

FRAMING OF ONE-PARTY STATE NARRATIVES IN SELECTED NIGERIAN ONLINE NEWSPAPERS AHEAD OF THE 2027 GENERAL ELECTIONS

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Abstract

Concerns about possible emergence of one-party system in Nigeria ahead of the 2027 general elections has been a subject of discourse in Nigeria recently. However, there have been few studies on how Nigerian newspapers construct and present these narratives. This study investigated the framing of one-party state narrative in some selected online Nigerian newspapers. The objectives were to determine the level of prominence, identify dominant frames, assess tone, analyse source attribution, and examine placement patterns of such narratives. A quantitative content analysis research design was adopted, covering six newspapers: *Daily Trust*, *The Scope*, *Leadership*, *The Punch*, *The Sun*, and *Vanguard*, from October 1, 2025 to March 31, 2026. The total number of articles found to be relevant to the study were 482 articles which were purposively chosen and analysed using a structured coding guide. Data were analysed using frequency counts and percentages. The results showed that one-party state narratives were generally moderately featured (41.7%) and were mainly found on the homepages of the selected newspapers. The study found that dominance frame was mostly used (25.7%), and negative tone was more prevalent (51.2%) in coverage. The study recommended better framing balance, more variety of sources, and editorial focus on issues that are important to democracy.

Keywords: Content analysis, framing theory, Nigerian newspapers, one-party state, political communication

Introduction

There has recently been growing concern about whether Nigeria is gradually evolving into a one-party dominant country. This concern has gained momentum in recent political discourse, particularly as the electoral strength of the All Progressives Congress (APC) led by Bola Ahmed Tinubu is increasing while the opposition parties seem to be weakened and internally divided. In democratic theory, the presence of multiple parties is not enough, it is the presence of viable and

competitive opposition that can hold the ruling party accountable and sustain democracy (Rakner & van de Walle, 2009). However, in Nigeria, recent events indicate a growing imbalance which has generated discussion on the future of political pluralism.

One of the key reasons for this worry is the ongoing internal problems in opposition parties, especially the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the Labour Party (LP). The PDP has been plagued by factional divisions, leadership struggles, and post-election tensions that have undermined its unity and leadership (International Crisis Group, 2023). Likewise, the Labour Party, which gained considerable ground in the 2023 general elections, has been plagued with leadership conflicts and organizational inefficiencies, casting doubt on its ability to emerge as a viable opposition party in the future (Akubo, 2025). Such internal fractures weaken the effectiveness of the party, and also provide an opportunity to the ruling party to consolidate its power.

Furthermore, there has been a trend of political defections in the country, especially from opposition to the ruling APC, which has been attributed to a narrowing of opposition space. Observers point to the structural flaws of opposition parties as well as the defections, which help to create a political climate of growing power centralisation (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023). In this regard, there have been rumours that President Bola Ahmed Tinubu is making attempt to turn Nigerian into a one-party state. While some people see this as a democratic regression, others see the wave of defections as a political realignment that is normal. President Tinubu has, however, denied the rumour of a one-party drift, saying the defections were the result of the democratic will and free choice of the defectors (Abdularahman, 2025; Ailemen, 2025).

The media, especially newspapers, have a significant role to play in understanding of these developments in Nigeria. Media scholars, based on the Framing Theory, suggest that news is not a mirror of reality but a constructed story that is influenced by selection, emphasis, and interpretation (Eze et al., 2026; Obi et al., 2025). The manner in which newspapers report on issues like opposition crises, party defections, and the dominance of the ruling party can therefore greatly affect how the public views them as routine democratic process or as a sign of a more serious democratic challenge.

Despite the growing of the emerging one-party-state narrative, studies on the depiction of this discourse in newspapers, especially towards the opposition parties' internal crises, remain limited. Existing studies tend to centre on individual political moments or events, and not on a narrative that follows several moments or events. Oloyede and Owolabi (2024) analysed the framing of the presidential primary by the newspapers in the run-up to the 2023 presidential election, while Ogbodo et al. (2022) examined the framing of the 2019 presidential election. Both of these studies were based on a single electoral event. Likewise, Okoji et al. (2024) examined the coverage of three prominent presidential candidates in five newspapers over eight months leading up to February 2023, and found that the coverage was largely ethnic, religious, and political-support frames, with no mention of any systemic story such as a party collapse or an authoritarian consolidation. This deficit of scholarly attention leaves a vacuum in the knowledge of the public interpretation of Nigeria's democratic trajectory as a result of media framing. This gap is even more significant as Nigeria prepares for the 2027 general elections. How the media report and shape narratives of political control and opposition fragility will shape public opinion and democratic participation. It is on this note that this study investigated the framing of one-party state narratives in Nigerian newspapers ahead of the 2027 general elections.

Research Objectives

1. Determine the level of prominence given to one-party state narratives in selected Nigerian newspapers ahead of the 2027 general elections.
2. Identify the dominant frames used by selected Nigerian newspapers in reporting narratives of a one-party state in Nigeria.
3. Examine the tone of newspaper coverage of one-party dominance narratives in selected Nigerian newspapers.
4. Analyse the sources most frequently cited in newspaper reports on one-party dominance discourse.
5. Determine the pattern of placement of one-party state narratives in selected Nigerian newspapers.

Literature Review

Media framing has continued to be an important way of comprehending the role of the media in shaping political reality, especially in fragile democracies like Nigeria. Building on framing theory, Lecheler and de Vreese (2019) present the idea that media do not simply represent reality, but select, emphasize and ignore parts of reality to create models for interpretation. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) also list five generic frames that appear in news reporting: attribution of responsibility, conflict, economic consequences, human interest, and morality. Interestingly, the responsibility and conflict frames are more frequently used by serious newspapers, while the human-interest frame is more often used by sensationalist newspapers; this is significant for Nigerian online newspapers as their ownership and political orientation influence editorial decisions.

This theoretical stance has been well accepted in communication studies and has been extensively used in Nigerian media studies, which is a terrain where the press exists in a complex web of political influences, ownership structures and socio-ethnic tensions. According to Ajetunmobi (2023, pp. 96) framing in Nigeria tends to be “theory and practice disconnect” because of the ideological and structural pressures in the Nigerian media system that make it hard to achieve objectivity as is expected in framing. This means any analysis of framing has to look beneath the surface of the frames and examine the power dynamics that inform the frames.

Empirically, several studies have examined how Nigerian newspapers frame political and conflict-related issues, providing useful entry points for this study. For instance, Aja et al. (2022) revealed that Nigeria newspapers reported farmer–herder conflicts in a ‘criminality frame’ which was mostly negative and sensational. This study is useful in illustrating the existence of certain frames but has a narrow application to wider political narratives because of its focus on conflict reporting. However, its conclusion that newspapers make high prominence of some issues, as evidenced by the placement of news stories in the front pages of newspapers and the use of bold headlines, underscores the need for the study of prominence variables in framing. Similarly, Ayih et al. (2026) examined the coverage of human rights violations and concluded that newspapers in Nigeria use a lot of the framing and agenda-setting processes to influence the public perception of the country's issues. Their work is consistent with the notion that framing is not a mere by-product but a systematic process, but it does not go so far as to question the process of framing in pre-election situations.

In addition to conflict reporting, studies on political communication also offer additional insights into how Nigerian newspapers build political realities. In her study of media coverage of the 2015

presidential election, Abubakre (2017) found that ownership of media has a significant influence on the framing of election coverage, and that media often frames political actors in a partisan manner. This is important because it brings into the picture structural bias as a framing factor, meaning that narratives like a one-party state have the potential to be over-emphasized or under-emphasized based on ownership interests. The agenda-setting function of the media in political discourse is also supported by more recent study by Alawode et al. (2026) on party defections, which found that framing in newspapers influences the perception of the voters.

Different studies have also explored the connection between framing and audience perception, emphasizing the societal impact of media narratives. Ajaegbu et al. (2025) established a “substantial relationship” between media framing and the perception of insecurity issues in Nigeria. This is consistent with previous study by Nwakpu et al. (2020) which revealed that the media framing of the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant effect on public reactions to the pandemic. All these studies show that framing is not just a journalistic tool but also an important device to influence public opinion and even political actions. They do, however, tend to be more concerned with non-electoral matters and thus leave out of their analysis how framing works in the construction of the political system narratives, especially those that imply democratic regression.

The other stream of studies explored is that of the specific frames used by Nigerian newspapers. Felix et al. (2025) found that the dominant frames used in farmer–herder crisis coverage were ethnic blame, victimization, and conflict escalation. Also, Frermann et al. (2023) posit that framing can portray political actors as heroes, villains, victims, and mediators, which influences the political events' interpretation. Bergstrand and Jasper (2018) discuss these three basic tropes –

villain, victim and hero – as they appear in images, claims and narratives, and how they have evaluative significance for viewers. These insights are especially germane for a study on one-party state narratives, which frequently employ dichotomous framing, seeing political domination as either stability and progress or as a democratic threat and authoritarian drift. However, few existing studies have examined the interaction or interactional predominance of competing frames. Recent studies focused more on media framing in political crisis and democracy. The findings of Innocent and Shahid (2024) show that media discourse plays a significant role in influencing public opinion on the political instability in Nigeria which influences public perception of governance and legitimacy. Amiebaho et al. (2023) demonstrate that the ownership of the media outlets significantly shaped the coverage of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, either highlighting or minimizing political tensions. The findings are especially relevant for the upcoming general elections in 2027, in which the rhetoric of the one-party state could either be normalised or help maintain public doubt over the nature of the democratic process.

Gaps in Literature

Although there is a considerable amount of literature, some shortcomings are observed. Firstly, most of the studies are oriented towards discrete political events and not to longitudinal or anticipatory stories. All of these studies are single-episode analyses, focusing on either presidential election (Ogbodo et al., 2022; Okoji et al., 2024), or on electoral violence (Amiebaho et al., 2023) and party primaries (Oloyede & Owolabi, 2024), without attempting to examine systemic narratives that cross election cycles. Secondly, while dominant frames are generally recognized, they are seldom discussed in relation to other prominence variables, including placement, headline size, and editorial positioning, as Okoji et al. (2024) hint at but do not connect with the frames.

Thirdly, the concept of a one-party state is not sufficiently explored as a political narrative that can be systemic across multiple events and address broader democratic trends. Lastly, the study by Ajetunmobi (2023) recognizes the importance of ownership and ideological orientation in newspaper coverage, but structural aspects are not fully incorporated into the framing analysis of empirical studies. This background is the context that informed the present study on the one-party state framing in selected Nigerian online newspapers in the lead up to the 2027 general elections.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Framing Theory and Social Responsibility Theory. Framing Theory is widely attributed to Erving Goffman, who first introduced the concept in 1974 in his seminal work *Frame Analysis*. Goffman (1974) argued that individuals do not directly interpret reality; rather, they rely on “frames” as cognitive structures that help organize experiences and guide interpretation of social situations. Media do not report on issues neutrally, but they build up narratives that shape perceptions of issues. However, the same political change, whether it is party defections or electoral victory, may be seen as a sign of political stability or democratic backsliding, depending on the emphasis given in the editorial. Entman (1993) noted that framing is a matter of selection and salience; that is, the news selection and salience of events have a profound impact on interpretation and public meaning-making. Framing theory is a theoretical framework that allows the analysis of the way the Nigerian newspapers create narratives on the subject of political domination, opposition weakness and the trajectory of the democracy.

Social Responsibility Theory, on the other hand, is a normative media theory that was developed in the middle of the twentieth century as a reaction to the perceived excesses and limitations of libertarian press freedom. It was later systematized and popularized by Theodore Peterson in *Four*

Theories of the Press (1956) and is generally agreed that it was formally propounded in 1947 (McQuail, 2005; Siebert et al.; 1956). Social Responsibility Theory stresses the moral responsibility of the press is to offer citizens accurate, balanced and meaningful information for their informed decisions. The theory imagines the media as a public space for the dissemination of ideas, as a representative voice of social groups, and as a medium for values and democratic stability. Importantly, it suggests that when the media does not do these things voluntarily, it may be necessary to regulate the media from the outside, usually from the state, to serve the public interest (Hutchins Commission, 1947; McQuail, 2005).

Social Responsibility Theory is based on the premise that the media has a significant role in the society and should thus be guided by the professional rules of the game which include the rule of truth, fairness, objectivity and balance. Additionally, self-regulation via professional ethics, standards of editorial practice and public accountability mechanisms is better than direct government regulation, though the latter may be warranted if the media are failing in their duties (Hasan, 2016; McQuail, 2005). The theory underlines the responsibility of the media to report on both sides of an issue, not to be a propagandist or have a political agenda, and to give voice to the opinions of all political parties.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative content analysis. Content analysis was suitable because it allowed a systematic, objective and replicable analysis of newspapers' content to examine the patterns of framing, tone, prominence and source attribution in political reporting.

Population of the Study

The population comprised all political news reports, editorials, feature articles, opinion pieces and commentaries published in the selected Nigerian national newspapers from 1st October 2025 to 31st March, 2026. The newspapers studied included six newspapers representing the geopolitical zones of Nigeria, namely: *Daily Trust* (North-West), *The Scope*, (North-East), *Leadership* (North-Central), *The Punch* (South-West), *The Sun* (South-East) and *Vanguard* (South-South). These were deliberately chosen to represent regional and ideological diversity, but also to have national coverage and editorial relevance in the context of political reporting.

Sample Size

The study used census sampling technique which involved obtaining 482 relevant newspaper items within the population defined. Therefore, all political articles published during the study period that discussed party politics and one-party dominance narratives were analysed. This was justified as the population was finite and manageable, and it increased the validity as sampling bias was avoided and all relevant contents were covered.

Sampling Procedure

A multi-stage procedure was employed. Firstly, purposive sampling was used to select the six newspapers based on geopolitical spread and editorial significance. Secondly, the study period (October 1, 2025–March 31, 2026) was delineated to establish a time-bound census frame. Third, all editions within this period were systematically examined. Fourth, criterion-based filtering was applied to identify relevant items addressing party politics, opposition dynamics, ruling party activities, and one-party dominance narratives. Finally, all eligible items were retained as the study sample and prepared for coding.

Research Instrument

The data were collected using a structured coding guide and coding sheet which were developed for systematic analysis of the online newspapers' contents. The instrument measured important variables for the study such as prominence, framing, tone, sources and digital placement of political stories.

Prominence was defined as homepage visibility, headline hierarchy, and visual enhancement, which reflects the amount of editorial and algorithmic priority each story received. The political framing of the narratives was categorized as dominance, opposition crisis, democratic threat, conflict and neutral frames. The tone was determined as positive, negative, or neutral, depending on the evaluative content towards political actors and institutions. Source attribution identified the prominent sources mentioned in each article, including government officials, opposition figures, political analysts, civil society representatives and editorial commentaries. Placement was assessed based on digital visibility metrics such as home page placement (top, middle, bottom), category page placement and internal link depth needed to reach the article.

The unit of analysis was each individual online newspaper item (news reports, editorials, feature articles, opinion pieces and commentaries) that dealt with party politics and narratives of one-party dominance. The coding of each unit was done independently to ensure uniformity, objectivity, and analytical reliability.

Validity and Reliability of Instrument

To achieve validity and reliability, one additional coder was trained for two days for the pilot study. In this regard, the selected newspaper was randomly sampled and forty (40) editions were purposively selected for reliability test. The inter coder reliability test was conducted using the Krippendorff Alpha formula, which gave 0.86 result.

Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through archival retrieval of online editions of the selected newspapers. Relevant articles were systematically identified, extracted, and prepared for coding. The data collection exercise was conducted over a period of four weeks, spanning from February, 2026 to March, 2026.

Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the data. The results were presented in tables for easy interpretation and comparison between newspapers.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

A total of 482 relevant newspaper items were identified and analyzed across six selected Nigerian newspapers between October 1, 2025 and March 31, 2026. The distribution of analyzed items is as follows: *Daily Trust* (78), *The Scope* (64), *Leadership* (72), *The Punch* (96), *The Sun* (82), and *Vanguard* (90).

Table 1: Level of prominence given to one-party state narratives in selected Nigerian newspapers ahead of the 2027 general elections

Newspaper	High Prominence	Moderate Prominence	Low Prominence	Total
Daily Trust	17 (21.8%)	36 (46.2%)	25 (32.1%)	78
The Scope	14 (21.9%)	28 (43.8%)	22 (34.4%)	64
Leadership	20 (27.8%)	30 (41.7%)	22 (30.6%)	72
The Punch	35 (36.5%)	38 (39.6%)	23 (24.0%)	96

The Sun	23 (28.0%)	34 (41.5%)	25 (30.5%)	82
Vanguard	29 (32.2%)	35 (38.9%)	26 (28.9%)	90
Total	138	201	143	482

Source: Field Work (2026)

The distribution of prominence indicates that one-party state narratives are easily identified in the Nigerian media space but not always given top priority as issues. The largest number of stories (201, 41.7%) are in the moderate placement category, which suggests editors recognize the importance of the discourse but tend to place it alongside other political events, rather than give it sustained headline coverage. The relatively higher share of high prominence stories in *The Punch* (35 items, 36.5%) and *Vanguard* (29 items, 32.2%), however, indicates a higher editorial bias in these outlets to highlight political power consolidation issues, particularly during critical moments. Newspapers like *Daily Trust*, on the other hand, which only had about 21.8% of stories that were high in prominence, seem to have a more measured approach to their editorials, which may be due to regional sensitivities or a more measured approach to news style.

Table 2: Dominant frames used by selected Nigerian newspapers in reporting narratives of a one-party state in Nigeria

Newspaper	Dominance	Opposition Crisis	Democratic Threat	Conflict	Neutral	Total
Daily Trust	16 (20.5%)	18 (23.1%)	15 (19.2%)	16 (20.5%)	13 (16.7%)	78
The Scope	13 (20.3%)	14 (21.9%)	12 (18.8%)	14 (21.9%)	11 (17.2%)	64
Leadership	18 (25.0%)	14 (19.4%)	15 (20.8%)	14 (19.4%)	11 (15.3%)	72
The Punch	30 (31.3%)	21 (21.9%)	17 (17.7%)	16 (16.7%)	12 (12.5%)	96

The Sun	21 (25.6%)	19 (23.2%)	15 (18.3%)	16 (19.5%)	11 (13.4%)	82
Vanguard	26 (28.9%)	16 (17.8%)	22 (24.4%)	12 (13.3%)	14 (15.6%)	90
Total	124	102	96	88	72	482

Source: Field Work (2026)

The framing patterns show that Nigerian newspapers do not present one dominant interpretation of one-party dominance, but rather multiple competing interpretations of it. The dominance frame has the largest proportion of items overall (124 items, 25.7%), but there is a revealing variation in the newspapers. For example, *The Punch* has a relatively high proportion of this frame (31.3%), indicating that they are more interested in power consolidation stories, while *Daily Trust* has a lower proportion (20.5%), with slightly more emphasis on opposition crisis (23.1%). This change suggests that some newspapers are more concerned with the failure of opposition parties than deliberate opposition party failure by ruling actors. Furthermore, *Vanguard's* normatively critical approach is reflected in the greater share of items that focus on threats to democratic pluralism (22 items, 24.4%) when compared to the other groups. The relatively low use of neutral framing in most newspapers (usually less than 17%) also indicates that the coverage tends to be more interpretative and value-laden.

Table 3: Tone of newspaper coverage of one-party dominance narratives in selected Nigerian newspapers

Newspaper	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Daily Trust	19 (24.4%)	34 (43.6%)	25 (32.1%)	78
The Scope	13 (20.3%)	31 (48.4%)	20 (31.3%)	64
Leadership	15 (20.8%)	36 (50.0%)	21 (29.2%)	72

The Punch	26 (27.1%)	53 (55.2%)	17 (17.7%)	96
The Sun	17 (20.7%)	45 (54.9%)	20 (24.4%)	82
Vanguard	19 (21.1%)	48 (53.3%)	23 (25.6%)	90
Total	109	247	126	482

Source: Field Work (2026)

Media orientation toward one-party dominance narratives is mostly critical as shown by the tone of coverage: negative stories make up more than half of the total coverage (247 items, 51.2%). This indicates that the media portrays the issue as a challenge to democratic governance in general. The differences between newspapers, however, offer greater understanding of editorial stance. For instance, *The Punch* has the highest level of negative tone (53 items, 55.2%) and *Daily Trust* has a relatively lower level of negativity (43.6%) and a higher proportion of neutral coverage (32.1%). The pattern indicates a more neutral or conservative tone for the editorial content, likely to achieve a wider political appeal. There is a small amount of positive tone (109 items, 22.6%), suggesting that some narratives might be about the dominance of one party in terms of political stability or strategic advantage, but not as often.

Table 4: Sources most frequently cited in newspaper reports on one-party dominance discourse

Newspaper	Govt Officials	Opposition	Analysts	Civil Society	Editorial	Total
Daily Trust	22 (28.2%)	20 (25.6%)	14 (17.9%)	12 (15.4%)	10 (12.8%)	78
The Scope	17 (26.6%)	15 (23.4%)	11 (17.2%)	11 (17.2%)	10 (15.6%)	64
Leadership	21 (29.2%)	16 (22.2%)	13 (18.1%)	12 (16.7%)	10 (13.9%)	72
The Punch	32 (33.3%)	22 (22.9%)	17 (17.7%)	14 (14.6%)	11 (11.5%)	96

The Sun	24 (29.3%)	20 (24.4%)	15 (18.3%)	13 (15.9%)	10 (12.2%)	82
Vanguard	25 (27.8%)	20 (22.2%)	22 (24.4%)	14 (15.6%)	9 (10.0%)	90
Total	141	113	92	76	60	482

Source: Field Work (2026)

The sourcing pattern indicates that news production is highly elite oriented, with government officials being cited the most (141 times, 29.3%). This means that the official actors are key in shaping and constructing political stories in the media. The relatively high number of opposition sources (113 instances, 23.4%) indicates that newspapers try to cover political contestation, but in an elite manner. Importantly, *Vanguard* is more dependent on analysts (22 instances, 24.4%) than some other newspapers, which have less than 20% of their content from analysts, suggesting a greater focus on interpretative and explanatory journalism. Civil society voices, by contrast, are relatively small (76 instances, 15.8%), reflecting the marginalisation of grassroots voices in discussions of one-party dominance. This imbalance suggests that public opinion on the issue is dominated by political elites and professional commentators, and not by a wide range of actors within society.

Table 5: Pattern of placement of one-party state narratives in selected Nigerian newspapers

Newspaper	Top Section	Middle Section	Lower Section	Total
Daily Trust	18 (23.1%)	34 (43.6%)	26 (33.3%)	78
The Scope	14 (21.9%)	27 (42.2%)	23 (35.9%)	64
Leadership	18 (25.0%)	31 (43.1%)	23 (31.9%)	72
The Punch	31 (32.3%)	37 (38.5%)	28 (29.2%)	96
The Sun	20 (24.4%)	36 (43.9%)	26 (31.7%)	82
Vanguard	25 (27.8%)	33 (36.7%)	32 (35.6%)	90

Total	126	198	158	482
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Source: Field Work (2026)

The positioning of stories further reinforces the idea that one-party dominance stories are not a dominant element in newspaper layout, but are moderately visible. The middle section (198, 41.1%) is the most abundant, showing that the issue is consistently covered but may not be the highest priority in news coverage. But there are again differences in newspapers. *The Punch*, for example, has a relatively high percentage of stories in the top section (31 items, 32.3%), suggesting a greater tendency to focus on politically strategic content, while *Vanguard* has a more even distribution with a significant number of stories in the lower section (32 items, 35.6%), indicating a wider spread of political content through page depth. A balanced content positioning strategy is also supported by newspapers such as *Daily Trust* which has a higher middle section concentration (43.6%).

Discussion of Findings

The first objective determined the level of prominence given to one-party state narratives in selected Nigerian newspapers ahead of the 2027 general elections. The findings indicate that one-party state narratives were not prominently featured in the selected newspapers, with the highest number of stories being found in the mid-level position, rather than as lead headlines. The selected newspapers perceived the issue of one-party-state narrative as being politically important, but not necessarily as the most pressing national problem. This partially corroborates the study conducted by Aja et al. (2022) which revealed that Nigerian newspapers focus more on politically sensitive issues particularly during tension. This study, however, suggests a more nuanced and event-driven prioritization than the one found in the previous study, in which prominence is more likely to be found on the front page during important political moments, but is not necessarily maintained.

This corroborates framing theory, especially Entman's (1993) notion of salience, which suggests that the media can actively enhance the salience of a one-party story where there are certain contextual conditions, such as defections or alignments of the elites. However, in terms of Social Responsibility Theory, the findings are disturbing. The absence of a consistent high prominence of top positions implies that media may not be fulfilling their normatively expected role to draw the public's attention to political developments of high political salience for democratic stability, and may consequently not be raising the public's awareness of longer-term systemic political developments.

The second objective identified the dominant frames used by selected Nigerian newspapers in reporting narratives of a one-party state in Nigeria. The study revealed that dominant frame was slightly more dominant than opposition crisis frame and democratic threat frame in the reporting of the narratives of a one-party system in Nigeria. The results of this distribution indicate that Nigerian newspapers offer multiple interpretations of the situation, and not just one, ranging from power consolidation to opposition weakness and democratic concerns. This agrees with Felix et al. (2025) which revealed that Nigerian newspapers tend to use various frames to create political realities such as conflict, blame and victimisation frames. However, this study goes beyond previous studies by demonstrating that these frames are not mutually exclusive, but rather intermingle and compete, especially in the pre-election setting. It is this that is captured by the findings, which are indicative of the selection and emphasis processes by which newspapers highlight different aspects of the same political phenomenon, a phenomenon captured by Framing Theory. The relative greater democratic threat framing exhibited by *the Vanguard*, for instance, indicates a conscious interpretative approach with a focus on the democratic threat. But for the purposes of the theory of Social Responsibility, the multiplicity of frames may be a boomerang. It

reveals a variety of perspectives, but is not very neutral, meaning that news can be more interpretative and perhaps value-laden, which can impact on the objectivity and balanced reporting that is expected of the media.

Furthermore, the study examined the tone of newspaper coverage of one-party dominance narratives in selected Nigerian newspapers. The analysis of the tone of the newspaper coverage of the one-party dominance narratives in the selected Nigerian newspapers showed that the newspapers coverage of one party dominance narratives is negative, thus the media perception of the issue is one of concern towards democratic governance. This is consistent with the findings of Aja et al. (2022) and Ayih et al. (2026) which found that, Nigerian newspapers in general have negative and critical tone in their reportage of politically sensitive issues. The neutral and positive tones, however, indicate that it is not equally important, there is some editorial variation and context interpretation. In the case of newspapers, for instance, *The Punch* is relatively more negative than to act as a watchdog and *Daily Trust* is more neutral, in order to be more cautious. The findings are in line with the Framing Theory, which states that the evaluative elements of framing, such as tone, shape the audience's attitude towards an issue and whether it is a problem or an acceptable issue. At the same time, the findings provide mixed results in terms of Social Responsibility theory. The predominance of negative tone can, on the one hand, be read as the media carrying out their role in critically questioning power structures. If there is a strong negative bias, however, the danger lies in becoming sensational or biased, not representative of the theory's notion of fairness and objectivity. This means the results provide support and a certain contradiction to the principles of responsible journalism.

Moreover, as regards the sources most frequently cited in newspaper reports on one-party dominance discourse. Findings demonstrate a strong proportion of elite sources (including

government officials and opposition actors) and a comparatively low proportion of civil society sources. The result corroborates Abubakre (2017) who posited that the structural environment such as political power and access to the elites also matter in the framing of news in the Nigerian media. It is also in corroboration with Alawode et al. (2026) who set the groundwork that the media narrative of party defection is party-centric. It is implied that news discourse is strongly influenced by the elite while the grassroots and alternative voices are poorly represented. This is quite consistent with the core principles of Framing Theory that suggests that media frames are shaped by institutional and power relations and that journalists rely on easily accessible and authoritative sources. However, according to the Social Responsibility Theory, this has a major drawback. Media's low representation of civil society and independent voices suggests that civil society is not adequately represented in media, thus reducing the pluralism of public discourse. The lack of balance implies that audiences are exposed to a skewed political picture that may restrict democratic debate.

Finally, as regards the pattern of placement of one-party state narratives in selected Nigerian newspapers, findings indicate that most of the narratives have been positioned in the middle part of the home page of the newspapers while a few were positioned in the top spaces of the home page. This is in line with the previous finding of the moderate prominence and suggests that the one-party dominance stories are not always highlighted as the primary stories in the general political reporting. This is somewhat in line with the work of Aja et al. (2022), which focused on the salience of placement, but not as much as the present study, as there was more visibility in the present study. With a Framing Theory approach, placement is a structural framing device that impacts audience attention by what is visible and what is available. Not all stories are given salience by the media: the non-primacy of many stories suggests otherwise. Normatively, this

poses interesting questions from the perspective of Social Responsibility Theory. The relatively low ranking on the top positions might indicate that the media is not fully engaged in longterm democratic issues, which may have implications for democratic stability and consequently how the media can contribute to informed public participation. That congruence suggests that there is some degree of agreement with framing mechanisms and less congruence with the ethical expectations for responsible journalism.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to analyse the framing of the one-party state narratives in selected Nigerian newspapers in preparation for the 2027 general elections as regards prominence, framing patterns, tone, sources and placement. The result shows that the one-party dominance discourse is always there in the Nigerian newspapers but is usually discussed as moderately salient issues and not as a dominant issue on the newspapers front pages.

The study also reveals that within the Nigerian newspapers, there are multiple and competing frames that are used to build one-party state narratives. The dominance frame is a bit more dominant, but it is present alongside opposition crisis, democratic threat, conflict and neutral frames. It serves as a sign of a media landscape that is broken and interpretive, in which political reality is shaped by various editorial angles, not one single story. As far as sources are concerned, the study shows that elite political actors, especially government officials and opposition actors are very dominant sources of Nigerian newspapers, whereas voices of civil society are relatively weak. The pattern of sourcing is dominated by elites, indicating that political discourse is not very grassroots. In addition, the positioning of the stories suggests that most stories are not always in the front of newspapers and that one-party stories are not always given the lead story position, but

are covered consistently. In conclusion, the study finds that the Nigerian newspapers have an important but uneven role in the production of narratives of one-party dominance, which reflect political realities but also affect the public's interpretation of democratic developments in the lead up to the 2027 general elections.

Recommendations

- i. Newspaper editors in Nigeria should be able to give consistent high-level prominence to issues of one-partyism and democratic consolidation more so in politically critical periods like pre-election periods.
- ii. Journalists and editorial boards should make an effort to have a more balanced approach to the presentation of one-party state narratives, avoiding the dominance, opposition crisis and democratic threat frames without providing balance in the context.
- iii. Media outlets should deliberately balance out the over-dominant negative tonal framing of news (more than 51%) with more neutral and explanatory reporting.
- iv. More voices from civil society organizations, academia, political think tanks and grassroots actors need to be included in Nigerian newspapers, beyond government and opposition elites, so as to diversify the sources.
- v. Editorial teams should look at giving more visibility to politically significant stories, by adjusting how they are placed on the homepage top sections and less on the bottom and middle sections.

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