

POLITICIANS-CONSTITUENCY RELATIONSHIP IN AKWA IBOM: HOW ARE THE MEDIA REPORTING?

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Abstract

The means through which citizens have traditionally had access to their parliament has been through their elected representative(s). In most countries, where the electorate is divided into geographically-based constituencies, and members represent a specific locality, such access has typically been through face to face contact in the area where the electors live, or through the usage of constituency office. This paper seeks to find out the relationship between politicians and their constituents in Akwa Ibom State, the role of the media in enhancing and reporting politician-constituency relationship and how best the media can play its constitutional role of creating, nurturing, and sustaining a mutually beneficial relationship between politicians and their constituents and reporting that much needed interface and constant communication between the politicians and their constituents. This paper recommends the effective utilization of constituency offices and the establishment of a functional and up-to-date official website of elected representatives to enhance access to information by both the media and constituents.

Keywords: Politicians, Constituency Relationship, Akwa Ibom, Media Reporting

1 Introduction

In democratic societies, governments (including legislatures) routinely consult, interact, and exchange views and decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods. While elections are the most common mechanism linking citizens and their government, they are occasional and citizen participation is generally limited to casting a vote. Dealing with elected representatives on an on-going basis strengthens the relationship between legislators and constituents and increases the possibility of legislators acting on their behalf. Effective member-constituent relationships contribute to democracy by strengthening the people's connection to their government, and by providing "real life" assessments of how government programs are actually working on the ground. Legislators with strong ties to constituents are more likely to be reelected and to advance in their political careers. Constituents benefit by having their views and concerns heard in the policy-making process or by

having an advocate in the legislature able to act on their behalf when government programs adversely affect them.

Legislators are not always just responding to public opinion alone. They are also influenced by lobbyists, political donations, personal political views, and party platforms. Nevertheless, popular opinion may play a larger role in shaping elected officials' positions when it signals a dramatic shift and the public feels strongly on one side of an issue. Thus, political organizations and concerned citizens can influence policy by raising and changing public awareness, and then explaining these popular sentiments to politicians who learn about their constituents' attitudes.

One of the most foundational assumptions behind modern democracy is that the elected officials somehow represent the interests of those who elected them. Media scholars across the globe have established through extensive research studies, the interface between the mass media and the political process. A critical function of the media is to provide members of the public with adequate information to enable them to not only monitor and evaluate their political leaders, but also, to make informed choices during elections and outside election years

As Udoakah (2014: 101), noted, Section 30 of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria gives an obligation to the mass media, to be free at all times to uphold the Fundamental Objectives contained in the Constitution and uphold to the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people. Looked at critically, this obligation demands from the media to provide information, discussion and debate on public affairs, for the enlightenment of the public; secondly, it demands from the media to protect the rights of the individual by making these rights known to the public and reporting any violations. It is this strategic place of the media in society and their relevance to good governance that have made them a component of the social system that cannot be ignored".

Both the political establishment and the media need each other to survive. The media needs the politician as a source of news. The politician needs the media for his voice, views, opinion to be heard. Thus one cannot do without the other.

Mass media content is influenced by political and economic factors which have direct implications on the electoral process. The political factor refers to the editorial independence and content of the media while the economic influence are the advertisers who constitute the economic force that also determines what should be and what can be the content of media message. The ownership of the media is therefore, an economic imperative that influences not only the editorial independence of the media but also the generality of the content, including the selection of news. This is why it would be naïve to think that the economic and

political interests of these institutions do not get reflected in their informational products.

From colonial era to independence period, to the post-military interventions, the Nigerian press had been seen to be overtly furthering the cause of partisan politics. In other words, politics and news institutions in the country have been closely interconnected. This is also marked by the activities of various Nigerian nationalists who also were prominent journalists during their lifetime. We shall in this work, examine the relationship between the average Akwa Ibom politician and their constituents and how the press in the state is reporting it.

2 Conceptual Issues

2.1 Who is a Politician?

Many definitions could be derived from the word politician especially, the Nigerian version but I will try to limit it in this work to some universally acceptable definitions such as;

- A politician is a person who is professionally involved in politics, especially as a holder of an elected office.
- A politician is a person active in party politics, or a person holding or seeking office in government.
- Politicians propose, support and create laws or policies that govern the land and, by extension, its people.
- Broadly speaking, a "politician" can be anyone who seeks to achieve political power in any bureaucratic institution ((C) Wikipedia)
- A politician is a person who is active in party politics.
- A politician is a person skilled in political government or administration; statesman or stateswoman.
- A politician is an expert in politics or political government.
- A politician is one versed or experienced in the science of government; one devoted to politics.
- A politician is one primarily devoted to his own advancement in public office, or to the success of a political party.

2.2 Who is a Constituent?

A *constituent* is a member of an area which elects a representative to a legislative body. *Constituent* means part of a whole. The word comes up often in political contexts: *constituents* are the people politicians have been elected to represent. Constituents are citizens whom a legislator has been elected to represent. Part of a legislator's job in a democracy is to serve these constituents by representing their interests in the legislature and by providing a direct link to government.

To understand *constituent*, look at *constitute*, which means "to make up." The words share the Latin root *constituentem*, meaning "to compose," as in a part that makes up a larger whole. A politician's electorate is made of individual constituent voters.

3 Constituency: Meaning and Role in Parliamentary Democracy

3.1 The Concept of Constituency

A constituency is a basic electoral unit into which eligible electors are organized to elect representatives to a legislative or other public body. The registration of electors is also usually undertaken within the bounds of the constituency.

A constituency is a community or an area represented by an office holder. It is a community whose electorates send a representative to the legislature. The constituency is a government electoral district, in other countries it refers to an area which country had been divided for the purpose of elections, and from which the legislative member is elected to serve in a parliament (Benjamin, 2014). In Nigeria, each state is divided into three senatorial districts and there are also 360 federal constituencies in the entire country (Benjamin, 2010).

Nigeria operates bi-cameral legislative system, which consists of two houses: The Senate and the House of Representatives. However, unicameral system is in place at the state and local government levels. Elections into the national and state assemblies are held every four years to elect a total of 360 members of the House of Representatives, who represent the nation's 360 Federal Constituencies and 109 Senators. (Three Senator per state and one from FCT)

A Constituency, also known as an *election district*, *legislative district*, *voting district*, *electoral area*, is a subdivision of a larger state (a country, administrative region, or other polity) created to provide its population with representation in the larger state's legislative body. That body, or the state's constitution or a body established for that purpose, determines each district's boundaries and whether each will be represented by a single member or multiple members. Generally, only voters (*constituents*) who reside within the district are permitted to vote in an election held there ((C) Wikipedia).

3.2 The Role of Constituency Office in a Democracy

A constituency office should be a place, where the constituents can feel comfortable to discuss and share their concerns on a regular or meaningful basis. It is no surprise that most people have no idea who their lawmakers are and how to get hold of them. In fact, many voters do not know where their lawmakers' constituency offices are situated. The offices are meant to be where the public can go to get help from the elected representatives and where parliamentarians report back to their

communities on what is happening in parliament. The main purpose of a constituency office is to listen to the public's grievances and deal with them as quickly as we can. The office is open to everyone, as it is a Parliamentary Constituency Office (PCO). This means it doesn't only look out for members of the lawmakers' political party – everyone is welcome. Anyone can come and raise their issues as it concerns them. The constituency office takes problems to the lawmaker in parliament. They are on the ground level and relay messages to the lawmaker and those higher up.

But the effectiveness of the constituency office depends to a large extent, the level of utilization of it by both the politician and the constituent and the relationship that exist between the relevant democratic stakeholders and the media who has the constitutional and professional duty of reporting the activities of the representatives to the people. As Udoakah (2014: 103), noted, "... the media play the generally acknowledged role of bridging the gap between government and the people through a complex process of information, education, public opinion molding and general interrogation of the process of Governance".

3.3 Core Functions of Constituency Office

1. Provide service and assistance in dealing with government departments
2. Engage the public
3. Maintain a presence in the community
4. Provide informal counseling on personal and professional matters
5. Act as brokers and mediators between interests within the constituency
6. Collate local opinion
7. Advocate to each level of government and their party on matters concerning specific individuals and their community-at-large.
8. Present individual and community matters to the state/national level and political parties to solve them by proposing legislative initiatives.

A constituency office is important for an elected representative to manage constituency affairs, but there are pros and cons for establishment of the office.

3.4 The Pros and Cons of a Constituency Office

The Pros

- i. A constituency office can convey a sense of permanence about a lawmaker's participation in the community.
- ii. A constituency office always can be used as a physical site for meetings, discussion, etc.
- iii. A constituency office can serve as identified one central location where constituents can contact and reach their elected representative, instead of

- reaching their representative at the parliament which could be far away from the constituency.
- iv. A constituency office can serve as a resource center for the public
 - v. A constituency office is the place where all information about the lawmaker can be centralized and be easily accessible by the legislator and staff.
 - vi. A constituency office symbolizes organizational capabilities and seriousness of a lawmaker. Through the office, management and access to information is institutionalized.

The Cons

- i. A constituency office may prevent a lawmaker from thinking creatively about various outreach mechanism as a constituency office is only one of several mechanisms for reaching out to the constituents and managing constituency issues.
- ii. A constituency office is only as effective as lawmaker and constituents are using it
- iii. he majority of constituents will never visit the office due to lack of knowledge and or money for transport.
- iv. Running a constituency office is costly

Even a highly efficient office cannot replace...

- i. Regular visits to the constituency by the lawmaker.
- ii. The necessity of constantly exploring innovative and creative outreach mechanisms.
- iii. Attention and prioritizing to the planning and management of community development programs.
- iv. Authority of the lawmaker to represent constituency in the legislature and involve people into decision-making process.

3.5 Support Team of a Constituency Office

A constituency office does not run itself, it requires staff and budget. Constituency office staff plays an important role in assisting and supporting the Parliamentarians to serve their constituents in a more effective manner. It is important to hire specialists, who have basic understanding of legislative issues they can face daily. Constituency support staff should be friendly, professional and energetic.

Constituency office staffs play an important role in dealing with press relations, preparing press releases for members, in hearing constituency complaints, responding to mail from constituents and in arranging appointments for members with constituent groups.

3.5.1 Constituencies in Akwa Ibom State

Akwa Ibom state has constituencies at various levels that enables elected

lawmakers have regular interface with their constituents. Three senatorial constituency offices exist in the three senatorial district of the state, while ten federal constituencies exist for the ten House of Representatives members and twenty-six State constituencies for the twenty members of the state legislature. They are:

Three Senatorial Districts

1. Akwa Ibom North West: Ikot Ekpene - Senator Christopher Ekpeyong
2. Akwa Ibom North-East: Uyo - Senator Bassey Albert
3. Akwa Ibom South: Eket - Senator Akon Eyakenyi

Ten House of Representatives

1. Abak/Etim Ekpo Ika: Hon Aniekan Umanah
2. Eket/Onna/Esit Eket/Ibeno: Hon Pat Ifon
3. Etinan/Nsit Ibom/Nsit Ubium: Rtd. Hon Onofiok Luke
4. Ikono/Ini: Hon Emmanuel Ukpong Udo
5. Ikot Abasi/Mkpat Enin/Eastern Obolo: Rtd. Hon Charles Uduyok
6. Ikot Ekpene/Essien Udim/Obot Akara: Rtd. Hon Nsikak Ekong
7. Itu/Ibiono Ibom: Dr Henry Archibong
8. Oron/Mbo/Okobo/Udung Oko/Urueoffong/Oruko: Rtd. Hon Nse ekpeyong
9. Ukanafun/Oruk Anam: Hon Uyime Idem
10. Uyo/Uruan/Nsit Atai/Ibesikpo Asutan: Rtd. Hon Mike Enyong

Twenty-Six State Constituencies

1. Abak
2. Eket
3. Esit Eket/Ibeno
4. Onna
5. Mkpat Enin
6. Ikot abasi/Eastern Obolo
7. Itu
8. Ibiono
9. Ikono
10. Ikot Ekpene/Obot Akara
11. Ibesikpo
12. Ini
13. Essien Udim
14. Ika/Etim Ekpo
15. Ukanafun
16. Oruk Anam
17. Uyo
18. Uruan
19. Nsit Ubium

20. Nsit Atai
21. Nsit Ibom
22. Etinan
23. Oron/Udung Uko
24. Mbo
25. Urue Offong/Oruko
26. Okobo

While the constituency office is meant to serve as a link between the lawmaker and the people whose mandate he/she carries, a look at the state of many constituency offices in Akwa Ibom shows they are only used occasionally and not on a day-to-day basis. Most constituency offices are used during political campaigns and electioneering. Once election is over, one hardly finds the lawmaker using their constituency offices for social and political interaction and interface. Also, none of the constituency office in the state can be found on any personal website of the lawmakers apart from the official website of parliament which could have helped the constituents access basic information like address, support staff, email of their representative and contact numbers to reach out to the constituency office when the need arises.

4 Akwa Ibom Politicians and Media Partnership: A Tool for Achieving Effective Politician-Constituency Relationship

Relations between constituents and their representatives differ from other citizen-government relationships. Compared to the executive, the legislative branch is usually more equal in its membership, diverse in composition, and expected to be more accessible to all citizens. In addition, the legislature is far more likely than the executive to do at least part of its business in public, making it easier for constituents to learn what their representatives are doing, and why.

An effective legislature represents constituents, influences law and policymaking, and acts as a constraint on executive power by exercising a degree of oversight. Member-constituent relations can affect each of these functions by shaping member motivations and incentives, by providing local content and human context to decisions, and by providing a way for constituents to measure performance of legislators and to assess government actions.

According to Bergan (2005), “Constituency relations require a reciprocal system of communication. On one end, it is incumbent upon the legislature and legislators, as representatives of the people, to communicate their deliberations and decisions with the public.

Such communication is essential for strengthening public appreciation for the work undertaken by the legislature, which is instrumental in ensuring its legitimacy. On

the other hand, it is important that mechanisms are introduced to enable and encourage constituents and civil society groups to contact and influence their legislative representatives. This is why both parties cannot function effectively and efficiently without the media being available to help nurture, sustain and consolidate this relationship’.

Contacting legislators is one of the most common forms of political engagement. Hearing from constituents, particularly in face-to-face meetings and phone calls, can influence politicians’ action on an issue. The greatest impact, however, is when the contact is outside of routine communications and part of a collective campaign.

As Udoakah (2014: 2) noted, "The press owes the society and obligation to report events so that the citizens would have sufficient information to plan their lives and avoid danger. It helps to discover the truth, and assist in the process of solving political and social problems by presenting all manner of evidence and opinion as the basis for decision making... the press has a history of public education- letting the public know what it is supposed to know and helping it to understand social problems and take rational decisions. It is a channel for social communication and for publishing Information which affects the life and future of citizens".

But in Akwa Ibom state, the relationship has been mostly exploitative than mutually beneficial even as both the press and the politicians need each other for survival. No one among them can do without each other. Delete the press from the life of a politician and watch as the politician go into political oblivion. No politician wants to be away from the media spotlight. The love the publicity, fame and prestige that comes with it and but frown at the press when such median attention demands accountability, effective representation and for greater concern to issues that affects the constituents.

As Udoakah (2014) noted, "The absence of the press as would the absence of the Executive, Legislature and the Judiciary can paralyze the operations of the society. The press exists to protect individual freedoms. The citizens cannot be said to be free if they are not informed. Information helps them to know their rights and responsibilities. With information, they are able to hold opinions and express them and even protest if need be”. Before we progress, it is pertinent to take a critical look at the various broadcast media outfit in Akwa Ibom state to know their ownership structure so as to determine if ownership plays any role in how a particular media outfit in Akwa Ibom report about politicians in the state.

The major broadcast media in Akwa Ibom State and owner(s) are given as follows:

- i. Planet FM: Mr. Tony Affia
- ii. Comfort FM: Senator Effiong Bob

- iii. XL: Obong Nsima Ekere
- iv. Passion FM: Senator Godswill Akpabio
- v. Inspiration FM: Mr Erastus Akingbola
- vi. Redemption FM: Mr Ahazia Umanah
- vii. Radio Nigeria, Atlantic FM: Federal Government
- viii. Akwa Ibom Broadcasting Corporation, AKBC: Akwa Ibom State
Government Nigerian Television Authority, Channel 12, Uyo,
- ix. NTA: Federal Government

As we can see above, majority of broadcast media outfits in Akwa Ibom are owned by politicians. It therefore goes without saying that these stations will, to a very large extent, always advance the political interest of their proprietors.

According to Udoakah (2014: 56), While some media personnel say that media ownership has no significant impact on media practice, others agree that media output closely follows the policy objectives laid down by media owners. Still, others say that the effect of media ownership on practice depends on who the editor is; and that "he who pays the piper dictates the tune".

Citizen understanding and impressions of legislatures are, to a great degree, shaped by media coverage given the legislature. The viewpoint of the media (government controlled, opposition controlled or independent), the style of political reporting (skeptical, sensational), and the level of knowledge and professionalism of reporters largely affect legislative coverage.

Effective communication is the basis for maintaining successful relations. Building those relationships is what makes it possible for legislature to meet the mission. Legislators use many methods to communicate with constituents. Effective communication with constituents demonstrates a legislator's responsiveness and commitment to a community.

Udoakah (2014: 103-104), notes that, " There is presumption by the principle of social contract that members of the society are entitled to know the workings and decisions of government which their mandate or support sustains in power. This feeling of entitlement to public affairs information heightens the feeling of suspicion of the media among government operatives. It is also the root of the tension between government and the media. Fortunately, the media, over the years, have developed and been accepted as the defender of the rights of the public in the face of often overbearing government. It is in the role of the media as a watchdog of society that government parts ways with the media and regards them with suspicion".

Basically, politician-constituency relationship is designed to;

- i. Bring constituents closer to elected or appointed representative.
- ii. Help representative address constituents' deeply felt or urgent needs.
- iii. Engage members with their constituents in mutually beneficial problem identification and problem solving.
- iv. Inform development, introduction and enactment of, or advocacy for, legislation.
- v. Ensure accountable, equitable, accessible and appropriate services for all, who need them.

Tips to maintaining good media relationship to enhance better politician-constituent relationship include:

- i. Keep yourself accessible. Make sure the media knows how to get in touch with you.
- ii. Always call a journalist back as soon as possible – it helps maintain a good relationship.
- iii. Be prepared. Do your homework. Talk to the journalist beforehand so that you understand what questions will be asked. This creates a relaxing atmosphere.
- iv. Stick to main points and don't go off the topic. Most people make the mistake of talking too much.
- v. Know the message. Do not just respond to the interviewer's questions.
- vi. Use simple language. Be brief. Avoid jargon. Explain special terms, but remember who the audience is.
- vii. Don't overestimate a reporter's knowledge of the subject. When a reporter asks a question, which is not correct, do not hesitate to set the record straight. Offer background information where necessary.
- viii. If a question is unclear, ask for clarifications.
- ix. Avoid saying things "off the record." If you don't want to hear it on the evening news, it is better not to say it.
- x. Ensure that the host has a politician or lawmaker's biography. The audience's initial impression will be largely determined by how impressive bio is.
- xi. Be honest. Don't try to conceal negative information instead, let interviewer know what and how this problem can be solved.
- xii. Be confident. Remember about own expertise, commitment and authority.
- xiii. Monitor all print and electronic media, especially when you have been interviewed and after you have conducted an earned media event.
- xiv. For television programs, wear solid-color clothing. Stripes and other designs can cause problems with color TV pictures.
- xv. Look in a mirror just before going on camera. The reporter may not tell you that your collar is folded over or your hair is out of place.
- xvi. Choose a location where you can screen out background noises. Switch off

- your cell phone and turn off your computer. Avoid rooms with loud background hums from air conditioning or heating units.
- xvii. Find out in advance whether the interview is edited or live. If you agree to a live interview, be sure you are comfortable thinking on your feet.
 - xviii. In edited interviews, it is normal to stop and start over again if you don't like the way you worded your answer.
 - xix. In a TV interview, look at the reporter and not the camera.
 - xx. Be still in front of radio or TV microphones and avoid sitting in a chair that rocks or spins.

4.2 Internet and Social Media Usage as Tool for Bridging the Gap in Politician-Constituent Relationship in Akwa Ibom

Despite Akwa Ibom politicians having established private radio stations in the state, the world has advanced at a fast pace that the social media is today one of the fastest and cheapest way of reaching thousands and millions of followers at a go and our politicians are not left out in the usage and deployment of the internet and social media to interact and interface with their constituent.

Butler and Nickerson, (2011) noted that, “a wise use of technology can help legislators to maximize the number of constituents they interact with while minimizing the amount of time a politician or lawmakers’ staff spend on constituent correspondence. A politician or lawmaker can use email, create personal websites and political blogs, use social networking tools and solicit information from constituents”. But it is one thing to create a website, it another thing for it to be promoted and updated regularly even as there is the need for lawmakers to create a directory of constituency common problems using these channels.

To a politician, the social media is in no longer a novelty-it is necessity. It is developing a two- way dialogue with constituents about most meaningful and important issues. It is today part of a 21st century politician’s outreach because;

- i. Your constituents are on social media and are expecting you be there, too.
- ii. Your constituents want engagement.
- iii. Remember what you say anywhere on social media may be shared everywhere on social media.
- iv. Do not just set up an account, update it regularly with fresh, new content, and respond to constituents.
- v. Share your legislative initiatives, your votes, key issue of concern, photos and videos.
- vi. Ask constituents to share their concerns, idea, opinions, and respond.
- vii. Conduct opinion polls.
- viii. Share links with valuable content.
- ix. Find and follow your constituents and supporters.

- x. Remember that your post is about conversations, not only your PR.
- xi. Link Facebook and Twitter account to YouTube Channel to share content across platforms.
- xii. Commit the necessary time and resources to a strong social strategy for social media success.

5 Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusion

Gathering information about constituency is essential for identifying and pursuing the issues most relevant to constituents and also helps to identify best possible ways a politician can feel the pulse of the people whose mandate he holds in trust. In fact, any politician who wants to remain relevant must be seen to be constantly in tune with what the people wants, and this is where the media comes in.

The media helps politicians show citizens that they are really interested to know constituent concerns and problems. Politicians and legislators need to create structured programs to hear about the problems in the constituency and inform the public about their work in the legislature or government but for this to be realized, a mutually beneficial relationship must be created, cultivated and nurtured.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is hereby recommended that;

Legislators and politicians should ensure frequent consultation with constituents through regular media briefings and interactions and town hall meetings to create the necessary interface needed to bridging the gap between the politician and their constituents

Constituency offices should have a web address, dedicated telephone line(s) as well as contacts of support staff to make the interface more efficient and less stressful to constituents

Politicians should see the media as partners in progress in enhancing politician-constituent relationship and not as agents sponsored by perceived political opponents against them because of ownership of the reporter's media outfit.

More funds should be made available for the equipping of constituency offices and the employment of support staff so as to achieve efficiency of the offices.

Politicians should pay more attention to the needs of their constituents and make good use of their constituency offices and media relations at all time and not only during electioneering period.

The media should encourage Akwa Ibom politicians to have a functional official website where their constituents can access vital information about them and establish an easier, affordable and cost effective way of reaching them.

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