

## Examination of the tone of media coverage of Kenya's 2022 general election

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### Abstract

This study examines the media's tone of reporting on Kenya's 2022 presidential election by reviewing the Daily Nation and The Standard during the official campaign, focusing on candidates William Ruto and Raila Odinga. These newspapers were chosen due to their coverage of a diverse range of Kenyan media outlets; Daily Nation is considered centre-right, while The Standard is seen as having apparent political affiliations. Using a quantitative content analysis of 2,207 election-related stories, the study categorised tone as negative, neutral, or positive based on language, headlines, and framing. Raila Odinga received higher neutral coverage (91.5%) compared to William Ruto (88.5%), while Ruto faced greater negativity (9.0% vs 5.0%). Both candidates had low positive coverage, with Ruto 2.5 per cent and Odinga 3.5 per cent. Challenges such as media partisanship and historical biases significantly influenced coverage tone, reflecting the interplay between media ownership and politics. These disparities potentially shaped public perceptions, influenced by the candidates' reputations and campaign strategies. This study focuses on how responsible media coverage and processes play out in democratic processes and the centrality of media in the electoral processes.

**Key terms:** Bias, media coverage, presidential election, public perception, tonality.

## INTRODUCTION

The 2022 general elections in Kenya introduced a new and constantly evolving political scenario characterised by a record number of presidential candidates who would soon exceed fifteen interested people. Ultimately, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) approved four candidates for the ballot: David Mwaure Waihiga of the Agano Party, Roots Party's Prof. George Wajackoyah; Raila Amolo Odinga of the Azimio Coalition Political Party and William Samuel Ruto of United Democratic Alliance (UDA). These elections, held on August 9, 2022, also featured a known coalition pattern as there were two main alliances in the playing field. Deputy President William Ruto-UDA's running mate Rigathi Gachagua stood as the presidential ticket on the one half. In contrast, the other half had Raila Odinga- Azimio la Umoja running mate Martha Karua. The appointment of Karua, a female vice presidential candidate, was generally seen as an attempt to mobilise the gender vote.

The 2022 general elections were characterised by an almost unheard-of political realignment whereby the incumbent, President Uhuru Kenyatta, endorsed the opposition leader, Raila Odinga, against his deputy, William Ruto. This resulted in a highly polarising political situation, ensuring that the risks for the candidates and their factions were raised significantly. Such dynamics fostered by the media were fundamental during and after the Cold War in offering the formation of public opinion and supporting the democratic processes.

The media faced significant challenges while covering the elections, particularly regarding impartiality and accuracy. Historically, Kenyan media has been accused of contributing to ethnic strife, especially during the 2007/2008 Post-Election Violence (PEV) (Kibiwott, 2019). This criticism made journalists exercise much care in the succeeding elections. However, new problems emerged in the 2022 election year: the intimate connection between media ownership and parties and obvious party-affiliated biases. These elements sometimes restrict balanced reporting because politicians prefer to shape the discourses available in media organisations (Gitau & Ibelema, 2019). Savidge argues that such partisanship touches on issues concerning media coverage and democratic

processes in general about the tone of media coverage.

The tone of media coverage plays a critical role in shaping public opinion during elections. It affects voters' perception of the candidates and the political affiliations, and in a society as diverse as Kenya, it either fosters or aggravates division. Beyond reportage duties, the media must also balance its content to give the audience impartial, accurate, and relevant information that will enable the people to make the right voting decisions.

This study examines the tone of media coverage in Kenya's 2022 election to determine the role of media bias and historical prejudices. Through the examination of issues pertinent to media monopoly, political influence, and journalistic professionalism, the analysis seeks to uncover the potential ramifications for democratic processes in Kenya. The issues to be discussed will concern significant issues and concerns of the media, whether these challenges affect election coverage, and ideas concerning media democracy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Media bias in election coverage has been widely studied, with scholars highlighting the interplay between political contexts, media platforms, and audience demographics. A recurring theme across studies is the tendency of media to emphasise negativity, often overshadowing substantive policy issues and candidate achievements. The political environment plays a pivotal role in shaping media tone. Çarkoğlu et al. (2014) emphasise that media outlets often adopt a critical stance towards all candidates during political polarisation. This strategy aims to maintain the appearance of impartiality and attract a broad audience, avoiding alienation of specific demographic groups. However, the type of media outlet influences this approach significantly. Tabloids tend to favour sensationalism and adopt a more negative tone, while reputable sources often focus on policy matters and candidate credentials, striving for a balanced viewpoint.

Dunaway (2013) further contextualises this by noting that media portrayal of election coverage is influenced by the prevailing political climate, the platform used, and the target audience. Regardless of these variables,

the study finds that election coverage often leans towards negativity. The focus on "horse race" journalism—centred on competition and conflict rather than substantive policy—significantly contributes to this trend. This emphasis on weaknesses and errors creates a pessimistic atmosphere, detracting from a more balanced electoral discourse.

The language used in media coverage is another critical element that reflects inherent biases. Fernandes and Shumow (2016) argue that the choice of vocabulary in reporting can reveal the ideological positions of media outlets. The negative coverage tends to cover up scandals, mistakes, or controversies, whereas positive coverage covers achievements and political plans. This inclination towards scandals is a logical continuation of the previous point, as the audience is practised in identifying scandals as more valuable from the view of the readership share. This study underlines the importance of the balance within its framework to establish fair and objective coverage and journalistic professionalism simultaneously.

The literature review of media bias was conducted based on the analysis of studies that focused on the particular conditions of elections. However, the results received in various geographic and time contexts offer a more comprehensive perspective. For instance, studies in Western democracies frequently reveal trends in partisan bias, while research in emerging democracies often highlights the interplay between media ownership and political influence. Dunaway's (2013) findings on the United States media system align with Çarkoğlu et al.'s (2014) observations in Turkey, illustrating that media bias transcends political and cultural boundaries, albeit in context-specific ways. Expanding this review to include examples from Africa, Latin America, and Asia would further enrich the analysis and provide a comprehensive perspective.

The findings from these studies are directly relevant to examining Kenyan media coverage during the 2022 general election. The themes of partisanship, sensationalism, and the prioritisation of horse race journalism echo the challenges faced by Kenyan media, as noted in previous research (Gitau & Ibelema,

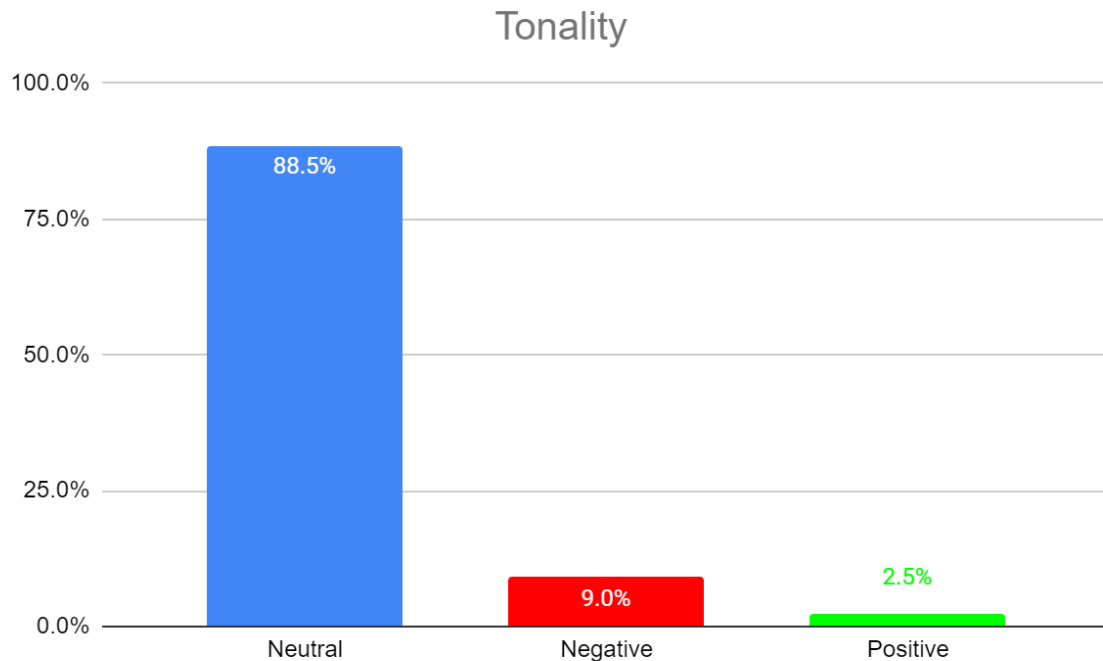
2019). Awareness of how such biases are expressed improves capacities for ascertaining their precise effect on Kenya's tenor of election reporting. Combined, this research will help advance the literature on media bias by presenting the specific ways media bias affects democratic processes.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study employed a comprehensive content analysis approach to examine the tone of newspaper coverage during Kenya's 2022 presidential election campaign. The analysis focused on stories directly related to the campaign and categorised the tone of coverage into three distinct categories: neutral, negative, and positive. Neutral tone refers to stories that report facts without evaluative language or bias toward any candidate, determined by the absence of language suggesting favourability or disfavour. Negative tone encompassed stories highlighting the candidates' scandals, controversies, or failures, often employing critical language or framing. Positive tone included stories emphasising candidates' accomplishments, policy proposals, or other favourable aspects, typically framed with supportive or optimistic language. This clear differentiation was essential for understanding how Daily Nation and The Standard framed their election coverage.

Observing the number of election-related articles and stories produced by the two newspapers, Daily Nation and The Standard, 2,207 during the three-month and eight-day official campaign period shows how these newspapers were involved in reporting the Kenyan 2022 presidential election. The extensive coverage of these two ministries shows how influential these media outlets are in wooing the general public during the campaign.

The tone of the coverage was categorised into three distinct types: neutral, negative, and positive, as shown in Figure 1 below. Neutral stories reported facts without evaluative language; negative stories emphasised controversies or failures, and positive stories highlighted achievements or policy proposals. These categories provided the framework for analysing the portrayal of the two leading candidates, William Ruto and Raila Odinga.

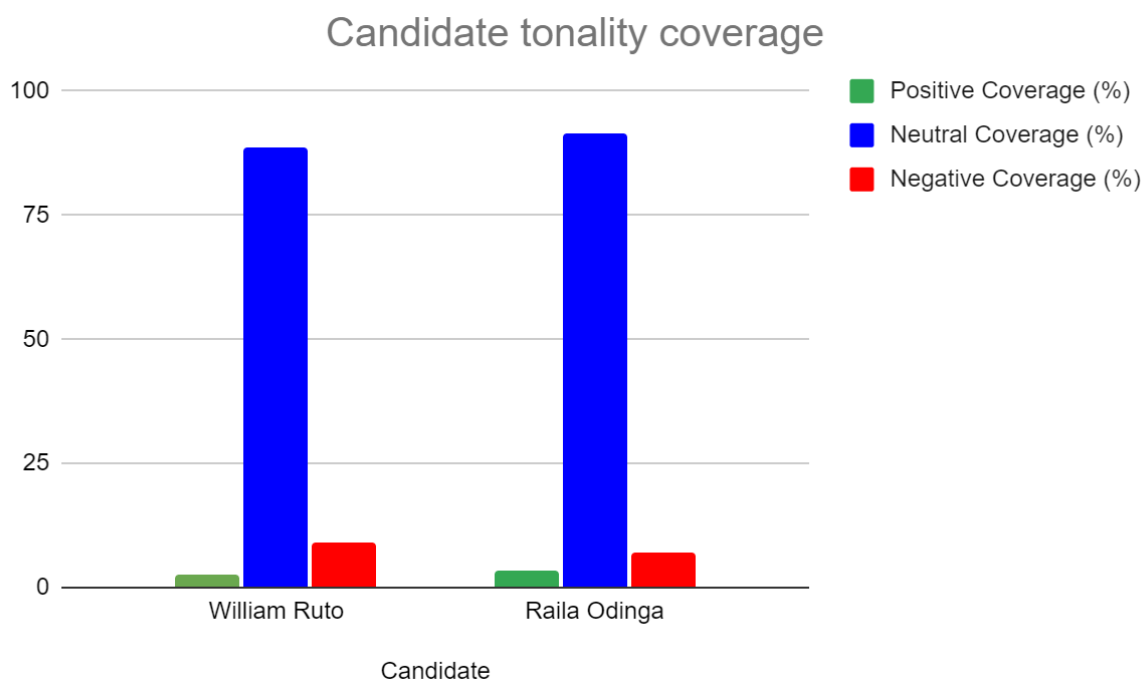


**Figure 1: Tonality**

The newspaper coverage of William Ruto and Raila Odinga during the 2022 presidential election campaign exhibited similarities and differences in tone. A total of 2207 stories were published in The Standard and Daily newspapers during the official campaign period, providing insights into the portrayal of these prominent candidates in the media. Data analysis reveals varying neutrality, negativity, and positivity levels in their coverage.

Analysis revealed significant differences in the tone of coverage between the candidates. Raila Odinga

received 91.5 per cent neutral coverage, compared to William Ruto, who received 88.5 per cent. This suggests that Odinga was portrayed with greater impartiality in the media. Regarding negative coverage, Ruto faced a higher proportion at 9.0 per cent, compared to Odinga's 5.0 per cent, indicating that Ruto encountered more critical media narratives. Regarding positive coverage, both candidates received minimal attention, with Odinga at 3.5 per cent and Ruto at 2.5 per cent. This low level of positivity reflects a broader trend of focusing on controversies rather than achievements.



**Figure 2: Candidate Tonality Coverage**

**Table 1: Association between the Candidate and the Tonality Coverage**

| Candidate    | Positive coverage (%) | Neutral coverage (%) | Negative coverage (%) | Chi-square(pdf) | P-value |
|--------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|---------|
| William Ruto | 92                    | 3263                 | 332                   | 16.5987(2)      | 0.00024 |
| Raila Odinga | 129                   | 3374                 | 258                   |                 |         |

The statistical analysis presented in Table 1 above further supports the findings. The findings indicate a statistically significant association between the candidate and the tone of coverage (Chi-square = 16.60,  $p = 0.00024$ ). This means there is a 95 per cent confidence level that the observed differences in tone were not by chance. Notably, Ruto's higher negative coverage aligns with his controversial reputation, including allegations of corruption and other misconduct, which may have drawn greater scrutiny from the media. Conversely, Odinga's longstanding political career and cleaner public image likely contributed to his comparatively neutral portrayal.

The media's framing of these candidates significantly influenced public perception. For example, headlines like "Ruto FAcEs New Corruption Allegations" from

The Standard framed Ruto negatively. At the same time, neutral stories such as "Odinga Unveils Economic Plan" in Daily Nation provided a balanced portrayal. This disparity in framing underscores the role of the media in amplifying certain narratives while downplaying others.

These findings underscore the media's critical influence on public opinion during elections. The results suggest that media ownership and editorial biases may have contributed to the disparities in tone. Additionally, the candidates' distinct campaign strategies and reputations likely affected their portrayal.

Journalists should receive training on impartiality and bias awareness to mitigate bias and enhance the

quality of election reporting. Media organisations should also implement editorial guidelines promoting balanced and fact-based reporting. Finally, voters must critically evaluate media content and seek diverse information sources to form informed opinions. Further research should better explore the language and framing techniques used in media coverage to understand their impact on voter behaviour and decision-making.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Conclusion:** These findings offer an understanding of media coverage in Kenya's 2022 presidential election to underpin the importance of the Issue Section that must transverse a coherent middle line instead of bias in media reporting. The continued occurrence of tone disparities and headship of media owning influences the coming out of greatness roles in guaranteeing fairness and integrity by media practitioners and companies. It remains crucial to provide a better-informed scholarly readership and to uphold the public's trust in democratic principles and their acts. The social relevance of this paper goes beyond the confines of the Kenya context because it endeavours to underscore how media plays an important role in determining electoral fairness and the perception of candidates. It can also contribute to the distortion of the democratic principle of allowing voters to make informed decisions, affecting the electoral result. Such understanding poses a challenge to the conventional structures of media ethical standards. It demands that editorial policies tighten their standards to enhance media organisations' political accountability and disclosure. Finally, the study points to a positive reminder that there is a need to encourage free and fair media that provides balanced voters with comprehensive information to support democracy. To solve these hardships, media organisations can,

therefore, be used as change-makers to enhance the indirections of democracy and fairness in elections within the Kenyan nation and worldwide.

**Recommendations:** Improving media coverage during presidential elections in Kenya requires a multifaceted approach focused on balanced reporting, ethical journalism, and informed voter engagement. Media organisations should set standards regarding the time that each candidate should be given airtime, conditions that news should be unbiased and language that should not be incendiary and should be audited frequently to ensure that standards are being followed. Journalists need targeted training in ethical standards, bias detection, and constructing objective narratives, with opportunities for advanced certifications through collaborations with international bodies. Media owners must uphold editorial independence by adopting transparent ownership policies, establishing ethics committees, and prioritising public trust. Empowering voters through media literacy campaigns and educational programs is vital, enabling citizens to recognise bias and seek diverse perspectives. Policy-centric reporting should be prioritised, with in-depth analyses of candidate platforms and integrated fact-checking initiatives to improve credibility. Partnerships with research institutes and policy experts can further enhance substantive coverage. Collaborative research between media organisations and academia should explore the impact of coverage on voter behaviour and the role of digital platforms in shaping public opinion. When these measures are implemented hand in hand, together with the support of key factors such as media houses, regulators, civil society and the like, Kenya can improve the quality of the election reporting, making it fair, rich in content and influential to the voters and the nation. As a result, democracy was fortified among the Kenyan electorate.

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