jackman, 2003; Jamieson & Adasiewicz, 2000).

The present study thus aligns with previous debate effects studies which have demonstrated the vital role that debates play in the electoral process. Based on the responses of some of the voters who claimed the debate influenced their choice of candidates, it can be inferred that presidential debates have the potential to influence voting decision. This finding supports Bidwell *et al.* (2018) who found that exposure to debate impacted on the voters' choice of candidate. It partly negates Mathews' (2012) submission that political debates have very little or no effect on the voters. Nonetheless, in response to Olaniyan's (2019) interrogation: "Who Debates Epp"?

The present study has in a way, indicated those ‘who debates have helped’ and in what ways they have helped.

The study further revealed factors other than the presidential debate that informed respondents’ voting choice in the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria. Analysis indicates that political affiliation is the most significant factor that influenced voters’ choice of candidate in the 2019 election. Ethnic group, family and mass media reports also had some level of influence on the voters’ choice while demographic variables such as gender, marital status, age, occupation and education did not. Results lend credence to previous works which indicate political party as a dominant influential factor that affects voters’ choice (Karahan-Uslu, Bozkurt & Tüfekçioğlu (2017); Krishna & Sokolova 2017).

Findings of the present study are in line with the postulation of the rational choice theory. The theory predicts that voters will make choices that are beneficial to them and a voter may vote for a candidate because such candidate is supported by his family, peer or political party. It also assumes that a partisan may vote for a candidate because of perceived possibility of that candidate winning the election.

It can be deduced from the findings that political affiliation is a strong factor in voting decision. This probably explains why the two leading political parties whose presidential candidates boycotted the January 19, 2019 debate still had the highest number of votes in the 2019 presidential elections. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) declared Muhammadu Buhari (APC) the winner of the election with 15,191,847 (53.1%) votes while Atiku Abubakar (PDP) came second with 11,262,978 (39.4%) votes. Kingsley Moghalu, the perceived winner of the 2019 presidential debate trailed behind in the 14th position with 21,886 (0.08%) votes (INEC, 2019). His party (YPP) is a new, relatively unknown political party in Nigeria. Hence, Kingsley Moghalu may not have fared well at the polls possibly because voters view candidates through the prism of political parties.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study has provided evidence that political debates do indeed matter. It has shown that presidential debates are considered useful and relevant in the electoral process. The electorate sampled in Ekiti State, Nigeria watched the 2019 presidential debate because they wanted to increase their knowledge of political issues as well as learn more about the presidential aspirants and these expectations were met to a large extent as indicated in the present study. Although the 2019 presidential debate may not have significantly altered the voting decision of majority of the respondents, it has had a subtle effect on some respondents who claimed to have been influenced in their choice of candidates by the debate. This category of electorate may be regarded as non-partisans. Such people are usually undecided or sometimes uncommitted to political matters. Often times, the apathetic electorate are the target of election campaign messages since it is assumed that they are likely to influence the outcome of an election. In essence, whilst debates may not necessarily influence partisans, they are capable of persuading undecided voters to support a particular candidate. Besides, analysis has revealed political affiliation as a significant factor in voting decision.

This study foregrounds the need to pay attention to how presidential debates are organised and perceived by politicians in Nigeria. It also emphasises the importance of political party reputation and clout. The study therefore recommends that presidential debate should be taken more seriously by lawmakers/INEC by legally incorporating it into the electoral process for presidential elections in Nigeria. Also, political campaign managers and politicians should leverage the debate platform to promote their candidates. The debate platform can be used as a free medium to reach millions of people who watch the debate. More so, voters perceive the debate as an avenue to learn more about the contestants and decide on their choice of candidate. It is also necessary for political party leaders to strengthen their parties in terms of followership and reputation as well as discourage their candidates (incumbents, in particular) from boycotting debates. In order to forestall perceived selection bias, organisers of the debate

should strongly justify their choice of candidates invited to participate in future debates.

Since this study was conducted in one out of the six geo-political zones of the country, and it relied on self-report, findings can therefore not be generalised. It is suggested that future studies broaden the scope and employ mixed methods of research. Despite, these limitations, findings of this study are valid and can possibly be used to influence policy decisions on political debates in Nigeria.

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