Persuading the few: How communication strategies shape intra-party leadership contests in Ghana and the United States

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ABSTRACT

How does selectorate structure condition the relative effectiveness of different political communication strategies in intra-party leadership contests? This paper addresses that question by extending Hazan and Rahat's selectorate framework to African delegate-based primaries. Through a structured, focused comparison of cases from Ghana and the United States, it examines how messaging, media use, symbolism, and elite persuasion interact to shape candidate success across selectorates. The analysis draws on documentary evidence, including official electoral records, party documents, contemporaneous journalism, and peer-reviewed scholarship, and uses process tracing within cases and structured comparison across cases. Two key findings emerge. First, in exclusive selectorates such as Ghana's delegate conferences, elite persuasion is the primary channel through which messaging, media, and symbolism reach decision-makers; in more inclusive selectorates, mass communication can substitute aspects of this function, but elite alignment remains influential. Second, candidates face a dual-audience problem: the frame that wins a primary may be poorly structured for the general election that follows. The paper concludes that Ghana's delegate-based primaries operate communication logics closer to pre-1968 US convention politics than to modern US mass primaries, and that elite persuasion is a conditional transmission mechanism rather than a universal first cause, with Trump's 2016 campaign marking a boundary case. The paper contributes an empirical extension of selectorate theory and a theoretical refinement of the elite-persuasion claim. The main practical recommendation is that primary-stage communication should be designed for both the selectorate and the general electorate from the outset. Future research should employ interviews with party executives and delegates, compare other African delegate-based systems, and examine digital communication longitudinally.

Keywords: Delegate Primaries, Dual-Audience Problem, Ghana, Intra-Party Democracy, Political Communication, Selectorate

I. INTRODUCTION

Most political communication research concentrates on general elections. The reason being that they are visible, well-documented, and determine who governs a country. However, before any political party participates in a general election, it must first select its leader. That initial contest—the flagbearer race, presidential primary, or leadership election—takes place in limited institutional spaces, involves a much smaller audience, and is governed by rules that differ significantly from those of the subsequent national contest. The communication dynamics of these internal races have received considerably less attention than they deserve, especially in African contexts.

The situation in Ghana underscores the importance of analysis in a notably clear way. Throughout the Fourth Republic (1993–present), the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) have alternated power in an almost automatic eight-year cycle, adhering to the two four-year term limits permissible under Ghana's constitution. Whoever wins a flagbearer contest in either party, therefore, has a serious chance of becoming president—twice if successfully re-elected. The internal contest effectively functions as a pre-election with nationwide implications. The way candidates communicate within their parties to delegates, regional executives, traditional rulers, and party elders strongly shapes who Ghanaian voters elect as president every four years.

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This paper probes how selectorate structure conditions the relative effectiveness of different political communication strategies in intra-party leadership contests. The argument advanced here is that four mechanisms—messaging, media use, symbolism, and elite persuasion—interact to shape outcomes and that the relative weight of each varies systematically with the structure of the selectorate.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the pivotal role of intra-party leadership contests in determining who governs, the communication strategies candidates deploy within these contests remain under-theorised and empirically under-examined, particularly in African delegate-based systems. Three interrelated research gaps motivate this study.

First, the comparative literature on candidate selection has demonstrated that selectorate structure influences who is chosen (Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Rahat & Hazan, 2001; Cross & Blais, 2012), but it has been primarily based on European and Anglo-American party systems and offers little insight into how candidates actually communicate within the selectorates it describes. The selectorate is well mapped as an institution but remains under-examined as a communicative space. This gap is especially acute for African delegate-based primaries, where the formal selectorate framework has not been systematically applied and where party institutionalisation, ethno-regional divisions, and patron-client networks differ substantially from the framework's original empirical base (Ichino & Nathan, 2012, 2013, 2022; Osei, 2016).

Second, the political communication literature that could fill this gap—framing theory (Entman, 1993), frame resonance (Benford & Snow, 2000), the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), condensation symbolism (Edelman, 1964), the two-step flow (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), and elite cue-taking (Broockman & Butler, 2015; Zaller, 1992)—was originally developed to explain communication targeting mass publics. When applied to internal party contests, it has typically been treated as a smaller version of mass campaigning rather than as a fundamentally different environment where the audience consists of a few hundred thousand institutionally embedded delegates filtered through regional and constituency executives. A frame built for a dispersed electorate, and one designed for a delegate body influenced by party elites respond to different resonance conditions, yet the existing literature does not systematically address this difference.

Third, the standard claim about elite persuasion in intra-party contexts—that it is the most influential mechanism—is too strong as it stands. It does not specify the structural conditions under which elite persuasion dominates or those under which mass media can partially substitute for it. The Trump 2016 Republican primary victory, often seen as contradicting elite persuasion theories, illustrates why a more precise formulation is necessary. Yet no systematic attempt has been made to refine the elite-persuasion claim by identifying the boundary conditions under which substitution becomes feasible.

These research gaps converge on a single analytical challenge: the need to examine how selectorate structure conditions the relative effectiveness of messaging, media use, symbolism, and elite persuasion in intra-party leadership contests, and to identify the conditions under which mass communication can replace elite transmission. This challenge has both contextual and theoretical dimensions. Contextually, the absence of systematic application to African delegate-based presidential primaries means that a significant gap exists in understanding how communication operates in the systems that determine presidential succession in countries like Ghana. Theoretically, the lack of engagement between selectorate theory and political communication scholarship means that neither tradition can fully explain the communicative dynamics of intra-party selection.

The practical consequences of this gap are substantial. In Ghana's duopolistic system, where the NPP and NDC alternate power in near-automatic eight-year cycles, the flagbearer contest in each party effectively determines who becomes president. Yet the communication strategies that win these contests have not been systematically studied, and the relationship between primary-winning frames and general-election success remains poorly understood. The 2023 NPP primary, in which Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia's elite-aligned, organisationally dense campaign defeated Kennedy Agyapong's media-dominant but organisationally weak campaign, and the subsequent 2024 general election, in which Bawumia's delegate-optimised digital-economy frame faltered before the wider electorate, illustrate both the analytical and practical stakes of this gap. Without a systematic framework for understanding how communication operates within exclusive selectorates, candidates, parties, and scholars lack the analytical tools to evaluate why some primary strategies succeed and others fail, and why some primary-winning frames translate into general-election success while others do not.

The present study was therefore necessary for both analytical and empirical reasons. Analytically, it was necessary to bridge two literatures that have developed in parallel—comparative politics scholarship on intra-party democracy and political communication research on framing, media systems, and elite persuasion—by theorising the selectorate as a communicative space and by specifying the conditions under which different communication mechanisms dominate. Empirically, it was necessary to extend selectorate theory to African delegate-based primaries and to examine how the four communication mechanisms operate across the full spectrum of selectorate inclusiveness,

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from exclusive party-elite conventions to inclusive mass primaries. The dual-audience problem—the structural tension between the selectorate that chooses the nominee and the general electorate that decides the election—further required systematic investigation because it has not been theorised in the existing literature and because it has significant implications for democratic representation. It is against this background that this study investigates how selectorate structure conditions the relative effectiveness of different political communication strategies in intra-party leadership contests.

1.2 Research Objectives

i. To extend Hazan and Rahat's (2010) selectorate framework to African delegate-based presidential primaries and to analyse how selectorate inclusiveness shapes the communication logic of intra-party leadership contests.
ii. To examine how the four communication mechanisms—messaging, media use, symbolism, and elite persuasion—interact to shape candidate success across different selectorate types, from exclusive party-elite selectorates to inclusive mass primary systems.
iii. To identify and specify the structural conditions under which elite persuasion operates as the primary transmission mechanism in exclusive selectorates and those under which mass communication and digital organisation can partially substitute for it in more inclusive selectorates.
iv. To investigate the dual-audience problem in intra-party communication by analysing how primary-developed frames translate—or fail to translate—into general-election success, and to identify the characteristics of frames that survive the transition from selectorate to general electorate.
v. To refine the elite persuasion claim in intra-party contexts by reinterpreting the Trump 2016 Republican primary as a boundary-condition case that defines when media substitution becomes feasible, rather than as a refutation of the elite-persuasion account.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This study sits at the intersection of two bodies of literature that have developed largely in parallel: comparative politics scholarship on intra-party democracy and candidate selection, and political communication research on framing, media systems, and elite persuasion. Each tradition offers essential analytical resources, yet neither alone can explain how communication strategies operate within the restricted institutional spaces of intra-party leadership contests, particularly in African delegate-based systems. This review critically synthesises these sets of literature, identifies their respective limitations, and establishes the research gap that the present study addresses. The review is organised around the study's key variables: selectorate structure as the conditioning variable, the four communication mechanisms (messaging, media use, symbolism, and elite persuasion) as the communicative repertoire, and the African delegate-based primary as the under-examined context.

2.2 Selectorate Theory and Intra-Party Democracy

2.2.1 The Selectorate Framework

Hazan and Rahat's (2010) selectorate framework represents the most systematic attempt to theorise how candidate selection methods shape political outcomes. Their central argument is deceptively simple: the group entitled to choose a party's candidates—the selectorate—is the key structural factor determining who gets selected, what policies emerge, and how representative democracy functions in practice. The framework distinguishes selectorates along several dimensions, with inclusiveness being the most analytically consequential. At one extreme, decision-making rests with a single party leader; at the other, an open primary permits any registered voter to participate. Between these poles lie various configurations: party elites, party organs, party members, registered delegates, and combinations thereof.

The theoretical implication for political communication is significant: more exclusive selectorates concentrate influence within elite networks and personal relationships, while broader selectorates favour broadcast messaging and direct candidate-to-voter communication (Rahat & Hazan, 2001). This proposition has generated a productive body of comparative research, primarily in European and Anglo-American contexts. Cross and Blais (2012) extend the framework to leadership selection across Anglo parliamentary democracies, demonstrating that selectorate inclusiveness influences party cohesion and leader tenure. Rahat and Hazan (2001) provide a finer-grained analytical classification that has become standard in the field. Collectively, this literature establishes that selectorate structure is not merely a procedural detail but a variable with substantial political consequences.

2.2.2 Extensions and Applications

The framework's influence has extended beyond its original European and Anglo-American base. Ichino and Nathan's (2012, 2013, 2022) research on Ghanaian primaries represents the most sustained application of selectorate

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logic to African cases. Their work demonstrates that primary elections in Ghana operate within clientelist networks, where candidate selection is mediated by patron-client relationships that formal rules do not capture. Ichino and Nathan (2013) find that primaries can improve electoral performance by resolving intra-party conflict, but only under specific institutional conditions. Their later analysis (Ichino & Nathan, 2022) of franchise expansion shows that selectorate inclusiveness affects both competition and representation in ways consistent with Hazan and Rahat's predictions. Osei (2016) nuances the discussion by showing how formal party organisation interacts with informal relations in Ghana's parties, demonstrating that selection outcomes are mediated by networks that the formal selectorate framework does not fully anticipate.

These applications confirm the framework's analytical utility while also revealing its limitations. The framework was developed from European and Anglo-American cases where party institutionalisation, ethno-regional divisions, and patron-client networks differ substantially from African contexts. Fisher, Gadjanova and Hitchen's (2024) finding that digital technologies integrate into existing patrimonial systems rather than transforming them—what they term "digital clientelism"—suggests that the relationship between formal selectorate rules and actual selection dynamics may operate differently in African party systems. The framework specifies the structural conditioning variable but does not predict within-type variation. As the present study demonstrates, the NPP and NDC both use delegate-based selectorates yet produce markedly different communication dynamics: the NPP regularly produces keenly contested primaries, while the NDC produces consensus selections cycle after cycle. Explaining this divergence requires attention to factors the framework acknowledges but does not theorise, including factional structure, leadership succession dynamics, and the specific patron-client networks each party has built over time.

2.2.3 Limitations and Unresolved Questions

Three limitations of the selectorate literature are particularly relevant to this study. First, despite its comparative ambitions, the framework's empirical base remains predominantly European and Anglo-American. Systematic application to African delegate-based presidential primaries is virtually absent. Second, the framework treats the selectorate as an institution to be mapped and categorised, but it does not theorise the selectorate as a communicative space. It tells us who selects but not how candidates communicate to win selection. Third, the framework largely overlooks variation within selectorate types. Two parties using similar formal selectorate structures may have very different communication practices influenced by their internal cultures, factional dynamics, and relationships with traditional authorities. These limitations define the first dimension of the research gap this study addresses.

2.3 Political Communication in Intra-Party Contexts

2.3.1 Framing and Messaging

The political communication literature provides the conceptual vocabulary necessary to theorise the selectorate as a communicative space. Entman's (1993) framing theory offers the foundational insight that communication involves selecting aspects of reality and making them more salient—defining problems, identifying causes, and proposing solutions. Benford and Snow (2000) extend this by demonstrating that frames must resonate with their audience's existing values and beliefs to be effective. In intra-party contexts, this resonance condition is particularly demanding: the audience is not a dispersed mass public but a structured elite whose members are embedded in specific organisational roles, regional networks, and patron-client relationships.

The framing literature has been applied extensively to general election campaigns but rarely to intra-party contests. When it has been applied, the tendency has been to treat intra-party communication as a smaller version of mass campaigning rather than as a structurally distinct environment. A frame built for a dispersed electorate, and one designed for a delegate body influenced by party elites respond to different resonance conditions, yet the existing literature does not systematically address this difference. This gap is particularly acute in African contexts, where the communicative work of winning a primary involves navigating both formal party structures and informal networks that the framing literature was not designed to capture.

2.3.2 Media Systems and Hybrid Media

Chadwick's (2013) hybrid media system framework provides essential tools for understanding how candidates communicate in contemporary intra-party contests. The framework demonstrates that old and new media interact rather than displace one another, creating complex communication environments where television, radio, and social media coexist and interpenetrate. Strömbäck (2008) adds that candidates increasingly adapt their behaviour to media logic rather than party logic, designing communication events around what generates coverage.

Within Ghanaian parties, this hybridity takes a specific form. Radio remains the primary channel for rural delegates; WhatsApp transmits real-time information and endorsement signals through party hierarchies; Facebook Live and YouTube enable candidates to bypass some traditional gatekeeping. Fisher et al. (2024) document how Ghana's NPP and NDC have constructed hierarchical WhatsApp structures that reflect pre-existing party organisation—tools

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integrated into older patrimonial logics rather than disrupting them. This finding is significant because it suggests that digital media do not automatically level the communicative playing field. Instead, they are folded into existing elite networks, reinforcing rather than undermining elite gatekeeping. The literature on hybrid media systems has not yet theorised how these dynamics operate in intra-party contexts where the audience is a structured elite rather than a mass public.

2.3.3 Symbolism

Edelman's (1964, 1985) work on political symbolism provides the third conceptual pillar. Political symbols, he argues, distil complex political identities into instantly recognisable signs that evoke emotional reactions. In leadership contests, symbolism works as much through candidate identity—region of origin, religion, ethnicity, personal history—as through intentional campaign imagery. A candidate's identity can become a condensed symbol itself, conveying messages that explicit messaging cannot. In Edelman's terms, a condensation symbol condenses a complex set of meanings, emotions, and identities into a single evocative sign—such as a candidate's regional origin or religious affiliation—that operates below the level of explicit argument. This distinguishes condensation symbols from other forms of political symbolism: they do not merely represent a position but embody an identity, making them particularly powerful in delegate contests where representatives' decisions are shaped by their assessment of a candidate's viability and representativeness.

The symbolism literature has been applied extensively to general elections but rarely to intra-party contests. Yet symbolism may be particularly consequential in delegate-based selectorates, where delegates' decisions are shaped by their assessment of a candidate's viability and representativeness. Bawumia's northern identity in the 2023 NPP primary, for example, functioned as a condensation symbol communicating a broadening of party leadership that no message could achieve as efficiently. The existing literature offers tools for analysing such symbolic dynamics but has not systematically examined how they operate in the specific context of intra-party leadership selection.

2.3.4 Elite Persuasion and Two-Step Flow

The fourth conceptual pillar is elite persuasion, grounded in Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow model and Zaller's (1992) elite cue-taking framework. Katz and Lazarsfeld demonstrate that messages originate from candidates through media, pass to opinion leaders, who interpret and broadcast them to less politically engaged audiences. Zaller argues that elite consensus or division is among the strongest indicators of mass opinion. Broockman and Butler (2015) provide experimental proof that elite endorsements can shift opinions even against prior preferences.

In delegate races, where individual delegates are often lower-information voters than the broader electorate, elite cues have disproportionate influence. Bob-Milliar (2012, 2014) demonstrates how ward-level executives and party foot soldiers serve as the practical conduit for candidate communication to reach delegate populations in Ghana. Yet the elite persuasion literature has typically been developed to explain mass opinion formation, not intra-party selection. The conditions under which elite persuasion operates as the primary transmission mechanism—and those under which it can be partially bypassed—have not been systematically theorised. This is the second dimension of the research gap this study addresses.

2.4 African Party Politics and Delegate-Based Primaries

2.4.1 Party Organisation and Grassroots Structures

The African scholarship that directly examines delegate-based primaries provides essential context. Bob-Milliar's (2012, 2014) work on Ghana's NPP and NDC grassroots structures documents how ward-level executives and party foot soldiers operate as the practical conduit through which candidate communication reaches delegates. His research demonstrates that party activism in Ghana is shaped by a combination of ideological commitment, patronage expectations, and social networks—factors that the formal selectorate framework does not fully capture. Osei (2016) adds that formal party organisation interacts with informal relations in ways that mediate selection outcomes. These findings establish that the selectorate in African parties is not merely a formal institution but a complex social space where formal rules and informal networks intersect.

2.4.2 Clientelism and Informal Networks

Ichino and Nathan's (2012, 2013, 2022) research on the logic of clientelism and intra-party conflict in Ghana provides the most systematic account of how primaries operate in clientelist contexts. Their work shows that primaries can improve electoral performance by resolving intra-party conflict, but only under specific institutional conditions. They also demonstrate that franchise expansion affects both competition and representation in ways that are consistent with selectorate theory but mediated by clientelist dynamics. Fisher et al. (2024) study of WhatsApp campaigning in Ghana and Nigeria extends this analysis to the digital sphere, documenting how pre-existing party institutionalisation determines how digital tools are integrated into older patrimonial logics. Their finding that Ghana's major parties have

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established hierarchical online communication structures that reflect existing party organisations—with messages flowing from national leaders to regional officials and then to constituency-level activists—is directly relevant to this study's analysis of elite persuasion in delegate-based selectorates.

2.4.3 Digital Communication in African Parties

The digital communication literature on African parties is emerging but remains underdeveloped. Fisher et al. (2024) provide the most comprehensive account to date, based on 113 interviews and 15 focus groups across Ghana and Nigeria. Their concept of "digital clientelism" captures how new tools are integrated into older patrimonial frameworks rather than disrupting them. This finding has significant implications for selectorate theory: if digital tools are folded into existing elite networks, they may reinforce rather than undermine elite gatekeeping in exclusive selectorates. The present study extends this insight by examining how digital communication operates within the specific context of delegate-based presidential primaries, where the audience is a structured elite rather than a mass public.

2.5 The Research Gap and This Study's Contribution

Read together, the reviewed literature converges on a question that they do not resolve. The comparative work on candidate selection demonstrates that the structure of the selectorate influences who is chosen, but it has been primarily based on European and Anglo-American party systems and offers little insight into how candidates actually communicate within the selectorates it describes. The African scholarship that directly examines delegate-based primaries focuses mainly on institutional factors and electoral impacts, not on the communication strategies candidates use to win them. The political communication literature provides the conceptual tools necessary for understanding how communication functions but has rarely engaged in sustained examination of intra-party leadership contests, where the audience is small and institutionally embedded rather than large and dispersed. When intra-party communication has been studied, it has typically been treated as a special case of mass campaigning rather than as a phenomenon structurally distinct.

The gap is therefore both contextual and theoretical. Contextually, selectorate theory has not been systematically applied to African delegate-based presidential primaries, and political communication scholarship has not clarified how its core mechanisms function when the audience is a structured elite rather than a mass public. Theoretically, the elite persuasion claim has not been refined to specify the conditions under which elite persuasion operates as the primary transmission mechanism and those under which mass communication can substitute for it.

This study addresses these gaps in three ways. First, it extends Hazan and Rahat's (2010) selectorate framework to African delegate-based primaries, demonstrating that Ghana's NPP and NDC operate communication logics closer to pre-1968 American convention politics than to modern US mass primaries. Second, it theorises the selectorate as a communicative space, examining how four mechanisms—messaging, media use, symbolism, and elite persuasion—interact to shape candidate success across different selectorate types. Third, it refines the elite persuasion claim by specifying the structural conditions that enable it to dominate and those under which mass media can partially substitute for it. The Trump 2016 case is reinterpreted as a boundary-condition case that defines when substitution becomes possible, rather than as a refutation of the elite-persuasion account. In doing so, the study not only fills an empirical gap but also sharpens the selectorate framework itself, showing where the relationship between formal selectorate rules and the communicative work of winning a primary may travel beyond the cases on which the theory was built.

III METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts interpretive research philosophy. It treats political communication as meaning that candidates and party actors construct, contest, and read within particular institutional settings, and takes the researcher's task to be the interpretation of how communicative strategies acquire significance for a given selectorate rather than the measurement of law-like regularities. Knowledge claims are therefore understood as contextual and theory-informed rather than statistically generalisable. This study uses structured, focused comparison (George & Bennett, 2005) across four primary cases, supplemented by two translation tests. Structured comparison addresses the same theoretically driven questions in each case to facilitate cross-case inference; focused comparison concentrates on the specific aspects of the cases relevant to the research question rather than attempting a comprehensive explanation. The approach is suitable for a small-N comparative design aiming to develop and refine theory through within-case analysis rather than statistical generalisation across many cases.

Cases were selected to encompass the inclusiveness dimension of Hazan and Rahat's (2010) typology and to enable both within-country and cross-country comparisons. The American cases cover the full structural spectrum: 1960 represents an exclusive party-elite selectorate where leaders controlled most delegate allocations; 2008 signifies an inclusive primary system where both a broader public and a narrower elite played a role; 2016 illustrates an inclusive

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selectorate where elite coordination completely broke down. The Ghanaian primary case is positioned at the structurally exclusive end of the spectrum: the 2023 NPP presidential primary operates via a delegate conference, with regional executives and constituency chairpersons wielding significant influence over delegate voting. The 2016 and 2024 Ghanaian general elections are included not as primary selectorate cases but as translation tests of how primary-developed communication strategies translate (or fail to translate) into the general electorate context—a relationship that the dual-audience analysis explicitly examines.

The primary cases were selected using a diverse-case design (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), chosen to cover the entire spectrum of the inclusiveness dimension rather than to represent a specific population. The American cases underpin an exclusive party-elite convention (1960), an inclusive primary with a residual elite check (2008), and an inclusive primary where elite coordination broke down (2016), while the Ghanaian primary occupies the exclusive, delegate-based end that the comparative literature has least explored. The 2016 and 2024 Ghanaian general elections are not viewed as additional selectorate cases but as translation tests, included specifically to observe what occurs when a primary-developed framework encounters the mass electorate, the empirical hinge of the dual-audience argument. This yields four primary cases and two supplementary translation tests, rather than six equivalent cases.

3.2 Method of Analysis

The analytical approach integrates both within-case process tracing and cross-case structured comparison. Within each case, process tracing investigates how the four mechanisms functioned, in what order, and with what causal significance—paying particular attention to the timing of elite signals, the tuning of messaging frames, and the use of symbolic resources. Cross-case comparison then detects patterns consistent across different selectorate types and those that systematically vary with selectorate inclusiveness. The aim is to identify patterns informed by theory within a small-N design, rather than to conduct statistical hypothesis testing.

This commitment is deliberate. Quantifying the four mechanisms—endorsement counts, social media engagement metrics, and frame consistency scores—would require primary data collection (interviews, content analysis with intercoder reliability checks, and audience surveys) that falls outside the scope of this study. Proposing quantification without actual data would weaken rather than strengthen the analysis. The qualitative interpretive approach recognises its limitations: it identifies patterns based on theory, suitable for developing and refining theories rather than for statistical generalisation.

Within each case, the analysis follows the mechanism-centred logic of process tracing outlined by Beach and Pedersen (2019): a causal mechanism is understood as a series of interconnected parts that transmit causal force from cause to outcome. Although the mechanism itself is unobservable, it leaves observable "fingerprints" that documentary evidence can recover. Here, the hypothesised mechanism runs from a candidate's communicative resources (frame, media operation, symbolic identity) through elite transmission (endorsements, regional-executive alignment, signalling events) to delegate choice. The observable implications traced are accordingly specific: the timing of elite signals relative to mass voting, the alignment or misalignment between a frame and the delegate audience's priorities, and the presence or absence of organisational contact behind a candidate's media reach. The aim is not statistical inference but the disciplined evaluation of whether these fingerprints are present in the cases where the theory predicts them and absent where it does not.

3.3 Data Sources

Evidence is derived from documentary sources in three categories. Official records include electoral commission declarations (Electoral Commission of Ghana, 2016, 2023, 2024), party documents, and convention proceedings. Contemporaneous journalism encompasses Ghanaian sources (Citinewsroom, GhanaWeb, Daily Graphic, Joy News) and US sources (The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN). Peer-reviewed scholarship covers both Ghanaian political communication (Bob-Milliar, 2012, 2014; Fisher et al., 2024; Frempong, 2017; Mensah, 2009, 2017; Narteh et al., 2017; Preko et al., 2019) and the comparative literature on intra-party democracy and political communication (Broockman & Butler, 2015; Chadwick, 2013; Edelman, 1964, 1985; Entman, 1993; Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Rahat & Hazan, 2001; Zaller, 1992).

Since the evidence is based on documentary sources, each key factual claim about a case event—such as vote shares, dates, endorsements, and withdrawals—was verified with at least two independent source types before being accepted as fact. These sources include official records like Electoral Commission declarations or party returns, which are cross-checked with contemporary journalism and peer-reviewed scholarship when available. If only journalistic sources are present or there are discrepancies among outlets, the differences are noted in the text.

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IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 The Dual-Audience Problem

Before delving into specific cases, it is important to address a fundamental structural tension that underlies them all. A candidate pursuing a party nomination must communicate with two distinct audiences in sequence: initially, the selectorate responsible for choosing the nomination, and subsequently, the general electorate that votes in the election. These two groups differ in their size, makeup, and concerns, meaning that a communication approach effective with one may not be suitable for the other.

The tension is not simply tactical; it is a fundamental aspect of party democracy in any system that employs an internal selection process separate from the general election. Rahat and Hazan (2001) observe that more exclusive selectorates tend to produce candidates whose appeal is narrower in certain aspects—ideological, regional, factional—because they need only persuade a homogeneous internal audience. Conversely, more inclusive selectorates generally yield candidates with broader appeal but weaker internal party discipline. The dual-audience problem appears in three recurring forms across the cases examined below.

The first is pressure to develop distinct messaging frames for each audience, with the risk that the primary frame leaves traces visible to general voters (examined through Kennedy in 1960 and the NDC in 2016). The second is pressure on symbolic resources, where identity mobilisation that energises one part of the electorate may alienate another (examined through Bawumia's northern symbolism). The third concerns the strategic incentive to craft frames that resonate with both audiences from the outset (examined through Mahama's 24-Hour Economy). The argument advanced here is that intra-party communication cannot be evaluated solely by whether it wins the primary. The harder question is whether it wins the primary in a way that leaves the general election still winnable. The case analyses return to this question in each case.

4.2 The United States: Three Cases Across the Selectorate Spectrum

The American cases are organised according to Hazan and Rahat's inclusiveness dimension rather than by chronology. The 1960 Democratic primary exemplifies an exclusive selectorate led by party bosses; 2008 shows an inclusive primary system where both a broad public and a narrower elite played significant roles; and 2016 depicts an inclusive system where elite coordination completely broke down. Each case illustrates how the four mechanisms operate differently as the composition of the selectorate shifts.

4.2.1 JFK 1960: Persuading the Bosses

In 1960, the Democratic Party still selected its presidential candidate through a convention system where major-city mayors, state chairmen, and union leaders controlled most delegate allocations. Presidential primaries existed but were not binding; their purpose was to show popular support to party bosses, who then made the decision. The actual selectorate, in Hazan and Rahat's terms, was a small party elite.

Kennedy's communication challenge was symbolic. His Catholicism made him a liability in the eyes of party leaders who doubted whether a Catholic could win a national election in a country that had never elected one. In West Virginia, a state more than 95% Protestant, early polling had him trailing Hubert Humphrey by 20 points once his religion became publicly salient (JFK Library, 2010). Rather than play down the religious question, Kennedy reframed it. A vote against him became a vote for bigotry; a vote for him became a vote for constitutional principle. In Entman's (1993) terms, he selected a different salience—replacing "Catholic candidate" with "fairness and tolerance" as the operative frame.

Kennedy won West Virginia on 10 May 1960 with 60.8% to Humphrey's 39.2% (Brookings Institution, 2016). The importance of this victory was not the popular mandate; it was the message it sent to the party leaders. In Zaller's (1992) terms, Kennedy had generated evidence relevant to elites: a Catholic could attract Protestant working-class voters. The elite communication environment shifted in his favour, and he secured the nomination on the first ballot at the Los Angeles convention on 13 July 1960 (Miller Center, 2025). The 1960 case illustrates elite persuasion operating in reverse: primary voters were not directly choosing the nominee but producing the evidence elite gatekeepers needed to be persuaded.

4.2.2 Obama 2008: Inclusive Selectorate, Hybrid Strategy

By 2008, the system had undergone a transformation. State-by-state primaries and caucuses awarded pledged delegates through popular vote, with senior party figures (superdelegates) holding influential but not decisive votes at the convention. The selectorate had shifted notably towards the inclusive end of the spectrum. Mass messaging and media reach mattered more than they did in 1960, but elite alignment continued to play a crucial role at the margins.

The frame and the symbolism. Obama's broadcast frame—"Hope and Change"—was simple and enduring. Hillary Clinton's competing frame emphasised experience and readiness to govern from the outset. Bill Schneider,

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CNN's political analyst, summed up the contest after Iowa: "The numbers tell us this was a debate between change and experience, and change won" (CNN, 2008). Obama won the Iowa caucuses on 3 January 2008 with 38% to Edwards' 30% and Clinton's 29%. Iowa carried symbolic significance beyond its delegate count: it showed that an African American candidate could succeed in a predominantly white state, transforming Obama from a long-shot historical candidate into a possible nominee.

The digital operation. Obama's campaign built the most sophisticated digital infrastructure seen to that point in American politics. The platform My.BarackObama.com, launched in early 2007, allowed supporters to organise local events, fundraise from their own networks, and connect with other supporters in their area—effectively a campaign-controlled social network with hundreds of thousands of registered users by Iowa. The Iowa caucus operation deployed thousands of out-of-state volunteers in a structure called "Camp Obama," which trained supporters in caucus mechanics through a precinct-by-precinct organising model. The Obama campaign broke previous primary records by raising approximately $409 million during the primary phase alone (Campaign Finance Institute, 2009). The digital platform did not replace traditional organising; it amplified it. Email lists segmented supporters by geography and engagement level, enabling targeted communication that converted online enthusiasm into in-person caucus turnout.

The Kennedy endorsement and the cascade. The decisive elite movement occurred on 28 January 2008, when Senator Edward Kennedy endorsed Obama at a rally in Washington, joined by Caroline Kennedy and Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick. Contemporaries described it as "the biggest Democratic endorsement Obama could possibly get short of Bill Clinton or Al Gore." In Zaller's (1992) framework, this was a maximum-credibility elite cue aimed precisely at the demographics where Clinton had structural advantages: organised labour, traditional Democratic constituencies, and Hispanic voters. The endorsement triggered a cascade of superdelegates. As major institutional endorsers shifted towards Obama, more followed suit. He finished the cycle with 1,764 pledged delegates to Clinton's 1,640 and 478 superdelegate endorsements to her 246 (Iowa Watch, 2024).

The 2008 case is the clearest example of all four mechanisms working together. Hope and Change set the framework; Iowa provided the symbolism; the digital campaign expanded the message; the Kennedy endorsement solidified elite support at a crucial moment. The case also shows the tension between dual audiences. Obama's main message translated fairly well into the general election against John McCain, but specific tonal choices that resonated with Democratic primary voters—especially on race and identity—had to be carefully managed in the broader contest.

4.2.3 Trump 2016: When Media Substitutes for Elite Alignment

Trump's 2016 Republican primary success illustrates that simple claims about elite persuasion's dominance are misleading. Republican party elites were largely opposed to his candidacy. The establishment rotated through Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, and Ted Cruz as preferred alternatives, without ever rallying behind any of them. What set Trump apart was his capacity to replace traditional endorsement networks with his dominance in earned media, which typically influence primary outcomes.

His broadcast slogan, "Make America Great Again," was intentionally vague in policy details but clear in emotional tone. Different voter groups projected their specific grievances onto it; the nostalgic message had emotional impact without requiring policy commitments. By March 2016, Trump had garnered approximately $1.9 billion in earned media coverage—more than twice that of any other candidate, and more than all his Republican rivals combined (Confessore & Yourish, 2016; Patterson, 2016). He spent only $10 million on television advertising during the primaries, compared to Jeb Bush's $82 million and Marco Rubio's $55 million (CNN Money, 2016). The spectacle of the campaign—rallies, provocations, social media activity—generated ongoing coverage that replaced paid advertising he could not afford and elite endorsements he never sought.

Trump's outsider symbolism reinforced his strategy. He positioned himself clearly against the Republican Party's establishment, making elite hostility part of his brand rather than a disadvantage. He entered the Republican National Convention with 1,543 delegates, having defeated sixteen other candidates who had entered the race at various points. The 2016 example shows that Hazan and Rahat's framework applies even in chaotic environments: when the selectorate is large and direct, elite coordination failure can be exploited by a candidate with enough media dominance and outsider symbolism. The conditions for this are unusual and cannot be deliberately replicated. The Trump case establishes the limit of the elite-persuasion claim rather than disproving it.

4.3 Ghana: Communication Inside the NPP and the NDC

The Ghanaian cases are at the most exclusive end of Hazan and Rahat's spectrum. Both major parties use delegate-based selectorates for presidential primaries, and the historical evidence shows clear patterns. The NPP has experienced more visible internal contestations in 2007, 2014, and 2023. The NDC has more often seen nearly uncontested coronations of its leading figures, with internal challenges usually marginal. These patterns reflect different communication logics, but both operate within the same exclusive selectorate structure.

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4.3.1 Ghana 2016: A General Election as a Test of Primary-Developed Strategies

The 2016 general election is analytically valuable because it demonstrates what occurs when communication strategies developed within parties are tested against a broad electorate. Akufo-Addo had been the NPP's flag-bearer in 2008 and 2012, losing on both occasions. Mahama was the incumbent president, having succeeded John Atta Mills in 2012 and winning the December 2012 election. Both candidates employed the communication structures their parties had built over three election cycles.

NPP: a clearer frame, stronger symbolism. The 2016 NPP campaign was Akufo-Addo's third bid for the presidency. The messaging was clearer than in either of his previous campaigns. The broadcast themes, "Ghana Must Work Again" and "Arise for Change," highlighted dissatisfaction with the NDC government as the main political reality and positioned the NPP as the trustworthy alternative. Two targeted policy commitments supported this narrative at the constituency level: Free Senior High School (Free SHS) education and One District One Factory (1D1F). Both were specific, emotionally compelling promises that voters could see as directly improving their lives. In Edelman's (1964) terms, Free SHS acted as a condensation symbol, simplifying a complex educational equity argument into a single clear promise.

Bawumia's position as running mate did important symbolic work. His identity as a Muslim northerner, paired with the Akan Christian Akufo-Addo, addressed the NPP's perceived demographic narrowness. Bawumia's widely shared economic lectures gave the campaign technocratic credibility on macroeconomic management (Frempong, 2017; Gyimah-Boadi & Asante, 2004). The NPP also ran a systematic elite persuasion operation, engaging traditional rulers, Pentecostal church leaders, and constituency executives as opinion leaders across the ten regions—a textbook two-step flow structure (Bob-Milliar, 2014). Akufo-Addo won with 53.85% to Mahama's 44.40%, a margin of more than one million votes and the first defeat of a sitting president in the Fourth Republic (Electoral Commission of Ghana, 2016).

NDC: the Mahama incumbency and a primary that signalled vulnerability. The NDC's 2015 internal nomination process was not a contested race in any meaningful sense. Mahama, as sitting president, was endorsed at the party's November 2015 delegates conference with 95.10% (1,199,118 of 1,286,728 votes cast). By intra-party communication standards, this was a coronation rather than a contest. It signalled internal unity in the run-up to the 2016 general election but also concealed the true state of the party's relationship with its base.

Mahama's 2016 broadcast frame, "Changing Lives, Transforming Ghana," which emphasised infrastructure delivery, illustrates the dual-audience problem in unforgiving terms. The frame had worked inside the party, where delegates could be presented with a list of completed projects and persuaded that the administration was delivering. Against the general electorate, the same frame missed the dominant concern: economic hardship under a regime of currency depreciation, "dumsor" (electricity rationing crisis), and youth unemployment. The campaign's media strategy compounded the problem. Frempong (2017) documents how NDC communications focused heavily on attacking Akufo-Addo's personal qualities rather than making a positive case for the NDC's own record. The framing advantage went to the NPP largely because the NDC ceded it. Narteh et al. (2017) note, more generally, that effective party communication in Ghana requires a sustained connection between the candidate brand, the party brand, and the policy positions on offer; the NDC's 2016 campaign struggled to maintain this connection. The NDC's reliance on an infrastructure-delivery frame that resonated with party loyalists but not with the broader electorate illustrates how a selectorate-optimised message can fail when the audience shifts.

4.3.2 NPP 2023: A Competitive Primary and the Power of Early Elite Alignment

The NPP's 4 November 2023 presidential primary at the Accra Sports Stadium is the richest available case of intra-party communication in contemporary Ghanaian politics. Four candidates ultimately contested: Vice President Dr. Mahamudu Bawumia, MP Kennedy Ohene Agyapong, former Agriculture Minister Dr. Owusu Afriyie Akoto, and former MP Francis Addai-Nimoh. Alan John Kyerematen had withdrawn following the August Super Delegates Congress, reshaping the race significantly.

The two-stage structure. Before the November primary, the NPP held a Super Delegates Congress on 26 August 2023, in which approximately 925 senior party officials reduced ten aspirants to five finalists. This two-stage structure mattered analytically. The August congress functioned as an elite signalling event that set the competitive frame for November. Bawumia took it with 629 votes (68.15%)—a commanding margin that transmitted a powerful elite consensus signal to the broader delegate population before mass voting began (GhanaWeb, 2023). In Hazan and Rahat's terms, an exclusive selectorate had imposed a pre-selection that shaped how the larger delegate body subsequently voted. Zaller's (1992) account fits closely here. Once an elite consensus formed around Bawumia, it became self-reinforcing.

Bawumia: digital organisation and northern symbolism. Bawumia built his campaign around a technocratic modernisation frame: Ghana's economic future relied on digitisation, and he was its architect. Specific achievements—mobile money interoperability, the Ghana.gov platform, digital property addressing—provided tangible evidence of the abstract vision. His media operation was the most advanced intra-party digital campaign yet seen in Ghana: systematic Facebook Live policy presentations, YouTube constituency engagement videos, and coordinated WhatsApp delegate

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networks. Fisher et al. (2024) study of WhatsApp campaigning in Ghana and Nigeria offers essential context. Their findings, based on 113 interviews and 15 focus groups across both countries, demonstrate that Ghana's major parties have established hierarchical online communication structures that reflect existing party organisations, with messages flowing from national leaders to regional officials and then to constituency-level activists. They term this pattern "digital clientelism"—new tools integrated into older patrimonial frameworks rather than disrupting them. Bawumia's 2023 effort was a sophisticated implementation of this very pattern, expanded to individual contact at the delegate level across all 276 constituencies. Mensah (2009) had previously noted how Ghanaian parties employ broadcast and narrowcast messaging within coordinated structures; the Bawumia campaign operationalised that logic with greater granularity.

Symbolically, Bawumia's candidacy was historic. No candidate from northern Ghana had ever won the NPP flagbearership. His identity as a Muslim northerner within a party traditionally associated with Akan and Ashanti constituencies functioned as a powerful condensation symbol, communicating a broadening of NPP leadership that no message could achieve as efficiently. In the North East region, he received 3,444 votes to Agyapong's 23 (Citinewsroom, 2023b)—a regional disproportion that identity mobilisation goes a long way towards explaining. He won the primary with 118,210 votes (61.47%) across fourteen of sixteen regions, the highest vote share recorded by any NPP flagbearer aspirant since 1992 (Electoral Commission of Ghana, 2023; Graphic Online, 2023).

Agyapong: the limits of media without organisation. Kennedy Agyapong's campaign provides the clearest analytical contrast in this case set. He ran an anti-establishment, diagnostic campaign that directly challenged the Akufo-Addo government's record, argued that the NPP needed honest self-criticism to recover, and achieved broadcast reach—through his ownership of Net2 TV and Oman FM—that few politicians can match. He created viral moments and high social media engagement yet finished a distant second with 71,996 votes (37.41%), securing only two regions.

The case provides a clear test of selectorate theory, but the failure mechanism must be precisely defined. It is tempting to see Agyapong as the mirror image of Trump—a media-dominant outsider who lost only because the selectorate was exclusive rather than inclusive. That interpretation is partly correct. The key difference is not that Agyapong's media was weaker, but that it reached the wrong audience. Trump's earned-media saturation reached tens of millions of voters who were themselves part of the Republican selectorate; Agyapong's broadcast assets reached the Ghanaian public, but the public was not the body capable of voting. In a delegate selectorate, viral content and delegate ballots are not interchangeable because delegates respond to elite cues and personal organisational contact filtered through regional and constituency officials, whose preferences influence the vote (Ichino & Nathan, 2013; Osei, 2016). Two mechanisms, therefore, work together in the Agyapong case: one predicted by structural selectorate theory—in exclusive selectorates, the marginal value of media reach is low compared to elite-network density (Hazan & Rahat, 2010)—and an audience mismatch, where media reach aimed at the general public simply does not reach the delegate body. Fisher, Gadjanova and Hitchen's (2024) finding that Ghana's WhatsApp structures are tightly controlled by parties adds a third factor: the very channels through which delegate persuasion occurs were closed to a candidate operating outside the party hierarchy. Agyapong's media dominance was genuine; it was targeted at people who could not vote in the contest he sought to win.

Kyerematen: elite signal failure as exit. Alan Kyerematen's third-place finish at the August Super Delegates Congress (95 votes, 10.29%) was a decisive elite signal that the party's senior figures had not consolidated behind him. His subsequent withdrawal and the founding of the Movement for Change party were themselves communication acts. It signalled that the NPP's internal endorsement architecture had failed to accommodate his constituency. His limited support in the 2024 general election confirmed how thoroughly party symbolism constrains independent political brands in Ghana's duopolistic system (Bob-Milliar, 2012).

4.3.3 NDC 2023: A Pattern of Consensus Selection

The NDC's 13 May 2023 presidential primary fits a longer pattern in the party's recent history. Mahama received 297,603 votes (98.9%) against Kojo Bonsu's 3,181 (1.1%); Kwabena Duffuor, the third declared candidate, withdrew the night before polling, citing irregularities in the delegate register (Electoral Commission of Ghana, 2023; Citinewsroom, 2023a). Read in isolation, this looks like an outlier. Read against the party's previous two primary cycles, it looks like a pattern. In 2015, Mahama was endorsed as flagbearer at the November delegates conference with 95.10% of votes cast against token opposition. In 2019, he won the primary again with 213,487 votes (95.23%), a contested race in name only (GhanaWeb, 2019).

This recurring pattern matters analytically. It illustrates how elite persuasion operates as a deterrent as much as an amplifier. By 2023, Mahama's alignment with NDC regional executives had become so strong that Duffuor, a former Finance Minister and Bank of Ghana Governor with significant personal credibility, could not secure the organisational backing required for a viable challenge. The communication of inevitability, sustained over multiple cycles, becomes a form of elite persuasion in itself. Potential challengers calculate the odds and decline to enter. This is consistent with what Hazan and Rahat (2010) identify as the responsiveness consequence of exclusive selectorates. Concentrated elite influence can suppress competition entirely, turning selection into ratification rather than contest.

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This within-type divergence between the NPP and NDC—both using delegate-based selectorates but producing markedly different levels of competition—points to factors the selectorate framework does not fully theorise. The NPP's history of contested primaries reflects a more fragmented factional structure, rooted in the party's origins and its relationship with its founder's legacy. The NDC's pattern of consensus selection reflects a more unified elite structure in which the incumbent or former incumbent's alignment with regional executives effectively deters challengers. Explaining this divergence requires attention to factional structure, leadership succession dynamics, and the specific patron-client networks each party has built over time—factors that the formal selectorate framework acknowledges but does not theorise.

Mahama's pre-primary communication served a strategic function. The 275-constituency tour he conducted in the months before the primary demonstrated organisational capacity, sustained delegate engagement, and projected party readiness to the broader electorate and the media. His substantive policy messaging centred on the "24-Hour Economy," a prognostic frame proposing staggered work shifts to address youth unemployment. The frame was designed from the outset to be as relevant to the 2024 general electorate as to the 2023 primary audience—a deliberate response to the dual-audience problem.

4.3.4 Ghana 2024: From Primary Frame to General Election Reality

The December 2024 general election concludes the analysis of the dual-audience problem. Mahama won the presidential contest on 7 December 2024 with approximately 56% of the vote, and Bawumia conceded the following morning; the NDC secured 184 of the 276 parliamentary seats then contested—the count increasing from 275 with the first-time inclusion of the new Guan constituency—and Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang was sworn in as Ghana's first female Vice President on 7 January 2025 (Electoral Commission of Ghana, 2024).

The result is analytically insightful not only because the NPP lost, but also because of what the two frames conveyed and omitted. Bawumia's digital-economy frame was tailored for a delegate audience concerned about the party's standing after eight years in government; its evidence—mobile-money interoperability, the Ghana.gov platform, digital addressing—were achievements obvious to insiders. For a general electorate whose main experience was cedi depreciation, the impact of the Domestic Debt Exchange Programme on savings, pensions, unemployment, illegal mining, and food prices addressed questions voters were not asking. The frame did not fail because it was poorly communicated; it failed because the audience it was designed for and the audience that decided the election valued different issues. Mahama's 24-Hour Economy frame, by contrast, was designed from the outset to address youth unemployment—a concern shared by delegates and the wider electorate alike—and thus required little change between the two contests. The contrast provides the clearest illustration of the dual-audience argument: the frame made for one audience faltered when the audiences diverged, while the frame made for both persisted through the transition.

4.4 Limits of the Framework and Alternative Explanations

Any case-based argument needs to engage seriously with the explanations it does not endorse. Three alternative accounts could plausibly be advanced for the case outcomes documented above.

The first is incumbency advantage. Bawumia was the sitting Vice President when he won the 2023 NPP primary; Mahama was a former president seeking a return when he won the 2023 NDC primary. Both candidates entered their contests with the institutional weight of office behind them, and that weight clearly mattered. Yet incumbency alone cannot explain the pattern. Akufo-Addo had also been the NPP's previous flagbearer in 2008 and 2012, and his 2008 primary had been seriously contested. Kyerematen, who had also previously contested NPP primaries, lost the 2023 race despite roughly comparable institutional standing to Bawumia's pre-vice-presidency position. What separated Bawumia from Kyerematen was the specific elite alignment Bawumia had built and Kyerematen had not maintained. Incumbency creates conditions favourable to elite alignment but does not substitute for it.

The second is rational coordination. Perhaps the elite consensus around Bawumia or Mahama was not produced by persuasion at all but by rational anticipation of an inevitable outcome, a coordination equilibrium rather than a communication achievement. Rational coordination has analytical merit but raises critical questions. For instance, why did the equilibrium settle on Bawumia rather than Agyapong, or on Mahama rather than Duffuor? Rational coordination requires a focal point, and focal points are produced through communication—endorsements, signals, displayed organisational capacity, and demonstrated viability. The Super Delegates Congress in August 2023 created such a focal point for candidate Bawumia. The communication account does not deny that coordination occurs but explains how the focal point gets selected.

The third is resource inequality. Bawumia's campaign was undoubtedly better funded than Agyapong's, and Mahama's national tour required substantial logistical resources. Resources are important, but they do not automatically determine election outcomes. Trump's 2016 Republican primary success came despite opponents with substantially greater paid media spending. Resource advantage must be deployed through some mechanism—typically messaging reach, organisational density, or elite persuasion—to produce outcomes. The communication account specifies which

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mechanisms convert resources into votes and identifies the conditions under which different mechanisms dominate. None of these alternative accounts is wrong. Each captures a real factor in the cases. The communication-focused selectorate account is preferable because it specifies the mechanism through which institutional weight, coordination dynamics, and resource advantages actually produce candidate selection outcomes. It explains not only which candidates won but how they won. That level of detail is what comparative case analysis aims to produce.

Two limits of the Hazan and Rahat (2010) framework also deserve direct acknowledgement. The first concerns its silence on within-selectorate-type variation. The NPP and NDC both use delegate-based selectorates, but their internal communication dynamics differ markedly. The NPP regularly produces keenly contested primaries, while the NDC produces "consensus selections" cycle after cycle. The framework specifies the structural conditioning variable but does not predict this within-type divergence. Explaining it requires attention to factors the framework does not emphasise, such as factional structure, leadership succession dynamics, the relationship between party founders and contemporary leadership, and the specific patron-client networks each party has built over time. The second concerns the framework's empirical base in Europe and the Anglo-American world. Fisher, Gadjanova, and Hitchen's (2024) finding that digital tools have been folded into existing patrimonial structures rather than disrupting them suggests that the relationship between formal selectorate rules and actual selection dynamics may operate differently in African party systems. The framework provides a good starting point, but African cases may eventually require modification.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

With respect to the first objective, the study concludes that Hazan and Rahat's selectorate framework can be productively extended to African delegate-based presidential primaries, but that this extension requires attention to features the original framework does not fully theorise. Ghana's NPP and NDC operate delegate-based selectorates in which regional executives and constituency chairpersons wield significant influence over delegate voting. In Hazan and Rahat's terms, this places Ghana's system closer to "party elite selection" than to genuine open primary competition, even though delegates formally cast votes. The communication logic of these contests therefore resembles pre-1968 American convention politics more than contemporary US mass primaries, where the selectorate is large, direct, and relatively less mediated by elite networks.

The study also concludes, however, that the framework's silence on within-selectorate-type variation limits its explanatory power. The NPP and NDC both use delegate-based selectorates, yet the NPP regularly produces keenly contested primaries while the NDC produces consensus selections cycle after cycle. This divergence cannot be explained by formal selectorate rules alone; it requires attention to factional structure, leadership succession dynamics, the relationship between party founders and contemporary leadership, and the specific patron-client networks each party has built over time. The framework specifies the structural conditioning variable but does not predict this within-type divergence. The extension of selectorate theory to African cases therefore confirms the framework's utility while also revealing the need for supplementary explanation.

With respect to the second objective, the study concludes that messaging, media use, symbolism, and elite persuasion function collectively rather than in sequence, and that their relative weight varies systematically with selectorate inclusiveness. In exclusive selectorates, elite persuasion operates as the primary transmission channel through which the other three mechanisms reach decisionmakers. Messaging frames, media operations, and symbolic resources matter, but they matter primarily because they shape what elites transmit to delegates. The 2023 NPP primary illustrates this logic: Bawumia's technocratic modernisation frame, his advanced digital operation, and his northern symbolism were effective not because they reached a mass audience but because they reinforced an elite consensus that had already formed around his candidacy at the August Super Delegates Congress. By contrast, Kennedy Agyapong's broadcast reach through Net2 TV and Oman FM, and his viral social media presence, did not translate into delegate support because they reached the general public rather than the delegate body, and because the WhatsApp structures through which delegate persuasion occurs were controlled by the party hierarchy.

In more inclusive selectorates, mass communication can substitute for aspects of elite transmission. Obama's 2008 campaign demonstrated how digital organisation, earned media, and a resonant broadcast frame could build delegate support while elite alignment continued to matter at the margins. Trump's 2016 campaign demonstrated a more extreme case in which earned media dominance and outsider symbolism allowed a candidate to win despite elite opposition. The study concludes that the four mechanisms are best understood as a repertoire whose effectiveness is conditioned by the structure of the selectorate, not as a fixed hierarchy of influence. With respect to the third objective, the study concludes that the standard claim about elite persuasion—that it is the most influential mechanism in intra-party races—is too strong as stated and requires refinement. The more accurate formulation is that in exclusive selectorates, where delegates lack the broad information environment available to general voters, elite persuasion is the primary transmission mechanism through which the other three operate. In wider selectorates, mass media and direct

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candidate-voter communication can compensate for some of this role, but elite alignment still affects outcomes at the margin.

The conditions that can override elite persuasion are identifiable but uncommon. They include inclusive selectorates, sufficient earned media to substitute for endorsement networks, and organised elite coordination failure. The Trump 2016 case establishes the boundary for the elite-persuasion argument rather than disproving it: Trump's victory was made possible by an unusually large and direct selectorate, by his capacity to generate earned media at a scale no other candidate could match, and by the Republican establishment's failure to coordinate around a single alternative. These conditions cannot be deliberately recreated. The study therefore concludes that elite persuasion remains the dominant mechanism in exclusive selectorates, and that media substitution is a boundary condition rather than a general alternative. With respect to the fourth objective, the study concludes that the dual-audience problem is structural rather than incidental. A candidate pursuing a party nomination must communicate with two distinct audiences in sequence: the selectorate responsible for choosing the nomination and the general electorate that votes in the election. These two groups differ in size, composition, and concerns, and a communication approach effective with one may not be suitable for the other.

The study finds that frames designed for both audiences from the outset survive the transition more successfully than frames optimised only for the selectorate. Mahama's 24-Hour Economy frame was designed to address youth unemployment—a concern shared by delegates and the wider electorate alike—and thus required little change between the 2023 primary and the 2024 general election. By contrast, Bawumia's digital-economy frame was tailored for a delegate audience concerned about the party's standing after eight years in government; its evidence—mobile-money interoperability, the Ghana.gov platform, digital addressing—addressed questions the general electorate was not asking. The frame did not fail because it was poorly communicated; it failed because the audience it was designed for and the audience that decided the election valued different issues. The 2024 Ghanaian general election provides the clearest illustration of this argument: the frame made for one audience faltered when the audiences diverged, while the frame made for both persisted through the transition. The study also notes that Trump's 2016 case is more ambiguous: his primary frame survived to the general election but activated more general-electorate opposition than a conventional frame would have.

With respect to the fifth objective, the study concludes that the Trump 2016 case is best understood as a boundary-condition case that defines when media substitution becomes feasible, rather than as a refutation of the elite-persuasion account. The case does not show that elite persuasion is unimportant; it shows that under specific and unusual conditions—an inclusive selectorate, exceptional earned-media dominance and organised elite coordination failure—a candidate can win without elite alignment. The study therefore refines the elite persuasion claim by specifying the structural conditions under which it dominates and those under which it can be partially bypassed. This refinement is the study's principal theoretical contribution. Taken together, these conclusions confirm that internal party leadership races operate by a communication logic that differs systematically from general election politics. Hazan and Rahat's selectorate framework offers a more analytical basis for understanding these races than frameworks developed for mass electoral politics. Extending it to African delegate-based contests not only fills an empirical gap but also sharpens the framework itself, showing where the relationship between formal selectorate rules and the communicative work of winning a primary may travel beyond the cases on which the theory was built.

5.2 Recommendations

Design primary-stage communication with the general election in mind. The dual-audience problem is structural, and the study demonstrates that frames optimised only for the selectorate can falter in the general election. Political parties should therefore require flagbearer aspirants to articulate how their primary-stage messaging will translate to the broader electorate. This does not mean abandoning internal appeals, but it does mean avoiding frames that are intelligible only to insiders. The contrast between Mahama's 24-Hour Economy frame, which addressed a concern shared by delegates and voters, and Bawumia's digital-economy frame, which addressed achievements obviously to insiders, illustrates the practical stakes. Parties could institutionalise this by requiring candidates to submit a general-election communication strategy alongside their nomination papers, or by organising internal debates that test candidates' ability to address both audiences.

Strengthen internal communication structures to reduce the risk of audience mismatch. The study finds that delegate persuasion occurs primarily through elite networks and party-controlled digital channels, and that candidates who operate outside these structures—however strong their media presence—struggle to convert broadcast reach into delegate support. Parties should therefore invest in transparent, well-documented delegate communication structures that give all aspirants access to the same channels. This would reduce the advantage currently enjoyed by candidates with privileged access to regional executives and constituency chairpersons, and it would make internal contests more genuinely competitive.

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Address the within-selectorate variation between contested and uncontested primaries. The study finds that the NPP and NDC, despite using similar delegate-based selectorates, produce markedly different levels of internal competition. The NDC's pattern of consensus selections suppresses competition in ways that may weaken its general-election preparedness. The NDC should consider internal reforms—such as clearer rules on delegate register integrity, transparent vetting procedures, and protected time for challengers to campaign—that would make contests more genuinely competitive without undermining party unity. The 2023 withdrawal of Kwabena Duffuor citing irregularities in the delegate register is a case in point: procedural transparency would strengthen rather than weaken the party's internal legitimacy.

Prioritise elite-network density over broadcast reach in exclusive selectorates. The study demonstrates that in delegate-based selectorates, the marginal value of media reach is low compared to elite-network density. Kennedy Agyapong's campaign in the 2023 NPP primary is the clearest illustration: he achieved broadcast reach through Net2 TV and Oman FM that few politicians can match, yet he finished a distant second because that reach was targeted at people who could not vote. Candidates competing in delegate-based primaries should therefore invest first in building relationships with regional executives, constituency chairpersons, and ward-level opinion leaders, and should treat broadcast media as a supplementary channel rather than a primary one. Use digital tools to reinforce, not replace, in-person delegate relationships. The study finds that WhatsApp networks, Facebook Live, and YouTube give candidates direct delegate-level reach, but that these tools are folded into older patrimonial logics rather than replacing them. Bawumia's 2023 operation is the clearest Ghanaian example of digital organisation that amplified rather than substituted for traditional organising. Candidates should therefore use digital tools to maintain contact between in-person engagements, to transmit endorsement signals through party hierarchies, and to coordinate volunteer activity—not as a substitute for physical presence at constituency and regional events.

Build frames that resonate with both the selectorate and the general electorate. The study finds that frames designed for both audiences from the outset survive the transition to the general election more successfully than frames optimised only for the selectorate. Candidates should therefore test their primary-stage messaging against general-election concerns before committing to it. Mahama's 24-Hour Economy frame, which addressed youth unemployment—a concern shared by delegates and voters—required little change between the 2023 primary and the 2024 general election. Candidates should ask whether their frame addresses a concern that delegates and voters share and should avoid frames whose evidence is intelligible only to party insiders.

Recognise the deterrent effect of early elite alignment. The study finds that elite persuasion operates as a deterrent as much as an amplifier: the communication of inevitability, sustained over multiple cycles, can suppress competition entirely, turning selection into ratification rather than contest. Party executives and delegates should be aware that early public alignment with a single candidate may discourage credible challengers from entering the race, thereby reducing the quality of internal debate and the party's general-election preparedness. Where possible, executives should refrain from public endorsements until all aspirants have had a fair opportunity to campaign. Protect the integrity of delegate registers and internal procedures. The study notes that the 2023 NDC primary was marked by the withdrawal of a candidate citing irregularities in the delegate register. Party executives should ensure that delegate registers are transparent, verifiable, and subject to independent audit. This would strengthen the legitimacy of internal contests and reduce the risk that procedural disputes undermine the party's general-election campaign.

Conduct qualitative interviews with regional executives and constituency chairpersons. The study's findings are derived from documentary evidence, and the micro-mechanics of elite persuasion can only be indirectly reconstructed from such sources. Future research should include qualitative interviews with Ghanaian regional executives and constituency chairpersons to illuminate how endorsement signals are transmitted, how delegate decisions are made, and how digital tools are used in practice. This would provide the primary qualitative data that the present study identifies as the next analytical step.

Extend comparative analysis to other African delegate-based systems. The study's findings are based on Ghanaian and American cases. Comparative analysis with other African delegate-based primary systems—such as Nigeria's APC and PDP, Kenya's major parties, and Senegal's emerging party landscape—would test whether the patterns identified here generalise across the continent or whether Ghana's specific institutional history exclusively produces them. Researchers should pay particular attention to whether the dual-audience problem operates differently in systems with different party structures, ethnic compositions, and media environments.

Conduct longitudinal studies of digital communication and elite gatekeeping. The study finds that digital tools are folded into older patrimonial logics rather than replacing them, but it cannot determine whether this pattern is stable or evolving. Future research should conduct longitudinal studies of how digital communication is reshaping elite gatekeeping in African parties. This would clarify whether the hierarchical WhatsApp structures documented by Fisher and colleagues are a transitional phase or a durable feature of African party communication. Develop quantitative measures of the four mechanisms. The study's qualitative interpretive approach identifies patterns based on theory but does not quantify the four mechanisms. Future research could develop quantitative measures—endorsement counts,

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social media engagement metrics, frame consistency scores—to test the study's propositions against larger samples. Such research would require primary data collection, including content analysis with intercoder reliability checks and audience surveys, and would complement the qualitative findings presented here.

Strengthen the regulatory framework for intra-party democracy. The study finds that delegate-based selectorates concentrate influence within elite networks and can suppress competition entirely. Policymakers and electoral commissions should consider whether the regulatory framework for intra-party democracy adequately protects the rights of party members and delegates. This could include requirements for transparent delegate registers, minimum campaign periods for all aspirants, and independent dispute resolution mechanisms. Such reforms would strengthen the quality of internal party democracy without undermining parties' legitimate authority to choose their own leaders. Support research and documentation of intra-party communication. The study's reliance on documentary sources reflects the limited availability of primary data on intra-party communication in Ghana. Funders and research institutions should support systematic documentation of intra-party communication, including archival collection of campaign materials, oral histories with party officials and delegates, and longitudinal tracking of delegate communication networks. This would build the empirical foundation for future research and strengthen the evidence base for party reform.

Declaration of Interest

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