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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on voter behaviour in Ghana's 2020 general election: a case study of the Greater Accra region

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I seek to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on voter behaviour in the 2020 general elections in Ghana using survey data compiled in Greater Accra between July and August 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic became a major campaign issue in last year's election prompting varied responses and support from both the government and the main opposition parties. Though a majority of the electorate were satisfied (83.5%) and grateful (82%) for the relief items they received, only 3 out of every 10 of the respondents think the intervention had an effect on the way they voted. Using the rally-effect theory, the paper finds that the political leadership and incumbent government were able to rally support for their campaign as a result of the social intervention policies implemented in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, yet were unable to sustain and translate that support into electoral victory in the Greater Accra Region, a major swing region with the highest number of Covid-19 cases and one of the only two regions that witnessed a lockdown during the height of the pandemic.

Introduction

The impact of economic performance on voter behaviour in national elections has been widely studied. Scholars (Downs 1957) agree that there is a positive correlation between good economic performance and the popularity of incumbent governments and their ability to retain political power in a competitive democratic election. This is rightly so because voters mostly attach significant importance to their economic welfare, referred to as 'bread and butter' issues, in determining who to vote for in national elections. In this sense, the rational average voter examines the prevailing economic conditions in the country and decides to either reward or punish the incumbent government in the manner they vote. In the dominant literature on political economic cycles, rational governments that seek to retain political power either engage in expansionary economic policies and social interventions programmes; sometimes spending excessively, in the run up to elections or will go to the extent of manipulating the economy for electoral purposes. The rationality exhibited by voters in the 'reward or punish' hypothesis and political parties' generosity in programming, even to the adverse effect of the economy or in manipulating the outcomes of economic conditions, has been one of several explanations for voter behaviour in democratic elections.

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Studying this rational behaviour is compounded by environmental factors, including pandemic situations. The recent Covid-19 pandemic that has ravaged global economies witnessed several competitive democratic elections held globally. While some countries decided to either postpone or cancel completely scheduled elections, others went ahead, including Ghana. Emergencies have served as rallying point for nations across generations. This unavoidable convergence has happened in terms of wars, disasters, pandemics, or terrorist attacks and has often resulted in popular support for leaders and the initiatives put in place to combat and prevent a future occurrence of the phenomenon/crisis of concern. Indeed, Nathalie Tocci (cited in Steven 2020, 1) notes that '[I]n a warlike situation, you want to trust who governs you, and that goes for bad leaders and competent ones' (Steven 2020, 1). Though theories of the rational choice tradition have done some justice to this phenomenon, exploring the inclination of individuals to act rationally to mitigate the impact of a crisis or prevent its future occurrence, the most constitutive theory that seeks to explain the behaviour of citizens in the event of an emergency, is the 'rally around the flag effect', hereinafter referred to as the 'rally effect'. The 'rally effect' is used to account for the popular, albeit ephemeral support enjoyed by governments and political leaders in times of crisis such as wars, economic depression, or pandemics (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2008). In essence, the theory suggests that citizens or members of a group tend to support their leaders or governments when faced with a crisis that threatens their common interests. This support is influenced by interventions (i.e. political, economic, social, and environmental) embarked by the leaders to deal with the crisis at hand and may translate into higher approval ratings for the incumbent government and in the event of an election will result in victory. Introduced by Mueller (1970, 1973), the 'rally effect' has become the mainstay in the literature on public opinion and foreign policy. More significantly, it has become popular for its explanatory power of the relationship between national emergency/crisis and higher approval ratings enjoyed by governments and political leaders.

Mueller's (1970) initial conceptualisation of the 'rally effect' was narrow in both utility and explanatory power. It was originally applied to events that are 'international' in character, 'involves the United States and particularly the presidency directly' and very 'specific, dramatic and sharply focused (Mueller 1970). The concept was later expanded in geographical scope, partly due to its appropriateness in accounting for the behaviour of citizens and electorates towards their leaders and governments during the crisis. Notwithstanding, its popularity and wide usage, the precise sources, significance and duration of the rally effect is still under so much contention. However, scholars point to several possible sources worth noting. Parker (1995), for instance, attributes the source of the rally effect to the surge in patriotism during periods of crisis. According to Parker, crisis enables governments or leaders to harvest patriotism by focusing or refocusing the attention of the country away from issues considered peripheral to the threat at hand. Others, such as Barody and Shapiro (1989), argue that criticism of government falls to its nadir during crisis, prompting a surge in popular support and hence the rally effect (Barody and Shapiro 1989). Barody (1991), on his part, underscores exclusive media public relations as a key source of the rally effect. According to him, governments and, in some instances, leaders, become the primary source of information in periods of crisis which could induce a rally effect to the benefit of the government or president. Others such as O'Neal, Lian and Joyner have found evidence to suggest that the surge in bipartisan

support during crisis situations in the United States of America accounts partly for the popular but ephemeral support that governments or leaders do enjoy (O'neal, Lian, and Joyner 1996).

In what could be a more comprehensive, though not dissimilar account of the sources, effect, and duration of the rally effect, is the emergence of two schools of thought that explain Mueller's theory (Hetherington and Nelson 2003). These are the Patriotism School of Thought and The Opinion Leadership School of thought, respectively. While the former champions the view that, in the event of crisis, the president or leader is perceived by the public as the embodiment of national unity, the latter posits that criticisms against the president or the governments from especially opposition parties diminishes in times of crisis since all efforts are geared towards finding solutions out of the crisis. For example, the media reports less on the faults of the incumbent government and opposition parties tend to support the government to overcome the crisis. Hetherington and Nelson (2003) cite US congress as frequently exhibiting this aspect of the rally effect. However, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has witnessed more opposition parties across the globe cooperating with their governments and help in mobilising support to overcome the pandemic.

Empirically, several studies are consistent with the rally effect thesis. Jordan and Page (1992) and Lian and Oneal (1993) have both established that presidents over the years and across several jurisdictions have enjoyed spikes in their public approval rating because of sudden high-profile foreign policy events. For instance, a Gallup poll conducted prior to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre showed an approval rating of 51% for President Bush's job performance. However, similar polls in the aftermath of the attacks, saw the President's performance rating jumped 350 basis points from 51% to 86%, representing the largest rally-round-the-flag-effect in history. Similarly, the ABC News poll on 13 September 2012 recorded 86% ratings for the President, while the CBS news poll recorded an 84% post-attack approval rating on a 13–14 September 2001.

Recent studies have also noted an increase in voter turnouts alongside increases in government approval ratings in the face of crisis. For instance, Loumeau and Tommaso (2020) analysed voting behaviour in France during the Covid-19 pandemic and found that voter turnout increased remarkably because of containment measures put in place by the government to limit the spread of the virus (Loumeau and Tommaso 2020). In the specific case of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is ample evidence to evince that governments and political leaders across the world have gained substantial amount of support, with some being retained in offices for the second term as a direct or indirect result of the rally effect (Bahegot 2020). For example, Silver (2020) observed that in spite of the unimpressive economic performance of Donald Trump, his approval rating saw a moderate increase during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, reflecting the rally around the flag effect in times of national crisis (Silver 2020). Others have also cited governments and leaders of countries such as France's Emmanuel Macron, Italy's Giuseppe Conte, Netherland's Mark Rutte and Britain's Boris Johnson, as having gained increased popular support weeks into the pandemic (Steven 2020).

The surge in approval ratings under the rally-round-the-flag effect is often short-lived (Silver 2020). In spite of its explanatory power, the theory is criticised for being applicable only to short-term approval ratings of governments or political leaders. Rallies do not last

and as opined by former NATO Secretary General, George Robertson, 'People do rally around, but it evaporates fast' (Steven 2020). Rallies may last for up to a year or more, but others may also just last for a week or a couple of weeks. This explains partly the reason rallies do not necessarily translate into election victories or increase in the number of votes an incumbent candidate polls in an election. This may be due to the time factor, especially when the time between the rally and the election is too wide. For example, despite the moderate rally gained by President Donald Trump during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, he lost the elections to an opposition candidate, Joe Biden. Similarly, a 2019 study by Kuijpers (2019) showed that voters temporarily support governing parties during periods of crisis, but soon start to punish them even as their interventions are still alive, suggesting the ephemeral nature of the rally effect. There is also the notion, especially from the diversionary theory of war perspective, that presidents could misuse the rally effect to their advantage (Tir 2010). According to this critique, presidents may create international crisis or magnify the effect of an existing threat to shore up their approval ratings through a rally effect. Presidents or governments may also do this to avoid dealing with domestic problems and divert the attention of the public and tame opposition parties from speaking up about a domestic challenge. This is particularly so when leaders or governing parties notice that their approval rating is on the decline (Tir 2010).

The Ghanaian case

Ghana became the first country in the world to receive its first batch of vaccines of 600,000 doses through the COVAX initiative on 24 February 2021. The intention of the government was to secure vaccines for 20 million Ghanaians to attain herd immunity by the end of 2021. Ghana's current Covid-19 cases stand at 171,099 with 1462 deaths (GHS 2023). A total of 24,091,591 Covid doses have been administered since the beginning of the pandemic and 9,183,560 people, representing about 30.3% of the total population, have been fully vaccinated (GHS 2023). Ghana recorded its first Covid-19 case on March 12, 2020. The first confirmed cases were two individuals within the Greater Accra region. Within the month of March, and as of 31st March, the total number of cases stood at 161. There were three major peaks within March on 26th when 41 cases were recorded, followed by 25th when 38 cases were recorded and on 24th when 26 cases were recorded (GHS 2020). Similarly, within the month of April, and as of 30th April, the total confirmed cases were 1638. The month of April, unlike March, witnessed higher spikes with three-digit daily rise. On 30th April alone, the country recorded 403 cases, more than the total figure for the month of March. On 26th April, the total recorded cases were 271, then 208 on 20th April, 158 on 12th April; 125 and 121 on 24th and 28th, respectively (GHS 2020).

The voters' registration exercise commenced on June 30 to August 6, 2020, from 7 am to 6 pm daily after the Electoral Commission (E.C) won a case at the Supreme Court filed by the opposition NDC and selected CSO aimed at stopping the process. Even though the rationale behind the suit was to contest the qualification criteria set out for the registration process in the new Constitutional Instrument (C.I. 127), the issue of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic was roped in to strengthen the case of the petitioners. The Electoral Commission had already made provisions for the pandemic in the registration

exercise by proposing to organise it in a Cluster System where each Cluster would have five registration centres in five phases with each phase lasting for three days. This would then be followed by three days mop-up of the entire process. All these took place within the strict observation of the COVID-19 protocols, including the provision of Veronica buckets for handwashing, the provision of hand sanitisers, the wearing of face mask and always maintaining social distancing in queues. The E.C. introduced new strategies with the issuance of chits and the digital queuing system, which comparatively controlled the mass of voters at the registration centres. Apart from the registration process, which saw new modalities for registration, the E.C also rolled out a digital voter exhibition and verification mechanism which required the use of a short code to identify one's name and the polling station which was designated for one to vote in, which replaced the in-person method of voter verification. The registration process was criticised for lacking the enforcement of some COVID 19 precautionary measures, including social distancing, checking of temperature, cleaning, or wiping registration materials periodically, and handwashing at the registration (CODEO 2020).

During the registration exercise, the number of cases of covid-19 infections continued to rise within the voters' registration period, infecting high-profile individuals and government officials and prompting the Chief Justice and the President to take precautionary self-isolations. However, the registration exercise and the campaign for the 2020 general elections continued uninterrupted. Prior to the pandemic, the idea of participation in elections evoked wider academic debate. While some favoured elevated level of participation, arguing that citizens' involvement in elections could lead to greater representation (Vowles 1995), others favoured low participation, noting that too much participation would overwhelm and cripple the democratic system (Vowles 1995). The COVID-19 pandemic increased the vulnerability of political participation across the world. The International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) argued that the pandemic created an opportunity for governments to either cancel or circumvent the integrity of elections, noting that about 40 countries had postponed their election dates in 2020 alone (IFES 2020). In cases where elections were allowed, there was the tendency of incumbent governments riding on the back of emergency powers passed because of the pandemic to target opposition parties, the media and civic groups that are thought to be overly critical of government business (Akuamoah 2020). The effect of these measures could lead to a collapse in democratic practice and the erosion of democratic principles. The implication of this on good governance is grave. First, the passage of emergency powers because of the pandemic could lead to power centralisation and abuse. Second, through fake news and repressive cyber security regulations, governments may censor the internet and tighten their grip on the flow of information. Finally, the pandemic may create an opportunity for corruption and the strengthening of social cleavages through the management of the pandemic and other related emergency funds and relief packages (IFES 2020).

While Scientists were still trying to understand the pandemic and governments were struggling with policy responses that could help halt the spread, there was a constitutional duty to allow the people of Ghana to vote to elect their President and 275 Members of Parliament. Ghana conducts its elections once every four years. It is noted as one of the most successful electoral democracies since the return to multi-party democracy in 1992 after almost 10 years of military rule (Alidu and Aggrey-Darkoh

2018; Alidu and Bukari 2020; Abdulai and Sackyeffo 2020). The 2020 election was the country's eighth election in the Fourth Republic. The COVID-19 pandemic therefore became a major campaign issue prompting varied responses and support packages from both the government and the main opposition party. There is quite a sizeable literature on the impact of the pandemic on the socio-economic lives of urban people (Asante and Mills 2020), on poverty and living standards (Bukari et al. 2021), on businesses in the transport sector (Bonful et al. 2020; Dzisi and Dei 2020), the preparedness of the African state in dealing with the pandemic (Amoah 2020), on political support for government (Bol and Giani 2020), on the impact on parliamentary oversight (Bar-Siman-Tov 2020) and on the rights of citizens (Gostin, Hodge, and Wiley 2020; Grogan 2020). However, little has been done to examine the direct impact of the pandemic on voter behaviour in Ghana. This paper seeks to fill that gap by evaluating the impact of the pandemic on voter behaviour in the 2020 general elections using survey data compiled in the Greater Accra between July and August 2020. The Greater Accra region is a significant case because it is not only the capital of the country but the second most populous after the Ashanti region and a microcosm of the country's diversity. Politically and electorally, it is a swing region and political parties that have won Greater Accra Region ended up being the eventual winners of the national elections. In terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, the region recorded the highest number of cases and deaths and was one of the two regions that witnessed a lockdown and the strict enforcement of the COVID-19 protocols.¹

Methodology

The target population for the survey was all residents of Greater Accra Region who were 18 years or above on the day of the interviews. A multistage probability sampling technique was employed to select 5722 respondents in the 34 constituencies in the Region. The sample size, using an estimated voter population of 4,239,187² for Greater Accra Region, together with a confidence interval (error margin) of two and a confidence level of 99%, is 4156. However, because of observed increases in the voter population in the registration exercises that preceded the main election, especially in Amasaman, Adenta, Ningo-Prampram and Bortianor-Ingleshie-Amanfrom, a margin error of one and a confidence level of 99% were used to enhance the precision of the results.

A proportionate sampling technique was then used to distribute the 4156 sample size among the 34 constituencies in the region. Cluster sampling technique was further employed to select respondents in each constituency. Each constituency was clustered into three groups of five electoral areas as follows: two most developed electoral areas, one medium-level electoral area, and two most deprived electoral areas. The total number of respondents in each constituency was proportionally distributed among the selected five communities. Upon entry into a constituency, the core demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, religious affiliation, occupation, age, and educational attainment guided the random selection of respondents to reflect the character of the constituency. The data was collected by selected graduate students from the Department of Political Science at the University of Ghana between the period of July and August 2020. They were made up of nine teams consisting of five researchers and monitored by three faculty members (including the author) throughout the data collection period.

A Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) technique was employed in the data collection. The CAPI is an interviewing technique in which the interviewer uses a computer to electronically record responses to questions provided by the respondents. Immediately after the field work, the data collected were cleaned, after which charts, tables and cross-tabulations were used to analyse the data.

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on businesses and the economy

The Ghana Statistical Services (GSS) study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that both businesses and households were affected in several ways, including demand, supply, and financial shocks, as well as continued uncertainty. The study notes that between May to June 2020, almost 36% of businesses had to close during the partial lockdown imposed in the country and 16% remained closed after the easing of the lockdown. Of this figure, businesses in the accommodation and food sector were gravely affected with 24% in the sector closed permanently. Also, 46% of businesses had to reduce the wages of their employees for almost 26% of the workforce; an estimated 770,124 workers (GSS 2020). Only 4%, corresponding to 1.4% of the workforce (an estimated 41,952 workers) were laid off, the study indicated. The good aspect of the study is that businesses were compelled to adapt to innovative and digital means of reaching out to their customers because of the pandemic. More than 38%, almost a third of the firms surveyed, began, or increased their use of digital tools, including mobile money payments, for their sales and about 9%, a tenth of the businesses surveyed, began, or increased their use of digital sales via the internet. Businesses in the country expressed uncertainty in future sales and employment, with about 24% worried of sales in the future and 15% concerned about employment in the future (GSS 2020).

The impact on the economy was expressly clear as it led to the revision 'in GDP growth for 2020, from 6.8% to 0.9%, and later to 1.9% to reflect significant slowdown in economic activities as a consequence of the effects of COVID-19 on lives and livelihoods' (State of the Nation Address 2021). It also affected government revenues with a sudden shortfall of GH¢13.6billion and an unexpected rise in expenditures of GH¢11.7billion (Budget Statement 2021). The government undertook several policy interventions [about 26 of them], which will be discussed later in this paper, to revitalise and transform the economy. Through support from development partners such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the African Development Bank, government also rolled out the Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan (EPRP I and II) and the Coronavirus Alleviation Programme (CAP).

The results of these interventions, without mentioning the political controversies that surrounded their implementation, seem to be effective. The second round of the GSS survey conducted in August and September 2020 indicates that 8% of businesses reported closed, a figure much lower than the 36% during the partial lockdown in March/April and the 16% reported in May/June the same year (GSS 2020). Again, in the second round of the survey, 28% of businesses reported reducing their wages, an improvement compared to the 46% figure in May/June. Also, 1% of businesses reported laying off their staff compared to the 4% recorded in May/June. This result corresponds with the number of businesses that reported receiving government support during the time, about 9%, compared to the number of businesses that received support at the

time of the first survey, that is, 3%. Following from the above, the average expectation in sales and employment of the businesses surveyed improved significantly in the last study compared to the first. In the 2021 budget, the Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, who read the budget on behalf of the finance minister-designate, notes, that the results of the measures put in place by government as 'being vital in preventing social dislocations, deeper economic scarring and damage to our economic prospect' (Budget Statement 2021).

Mitigative measures undertaken by government

Governments worldwide were forced to act in the face of these catastrophic losses to the economy. The responses, in themselves, had triggered further challenges and debates since they revolved around restrictions on certain fundamental rights of the citizens, including border closures, isolations, lockdowns and general restriction on movements, gatherings and associations (Ogendi 2020; Chesterman 2020; Gostin, Friedman, and Wetter 2020). The level of economic activities in the country was reduced by increased healthcare expenditure and the unpredictable effects of containment measures undertaken by the government (Zetzsche 2020). The initial cost of preparedness and response strategy towards the fight against Covid-19 in Ghana was 570 million Ghana Cedis (Economic Commission for Africa 2020; Deloitte Ghana 2020); enough to throw the economy off gear. In the throes of the rise in infection and recorded deaths, the government was compelled to roll out measures to contain the spread of the virus. The Government of Ghana, therefore, instituted several measures aimed at achieving five-pronged objectives; limiting and stopping the importation of the virus into the country; containing the spread of the cases that the country had already recorded; providing adequate care for the sick and limiting the impact of the virus on social and economic life. In the attempt to achieve these objectives, the following measures were undertaken by the government of Ghana under the five stated objectives:

Limiting and stopping the importation of the virus into the country

In line with the first objective, the Government, on the 21st of March 2020, authorised for the closure of the borders of the country by land, sea and water to human traffic, authorised a mandatory quarantine and testing for all arrivals into the country before the closure date; increased contact tracing and testing for people who have come into contact with infected persons; call back retired healthcare professionals to augment the health system in anticipation of a possible surge of cases, and promise support for local pharmaceutical companies to produce more hand sanitisers and face mask.³

Containing the spread of the virus

In order to achieve the second objective of limiting and stopping the importation of the virus into the country, the government, on 15th March 2020, suspended all public gatherings (except private burials for only 25 people); closed schools from the Basic to the University levels; prescribed social distancing for businesses and the use of alcohol-based sanitisers and face mask; authorised the Ministry of Local Government and Rural

Development to ensure that markets across the country remain in highly hygienic conditions.⁴ The government also passed the Imposition of Restrictions Act, 2020 (Act 1012) on the 21st of March to help reduce the movement of people in order to reduce the spread of the virus. The government also employed additional 24,285 health professionals between March and June to help fight the pandemic and expanded the capacities of laboratories to increase COVID-19 testing as well as establish isolation centres in all regions and districts in the country.⁵

The government further provided 3.6 million reusable face masks, 50,000 medical scrubs, 90,000 hospital gowns and head covers to health facilities as at June 2020.⁶ It also gave 50% of the basic salary as allowances for frontline health workers, waived Income Tax for all healthcare workers and waived Income Tax on the 50% additional allowances paid to frontline health workers.⁷ Public markets, schools and lorry terminals in almost all 16 regions were cleaned and sprayed and some markets in Accra and Kumasi were closed down for flouting the social distancing protocols.⁸

Providing adequate care for the sick

To achieve this objective, the government procured and distributed 17,000 coveralls, 350,000 masks, 17,000 goggles, 2400 non-contact thermometers, 350,000 gloves, 25,000 sanitisers, and 30,000 tests kits to healthcare personnel and those undertaking contact tracing and testing.⁹ Also, the government recruited 1000 community health workers and an additional 1000 volunteers to help in taking care of the sick. The government further procured 100 pick-up vehicles and 2500 tablets for the exercise.

In order to ensure adequate care is provided to the sick, government further provided an insurance package, with a sum of GHS350,000 (USD 65,789)¹⁰ for each health personnel and allied professionals at the forefront of the fight against the pandemic, with a daily allowance of GHS 150 (USD 28) being paid to those doing contract tracing.¹¹ Health workers were also exempted from paying tax on their emoluments for the months of April, May and June 2020, and all frontline health workers received an additional allowance of 50% for their basic salary per month for the months of March, April and June.¹² Finally, the Ministry of Transport made available for free, the 'Aayalolo' buses to convey health workers in Accra, Tema, Kumasi and Kasoa to and from work during the lockdown period.¹³

Limiting the impact of the virus on social and economic life

Government took various measures to achieve this fourth objective, including the establishment of a COVID-19 Fund, to be managed by an independent board of trustees, and chaired by former Chief Justice, Sophia Akuffo, to receive contributions and donations from the public to assist in the welfare of the needy and the vulnerable; the establishment of a GHS 1,000,000,000 (USD 187,969,924) Coronavirus Alleviation Programme and a GHS 3,000,000,000 (USD 563,909,774) facility, to support industry especially in the pharmaceutical, hospitality, service and manufacturing sectors.¹⁴ Government also provided additional reliefs, including the extension of the tax filing date from April to June for business and 2% reduction of interest rates by banks. It further granted banks a 6-month moratorium of principal repayments to entities in the airline and hospitality

industries, i.e. hotels, restaurants, car rentals, food vendors, taxis, and uber operators. The government further allowed mobile money users to send up to GHS 100 for free; and a 100% to 300% increase in the daily transaction limits for mobile money transactions.¹⁵

In addition, the government provided food for up to 400,000 individuals and homes in lockdown areas and absorbed water bills for all Ghanaians throughout the year, initially starting in the months of April, May, and June. Water tankers, both privately and publicly owned, were mobilised to supply water to vulnerable communities without running pipes. The government also fully absorbed electricity bills for the poorest of the poor, that is, for all lifeline consumers who consume 0–50 kilowatt hours a month for this period. The government further absorbed 50% of the electricity bill for consumers, residential and commercial, for the months of March, April, and May, using the March 2020 bill as a benchmark.

The government, in collaboration with the National Board for Small Scale Industries (NBSSI), the Business and Trade Associations and the selected Commercial and Rural Banks, rolled out a soft loan scheme of up to a total of GHS 600,000,000 (USD 112,781,955) with a one-year moratorium and a two-year repayment period for micro, small and medium businesses.¹⁶

Support provided by the opposition national democratic congress

The NDC and its flagbearer, John Mahama, did not just leave the fight of the COVID-19 pandemic to government alone, given the fact that it was an election year and a campaign issue. The party started by unveiling a 13 member COVID-19 team¹⁷ made up of professionals to guide the party's effort and response to the pandemic.¹⁸ The former President and flagbearer of the NDC also submitted a 13-point proposal to the NPP government to help it fight the pandemic.¹⁹ These included developing a National Infectious Disease Response Plan; building an Infectious Disease Centres for the three ecological areas in the country, establishing an additional medical research centre in Northern Ghana to supplement the Noguchi Medical Research Institute, an expansion of the capacity of the 37 Military Hospital; reduction in telecommunication tariffs, extending the deadline for tax returns submission for businesses, support and expand Covid-19 testing centres across the country, expanding the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) programme to cover more poor households under lockdown. The rest of the initiatives included the distribution of food supplements to the poor and vulnerable in the country, reduction in direct taxes for essential Covid-19 related goods such as sanitisers, disinfectants, among others. Finally, the opposition NDC urged the government to provide insurance cover for frontline health workers and the need to partner with supra-state institutions such as ECOWAS and the AU to manage the movement of people across the sub-region.²⁰

The opposition NDC and its flagbearer also embarked on PPE donations across the country, at the time, many health workers were complaining of inadequate or shortage of these essentials. He donated 40 sets of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to the health workers at the Greater Accra Regional Hospital, including 10 gum boots, 120 doctor scrubs, 50 patient gowns, 30 theatre gowns and 400 packs of water.²¹ Similar donations were made at the Korle Bu Teaching hospital.²² These donations continued at the Ho hospital, the South Tongu district hospital, Ketu South Municipal hospital²³ in

Sogakope and the Aflao hospital²⁴, all in the Volta region. The Sogakope and Aflao hospitals got 4000 nose masks, 4000 hand gloves, 60 boots, 60 pieces of goggles, 60 overalls, 60 sanitisers and 60 scrubs.²⁵ The Tamale Teaching Hospital in the Northern region also benefitted from the generosity of the NDC and its flagbearer²⁶; the Upper East Regional Hospital got its share as well.²⁷ The Eastern Regional Hospital at Koforidua and the Hawa Memorial Hospital at Akyem Osiem all got their share²⁸; the Effia-Nkwanta Hospital in the Western region²⁹ and the Cape Coast Hospital in the Central region³⁰ all benefited. Further donations were made by the party and its flagbearer to the Bono Regional health centre in Sunyani³¹ and across the length and breadth of the country.

The fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana was therefore not just about saving lives but it also became serious political and campaign issue between the governing NPP and the opposition NDC. The implementation of government intervention programmes, including the hot meals during the lockdown period, the disbursement of the COVID-19 Relief Fund, the NIBSS support for businesses in the country were all praised and criticised for political reasons. These interventions in an election season in Ghana raise several questions. Did these actions sway voters at all? What did Ghanaians think about all these and how did that affect the manner they voted? The next section provides the answers.

The effects of COVID-19 pandemic on voter behaviour

The Covid-19 pandemic affected the organisation of election campaigns in the 2020 elections. Political rallies are mostly organised in large gatherings amidst funfair, where party leaders interactively present their messages and make justifications for why they should be elected. However, social distancing rules and other protocols related to the prevention of the spread of the virus influenced the choice of campaign strategy. The discussion in this section pertains to the opinions of respondents on the impact of Covid-19 on their lives, livelihoods and voting choice. The study first sought to find out whether the respondents had experienced any adverse consequences because of the pandemic. As shown in [Figure 1](#), about nine out of every 10 individuals interviewed were negatively affected by the pandemic. The variation between male and female is not too obvious.

Respondents were asked to indicate the key component of their lives that were hardest hit by the pandemic and about eight out of every 10 of them mentioned livelihood (see [Figure 2](#)). This is not too surprising because businesses in the Greater Accra were affected by the pandemic especially when government announced a two-week lockdown of the city from between March and April.

Mindful of the adverse consequences of the pandemic on both lives and livelihood, the Government began the implementation of social intervention policies as discussed earlier in this paper with the aim at mitigating the impact of the pandemic on citizens. Respondents were asked about their opinion on the interventions started by the government and as much as 83.5% of the respondents praised the Government for that initiative. This response is illustrated in [Figure 3](#).

Respondents were asked to specifically indicate whether the interventions put in place by the government to ameliorate the effect of the virus will affect their decision to vote for the Government and only 3 out of every 10 of them think the intervention will have a positive effect on their decision to vote for the Government. There is, however, not much variation between the males and females ([Figure 4](#)).

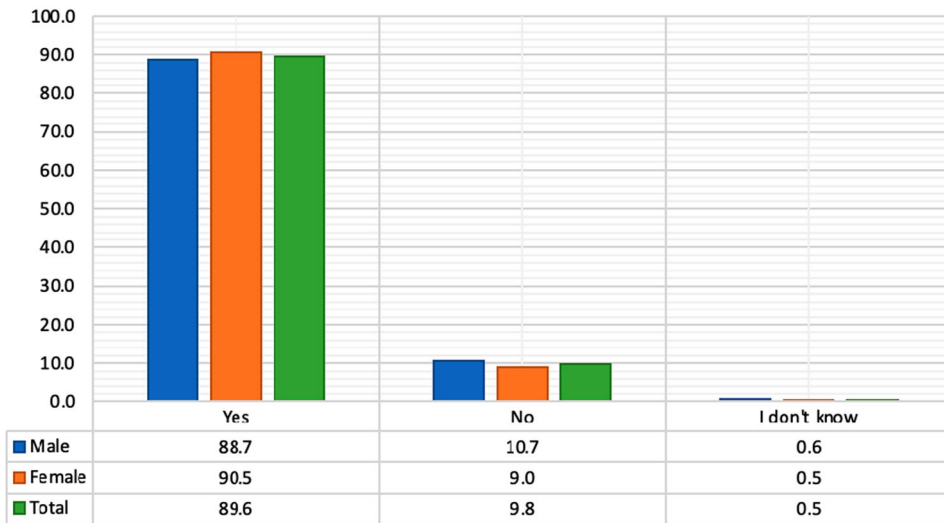


Figure 1. Have you been adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic? Source: Field work – July/ August, 2020.

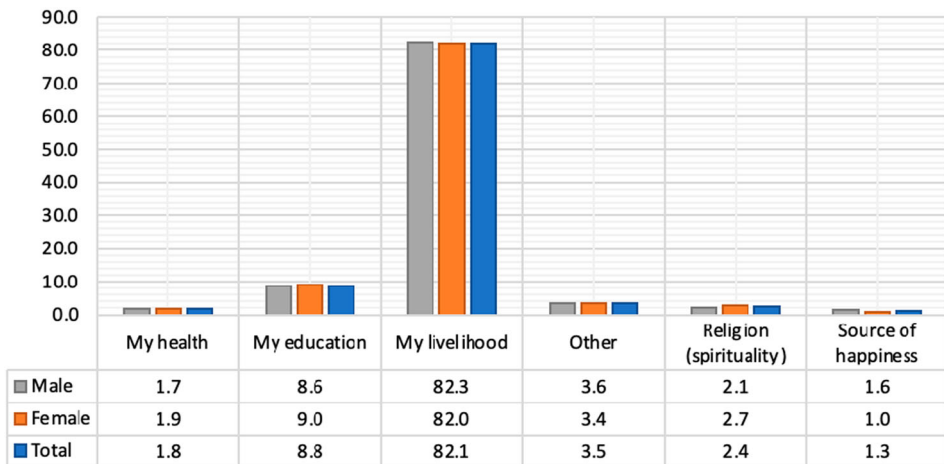


Figure 2. In what ways have you been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic? Source: Field work – July/ August, 2020.

Overwhelming majority of the respondents (82%) indicated that they are satisfied with how the Government has so far handled Covid-19 pandemic (Figure 5).

Similarly, respondents were asked to assess the interventions made by the opposition NDC led by its flagbearer, John Mahama, in relation to the pandemic. This is illustrated by Figure 6, with 6 out of every 10 respondents indicating their satisfaction with the opposition NDC’s initiatives.

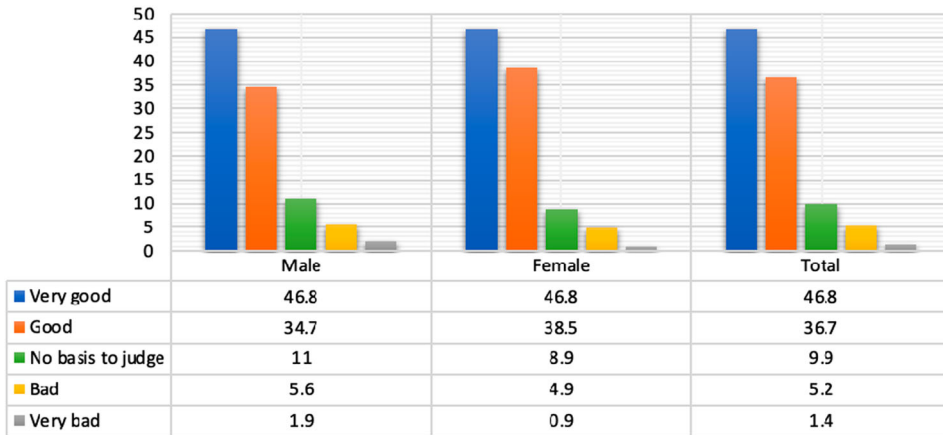


Figure 3. What is your opinion on the decision of the Government to absorb cost of utility (electricity and water) for both households and businesses? Source: Field work – July/August, 2020.

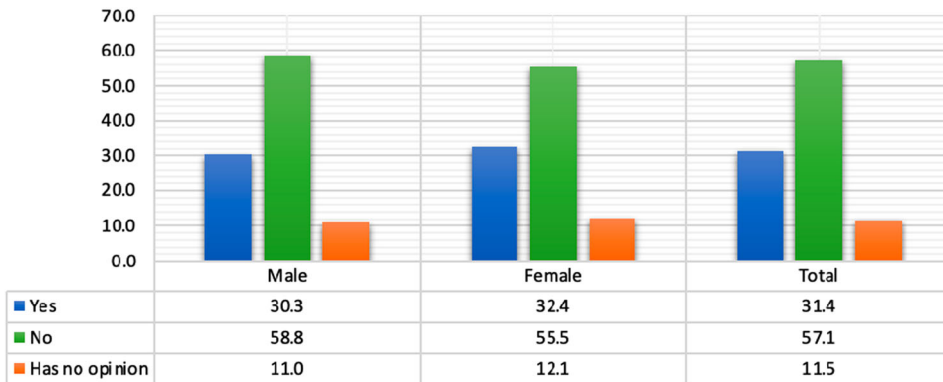


Figure 4. Would you vote for the Government particularly because of the social interventions? Source: Field work – July/August, 2020.

Discussion and implication of findings

The electorate in the Greater Accra region was incredibly grateful for the provision of COVID-19 relief items and the generous donations of hot meals, free water, and subsidised electricity from the government – 83.5% of the respondents praised the Government for that initiative. Also, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (82%) indicated that they are satisfied with how the Government has so far managed the Covid-19 pandemic in the run-up to the elections. Yet, these same respondents were hesitant in voting for the government despite their gratitude and satisfaction with the policy interventions introduced; only three out of every 10 of the respondents think the intervention will have a positive effect on their decision to vote for the Government. And there was not much variation between the males and females' responses.

This study was done between July and August, four clear months to the 2020 general elections. The election results in the Greater Accra region reflected the sentiments

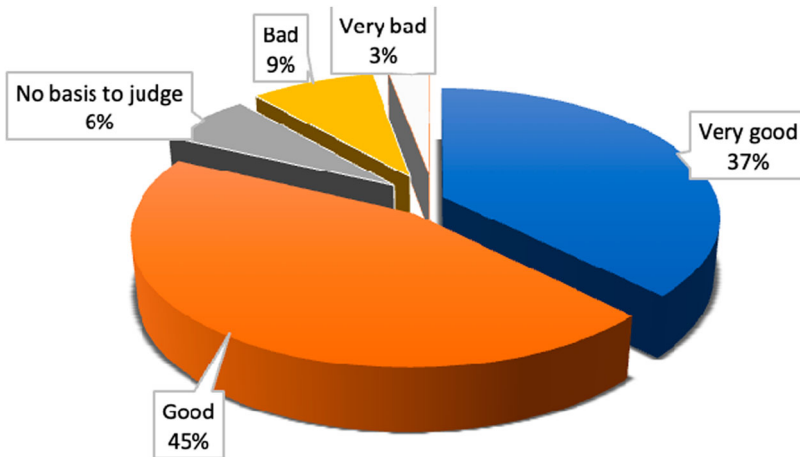


Figure 5. What is your overall impression about how Government has handled the crises? Source: Field work – July/August, 2020.

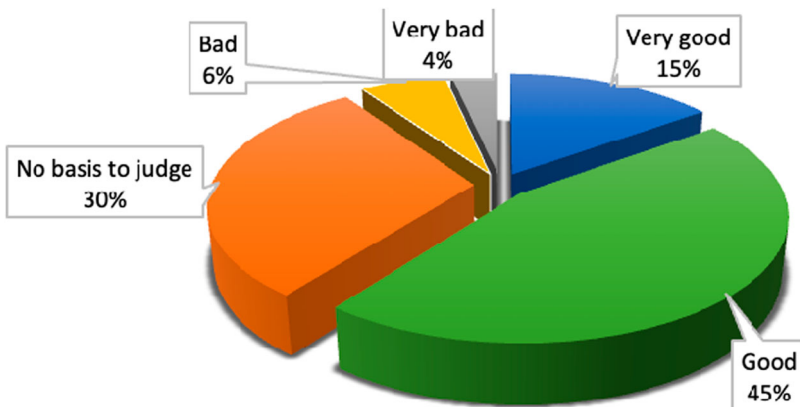


Figure 6. What is your impression about NDC and John Mahama on the Covid-19 response initiative. Source: Field work – July/August, 2020.

expressed in the study. For the first time in the electoral history of the country under the Fourth Republic, a political party won the presidency without winning the Greater Accra region. At the presidential level, the President and his party got 1,253,179 votes representing 48.10%, while the NDC and its candidate got 1,326,489 votes, representing 51.04% of the valid votes cast. Compared to the 2016 general elections where the NPP’s Nana Addo got 1,062,157 votes representing 52.4% and the NDC’s John Mahama got 946,048 votes representing 46.7%. The NDC and its candidate improved strongly in their performance in the region in the 2020 general elections relative to 2016 one.

The Greater Accra Region has 2 metropolitan areas, 4 districts and 23 municipal assemblies, a total of 29 local Assembly units. Of these 29 units, 27 of them were part of the districts that the President imposed a lockdown at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.³² The governing NPP held 21 out of the 34 seats in the region and the opposition NDC had

13 seats. After the 2020 elections the NPP lost 8 out of these 21 seats³³ and captured a seat (Amasaman) and retained 13 seats.³⁴ Of the eight constituencies that the NPP lost, seven of them were under the lockdown imposed by government at the peak of the first wave of the pandemic, except Krowor. All 13 seats that the NPP retained were under the lockdown and the only seat that the party captured was also under the lockdown imposed by government. It, therefore, confirms that it may not necessarily be the lockdown specifically, or the COVID-19 pandemic, which might have caused the defeat of the party in these constituencies or at the presidential election. This conclusion is supported by the data presented earlier. An overwhelming majority of respondents approved of the government's response and the contribution of the opposition party to the pandemic. Yet, they maintained that it will not affect their voter behaviour and pattern. If the pandemic did not affect the manner electorate in the Greater Region voted, what then did and what does that say about the kind of voters they are? In the same study conducted last year, respondents were asked to state the reasons why they will vote for a party or its candidate. Their reasons are captured in [Figure 7](#).

Four issues stood up as important to the electorate in the Greater Accra region, campaign message (31.9%), party affiliation (27.3%), competence and experience (19.3%) and trustworthiness (11.3%). These four issues are grouped into two widely known voter behaviour theories in political science, the party identification theory, and the rational choice theory. In the party identification theory, the electorate considers their long-term association to a specific party and cast their votes (Heywood 2017; Alidu and Aggrey-Darkoh 2018; Alidu 2016). Voting behaviour is less informed by the qualification, capacity, competence, or experience of the candidates contesting; voting is construed as a 'partisan' affair. This partisan sense of attachment shapes the electorate attitude towards their party leadership, policies, and the interpretation of everything related to elections (Heywood 2017). The rational choice model, on the other hand, assumes that electorates elect a specific candidate or political party in anticipation of the benefit that will accrue from their decision (Alidu and Aggrey-Darkoh 2018). When using this voter behaviour,

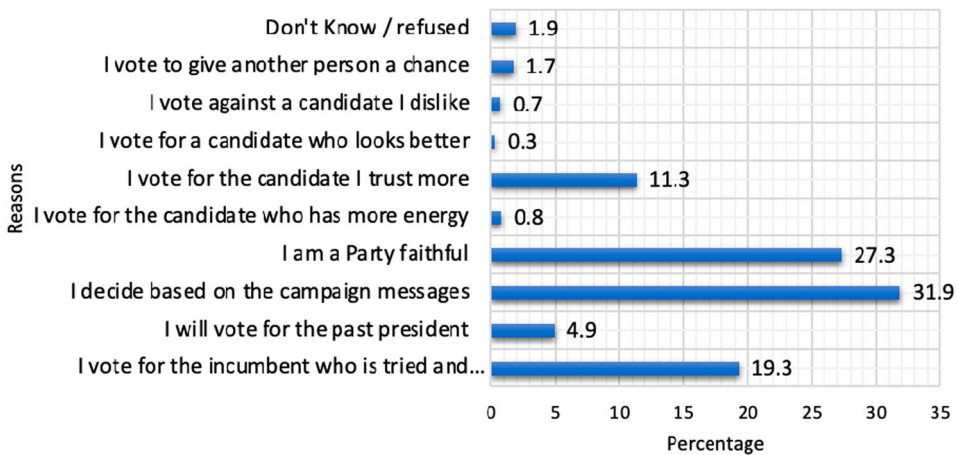


Figure 7. Reasons for choosing a presidential candidate in an election. Source: Field work – July/August, 2020.

electorate considers all other variables (qualification, competence, trustworthiness, experience, ethnicity, religion, gender, geography, etc.) as only relevant when it can be used to achieve a specific benefit (i.e. dispense patronage to them).

As Figures 3 and 4 have shown, the rally effect kicked in at the point of intervention when the government announced several relief and stimulus packages as well as the implementation of restrictive measures aimed at addressing the pandemic. In terms of voting, the rally effect could not influence the decision of voters to accept voting for the governing party. This disposition is reflected in Figure 4 where only 3 out of every 10 Ghanaians agreed to vote for or consider voting for the governing party. This is in sharp contrast to the proportion of electorates who endorsed the government's Covid-19 interventions, particularly the economic interventions such as the absorption of the cost of utilities and stimulus packages for both households and businesses. Consistent with Mueller's postulations and a host of other empirical finding, the government of Ghana can be said to have enjoyed approval rating for its Covid-19 intervention. However, the rally did not translate into an increase in votes for the president and his party in proportional or percentage terms during the presidential elections (Steven 2020). As shown by the data, the governing party saw decline in votes in the 2020 elections despite the Covid-19 interventions that prompted a rally indicating about 90% approval rate. For example, in the Greater Accra Region the governing party polled 48.1% votes, with a 4.3%-points slump from the 2016 figure of 52.4%. Conversely, as shown by the same data, the main opposition candidate garnered 51.04% of the votes, showing approximately 4% points jump from the 2016 share of 46.7%.

Several other factors could account for the failure of the rally effect in the case of Ghana. Firstly, time factor or duration. In explicating the core features of the rally effect, Mueller argues that the rally effect is 'specific, dramatic, and sharply focused' (Mueller 1970). This means the rally, in terms of the support for the presidential initiative, would not automatically influence the choice of the voter. The rally, in that case, was specific to the interventions. Additionally, and as also supported by Kuijpers (2019), rallies are usually dramatic and sharply focus lasting on for a brief time and having extremely limited effect.

Again, apart from the rise in patriotism, rallies, as opined by the Opinion Leadership school of thought, are sustained by the lack of criticism of the government by opposition parties and other political and social commentator (Hetherington and Nelson 2003). This was not the case in Ghana. The government came and indeed remained under constant criticism from various angles and especially from the opposition party right from the outbreak of the pandemic to the period of the elections. Thus, a key variable – lack of criticism of the rally - was missing in the case of Ghana, contributing to its short duration. Relatedly, Baum (2002) found that the principal sources of the rallies are members of the opposition and independents, who shift their support during crisis. To draw from Baum's conclusion, it means the governing party missed the principal sources since the government was always under criticism from these sources.

As emphasised by the Opinion Leadership school of thought, information, and the source of same, are quintessential for the sustenance of the rally effect (Hetherington and Nelson 2003). The government tried to control information on the pandemic by instituting a national broadcast within regular intervals to update Ghanaians on the pandemic and to show measures taken by the government so far to address it. There were close to

30 such broadcasts at the height of the pandemic. However, the prevalence of social media and the availability of multiple channels of information made it impossible for the government of Ghana to have exclusive control over the sources of information on the crisis. For this reason, the government did not enjoy the increasing attention from the public. It also made it possible for people to quickly verify the president's messages, diminishing any potential windfall the regular updates as instituted by the president might have. Though a surge in patriotism led to support from various groups, including the main opposition, this support did not last long enough to warrant a positive change in voter behaviour.

Conclusion

This study presents a new test case on the efficacy of both the dominant party identification model and the rational choice model of voter behaviour in Ghanaian elections. The paper shows that governments mostly win sympathy from electorate in an election season during a period of crisis and that could translate into electoral votes. The outcome of the 2020 election in Ghana in the Greater Accra region showed, to the contrary, that the long-held tradition of crisis-induced sympathy votes do not work in all cases. Though a total of 89% of respondents indicated that they were adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and scored the government very high - 82% - in its response to the pandemic, the party of the government lost in the Greater Region that was worst hit by the pandemic. The findings of this study also challenged the traditional rational choice – particularly the egotropic rationality, which assumes that voters are self-centred and demand instantaneous personal benefits in order to cast their ballot - voter behaviour in elections in Ghana. The study found that the government implemented several pandemic-induced social intervention measures, including absorbing the cost of utilities (water and electricity) for both businesses and households, to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. People in the Greater Accra region were provided with daily hot meals and other benefits, yet the governing party lost the elections to the opposition party. This paper shows that four important issues stood up as important to the electorate in the Greater Accra: campaign message (31.9%), party affiliation or party royalty (27.3%), competence and experience (19.3%) and trustworthiness (11.3%). These issues fit well into two well-known voter behaviour theories in political science – the party identification model and the rational choice model. Though this Ghanaian case disapproves of the egotropic rational voter behaviour, it also supports the sociotropic rational voter behaviour, which suggests that voters look beyond the instantaneous personal benefits that they may get and focus on the competence, experience and trustworthiness of candidates that seek to lead them. It also suggests a shift from party royalty to campaign messages and party programmes for the citizenry and this has the potential to further deepen democracy, especially electoral democracy in Ghana.

Notes

1. See 'Coronavirus: Greater Accra lead Covid-19 infections for Ghana' <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/world-52510586>

2. Source: Electoral Commission of Ghana. This was the voter population used for the 2019 District Assembly Elections.
3. President's address to the nation on Covid-19; Update number 1 (15/03/2020) accessed at <https://presidency.gov.gh/index.php/briefing-room/speeches?start=30> on 23/03/2021.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. This is based on the 2020 exchange rate of 5.32 Ghana Cedis to the Dollar.
11. Ibid, President's Updates on Coronavirus.
12. Ibid, President's Update on Covid.
13. Ibid, President's Update on the Coronavirus Pandemic.
14. Ibid, President's Update on the Coronavirus Pandemic.
15. Ibid, President's Update on the Coronavirus Pandemic.
16. Ibid, President's Update on the Coronavirus Pandemic
17. The team members included Mr Alex Segbefia, Professor Margaret Kweku, Dr Grace Ayensu-Danquah, Dr Vida Yarkong, Dr Jehu Appiah, Mr Prosper Bani, Mr Cassiel Ato Forson, Mr Kwabena Mintah Akando, Dr Ezanetor Rawlings, Mrs Mawuena Trebarh, Dr Jonas Asamoah, Dr Prosper Akanbong and Nana Kofi Quakyi.
18. <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/ndc-outdoors-covid-19-response-team.html>.
19. <https://www.pulse.com.gh/bi/politics/here-are-13-recommendations-by-ex-president-john-mahama-on-ways-to-boost-covid-19/34j59vl>.
20. <https://www.pulse.com.gh/bi/politics/here-are-13-recommendations-by-ex-president-john-mahama-on-ways-to-boost-covid-19/34j59vl>.
21. <https://www.johnmahama.org/news/john-mahama-donates-ppe-to-ridge-hospital-health-workers>.
22. <https://kbth.gov.gh/ndc-donates-ppes-to-korle-bu/>.
23. <https://www.modernghana.com/news/996870/covid-19-mahama-donate-ppes-to-keta-hospital.html>.
24. <https://www.ghanaiantimes.com.gh/ex-president-mahama-donates-ppe-to-sogakofe-ketu-hospitals/>.
25. <https://www.myjoyonline.com/mahama-donates-ppe-to-sogakope-aflao-hospitals/>.
26. <https://citinewsroom.com/2020/04/mahama-donates-ppe-to-tamale-teaching-hospital/>.
27. <https://www.modernghana.com/news/995460/covid-19-mahama-donates-ppes-to-upper-east-region.html>.
28. <https://mybrytfmonline.com/john-mahama-donates-ppes-to-two-hospitals-in-e-r-over-coronavirus/>.
29. <https://www.kyfilla.com/04/ex-president-john-mahama-donates-ppes-to-effia-nkwanta-hospital/>.
30. <https://kasapafmonline.com/2020/04/covid-19-mahama-donates-ppes-to-cape-coast-teaching-hospital/>.
31. <https://liveghanatv.com/2020/04/10/mahama-donates-ppe-other-objects-to-bono-regional-healthcare-facility/>.
32. i.e. Accra Metropolis, Tema Metropolis, Tema West Municipality, Ledzokuku Municipality, Krowor Municipality, Adentan Municipality, Ashiaman Municipality, La-Nkwantanang-Madina Municipality, La-Dade-Kotopon Municipality, Okaikwei North Municipality, Ablekuma North Municipality, Ablekuma West Municipality, Ablekuma Central Municipality, Ayawaso East Municipality, Ayawaso North Municipality, Ayawaso West Municipality, Ayawaso Central Municipality, Ga West Municipality, Ga North Municipality, Ga Central Municipality, Ga South Municipality, Ga East Municipality, Korle-Klottey Municipality, Weija/Gbawe Municipality and Kpone Katamanso Municipality.

33. The parliamentary seats lost were Okaikwei North, Ablekuma Central, Ledzekuku, La Dade Kotopon, Krowor, Tema East, Adentan, La Nkwantanang-Madina.
34. The parliamentary seats retained were Bortianor Ngleshi Amanfrom, Weija Gbawe, Anyaa Sowotuum, Trobu, Dome-Kwabanya, Ayawaso Central, Ayawaso West Wuogon, Okaikwei Central, Ablekuma West, Tema West, Tema Central, Ablekuma North and Okaikwei South.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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