

**SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH, GHANA INSTITUTE OF  
JOURNALISM**

**A STUDY OF THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS IN THE 2020  
POLITICAL ELECTION – A GHANAIAN CASE STUDY**

**BY**

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**DESERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ART IN PUBLIC RELATIONS**

**DECEMBER/2021**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Firstly, I wish to acknowledge the Almighty God for His grace and favor on my life and for bringing helpers my way to see me through this research work successfully.

I sincerely thank my supervisor, Dr. Mrs. Mavis Essandoh for her patience, guidance and support who in spite of her tight schedule always made time to guide, contribute and provide constructive criticisms which made this study one of a kind.

From the beginning to the end of this journey, there are those whose support and encouragement must be acknowledged. I therefore wish to extend a special thank you to all my siblings, to a father figure in my life; Hon. Emmanuel Kwasi Bedzrah, to Evelyn Gaglozu and to all my friends and colleagues whose support lessened the difficulty on the road.

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to The Almighty God for successfully guiding me through another milestone. I will also like to dedicate this research work to my parents; Mr. Emmanuel Kofi Gaewu and Mrs. Rejoice Gaewu and to Hon. Emmanuel Kwasi Bedzrah. They all did everything they could for me to get to where I am today. The words of encouragement and support from my parent were a source of inspiration.

### **STUDENT'S DECLARATION**

I confirm that this submitted dissertation is wholly my own work under the supervision of Dr. Mrs. Mavis Essandoh, and that no part of this dissertation has been accepted or is currently being submitted for any degree, diploma or certificate or other qualification in the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) or elsewhere. All materials used have been duly acknowledged when necessary to the best of my knowledge.

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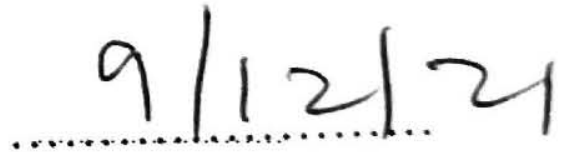
### SUPERVISOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation was supervised by me in accordance with the guidelines of dissertation supervision laid down by the School of Graduate Studies and Research, Ghana Institute of journalism (GIJ).

**Dr. Mrs. Mavis Essandoh**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Mavis Essandoh', written over a dotted line.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Despite the growing acknowledgement of Public Relations (PR) practice within the corporate environment, it has not been integrated and embraced into the political space of Ghana. Various perceptions about the practice has created a barrier to the appreciation of the relevant role PR practitioner's play for various political parties during an election. In 2020 however, amidst the emergence of the corona virus, a general election was held and many PR practitioners were engaged by different political parties to handle the strategic communication aspect of their campaigns.

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of Public Relations practitioners in the context of the 2020 election of Ghana. This study explored the role of the PR practitioners of a political party in the 2020 election, the strategies employed as PR practitioners at promoting and protecting the image of the presidential candidate and political party during the 2020 election, as well as the practitioners engagement with the electorate in the 2020 election. The two major political parties in Ghana that participated in the 2020 election were at the center of the study, that is, New Patriotic Party and National Democratic Congress. Thus, the study concentrated on the PR practitioners of these two political parties.

Qualitative methodology was used for the study and data were collected through the semi-structured interviews of 10 PR practitioners from both National Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC). The data were coded and analyzed using the thematic approach. Findings from the study revealed that roles of the public relations practitioner were communicating of political party's position on policies, monitoring of political discussion in the media, building of relationship with the voters, persuasion of voters and acting as a guardian of information and communication on issues and candidates. The use of propaganda and persuasive communication

were identified from the findings to be some of the strategies employed by the public relations practitioners to protect the image of the political party and candidates. Findings from the study also indicated that the engagement of the public relations practitioners with the electorates focused on vote winning messages.

Recommendations include increasing participants by incorporating PR practitioners from other political parties. The major conclusion of the study is that there is a gradual appreciation of the role of Public Relations practice within political parties in Ghana. The implication of this is that interventions and programs are needed to harness the full benefits of public relations practitioners' participation in the democratic electioneering process of Ghana and other developing nations.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

PR	Public Relations
NDC	National Democratic Congress
NPP	New Patriotic Party
EC	Electoral Commission
MP	Member of Parliament
MPs	Members of Parliament
FPTP	First Past The Post
P1 to P10	Participant one (1) to ten (10)
IPRA	International Public Relations Association

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Background and context of the study**

In a democratic process of government across the world where the people's will is the dominant political factor, elections occupy a position of special importance because it is primarily through them that the electorate can achieve the most potent expression (Garnett & James, 2019). The results of an election determine who represents the people in parliament, and other important decision-making bodies at the national, regional, district and local levels (Boateng, 1996:51). It is, also through an election that the President, the Vice President and many other high-ranking members and officials of the Executive and other branches are appointed in many democratic states (Pogunke & Webb, 2005).

An important factor in the election across the world is the mass media, which is an avenue for conveying policies and connecting with the electorate. However, it has been observed that economic and political pressure on the media makes them unreliable to fulfil the role of disseminator of information (Hiebert, 2005). Hiebert then suggested the only possible solution is Public Relations not in terms of spin or propaganda but in the context of developing "real Public Relations" in the public sphere. This is, important as cited by Fairbanks et al., (2007) that all organizations, including political parties, need to be proactive in reaching out to the public. In an era of open sharing of information, transparency requires organizations such as political parties participating in an election to understand and be responsive to the public.

Political Public Relations can be described as the management process by which an organization or individual acts for political purpose, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals (Stromback & Kiouisis, 2011).

Hence political public relations practitioners are PR practitioners who work in a political environment.

The important role of PR practitioners for political parties during elections cannot be gloss over. Grant (2000) asserted that the political landscape in many democratic societies' mainstream political parties is changing due to the declining number of members. In vast contrast, there is an upsurge of an increasing number of people joining pressure groups, single interest and voluntary groups. Also, during elections, political parties are more likely to find themselves assigned responsibilities of crisis that might originate within or outside their control. Moreover, there might be a high level of conflict about ideas and power that might always come from opposing camps and other stakeholders. Similarly, the dependence of the political parties on the mass media to communicate in politics may create challenges if not expert-led by Public Relations Practitioners (Groeling, 2010; Lengauer et al., 2012). All these challenges cited have to be addressed with an appropriate response and statement by the political party and thus the solution is the engagement of PR practitioners.

Ghana, as a democratic country, has organized several elections under the fourth republic to elect its leaders. As it pertains in other parts of the world, many of its political parties depend on the mass media for campaign activities. As observed by Hiebert (2005), the media in Ghana are not reliable due to economic and political pressure from the elites and ruling class. This situation has led to political parties engaging PR practitioners to communicate policies or messages to the public to seek their mandate to govern them.

However, in the Ghanaian political setting, a distinction between politicians and political public relations practitioner is difficult to identify their unique role. It is common practice for politicians or political leaders holding different capacity within the structure of the political party to release a statement without requisite skills in public relations.

This development creates a problem for the political parties during the election, which affects the confidence and trust of the electorate (Boateng, 1996, P.22).

Research on Public Relations practitioners in elections has begun to help political parties understand how different components of the profession have an impact on the achievement of a specific task. Lamme & Russell (2010) observed that several public relations theory and research focus on corporate settings and much of the literature that deals with public relations within the political space are limited.

Interestingly, most of the research on politics, political communication, political marketing and election campaigning do not give the needed attention to political public relations theory and research. Hence, there seems to be a gap between not only practice and theory in public relations, political science, political communication and political marketing (Cutlip, 1995).

Currently, there is an increasing acknowledgement of the role of Public Relations practitioners among political parties in elections in the world. The contribution of public relations practitioners shows an important sociological and psychological implication on the electorate and image of the political party in terms of its message and policies (Maloney, 2006). It has been reported that political parties lose elections because of inappropriate dissemination of message or response to the political opponent on social and economic issues (Negre, 1996).

Given the significant contribution public relations practitioners play in an election, most researchers have focused on identifying their roles in an election. A number of studies have also uncovered the role of public relations practitioners in an election (Stromback & Kioussis, 2011). For example, a study conducted in the United Kingdom by (McNair, 2003) indicated a positive relationship between public relations management in politics and electoral victory.

However, most of these extensive researches on the role of public relations in an election were conducted in Europe and United States.

Therefore, limited empirical evidence exists within the developing countries that have embraced the democratic process of election. To address this limitation, the current research was conducted in the context of the Ghanaian election.

Although previous research studies have highlighted the roles of public relations practitioners in the election, most of the findings are within developed and established democracy. The findings from those studies are not applicable within a fledging and unstable democratic environment where the election is associated with the allegation that influence electoral outcomes and thus the role of public relations practitioners cannot be overemphasized. In light of this, the study explores the role of public relations practitioners within the political party, promoting and protecting the reputation of the presidential candidate and political party and engagement with the electorate in the 2020 election of Ghana.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

The use of public relations has always existed in politics throughout history and it is even more predominant in contemporary politics. When Gordon Brown became the Prime Minister of the United Kingdoms in 2007, he made it clear that a different type of politics would be adopted and decisions would be taken only through open and honest dialogue (Guardian, 2007). Indeed the practice of Public Relations has seen an increase over the years with politicians and political parties now hiring PR practitioners to run their campaigns and manage their party image. Cockerall *et al.* (1984) suggest that, what government “chooses to tell us through its PR machine is one thing; the information in use by participants in the country’s real government is another” (p.9).

Over the years, politicians and political parties try to, and successfully control media representations by the use of Public Relations practitioners (Pearson, 1992; McNair, 2003; L’Etang, 2004).

Fairbanks *et al.* (2007) noted the decline in public trust in government and suggest that this decline “is an outgrowth of poor communication between government and its publics” (p. 23). Publics usually feel that they are not well informed about government actions. A healthy democracy requires an informed public and demands that governments provide information to the public about policies, decisions and actions.

Politicians and political parties knowing very well that, they have a responsibility as elected representatives of the people to help develop a functioning public sphere (Habermas, 1989), they are lately employing the services of PR practitioners to help approach information dissemination in a more open and transparent manner.

A study conducted by Freeman & Cicero (2012) shows that PR has participated in the electoral process. Practically survey has shown the role of PR practice to be very integral in the setup of organizations, including political parties (Grant, 2000), of which Ghanaian political parties cannot be excluded.

Prior research has tentatively established that the role of PR practitioners in the electoral process may help communication management (Stromback & Kiouisis, 2011). However, the practical role of PR practitioners in an election has been limited, as little is known about developing democracy. Nonetheless, the present study explores the role of PR practitioners in an African election, specifically in Ghana.

From a review of the study, there seems to be a paucity of research conducted on political public relations practice (Stromback & Kiouisis, 2011). Therefore, this study is in response to a call by Stromback & Kiouisis (2011) that more research is needed to understand the application or utilization of PR practice in an election.

In addition, most of the research conducted within PR practice seems to concentrate on corporate settings rather than electoral settings with varying interest groups, political ideologies and contextually related issues. Therefore, the current study is in response to a call for further study into public relations with focus on the general election of Ghana in 2020. The research problem addressed in this study is that, there is limited study on the role of PR practitioners and how the practice contributes positively towards peaceful and transparent elections in Ghana.

### **1.3 Research Aim & Objective of the study**

#### **1.3.1 Research Aim**

The overarching aim of this study is to examine the role of PR in Ghana's 2020 election. It explores the roles of the PR practitioners of the political parties in the 2020 election, specifically strategies employed by the PR practitioners of the political parties at promoting and protecting the image of the presidential candidate and political parties, as well as the practitioners of the political parties' engagement with the electorate in the 2020 election. To achieve this, the study examines responses from the PR officers of the political parties that participated in the 2020 election.

The research addresses the knowledge gap in this area of study and looks at how the political parties of Ghana's 2020 election worked with their PR officers in the electioneering campaign. The outcome of the findings may serve as guidance for intervention programs at deepening the understanding of political parties on the role and participation of the PR officers in political electioneering and the structure of the political parties in Ghana.

Another aim of this study is to identify the specific roles of PR practitioners within the context of the 2020 election. An in-depth study into it is expected to prove invaluable in finding how far and the level of appreciation of PR practitioners amongst the political parties in an election.

Such a study can greatly enhance an understanding of the structure of the political parties at embracing PR.

Identification and understanding of these issues could provide insight into an exact intervention that can be put in place to enhance the capabilities of public relations professionals working with political parties. The aim is to discuss how to employ PR to help overcome communication challenges in the participation of political parties in elections, as well as encourage political parties to usher and institutionalize PR practice as an integral part of the communication process. In addition, the findings of the study aims at promoting the streamlining and mainstreaming of ideas, innovations and strategies for improving the use of PR in our political systems. Consequently, it attempts to distil PR experiences and knowledge into a viable strategy for building participation and integration of PR in the political space of Ghana.

In light of the above, this study tries to avoid the existing tendency in public relations research, where the focus has been the business sector. This helps to consider the main role of PR in the election of Ghana. This study should therefore be seen in the light of the increasing importance and participation of PR practitioners in Ghana's election and the need to streamline the role of PR in the politics of Ghana.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that the definition of the term PR as used in this study is limited to political activities. In light of this, the definition of PR in the political context of this study is associated with the management process by which an organization or individual acts for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build and maintain beneficial relationships and reputation with its stakeholders to help support its mission (Stromback & Kiouisis, 2011). The definition as put forward by Stromback & Kiouisis are noted for activities and strategies at getting the needed support at attaining a set of objectives of winning an election (Stokes, 1992).

### **1.3.2 Objectives of the study**

The purpose of the study is to find out the role of PR practitioners in the election of Ghana amongst the two leading political parties, specifically the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and New Patriotic Party (NPP). The role of PR practitioners is increasingly becoming an integral part of Ghana's election. However, scientific research on the role of PR have so far predominately focused on corporate setting and also in the developed regions of the world. Since PR practitioners play information delivery role for political parties in an election, it has become necessary for a study to be conducted into the role of PR practice of a political party, protection and promotion of the image of the presidential candidate and political party and their engagement with the electorate. This is especially since knowledge derived from the study is essential in the integration and participation of PR practice into the political system.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Explore the role of PR practitioners of a political party in the 2020 election of Ghana.
2. Explore the strategies of PR practitioners at promoting and protecting the image of the presidential candidate and political party in the 2020 election of Ghana.
3. Explore the role of PR practitioners in the engagement of the political party with the electorate in the 2020 election of Ghana.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

The following were the research questions for the study:

1. What is the role of the PR practitioners of a political party in the 2020 election of Ghana?
2. What are the strategies employed as PR practitioners at promoting and protecting the image of the presidential candidate and political party during the 2020 election of Ghana?

3. What is the role of the PR practitioners in the engagement with the electorate in the 2020 election of Ghana?

### **1.5 Justification for the Study**

Ghana is one of the leading democratic countries in the West African region (Omotola et al., 2013: 2). This development has triggered the call for strong democratic institutions to safeguard and harness the benefits associated with democracy. An entity that plays a key role in the promotion of democracy has been the political parties. The political parties seek the mandate of the populace to govern the country through an election. In doing so the political parties use various avenues to communicate policies and information to the electorate (Boateng, 1996:181).

Within the political parties, although there seems to be an appreciation of the importance of communication, this does not necessarily transcend into public relations practice. In most cases, the political parties consider the ability of an individual to communicate without credence to competence.

Counter response in the election to opponents is predominately handled by communicators at various level of the political structure. However, the complexity surrounding political communication regarding policies and response to allegation demands an expert approach. The uncertainties surrounding the political environment during election periods point to the fact that the use of PR is crucial. To address some of the problems, there has been a call to engage professionals to handle some of the functions of the party.

Some of the political parties had engage PR practitioners to deal with communication and public issues. It is envisaged that, the study therefore explored the role of PR practitioners in the 2020 election of Ghana. The findings of the study will help develop intervention programs at enhancing democracy, as well as appreciate the role of PR in the electoral process of Ghana.

## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

A political party's election campaign messages are expected to be aligned to the political party's objectives, which, in an election period, is to attract voters. In other words, political party's messages in an election need to enhance the effectiveness of the political party's views on issues in the public sphere. However, if the campaign messages appears not well-coordinated, disorganized and random, it confuses the electorates about the kind of message the political party might be communicating to them. Consequently, an unplanned and disorganized election campaign communication does not help the political party to achieve its main election campaign objectives; to improve its reputation and build relationships with the voters who require access to critical information to formulate expectations and inform their voting pattern decision-making.

In light of this, the research investigated the role of PR in the 2020 election of Ghana, in respect to the actual roles of the PR practitioner of the political parties, strategies employed to promote and protect the image of the presidential candidate and political parties, as well as strategies and tactics employed in the engagement with electorates. The basis for focusing on the stated objectives stems from the fact that in democratic elections, the influence of a party at winning an election is important as compared to other factors (Holberg & Oscarson, 2011, p.39). Therefore, an in-depth understanding of the roles of PR practitioners in an election and benefits derived by political parties at engaging them would provide insight into how to advocate and develop strategies targeting policy interventions to the benefits of the political parties. Also, conducting an empirical assessment of the roles of PR practitioners in an election provides insight into the functioning of the political system to respond to the information needs of the electorate at making an informed choice during elections (Gibson & Rommele, 2007, p.4). The outcome of this assessment is then evaluated in light of the prevailing literature.

An emerged surprise of the study reviewed shows that, in developed democracies such as Italy, PR practitioners undertake significant roles in political activities such as marketing of candidates to the electorates (Calise, 2000). This study therefore attempts to contribute to addressing areas of the gap in the literature of PR practitioners' roles in Ghana's elections.

First, it responds to the calls to prioritize the participation and integration of PR amongst the political parties, as well as change the popular opinion that public relations practice relating to politics in Africa is only about propaganda and spinning of issues (Itoumba & Pike, 2017, P.7). Research on this topic needs to be undertaken and roles properly outlined and documented as public relations practice has become crucial in translating public opinions to political parties. In the political scope, these translations can serve as an attempt to adjust the socio-political environment to suit the political principles, as well as to help the political principles adjust to the environment by creating the right balance to mutually benefit a political party and its publics and that aids in promoting real participatory democracy. The knowledge acquired could also help lead to generating guidelines for public relations practitioners and can provide useful insights for political communication specialists.

This study contributes to, and try to fill the gaps in the practical relevance of embracing PR practice in political structures and shaping of policies and not only in election or campaign periods. A detailed reading of literature reveals that there is a need for refocus and rethink of the understanding of PR in the political space from the cooperate perspectives in democratic elections (Hofmeister & Grabow, 2011). Consequently, it is possible to clarify the misconception surrounding political PR at ensuring the benefits is harnessed. There is burgeoning knowledge highlighting the practical relevance of embracing political PR in the developed democracies which the study attempts to contribute. Literature search reveals a strong focus on PR roles in elections in the developed countries as compared to developing countries (Lilleker, 2006; Eriksen, 2005; Koch, 1995).

Few studies have touched on the role of PR in elections in developing countries such as Ghana. Hence, this study sets out to explore the relevant role of political PR practice in the 2020 election. Such knowledge when understood and harnessed is likely to enhance political communication and discourses at improving electioneering campaigns and politics in general.

### **1.7 Organization of the study**

The study is sub-divided into five (5) chapters. Chapter one is the introductory chapter and outlines the objectives, problem statement, and research questions among others. Chapter two deals with the review of empirical literature on roles of political PR, strategies developed at promoting the image of the political party and candidates, as well as engagement of PR practitioners with the electorate during election campaigns. Also, it consists of the theoretical framework of the study. Chapter three presents a detailed discussion on the methodological considerations, research design, and sampling strategy, study population, sampling size, method of data collection, data analysis method and ethics of the study. Empirical findings of the study are presented in chapter four from the observations made on data during analysis. In chapter five, findings are discussed in the context of literature and theory, and concludes the results of the study with recommendations.

### **1.8 Chapter Summary**

The above chapter focused on the background of the study, statement of the problem, research aims, objectives of the study, research questions, justification of the study, as well as the significance of the study.

The next chapter (chapter two) looks at review of empirical literature on roles of PR practitioner, and the theoretical framework of the study.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This study seeks to find out the role of public relations practitioners in the election of Ghana. This chapter presents studies of existing literature of the research objectives and provide discussion on why stakeholder theory was employed as the theoretical framework for the study. It will therefore analyze literatures related to the role of public relations, its history and an overview of election in Ghana.

#### **2.2 Conceptual Review**

##### **2.2.1 Public Relations**

Studies have shown that public relations has been used for a long time to describe the communication functions of the organization, as well as its importance of such communication (Veracic et al., 2001). A review of literature by Bernays (1952) points to three main elements of public relations. It noted that public relations is about informing people, persuading people or integrating people with people. There have been inconclusive debate about the definition of public relations among scholars.

Many scholars have written definitions attempting to define public relations by listing the major terminologies that make up the practice (Tench and Yeomans, 2017). Public Relations as defined by Lamme and Russel (2015) is a planned communication and relationship – building activity with strategic or deliberate intent. Other definitions emphasize the management of communications (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Broom and Sha, 2013), the management of relationships (Coombs and Hollady, 2006) and the creation and maintenance of reputation (CIPR, 2016).

A case of reference is Harlow (1976, p.36) who defines public relations as the management of mutually inferential relationships within the web of stakeholders and organizational relationships.

However, Grunig & Hunt (1976, p.36) argues that such a definition does not attempt to offer new dimensions into public relations, as they simply defined public relations, as “the management of communication between an organization and its public” (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). This definition however became one of the most used to identify public relations.

Some critics of the discipline of public relations have opined that the core essentials of the profession have not been reflected in its definition, putting emphasis on communication and relationship building. Hutton (1999, p.201) is probably the best-known critic of the definition. The scholar argues that the focus of public relations affects as well as tasks rather than its fundamental purpose of communication and relationship building. Therefore, the presentation of the academic and nominative scope of the definitions, instead of delving into the practicalities of public relations practice which involves an attempt to persuade or influence the public, as well as construct meaning for the public (Leichy & Warner, 2001). In light of this Hutton (1999) opinionated that public relations is concerned with organizational issues and not with individuals or a group of people without formal organization. A study that measures the effectiveness of an organization such as a political party and its ability to solve problems and meet the goals of the stakeholders, as well as management, as a failure to do so would result in a crisis that will affect organizational policies and decision (Grunig, 1992). Equally, Grunig (1992) asserted that to behave in a socially acceptable manner, the organization must identify the public who are affected by potential organizational decisions and work towards solving the problems that are crucial through symmetrical communication. Symmetrical communication helps to consider both interests of the organization and the public to better enhance the relationships.

The observation of the scholar cannot be ignored within the context of the political parties and elections. For instance, in the event a political party loses an election, it sometimes results in accusations and counteraccusations among the party members and leaders.

The leaders might need to respond to address the crisis emerging from the agitated supporters. This may be done, through reorganization of the political party structure or engaging in an open dialogue to address the concerns and thus improve the relationship between the supporters and leaders of the political party.

Further review of literature shows that public relations is the management, through communication, of perceptions and strategic relationship between an organization and its internal and external stakeholders (Skinner et al., 2004). Also, Jackson (2010) described public relations management as communication, relationship management and dialogue. Moreover, the International Public Relations Association (1978) defines public relations as synonymous with issues management stating that public relations are the art and science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organizations leaders, and implementing planned programs of actions that will serve both, the organization and the public's interest" (IPR, 1978; Heath & Palenchar, 2008; Donsbasch, 2014).

Thus, there are the various geographical perspectives of the definition of public relations. The American perspective of public relations considers it as relationship management on the part of organizations while the European consider public relations as an activity that is concerned with the publics and the public sphere and not limited to only relationship management (Veracic et al., 2001, 2006).

In sum, public relations is defined as an organizational communication with the following strategic objectives a) managing communication to promote the organizational agenda, b) building relationships with its publics (Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham and Bruning, 2001),

c) establishing a reputation with one's publics (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007; Stromback & Kioussis, 2013; Jackson 2010; Van Ruler, 2004; Grunig & Hunt, 1984); and d) to initiate dialogue, collaboration, co-operation and co-creation (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012; Kent & Taylor, 2002). Notwithstanding the numerous definitions of public relations, there is no ambiguity that strategy is key in public relations (Holtzhausen, 2002).

### **2.2.2 Political Public Relations**

Political Public Relations have been part of public relations practice for decades. Besides, it has been cited that its existence is comparable to politics (Stromback & Kioussis, 2011, p.8). It is claimed that the definition of political relations is about the activities aimed at influencing the public, through the use of communication and exchange of ideas to facilitate change (L'Etang, 2008, p.18); to manage mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Ledingham, 2003); to reputation management (Van Riel & Fombrom, 2007); to reach key audiences (Taylor, 2010); to stakeholder engagement (de Bussy, 2010) and through communication and public relations techniques and tools to enable people to share ideas (Jackson, 2010); debate differences (Moloney, 2006) and persuade each other (Pfau & Wan, 2006).

In addition to PR been described as purposeful communication to influence and establish relationships and reputations, which is one core function of the practice (Cutlip et al., 2000; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Ledingham, 2003), Public Relations also creates value as it ensures fair access to the public sphere; develops relationships in the public sphere (Hiebert, 2005), and promotes public engagement through dialogue (Edwards, 2016). Also, political public relations includes shaping and framing political debates and issues (Froehlich & Rudiger, 2005); news production (Cameron et al., 1997); as well as the framing of messages (Hallahan, 1999).

One of the main aims of a political PR practitioner is to successfully control media representations for the political party they represent (Pearson, 1992; McNair, 2003; L'Etang, 2004). From the varying definitions, it may be asserted that political public relations are based on political party messages and their activities. A further review of the literature shows that for public relations to be considered as political, there are certain features unique to it. Firstly, Stromback & Kiouisis (2008, p.18) found that organization or individual actors in question engage in public relations activities for political purposes. In other words, political public relations activities deployed by organizations and individuals are intended to influence politics, including political parties and candidates, but also government and public sector agencies, think tanks, unions, commercial businesses, as well as various interest groups and non-profit organizations that are more or less engaged in efforts to influence political processes or outcomes.

Next, the political public relation effect is to influence and establish, build, maintain beneficial relationships as well as reputation. Hutton et al. (2001) support the assertion of the previous study. Hutton et al. (2001) noted that political public relations are crucial at all stages of stakeholders engagement, regardless of whether it involves an adolescent embryonic stage of developing allegiance to a political party. Furthermore, political public relations is described as public relations on behalf of a political organization with the same strategic roles and objectives as all public relations exercises. For instance, a public relations officer of a political party manage the communication of the entity to promote the organizational agenda which involves talks about party policies and programs that are important to the public and the political party, to build a joint political position aimed at influencing public attitudes; building relationships and convincing voters to align themselves with the party through the political ideologies and to take action, in terms of soliciting votes; and to establish a reputation (a political identity for the party), and for the politicians in the party, which voters can identify

(Stromback & Kioussis, 2013; Perlof, 2013; Jackson 2010; Becker & Vlad, 2009; Kioussis et al., 2006; Van Ruler, 2004; Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Political public relations is not limited to simple information dissemination and exchange of highly involved stakeholder's engagement (Jackson, 2010). Therefore, the issue of reputations and relationship cultivation should be guided by short term and long term orientation regarding the engagement of political organization and the multiplicity of their publics (Kioussis & Stromback, 2011, p.13).

Finally, political public relations involves all kinds of model of public relations, including the publicity model, the two-way asymmetrical model and the two-way symmetrical model (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Cancel et al. (1997) in support of this distinction noted that the conceptualization of political public relations is non-normative and descriptive rather than perspective and thus agrees with the contingency theory that the preferred model of public relations depends on a host of factors and moves on a continuum ranging from total advocacy for an organization to total accommodation of the public.

Based on the literature reviewed, it may be concluded that public relations and political public relations are interrelated although a level of difference has been noted in the pursuance of the organization's goals. First, public relations seems to be a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and the public. Public relations is great for building a connection with audiences and promoting key messages properly tailored for a specific target. Also, public relations is more likely turned towards building strategic relationships while political public relations is highly inclusive and therefore use all strategic means possible for the quest of ideas and power.

### **2.3. Roles of Political Public Relations practitioners in Elections**

Communication is important during elections virtually in every part of the world that elects leaders. This is because, the public or voters need information to form opinions about “political programs, policy issues and political alternative” presented by the political actors (Gibson & Rommele, 2007, p.4).

Inversely, political actors need to know the wishes and demands of the people to be governed if given the mandate (Ulas, 2017; Sartori, 1976). Such communication creates an avenue to explain the actions of the political actors to the voters and to establish legitimacy and credibility with the voters (Lilleker, 2006). Political parties have been noted to use different mediums to implement plans to attain political power. The achievement of any political party in terms of winning an election is dependent on the way of communication between the political party members and the general public. PR has become crucial for political organizations in their quest to communicate and share the tasks with both the internal and external public. The media has become an important avenue for coverage of the opinion of the public that causes political parties to make changes to their policies and programs. PR practitioners of various political parties helps to receive and record knowledge from the public to political organization (Davis, 2002). For instance, a political party in government needs to inform the public about the policies or structure of government in a democratic society, as well as the politicians need to have an insight into public opinion. The ensuing section of the chapter presents the roles of political public relations.

#### **2.3.1. Media Management**

Public relations within the political organization goals centers on the use of media outlets (Froehlich & Rudiger 2005; Jackson, 2010). The media is an important channels of messages distribution for political public relations.

This is because, it has been noted to help communicate specific political views, solutions and interpretations to attract support for political policies or campaigns (Lilleker, 2006, Lasswell, 1936). According to Sancar (2013), political public relations represents a great tool in transmitting messages for political parties to their voters. Meanwhile, it aims at sustainability of political parties and their government (Grunig, 1992).

Sancar (2013) as well as Van Ruler (2004) notes the importance of feedback, which is a necessary condition for symmetrical communication and dialogue to effectively take place in the new communication arena. Furthermore, the authors highlight the contribution of public relations in the flow of communication process between political elites and institutions, political leaders and their publics. Political party campaign communication is often led by PR practitioners who monitors, evaluate and control the content of the message to the media. Sancar (2013) points out that in the world of election or politics, public relations is crucial in reaching strategic political communication. The scholar argues that public relations methods and techniques are the most important part of the political communication process to correct public perception of political parties and promote successful transmission of the desired image.

The mass media whether print or broadcast media has been noted to play a crucial role in political communication. Studies have shown that traditional mass media creates an avenue for connection point between the political actors and transmitting political messages to the public (Bennett & Entnam, 2001; McNair, 2011). Essentially, it is a tool in shaping a democratic landscape by making politics visible in society and providing information, analysis, forum and debate, as well as create a shared democratic culture (Dahlgren, 2009).

The political space at the election is highly competitive, and political actors compete for space in the mass media, as both the traditional and online can reach audiences of thousands (Rideout, 2015). It is common for political parties in such a situation to manage the media to protect its interest. Given this, media management is a crucial role in the PR practice of a political party.

Media management has been described as a variety of practices whereby political actors may seek to control, manipulate or influence media organizations in ways that correspond to their (actors) political agenda (McNair, 2003, p.123).

Imperatively, McNair (2011) asserted that media management of information by political parties can generate favorable publicity and that the purpose of political party public relations is to proactively attract positive media coverage; as well as to use political party mandates to set the national political agenda; as opposed to the reactive approach of damage limitation through lobbying journalists, the spinning of damaging stories and the suppression of damaging information (McNair, 2011, p.7). In addition, it has been established that the political party dominating the news coverage will receive a better evaluation of its arguments by the public than another party that obtains less coverage (Druckman, 2001); and political actors often seek media exposure to increase visibility, on a local, national and international level (Dahlgren, 2009; Franklin, 1995), thereby effectively using the mass media to boost and shape public opinion (Bennett & Entman, 2001). For instance, the case study in the United Kingdom on media management by (Jones, 1999; Fairclough, 2000) surrounding the Labor government welfare reforms is an attempt to control and manage the news agenda. The Labor Party in an attempt to introduce its welfare policy in 1998 to win an election and control the media opted to launch a welfare roadshow with Prime Minister Tony Blair riding on the road to make the party case for welfare reform (Fairclough, 2000, p. 129). The PR practitioner of the party gave private briefings to the media in which he emphasized, with a battery of facts and figures, the costs to the nation and benefits. Interestingly, at the official launch of the welfare roadshow two national newspapers, The Times and the Mirror, carried articles “written” by Tony Blair which were virtually indistinguishable from the earlier briefing. Fairclough (2000) notes that the risk of unpredictable and uncontrollable media uptake of the speech is minimized by trailing the speech in a way that presents it in the way the government intended.

Fairclough (2000) argues that the whole process, from the initial campaign, through the consultative stage, to the presentation of the Bill to Parliament, was, largely managed through managerial and promotional plans facilitated by the PR means rather than democratically through dialogue. Hence, PR practice and its practitioners play a pivotal role in political communication for political actors who strive to influence the production of news (Cameron et al., 1997); the shaping and framing of political debates, issues and messages (Froehlich & Rudiger, 2005); and thus, through the media the PR practitioners can influence public opinion (Bennett & Entman, 2001) to win an election.

### **2.3.2. Information Management**

A role of PR practitioner of a political party is information management. The practitioners of political parties act as gatekeepers of information. The role of the gatekeeper, in communication, is to decide which information of the political party is made available or consumed by the public and which is not. The PR practitioner role of information management is a typical gatekeeping function, as the media has the responsibility of relaying, limiting, expanding and reinterpreting the messages (Bittner, 1977). Each of these functions will either enhance or affect the appeal of the political party to the public (Coronel, 2008). In other words, PR is the avenue at which political and other forces work to facilitate or constrain the flow of information (Shoemaker & Riccio, 2016). The use of PR by the political parties enable the organization to manage the media and to control public knowledge of an event or policies through the selection of information to be consumed by the public. Also, the role of the PR is to control access to those in power as well as to regulate the flow of information and political influence.

In summary, the role of the PR is important at managing the constant flow of information which if not timely and effectively managed can result in a decline of public trust and confidence in a political party and thus affect electoral fortunes.

### **2.3.3 Relationship building & Reputation building**

Public relations whether for political or corporate reasons seeks to create public acceptance through carefully crafted messages to build relationships and reputation (Bernays 1928; Smith, 2013; Bivins, 1987; Cutlip, 1995; and Cutlip et al., 2000). The responsibility of such a task falls within the purview of the PR practitioner.

Relationship building is noted to be concerned with the building of trust between an organization and its publics. This relationship between an organization and its target public play an important role in building organizational success and organizational reputation (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Cutlip et al., 2006). It is, therefore logical to reason that relationship building is an important task for practitioners in influencing electoral decisions of their target publics. Ströh (2007) argues that public relations use communication to build healthy relationships between an organization and its publics. Relationships, according to Ferguson and Candib (2002), are the central unifying element and the key to public relations. Though, it seems unquestionable that the relationships amongst the different constituencies of an organization should be considered and well managed; it should equally be acknowledged that organizations do not operate in isolation but compete economically with other organizations in an environment regulated by legislation (Grunig, 1992) and all these divergent forces social, political, economic have to attain some level of balance (Nolte & Nolte, 2016). Grunig and Huang (2000) argue that public relations should seek to build mutual understanding with the public. Jackson (2010) observed that despite an attempt to link public relations to key stakeholder relationships, there is a need for improvement.

Knowing and understanding the public with whom the organization interacts is crucial (Diggs-Brown, 2011). The understanding that public relations are an essential communication that performs a dynamic role in informing the various publics, strategically cannot be compromised.

Also, in the process of developing mutual lines of understanding between the organization and its publics, the PR practitioner need to convince the public that the organization is worthy of its approval (Nolte, 1979, p.10).

Additionally, Gotsi and Wilson (2001) opined that reputation management is persuasive communication and therefore, public relations plays a role in shaping the opinion of both key audiences such as the voters. The reasoning behind this approach is that reputation, as intangible as it can be, has indeed a tangible effect on the organization's operations and success (Fombrun 1995, Gray & Balmer 1998, Griffin 2008). Likewise, organizations facing a crisis are more likely to have their reputation badly exposed (Regester & Larkin 2008). All this seems possible through concrete dialogue that can ultimately conduct all parties to a certain collaboration, cooperation or co-creation (Gray & Balmer, 1998).

#### **2.3.4 Management of communication**

Management of communication is a major role in public relations. The management of the communication helps the PR practitioner to have control of the messages disseminated to the public (Edwards, 2016). In other words, Grunig (2013) consider the public relations role to be the management of communication. The role of public relations is concerned with the planning, execution and evaluation of organizational communication', through which organizations adapt to, alter, or maintain their environment to achieve organizational goals (Long & Hazelton, 1987, p.6). Such a situation offers the organization to manage the communication purposefully, and with a strategic initiative. This buttress by Jefkins (2016, p.7) who noted that public relations activities are deliberate, planned and sustained over time as public relations practitioners act as

an interpreter for the organization, and explains its philosophy, policy and programs to its stakeholders in a consistent manner (Skinner et al., 2006:6; Cutlip et al., 2000:6; Seitel, 2007).

In addition, Rensburg and Cant (2009) observed that public relations do not operate in isolation; but forms a cognitive part of organizational communication and public relations practitioners should be equally focused on the strategic impact of the message and how it is framed; as well as understand the audience at whom it is directed (Gordon, 1997; Hutton 1999; Newson et al., 2000; Cutlip et al., 2006). The deliberate planned and sustained communication efforts of public relations practitioners, helps the organization and political parties to “build and hold goodwill” (Harlow 1976, p.49-63); and to gain understanding and acceptance from its publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In this dynamic, relationship and reputation building eventually takes place.

### **2.3.5 Issue Management**

Issue management plays a valuable role in detecting patterns in the organization’s environments that may affect either positively or negatively the organization; and enables the organization to identify stakeholders (Fawkes, 2007, p.316; Harrison & St John, 1998). An issue management process classifies the challenges political parties and other organizations may face as issues that can be perceptual, political, regulatory, social, commercial, physical, cultural, moral, ethical, or a mixture of all of these (Pal, 1997; Heath & Palenchar, 2008; Steyn, 2004) and thus allow the organization to plan a response. Steyn (2004) noted that issues management is associated with a continuous adaptation to change and the management of these issues can be approached in either narrowly or broadly manner which is largely dependent on whether the focus should be public or social issues. At elections, the PR practitioners of political parties are expected to manage issues that emerged from within and outside the political party.

## **2.4. Strategies of Political Public Relations**

During elections, political opponents and journalists have the opportunity to dig deep and uncover issues that might derail the political fortunes of the party or the image of its candidates. It then becomes the responsibility of the political PR practitioner to address or respond to the issues raised. The vulnerability of these political parties is worsened due to the continuous dependence on the media.

Despite the vulnerability of the political parties to the media, studies have shown that the increasing public relations activities has been accompanied by increasing dependence on media management strategies (Franklin, 2004; McNair, 2003; Faireclough, 2000). There are various strategies employed by Political PR practitioners to promote, protect and manage the image of the organization and its leaders and these strategies include sound bites and pseudo-events, spin and image management. Strategy is thus described as the determination of long-term goals and the necessary actions to attain the set goals (Heames et al., 2010). This section of the chapter delved into the strategies used for protecting and promoting the image or reputation of the political party and its candidate.

### **2.4.1. Press Agency, Publicity and Propaganda**

Political influence over the media is not a new phenomenon as politicians have sought to influence the media, either directly or through press officers, since at least the nineteenth century (Jackson, 2010). Press agency is the public relations practitioner's action to ensure publicity for their clients, which have very little regard to the truth; and is based on simple one-way dissemination of information to indoctrinate the public (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This style of one-sided publicity is considered one-way communication, propaganda, hype or spin (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Jackson, 2010); the hypodermic syringe theory of mass communication (Schramm, 1971; Croteau & Hoynes, 1997) or marketing and advertising (Van Ruler, 2004)

and all seek acceptance, without question or minimum questions as to the accuracy, of the information thereby attempting to fool the public.

Propaganda (referred to as hype or spin) is, according to Chomsky (2002) a service provided by the mass media or PR to the elite hegemonic interests of powerful groups such as governments and global corporations, when the media report on important matters on a superficial level without examining the wide picture and thereby creating the appearance of manufacture of consent from the public. On the other hand, Moloney (2006) believes that publicity differs from press agency, as publicity, sometimes referred to as weak propaganda, provides positive publicity for the organization in the competitive business arena rather than attempting to fool the public. Publicity can be used as a tool to increase awareness of organizations, individuals or issues, and it is the use of publicity in political campaigns that have led to publicity being considered the same as propaganda (Ewen; 1996; Stauber & Rampton, 2004).

#### **2.4.2. Sound bites & pseudo-events**

It is one of the strategies employed by political PR practitioners to promote and protect the image of an organization. The use of such a strategy is described as a situation in which the PR practitioner picks out the key detail or an important part of a political event or speech. The speech, if it contains memorable phrases, is selected and broadcasted for few minutes allotted on a broadcast news bulletin (Cockerell et al., 1996).

### **2.4.3. Spin & Image Management**

Spin is quite often located in media relations, it involves gathering the right image, and making the right connections to ensure the message appears on the front page of the media outlet (Street, 2001). McNair (2004) who opined that spin is a convenient and media-friendly shorthand for a particular kind of political PR, with negative connotations. Ludlam & Smith (2001) argue that spin can be understood as new strategic thinking against which all pragmatic or organizational initiatives are judged and it dominated the struggle of electability. The more tactful the spin-doctor, the better the likelihood of electability.

In an attempt to understand spin, Gaber (2000) argue that there is the need to break spin into two categories: the above the line and below the line tactics the spin-doctor may be employing. The above the line category of spin is associated with those activities that would be considered routine, and that would have caused an “old-fashioned press officer without any great difficulty. These activities may be carried out by individual working in communication, without breaking any regulation. They relate to the everyday business of government and organizational communications. Specific examples of such activities include writing of press releases and holding of press conferences. In addition, Gaber (2000) identified responses to the government, political party announcements, publication of speeches, interviews and articles, reaching to interviews and reacting to breaking news events as ‘above the line category of spin’.

The ‘below the line’ category include those activities employed by spin-doctors that are not conventional to PR and at times ethically questionable. Gaber (2000) argued that these activities are usually covert and as such, strategies and tactics are employed for an impactful communication. Below the line activities include staying on the message (the consistent line is taken), setting and driving the news agenda (the government or organization receives coverage on its terms), kite flying (testing out reaction to a policy before the formal announcement) and

fire breaking. Fire breaking involves distracting journalist from a particular story by planting another greater significant one (Gaber, 2000).

In conclusion, the review above shows that the strategies used at promoting policies and protecting issues and reputation within the public space by organization and government in their engagements.

## **2.5. Historical Overview of Public Relations in Ghana**

Gyan (1991) in her master's thesis, which was one of the earliest works on Public Relations in Ghana indicated that, before the country attained independent, PR was only practiced by expatriates in the country. After Ghana's independence however, indigenes were then trained to act as a link between ministries and other companies. The indigenes had no PR training although they performed PR functions (Gyan, 1991). Journalist were those appointed as Public Relations officers in many organizations at the time (Gyan, 1991).

There are very few empirical studies on PR practice in Ghana. Wu and Baah – Boakye (2008) also conducted a study to explore various issues about Public Relations practice in the country. They conducted a quantitative study to explore work – related cultural values and public relations models in Ghana. Wu and Baah – Boakye's (2008, 2009) studies provided some preliminary information about Public Relations practices in contemporary Ghanaian society.

## **2.6. Brief Overview of Ghana's Election Situation**

An election is the process where citizens elect people to run government and political offices at all levels in a democratic governance, and have a life span in office called a term of office (aceproject.org).

Countries across the world have different ways of organizing an election. Historically, in Ghana limited elections were held in the principal municipalities during the colonial period and even the election leading to the grant of self-governance in 1951 and finally, the independence in 1957. These elections were held under the direct supervision of the colonial government. For the 1951 election, a selected committee of the legislative council was appointed in 1950 to examine the questions of the elections and constituencies, while the principal provision of the 1957 constitution in this matter was appointed by the Governor-General of the General Electoral Delimitation Commission and Area Delimitation Committee to advise him on the delimitation of electoral districts for the holding of parliamentary elections (Boateng, 1996, p.52). No machinery was established outside of the government for the actual conduct of the elections (Boateng, 1996, p.52).

### **2.6.1 The Birth of Multiparty Democracy in Ghana**

The birth of Ghana's democracy in 1992 after attaining independence in the year 1957 gave room for multi-party involvement in our electoral process. There has been eight general elections under the Fourth Republic of Ghana to elect Presidents and Members of Parliament (MPs) to represent various Constituencies in the country. There are laws and regulations that guide the process of electing these leaders and election results have generally been accepted every election year. It was only in some few instances that results have been challenged through the court system and eventually resolved peacefully.

In Ghana, Presidential elections are held every four years to elect the President who is the head of state and the commander in chief of the Ghana Armed Forces through majoritarian system (Electoral Commission Ghana, 1996). The majoritarian system simply means that, votes are counted after the election and the presidential candidate that obtains fifty percent (50%) of the total valid votes cast plus one (1) additional valid vote is declared the winner of the polls. In the

case where none of the candidates secured 50% plus one of total valid votes cast, the winner is decided through a run-off election on a later date where only the two best candidates can contest.

The Parliamentary election on the other hand is a single – member constituency election which is also held every four years to elect representatives to the National Assembly (Parliament) and it is done using the First Past The Post (FPTP) system (Electoral Commission Ghana, 1996). This means, the candidate with the highest valid votes cast wins.

These elections (Presidential and Parliamentary) are held on the same day on December 7 every four years since 1992. The counting of votes and declaration of results takes place immediately after voting in the presence of party agents and voters (Electoral Commission Ghana, 1996). An official has the privilege to run for another term through reelection depending on the constitution (Christopher, 1996).

As predicted by Duverger’s law which holds that ‘simple majority single-ballot system favors the two-party system’, the voting system in Ghana has encouraged Ghanaian politics into a two-party system where (at the time of this study) the current opposition National Democratic Congress and the ruling New Patriotic Party has become the two major parties in Ghana (Duverger, Maurice 1964).

### **2.6.2 The Role of Ghana’s Electoral Commission**

The 1969 constitution for the first time in Ghana’s history made detailed and specific provisions for the establishment of an independent Electoral Commission (EC) to be headed by a sole Commissioner responsible only to the constitution in the performance of its functions. Such a precedent was followed by the 1979 constitution.

However, in the 1992 constitution, although the establishment of an EC subject only to the constitution, it was to have a Chairman assisted by two Deputies, who together with four other members constitute the National Electoral Commission (Electoral Commission Ghana, 1996)

The Electoral Commission is however mandated by the constitution of Ghana to be consistent with the laws regulating elections as an independent body in charge of Ghana's election to ensure free, fair and transparency during and after the voting exercise (Electoral Commission Ghana, 1996). Article 46 of the 1992 constitution provides that, in the performance of its functions, the electoral commission shall not be subject to the control or direction of any authority except as provided in the constitution or any other law not inconsistent with the constitution.

### **2.6.3 Membership and Functions of the National Electoral Commission**

The Commission, which is appointed by the President in consultation with the Council of State, consists of a Chairman, two Deputy Chairmen and four other members, and its functions as set out under Article 45 of the constitution are to:

- (a) Compile the register of voters and revise it at such periods as may be determined by law;
- (b) Demarcate the electoral boundaries for both national and local government election;
- (c) Conduct and supervise all public elections and referenda;
- (d) Educate the people on the electoral process and its purpose;
- (e) Undertake programs for the expansion of the registration of voters; and
- (f) Perform such other functions as may be prescribed by law.

## **2.7 Ghana's 2020 General Election**

Ghana has a constitutional democracy and multiparty political system (Boateng, 1996, p.14). In the view of Lilleker (2006) a country is described as democratic based on free, fair and regular elections. Also, during an election, the citizens who are eligible to vote are not prevented from voting. Thus, Ghana can be considered as a democratic country according to the widely accepted criteria of Dahl (1971), specifically fair, competitive and inclusion. Democracy allows the citizens to freely access information about political issues, express views and formulation of expectations and proposals without hindrance or fear of repression, through the liberty of vote in an election, engagement with civil society organizations or political parties, as well as competing as a candidate in a democratic election (Hofmeister & Grabow, 2011).

In Ghana, the political landscape is dominated by two main political parties since the onset of democracy in 1992, specifically the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP). Besides, there are a plethora of smaller parties that compete in the general election for the presidency and parliamentary seats.

The 2020 general election was the eighth election held in Ghana. It was held on the 7<sup>th</sup> of December, 2020 under the condition of universal adults' suffrage. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of October, 2020 the Electoral Commission of Ghana announced twelve parties have been certified to participate in the presidential and parliamentary election (EC, 2020). It is well-documented knowledge that NDC and NPP who have combined governed Ghana for 32 years dominated the election. However, the 2020 election saw the NPP winning the election and forming the government, while the NDC became the 'official opposition' political party.

## **2.8. Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework has been described as an over-simplification of a complex reality and thus should be treated as a guide to which the phenomenon is a view in the world (Rakodi, 2002). The use of theory has an immeasurable role in addressing and understanding a phenomenon. Imperatively, it has been noted that theory can aid and assist in policy formulation and thinking. This is because it creates an avenue to develop strategies suitable for identified issues (Clarke, 2013). It is a structure that can hold or support the theory of a research question. In other words, it introduces and describes the theory that explains why a research question under study exists (Swamson, 2013). In light of the importance of theory, it must be noted that theoretical framework of stakeholders and management was adopted for the study.

Stakeholder theory is concerned with how a business operates and creates value for its stakeholders. Stakeholders have been described as any group or individual who can affect or to be affected by the achievement of an organization's goal (Freeman, 1984, p.46; Thomson, 1967). Alternatively, Brenner and Cochran (1991), asserted that stakeholder theory is used to describe the nature of the firm and the strategic direction of the firm. Also, Brenner & Molander (1977) describe it as how board members think about the interests of their constituencies. Moreover, other scholars describe it as how the firm is managed (Wang & Dewhirst, 1992; Clarkson, 1991; Halal, 1990; Kreiner & Bhambri, 1991).

Freeman's (2010) preferred definition, according to Donaldson and Preston (1995:67), describes the normative view of the stakeholders as any person or group who has a stake in the organization.

Likewise, Harrison et.al., (2012) refers to stakeholders as any person, group or organization who can place a claim on an organization's attention, resources or output, or who is affected by that output, but this stake means that stakeholders have something at risk, therefore something to gain or lose as a result of organization activity or is at risk (Clarkson, 1994). Carroll and Buchholtz (2011) identify three types of stakes namely, an interest, a right and ownership. However, there is no consensus on the definition of stakeholders, (Miles, 2012) and Freeman et al. (2012) argue that more work needs to be done to refine the meaning of stakeholder on conceptual and practical levels.

Conversely, Friedman (1970) believes that a business has only one responsibility, which is to increase its profits ethically towards a satisfactory return on investment for shareholders. Other scholars have defined stakeholders as primary and secondary stakeholders (Clarkson, 1991); while Mitchell et al., (1997, p.857) use concepts of power, legitimacy and urgency and uses the risk of loss to narrow the field to those with legitimate claims, regardless of their power to influence the firm or the legitimacy of their relationship to the firm. Similarly, Donaldson and Preston (1995, p.67) use three critical concepts to underpin their definition of stakeholders as persons or groups with legitimate interests in procedural and/or substantive aspects of corporate activity” and to promote descriptive accuracy; instrumental power and normative validity. Stakeholder management is the implementation of stakeholder theory by the organization because the relationships with stakeholders are crucial, as stakeholders are a key element to the sustainability of an organization (Harrison et al., 2012; Freeman; 2010; Jones; 1995; Clarkson, 1991; Mitchell et al., 1997; Hillman & Keim, 2001; Jones & Wicks, 1999).

Given the argument expressed by the scholars on the above theoretical framework, it might be logical to assert that it is suitable for the present study. The rationale is underpinned by the fact that, it was adopted for a similar study that explores the application of public relations principles in political parties' campaign communication of the Democratic Alliance, in the context of three other political parties in a regional newspaper during the build-up to the 2014 South Africa general elections (Itoumba, 2019). The use of such a theory is based on the fact that managing communication to promote the organizational agenda is to highlight important issues of interest to both the political party and the public. Since, political PR need to communicate with the stakeholders in an election the message of needs to reflect the essence of interest and expectations.

Besides, the theory looks beyond political parties or organizations to significant others such as the public. Therefore, it is valuable in the context of the African election, where various interest groups are competing for power and demands from political parties. Since the political PR approach is fundamentally concerned with influencing voters to seek power, together with issue management, and media management (Jackson, 2010; Fawkes, 2007, p.316; Harrison & St. John, 1998). The theory in this context can provide the opportunity for integrating PR into the mainstream analysis of election campaigns and the empowerment of the political parties to embrace the PR profession in Ghana. The theoretical framework thus serves as a basis for the analysis of PR in the 2020 election in this study. Hence, it may be concluded that it is an important part of an enhanced political public relations for desired successful campaigns.

## **2.9 Chapter Summary**

This chapter focused on the literature in this area of study. A necessitating factor in this review is the quest to understand the subject matter, quality, and importance of maintaining consistency in the critical issues that pertain to this topic. It is evident from the foregoing review of literature that there are various definitions of political public relations.

According to key scholars, the purpose of political relations is to engage a dynamic interactive communication through the use of a defined outlet to communicate specific views for public support, which create an avenue for communication between political constituents, leaders and target audience. There has been a clear definition of the role of political public relations, specifically issues management, management of communication, relationship building and reputational building, information management and media management which exist beyond elections. Additionally, to further understand the strategies employed by the political PR to protect and promote the image of the political party and its candidate literature reviewed revealed the use of sound bites, pseudo-events, spin and image management, press gentry, publicity and propaganda. On the type of messages that the political PR engaged with the electorate, it has been identified that this PR practitioners who engage the voters to win support focuses on three main communication. The PR at the election engaged the electorate on party-specific communication, political party election campaign communication and policy development and information communication to influence the voters for support.

However, literature to the role of PR practitioners in Ghana's election processes is scarce. For instance, much has been written on roles of the PR practitioner in developed countries however, very little is known about developing countries like Ghana. With this in mind, it is hoped that, this study will add to the literature on the role of PR practitioners in developing countries especially on democratic electioneering. It is against this background that the literature review focused on the above-mentioned subjects and employed the Stakeholder and management theory for the study.

The literature survey on the theory calls for engagement with the public and other actors to ensure the objectives of an organization is attained. The theory views both organization and public aspects of the engagement as interdependent rather than separate entities which are crucial for success.

It is suggested in the literature that the theory is important for understanding political communication at an election due to the various competing interest group. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that political public relations or public relations in the context of political party election campaign communication are strategic and thus helps the organization, specifically the political party, to create a valid and valuable link with the different stakeholders of the organization and impacts on the organizational reputation through the management of strategic issues, which can influence or persuade voters.

The next chapter (three) of the study deals with the research methods explored for data gathering and analysis.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the research methods explored for data gathering and analysis. It also explains the sampling strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria and how participants were recruited. A methodology is largely used to describe a procedure used to describe, explain, and predict phenomena (Bowling, 2014). This chapter presents the underlying consideration for the adoption of qualitative methodology for the study, study population, sampling strategies, sample size, and data collection method, as well as data analysis. Also, the section delved into ethical considerations.

#### **3.2 Qualitative Methodology**

The methodological approach employed to attain the research objectives is generally qualitative. The qualitative approach has been identified as a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world they live in (Corbetta, 2003). This approach is underlined by the belief in interpretivism, which suggests that there is no single, tangible reality. Instead, there are multiple co-existing realities. In other words, it states that reality is seen from the individual perspective and embedded in the context, as opposed to being universal (Flick, 2002). In light of this understanding, the reason for resorting to this approach is the opportunity it offers for eliciting multiple perspectives on the aim of ascertaining the role of Public Relations in elections in Ghana. It is specifically useful in exploring how political parties respond to changes, as well as embracing the role of Public Relations within the political space during elections in Ghana.

Consequently, the interpretative paradigm of research which focuses on unraveling the underlying meanings of activities, in this case, responses of the PR practitioners from both political parties (NDC and NPP), yields itself a better philosophical focus for this study. Other paradigms such as the positivist approach that focuses deeply on reliable and valid methods, and the pragmatics that view methods that solve problems as the only best approaches, may not be suitable for this study.

The study compares several research paradigms and justifies why the interpretivism approach is the most appropriate for this study.

This study draws on the interpretive paradigm as its philosophical foundations, which is a dominant response to positivism to ontology (theories of what the world is) and epistemology (theories of human knowledge and how it can be known). This study stresses attention to the interpretation of the role of public relations within the political space in an election. Additionally, the approach affords generalizations made from the study to be context-specific but replicable in similar circumstances. Moreover, it provides the contexts within which specific interpretations, meanings, and definitions are ascribed to phenomena based on the emic perspective of the researchers and potential respondents (Weber, 2004). For this reason, the thesis continuously reviewed researchers' perspectives and acknowledged possible influences to address to minimize these so that meanings and interpretations that are plausible, credible, and dependable can be established.

Other philosophical paradigms are discussed in contrast with the interpretivism approach. Generally, the positivist approach to research centrally holds the view that to produce sound knowledge, it is essential to follow explicit procedures or methods. The rationale for this is that such explicitness serves to eliminate the biases that arise from the personal and social characteristics of researchers. This feature is what is sometimes referred to as procedural objectivity (Bowling, 2014).

Subsequently, reliance on explicit or transparent procedures is also seen as providing the basis for other researchers to replicate an initial study, and replication is sometimes regarded as essential to test whether the knowledge produced is sound (Creswell, 2013). But interpretivists believe strongly that humans, and for that matter society unlike stooges, actively interpret or make sense of their environment and themselves that how they do this are shaped by the particular environment in which they live.

Given this, it is suggested that any attempt to find universal causal relationships located in some fixed human nature or mode of life is futile, thereby challenging the central tenet of positivism of explicit methods and procedures (Bowling, 2014). Furthermore, interpretivists argue that it is impossible to understand why people do what they do, or why particular institutions exist and operate in characteristic ways, without grasping how people interpret and make sense of their world (Weber, 2004). However, this also has important implications for how we can gain knowledge of those phenomena. The very methods that positivists use such as experimental control and reliance upon standardized questionnaires to ensure comparability of response across people – assume that there are relatively standard patterns of a causal relationship, or at least calculable probabilistic relationships, among psychological and/or social phenomena (Weber, 2004).

Moreover, interpretivism carries a different impression from positivism about what is required to understand people's perspectives, attitudes, or beliefs. Whereas positivism assumes that, for example, attitudes can be documented by getting people to respond to a questionnaire, interpretivism argues that all research methods involve complex forms of communication, and that coming to understand other people necessarily relies on researchers having both the necessary background knowledge and skills and a willingness to suspend prior assumptions to enable an understanding of other people's orientations to emerge throughout the inquiry (Weber, 2004).

In summary, therefore, interpretivism carries the following implications for research. First, rather than setting out to test hypotheses or to find recurrent patterns of causal or probabilistic relationship, it requires the researcher to adopt an exploratory orientation to try to learn what goes on in particular situations and to come to understand the distinctive orientations of the people involved. Thus, it is assumed that what is discovered may well be different from what was initially expected. Equally important, any tendency to dismiss other people's views as irrational must be resisted. Instead, the research must be carried out on the assumption that these views make sense, and are seen as justifiable by, the people concerned. The aim is to discover the rationality of what may at first seem strange in terms of the role of public relations in an election.

A second implication, closely related to the first, is that the data should be structured as little as possible by the researcher's prior assumptions. So, rather than setting out to observe a situation with a pre-specified set of categories of events to identify, or asking questions in an interview that are designed to elicit pre-determined differences in roles, the aim (initially at least) should be to collect data in the most open-ended fashion possible; in the case of interviews, for example, by trying to get the informants to talk in their terms about phenomena relevant to the research topic. Therefore, this study utilizes in-depth and key informant interviews to understand the role of public relations practitioners in an election.

### **3.3. Research Design**

Research Design has been described as a plan and structure of investigating a phenomenon to obtain answers to research questions (Kerlinger, 1986). In other words, it describes or narrates the plan of the overall activities and programs of the research. It is against this backdrop that the study employed a descriptive research design for the study.

The rationale for the use of descriptive research design is underpinned by the opportunity it offers at answering questions such as who, how, when, and where (Cooper & Schinder, 2003). Also, descriptive research design ensures a complete description of the situation, attainment of minimum bias on the data collected, as well as in the interpretation of data collected from study participants. Hence, since the study had an objective of understanding the role of public relations in an election, it is thus appropriate to explore a descriptive research design for the study.

Practically, the design of the study started with the submission of a research proposal for ethical approval from the institutional review board to ensure adherence to the standard requirement. After getting approval, contact with the gatekeeper of the political parties was established to get access to the potential study participants and the study participants were selected from those who satisfied the inclusion criteria. These study participants were contacted through the communication team of the political parties to seek their consent and create rapport, as well as agree on the convenient time for the interview. The data was audio recorded with the consent of the study participants and analyzed with the use of a thematic approach.

### **3.4. Sampling Strategy**

A feature of qualitative approach is the intrinsic challenge of predefining the research design preceding the start of the research and relatively offer small sample size (Denscombe, 2010; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Sampling frame is a significant component of a research study and its use is very important to any form of research. Denscombe (2007) described a sampling frame as an objective list of the population from which researchers make their selection. The selection of targeted respondents is normally through the non-probabilistic sampling techniques (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2014, p.161).

This is premised on the fact that the qualitative research process is one of discovery (i.e., inductive), not of hypothesis testing (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Hence, within the confines of this study, the gathering of qualitative based data from relevant members of the political party is required to adequately address the research questions of the study. In order to ensure accuracy of the sampling frame, I made sure that the frame was relevant, precise, complete, and current.

Purposive sampling technique was adopted for this study to retrieve enough information from the target study participants who possess adequate knowledge of the communication strategies employed by their political parties. This is also because, the purposive sampling technique is seen as an effective way of gaining the needed information by focusing on items or persons of interest most likely to possess the experience or expertise to afford requisite information and insights valuable to the research (Denscombe, 2010; Black et al, 1999). Pettus-Davis, Grady, Cuddeback, and Scheyett (2011) described purposeful sampling as a nonprobability sampling technique that researchers utilize to recruit study participants from a specific predefined group. The purposeful sampling is believed to create a realistic view to better understand the phenomena that is being studied. Participants in this study were not randomly selected, but rather they were chosen based on certain distinctive features.

Selection of targeted respondents during the qualitative data sampling involved a series of iterative steps from the broader to specific level. The approach started with the identification of all relevant members of the communication team of the political parties at the national level. This group was selected because of their in-depth knowledge of the communication strategies of their political parties. Targeting them will give the opportunity to get the required data to help answer the research questions.

To ensure that only qualified study participants are selected, inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed which are stated in heading number '3.4.1' and '3.4.2' respectfully.

The rationale for the use of inclusion and exclusion criteria in research is to increase the likelihood of not exploiting the vulnerable persons within a given study (Salkind, 2010). At the end of the study, all identifying characteristics of the participants that were interviewed were coded anonymously.

#### **3.4.1. Inclusion Criteria**

Inclusion criteria are described as a key feature of the target population that the investigator will use to answer the research question in the study (Patino & Ferreira, 2018). In light of this, the inclusion criteria used for the study are as follows: the potential participants were member of the political party and part of the communication team of the 2020 political election of Ghana. The reason for the use of the stated criterion is underpinned by the fact that there is a potential to elicit the relevant information on communication strategies in the 2020 election and the underpinning philosophies which influences the way they communicate. Equally, the use of such criteria create an opportunity to access the qualified study participants, as well as ensure that the burden and benefits of participation are equally distributed (Schmidt et al, 2014).

#### **3.4. 2. Exclusion Criteria**

Exclusion criteria are described as those characteristics that disqualify prospective participants from inclusion in the study (Patino & Ferreira, 2018). The exclusion criteria used were party members who were not part of the communication team in the 2020 election and also members of different political parties. The use of such criteria helps to eliminate participants whose narrations or experiences might not help to achieve the needed outcome of the research objectives.

### **3.5 Recruitment of Study Participants**

Firstly, the researcher applied for and received ethical approval from the institutional review board as required. After the ethical approval for the collection of the data, a gatekeeper within the political parties was contacted to get access to the communication team. The gatekeepers or contact persons within the political parties were used to identify potential study participants by the use of word-of-mouth communication and social networks such as WhatsApp and Telegram.

After the contact person or gatekeepers have mobilized the potential study participants of the political party from the communication team of the political parties, there was a verification checklist to ensure those potential study participants satisfied the criteria. Potential study participants selected were engaged on issues that pertain to the study. The issues discussed with the selected participants focused on privacy, objectives of the study, the right to terminate the interview session at any time among others. When a suitable sample size has been recruited, there was a mutually agreeable time for each participant to be interviewed. In order not to interfere in their privacy or inconvenience them, the researcher took every necessary step, not to overload respondents with questions and activities throughout the entire data collection exercise.

Permission for visits either to participant's office, convenient place or home, for example, was negotiated in a manner that afforded them ample time and space to organize well for the engagement. The rationale for engagement with the study participants at the agreeable time was to ensure participation and empowered them on decision making, as well as making them part of the process (Staples, 2000; Friere, 1979).

### **3.6. Sample Size**

Different sample sizes have been suggested by qualitative methodologists for conducting qualitative studies. For example, while Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Morse (2009) recommended 30 – 50 participants for ethnographic or grounded theory research, Creswell (1998) recommended 20 – 30 participants. Also, while Morse (2009) recommends a minimum of six participants for phenomenological research, Creswell recommended between 5 – 25 participants. The guiding principle, however for the study was the concept of saturation. It is where there is enough information to replicate the study, when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained and when further coding is no longer feasible (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

In light of this present study, a total of ten members of the communication team of the political parties were recruited from the two main political parties, specifically National Democratic Congress & New Patriotic Party for the study. The rationale for the use of the sample size is based on a study that asserted that in qualitative study frequencies are rarely important as one occurrence of data is potentially useful as many understanding the process behind the phenomenon (McKenzie & Crouch 2006). The study, further reviewed that qualitative study is concerned with meaning and not making generalized hypothetical statements, as well as findings, cannot be generalized but limited to the study areas. Given the assertion above, the sample size of ten interviewees is sufficient for the development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations for the study.

### **3.7 Data Collection Method**

The interview method has been noted to be maybe the commonly used data collection instrument in qualitative research (Punch, 2014; O'Leary, 2013; Denscombe, 2010).

Punch (2014, p.144) further suggests that “interview is a very good way of accessing people’s perceptions, meanings, definitions of situation and construction of reality”. In other words, an interview is based on the interviewee’s understanding or evaluation of a particular phenomenon as opposed to that of the interviewer. It mostly involves open-ended questions which allows for flexibility and adaptability to different research situations (O’ Leary, 2013).

This study used a semi-structured approach to gather relevant data on the role of PR practitioner of a political party in the 2020 political election of Ghana. The study also looked at strategies of PR at promoting and protecting the image of the presidential candidate and political party in the 2020 election of Ghana and the role of PR in the engagement of the political party with the electorate in the 2020 election. I chose a semi-structured approach which was informed by the fact that the research questions were pre-formulated subject to adjustment based on the emerging field data collection. It also provided the opportunity of flexibility in responses, as well as enabling cross-comparison of interviews (O’Leary, 2013; Berg, 2009).

Additionally, the reason for the use of the interview method for the data collection is underpinned by the opportunity it creates for conversations, interacting, listening, and gaining access to the account of the study participants (Patton, 2002). In other words, it provides the benefit of flexibility at getting an in-depth understanding of the research questions from the participants. Also, a review of a study on an interview method by Bertrand & Hughes (2005) noted that it makes participants respond to question on their terms and within their linguistic parameters. Hence, the use of interview provides an opportunity to reconstruct the past, interpret the present, and predict the future of a phenomenon.

Employing this method offered the opportunity to have conversation with the various participants to share their experiences on communication strategies employed during the 2020 political election. It gave the opportunity to probe further for detailed information and allowed the participants to recollect from the past during the conversation.

Although interviews have benefits as a research technique, they also have some disadvantages. Bertrand & Hughes (2005) observed that interview is not particularly conducive to the reproduction of complicated and exact experiences. Therefore, it is rare for participants to instantly recall precise information without consulting a record of experiences. Despite its shortcomings as a data collection method, its benefits outweigh its disadvantages which informed its use by this research to enable me gather the needed data for the study.

Thus, a semi-structured interview was employed for the study. This method is open and allows for new ideas as questions are well structured, participants have the opportunity to freely express themselves and it also allows for probing (Newton, 2010). The interview questions centered on the research questions to establish study participant's understanding of the role of PR in the 2020 election.

The interviews were held virtually via zoom, Skype and phone calls, as well as face-to-face mode of communication. The reason for the interview been conducted via virtual means is the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the case of this study, participants decided on face to face interview with observance of COVID-19 health protocols at the time of the study. The researcher and each participants all wore face masks during the interviews with their hands sanitized before the start of the interviews. The researcher made hand sanitisers and face masks available for participants who did not have them. A social distance of at least one metre was maintained in the course of the interaction with each participant. The duration of the interview was on average 30-60 minutes.

### **3.8. Data Organization and Analysis**

Data organization is critical for effective data analysis. Given and Olsen (2003) posited that the idea for organizing data is to retrieve from raw data that which is relevant. There are several ways that I used to manage collected data. Transcripts of the data that have been collected were coded in accordance with the responses from each participant to the question asked.

I typed the transcripts into a computer file that was created especially for that purpose. I labeled the tapes in order to avoid any mix up with the tapes and also to prevent them from being recorded over. Security measures that were adopted included the use of Drop box software to save data and only accessible to the researcher. I also backed up my data by using an external storage device, such as an external hard drive, flash memory device, and my workplace computer. I made duplicates, which served as back-up copies as a final act of data management. Mack et al. (2005) advised that the duplicate copies should not be stored in the same location as the original tapes.

All interactions were done in the English language and recorded per agreement by participants. Data gathered was open coded and thematically analyzed. All interview materials were initially transcribed into hard copies. Thematic analysis has been described as a “web-like network that organizes and provides a means of representing data whiles making explicit the procedures employed from text to interpretation (Attride-Stirling, 2001). According to Attride-Stirling, the thematic network analysis involves a thematic organization of qualitative data by breaking up text and finding within its clear justifications and their implied meaning to extract the themes noticeable in a text at different levels. The texts were reduced using coding frameworks to generating basic themes which are further grouped into abstract principles, organizing themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The last phase is the development of global themes which are construed from the fusion of organizing themes into a more sophisticated structure in the text, from which understanding of the text is completed.

### **3.8.1 Coding the data**

To be more comfortable with the data, reading through the text as well as listening to the recorded audio was the first actionable step taken. This enabled the identification of recurring patterns and aligning of participants' perspectives. The data was openly coded and appraised with units of analysis assigned. The coding was based on grounded theory to “allow for the generation of enough codes through which the researcher can verify emerging concepts and also open up to all avenues of inquiry” (Green & Thorogood, 2014, p.11).

### **3.8.2. Theme identification**

As codes that shared similar patterns and meaning were identified, themes were developed. This was done through the integration of complementary codes into basic, organizing, and global themes in conformity to the research objective and questions. These include strategic thinking and planning, monitoring, goodwill and persuasion, and sense of responsibility. The transcripts were informing factors to the relevant texts assigned to each basic theme and this explains participants' perspectives on the issues.

### **3.8.3. Constructing the networks**

Thematic networks aim to explore the understanding of an issue or the signification of an idea (Attride-Sterling, 2001). Themes were arranged based on similarities and grouped, basic themes were selected which results in the generation of concepts and aided analysis of the data (Attride-Sterling, 2001).

### **3.9. Ethical Considerations**

Most research requires ethical clearance to ensure the research is conducted responsibly in a way that would reduce the risk of harm to humans and be assured of a positive outcome. Green & Thorogood (2014) are of the view that 'ethical practice' varies with context, time, and across disciplines and thus contingent on the context of the study.

Participants consented before taking part in the study, participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality to ensure identities were not exposed. In light of this, participants were identified with the use of codes and general titles to avoid any personal and classified information was revealed. Participants were as well informed of the liberty to withdraw from the study at any given stage.

It is critical to protect and keep participants' information safe in research. In this regard, participants were assured of safety as far as the data is concerned. The participants were assured that all information will be kept safe and free from viewership by others.

### **3.10. Chapter Summary**

The methodology a researcher employs drives the research study and ensures that the topic being investigated including the research questions the study seeks to answer are satisfactorily and adequately addressed. In this chapter, an in-depth discussion of the research design and methodology used in this study was provided. I outlined and justified the selection of the qualitative research tradition as the most appropriate choice for this type of research study.

This chapter reviewed the philosophical assumptions underlying the research methodology, which involved interviews. The next chapter presents the data analysis and discusses the findings of the collected data.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **4.0 DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of PR Practitioners in the 2020 election of Ghana. The research technique employed in this study involved in-depth telephone interviews with the participants to observe social distancing and to avoid exposure to the Covid-19 disease.

The research sought to provide answers to the following research questions:

##### **4.1.1 Research Questions**

- 1 What is the role of the PR practitioners of a political party in the 2020 election of Ghana?
- 2 What are the strategies employed as PR practitioners at promoting and protecting the image of the presidential candidate and political party during the 2020 election of Ghana?
- 3 What is the role of the PR practitioners in the engagement with the electorate in the 2020 election of Ghana?

##### **4.1.2 Participants Data**

This section reports on the findings from the analysis of the interview transcripts. It draws upon a total sample of ten (10) PR practitioners from the two major political parties in Ghana who took part in the study. The research participants have participated in the 2020 election and had the experience and knowledge of political communication of the political party. Seven of the research participants were males while three were females and their ages ranged from 30 to 40 years. This explains why professions related to politics are dominated by males.

Three of the research participants do not possess any form of academic title in public relations but were engaged to take up the work due to their natural communication prowess. The political public relations officers especially those without public relations background were trained by their political party's communication experts and also attended ideological schools of the political party. Many of the participants had been with a political party for over ten years. In addition, the participants had been members of the communication team for more than five years. The research participants had completed a higher level of education. This means the PR practitioners engaged by the various political parties possess a degree in relevant field and some practical experiences.

#### **4.1.3. Major Themes Identified**

There were four notable themes identified from the interview with the research participants. These include strategic thinking and planning, monitoring, goodwill and persuasion, and sense of responsibility. The role of PR practitioners are therefore presented according to the most recurring subject matter.

## **4.2 The Role of Public Relations Practitioners in an Election**

### **4.2.1. Communication of the political party's position on policies**

This was a notable response identified when all of the participants were asked about their role as PR practitioners in the 2020 general election in Ghana. P6 explained:

To communicate the party's position on various policies to the Ghanaian populace. Communication comes at different levels. Those who do the strategic thinking and planning and those who communicate what were planned to the electorates. There were practitioners who were part of the backroom thinking and at the same time communicating largely on social media. I and other members were assigned to special constituencies to persuade voters with messages on why they need to vote for us and what my party intends to do when given the mandate. Other times, we were on radios and TVs as well. [Male, Age 38]

From the response of participant six (P6) it can be said that his political party divided the PR practitioners into categories. Some were responsible for creating strategic communication plans and others were the implementers of the created plan to targeted areas.

#### **4.2.2. Monitoring of political discussion in the media**

The analysis of interview transcripts showed the political PR practitioner has the responsibility of monitoring radio and television as well as other media outlets on political discussion, and then calling into the program to debunk issues that might affect the political fortune of the party he or she represents. When asked about what the role of a PR practitioner in NDC and NPP during the 2020 election were, all the participants mentioned participating in radio and television discussions to communicate programs of their parties to the electorate and engaging in political discourse. The narrative from the participants show a defined role in the engagement with the media.

According to participant five (P5):

My colleagues and I were tasked by the committee to listen to political discussions on radios, as well as watch television to respond to any issue raised against our party. We do this from morning until night. We are given call credit and allowance to do it. Sometimes, we phone into the program to contribute as ordinary citizens or just any random voter. Sometimes too we disclose the political party we are speaking for. [Male, Age 40]

Participant five explained how some of them go about their assigned monitoring activities where they're duty was to pay attention to happenings on the media and counter respond appropriately either under disguise or exposing their identity, all in an attempt to make their political party admirable by the ordinary voter.

P2 also reflected the opinion of other participants when she said:

We are usually invited as guests on TV and radio programs to expose the lies communicated by our opponents and to set the record straight. This usually happens when we phone in to a live discussion to correct lies from opposition. [Female, Age 32]

Participant two (P2) affirms what participant five earlier said by stressing on how they pay keen attention to the media space and timely respond to allegations.

P6 confirmed similar thoughts as expressed by the above mentioned participants and stated that:

A team of practitioners were monitoring how we were performing both on media and on the grounds. Because you need to vary the strategy. Each passing day or week comes with an agenda and practitioners who do the thinking, brings the agenda for the day or the week. They pick feedbacks to review whether the objectives of the strategy is been achieved. This could only be done if they monitor our movements on the media and on the ground. [Male, Age 38]

According to Participant six (P6), PR practitioners were divided into categories with some monitoring the media space, responding to allegations and relaying feedbacks to another category of practitioners who use the given feedback to work on subsequent agenda in order to achieve strategic objectives.

It can therefore be said that, PR practitioners who were engaged in the 2020 general election in Ghana monitored happenings in the media and responded to it appropriately to protect the image of both their candidate and the political party they represent.

#### **4.2.3. Building of relationship with voters and persuasion of voters**

Almost all interviewees emphasized the importance of having goodwill among the electorate. Achieving the goodwill of the people demands the use of strategies. The PR practitioners move around various communities nationwide, greeting and helping people with their daily activities. All these actions are aimed at building a relationship and then communicating the political party's vision to win votes.

A PR practitioner who can speak the local language and understand the culture of a particular ethnic group is engaged to build rapport in that part of the country and leverage on it to persuade them vote for their political party. In a short time, the people would be convinced to cast their votes in a certain direction because of the unique identity with the PR practitioner and the kindness shown them.

The following interview excerpt illustrates this. P10 said:

As part of the campaign, we engage in house-to-house campaign where we dispatch staunch supporters who speak same language with the electorates to move to the houses of the electorate and tell them to vote for us. We do not just tell them directly to vote for us. We observe whatever, they are doing. For instance, if they are pounding “Fufu” or doing anything that might take their attention from us we get involve and assist with the chores. While helping them we use the opportunity to sell our party message to them. This in itself is a very unique technique that we use to convince the electorates that we care about them since we are one people and they ought to vote for us. [Male, Age 38]

Participant 10 here explained how they work on the minds of citizens by engaging them in local languages they speak and understand, helping them with chores and familiarizing themselves with the people for votes.

Also stated by ‘P6’ in his response when he was asked about strategies employed in protecting their presidential candidate as stated below in title ‘4.3’ he said among other things:

...we were in opposition but we were more persuasive and more interested in exposing the rots of our main opponent. In doing so, we were more persuasive with our communication. ...moving from house to house, ghetto to ghetto, and one on one engagement on the grounds. [Male, 38]

#### **4.2.4. Guardian of Information and Communication on issues and candidates**

Majority of the interviewees from both political parties asserted that information concerning their parties on policies and allegations that might tarnish their presidential candidate, as well as the electoral fortune for success is entrusted to them. The PR practitioners determine the medium of communication employed to respond to allegations, set agenda for the media and release press statements on issues to address concerns of the electorates.

The following interview excerpt illustrates this:

P1 made it clear that:

We must act like the big brother for our party in this era of so many media houses in Ghana that sometimes speak only lies about us. We do not stay calm, we hit back by the use of social media and traditional media. We determine the communication strategy and wording of the message to ensure it makes sense then we release it to other communicators all over the country so we speak with one voice. We are responsible for the timing of press statements and we respond to all allegations. We also communicate necessary information to the floating voters and conduct mop-ups to resolve any lapses or issues that may arise from unguarded statement of our leaders [Male, Age 39]

This participant (P1) explains that, social media is one tool they use to disseminate the information needed to convince voters. They also address the Press and organize activities purposely to clean their parties and candidates in the eyes of voters.

While answering the same question, P9 shared similar thoughts on staying alert and responding to pressing issues and stated that:

We don't sleep during the period of election. We are always on social media monitoring whatever people are talking about to ensure nothing escapes us. We are responsible for press releases on behalf of the party and our candidate. We determine how to respond to allegations of corruption and nepotism leveled against the party by our opponents. [Female, Age 35]

P9 indicated how their activeness of social media to timely respond to allegations through pressers and other means. She also indicated that, the main allegations levelled against them during campaign seasons are linked to corruption and nepotism.

#### **4.3 Strategies for Promoting & Protecting the Reputation of the Political Parties & Presidential Candidate.**

There were strong endowments of brainwashing of the electorate in the responses of six of the studied political parties PR practitioners. This manifested in dense dissemination of a particular message or news about their candidate in terms of positive attributes and achievements (whether valid or invalid) to the masses. The respondents referred to the co-operation and solidarity in their political strategy by describing their candidates as 'flawless' or 'saint'. Political PR interpretation of 'flawless ' referred to the extent to which candidates are, without blemish in terms of accusation of corruption and leadership qualities, as well as achievement.

According to the responses from the participants, the strategies utilized for promoting and protecting of political parties and their candidates depends on which part of governance you

belong. PR practitioners representing the governing party employed different PR and communication strategies as against those representing the opposition party.

The interviewees narrated the use of political lectures or discussions to promote the intellectual acumen and aspect of the life of the candidate. In addition, the interviewees used “information sound” bits aimed at stimulating the thoughts of the voters. These include sounds such as words, music, use of the front page and press releases. They also used propaganda or spin as a strategic tool while others used persuasive communication. P7, a 34 years male PR practitioner explained the strategy of his political party in strong terms:

The electioneering campaign can be dirty, just to see or hear the image of your candidate and beloved party destroyed can be hard to take. It is sometimes too costly to let go of these allegations.

We cannot bear its impact on our electoral fortunes. We respond by firstly defending our candidate with facts that oppose the claim and then we use the opportunity to make allegations or point to the opposition’s past dirty work, comments or behaviors to silence them and redeem the image of our candidate and political party. We sometimes use catchy sound bites such as incompetent, corrupt leader, and the likes on radio and television to discredit our opponents. I can say propaganda is one main strategy we employ in dealing with allegations.

This participant agrees that, through patriotism to their political party, they can utilize any means necessary to uphold the party and candidate during an election.

Responding to the same question, P4 also emphasized the use of sound bites but gave more background to when to use it as a strategy:

Using sound bites to redeem your candidate’s image is one strategy but it must be employed wisely depending on whether you are in opposition or in power. As a member of the communication team of the governing party, whenever an allegation is raised against the leader and the entire political party we treat it with the contempt it deserves. If we realized the accusation is causing a lot of havoc for the party in the eyes of the public, we fight back with a rationalization to protect the image of the leader and the political party. If such approach is not working, we throw in an equally important controversial statement to generate public conversation in an attempt to promote and protect the interest of the party. A strategy we mostly adopt is the timely use of communication spin or propaganda depending on which side of the divide you belong [Male, Age 38]

According to Participant four (4), PR practitioners use different strategies depending on the part of the divide you represent. A party in power does not only stand up to speak but needs to monitor the situation before taking any decision. The opposition party however speaks freely and maximize the use of propaganda and spinning to make the other party irrelevant.

In Addition, another male respondent, P8, age 30 indicated that:

When every strategy to protect the reputation of our party or candidate fails, which include the use of propaganda, one last resort we employ when it seems the accusation cannot be defended is we divert attention by planting another relevant story in the media which immediately water down the essence of the earlier damaging story. We utilize this tactics as our final resort to protect the image of the party and candidate. When in opposition, we do not really care that much but in power, everything must be taken seriously

This statement by P8 confirms the numerous strategies of a PR practitioner to achieve a set objective. His explanation shows how his party diverts attention from one important event to the other to prevent hostility from ordinary citizens.

Another strategy explained by P6 is the use of “persuasive communication” as he said:

We deployed a lot of PR strategies to promote and protect our candidate and party. I will not say propaganda in its pure sense was what we used knowing that, we were in opposition but we were more persuasive and more interested in exposing the rots of our main opponent.

In doing so, we were more persuasive with our communication. The Ghanaian voter no longer believe in propaganda and telling lies having experienced what happened in earlier elections, we did not deploy pure propaganda in this election. Once the governing party comes out with veil lies and propaganda, we normally come out with a press release to clear our candidate’s name. Normally the strategy is to hold a press conference or release a press statement to deny whatever lie was been told about our candidate. [Male, 38]

It can be derived from this respondent that, strategies utilized when a political party is in power is different from those used when in opposition. Propaganda is sometimes used by the opposition parties while the party in power mostly try to divert attention to other pressing but less damaging issues in an attempt to protect their party and candidate

#### **4.4 Public Relations Practitioners Engagement with Electorates**

##### **4.4.1. Vote winning message to the electorates**

The primary role of the PR practitioner of a political party in the 2020 Ghanaian elections is seen in the strengthening of the voter base with policies and messages of the party to enhance or increase votes. Most PR practitioners during the 2020 election relied on the policies detailed in manifestos of their political parties to engage electorates via social media, town hall meetings and rallies. For example, P6 emphasized that:

There is no luxury of time not to be straight with the electorates. They usually do not have the time to listen to innuendoes because of mistrust for politicians due to perceptions of promise and fail attitudes during the previous campaigns. Understanding these makes us develop a convincing manifesto and verbally explain to them what our party will do for them if voted into power. We usually have to craft the message and boldly present it with a convincing attitude to regain trust [Male, Age 38]

P6 above has recognized how uninterested citizens have become with issues relating to voting. For this cause, they develop a strategy to keep their manifestos simple and easy to understand and then, they try to regain the trust of citizens

P3 confirmed the views of expressed by all the participants and further pointed out that:

We tell them why they should vote for us by looking at our promises such as legalization of 'Okada' (commercial motor cycles), free vocational-technical education and many others. It is about what the party will do for citizens who are eligible to vote and their children. We try as much as possible to research and find out the pressing needs of the people before our policies are proposed. It's a lot of work and without training in public relations skills and approaches, it will be difficult to achieve. [Female, Age 37].

P3 indicated how they study the environment and campaign by promising to cater for the most pressing need of the area in an attempt to win votes

#### **4.4.2. Social Media as the main channel for PR engagement with target audience**

These was also a notable theme discovered from the participants' responses. All the ten (10) participants used the word social media and suggested politicians must know that PR has gone beyond traditional media as the corona virus has come to teach as a great lesson. When asked in what ways they engaged with the electorates in the 2020 election, P8 said:

Because of the Covid-19, the large gathering was not part of our agenda that much. We relied mainly on Social Media before small group meetings, moving from house to house, ghetto to ghetto, and one on one engagement on the grounds. We however used TV and Radios as well to penetrate places we cannot visit frequently. It is however public knowledge that, social media was the main platform we utilized. Our Presidential candidate and almost all our communication officers actively engaged audiences with their individual social media platforms. [Male, 30]

In this regard, it is clear that social media was one very helpful tool utilized for PR works during the Ghana's 2020 general election. The ban on gathering and the limited time allocated to stay at an event boosted the use of social media platforms.

Similarly, P2 also emphasized the importance of social media during the 2020 general election of Ghana and suggested that:

Political parties have to take PR and PR planning seriously and they should also know that PR has gone beyond the traditional media as Corona virus has thought us in the 2020 general election that social media is a very effective way of reaching electorates. [Female, 32]

She tried to tell us of how helpful social media was to her and her party during the election and how it has become necessary for all to maximize the use of this new media.

P6 also mentioned some challenges he encountered when he was on the grounds and how social media made everything easier. He stated:

The time in which we were was actually a problem, people were scared of the corona and they preferred to stay far from you. It made the communication too difficult. You give out materials and they do not even want to take it. You cannot even interact with people anymore to explain things in details. This affected the work and made the communication a bit difficult but social media especially relieved us. [Male, 38]

P6 indicated how difficult it was to stand with voters and to convince them due to the fear of corona virus but with social media, everyone remains at their comfort and follow proceedings

#### **4.4.3. Gains made by engaging PR practitioners**

When the participants were asked about some of the gains their political party has made by engaging PR practitioners, a number of similar things were mentioned. Participant six (P6) summarized it for as he said:

It redefined the party's way of communication. It made the communication more professional. It's one thing been able to talk on radio or TV, it's one thing been able to eloquently express yourself but it's another thing utilizing PR strategies to communicate specific messages to specific targets. PR as a profession starts with research and ends with research, you need feedbacks with every strategy you deploy to be able to start another strategy and because my party engaged PR professionals like myself who were directing the next action, things went smoothly as planned. Our communication was specific; it was tailored for specific purposes. It helped the party to demystify perceptions about our flagbearer and the party itself. PR has been very helpful in cleaning the image of our flagbearer and party. The party did some strategic planning and realized that when you send this specific messages to specific constituencies and you hammer it very well, there are seats you can easily win in Parliament and it worked for us. [Male, 38]

This explains how relevant PR is in every given field of work or profession and how political parties use various PR strategies to beat their opponents.

#### **4.5. Chapter Summary**

This chapter saw a brief overview of the purpose of the study and the research questions the study seeks to address. The results of the study are based on the most recurring theme which were analyzed and respondents were labeled; Participant One (P1) to Participant Ten (P10) depending on the extract quoted.

The next chapter summarizes some of the major findings, makes recommendations for policy and further research and concludes the study.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **5.0 SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the role of public relations practitioners in Ghana's election. Prior to this study, there was little empirical research data on the role played by public relations practitioners in Ghana's politics, which necessitated this study. In an attempt to fill this gap, I utilized the in-depth and key informant interviews to gain a better understanding of the role of public relations practitioners in an election in Ghana. I interviewed ten PR practitioners drawn from the two main political parties in Ghana (NPP and NDC) who were part of their 2020 Communication Team. This helped me to understand their roles and strategies employed during the 2020 general elections and campaign in Ghana.

The objective of this section is to discuss the result as reported in the previous chapter. The discussion concludes by offering recommendations for further studies and the conclusion of this qualitative study is also presented in this chapter. Below are described some of the important themes emerging from the study.

#### **5.2. The Role of Public Relations Practitioners in an Election**

The issue that emerged from the analysis shows there is no knowledge and understanding deficit of the defined roles of public relations practitioners as opined by the respondents. The existence of the role of PR practitioners is exhibited in the monitoring of political discussion in the media, building relationships with voters, persuasive communication activities, as well as the guidance of information, management of presidential candidates and the party's image and communication on relevant issues were identified by the respondents.

This narration is a reflection of the relative appreciation of the roles of political PR experts within the body politics of Ghana, especially amongst the two leading political parties. It is therefore accurate for the respondents to limit the description of the role of political PR practitioners to media management, image management, relationship building, information management and communication on issues without emphasis on the other many organizational roles attributed to public relations practice in organizations and the political space.

### **5.2.1. Communication of party policies and Monitoring of political discussion in the media**

The findings are consistent with evidence that PR in terms of media management is concerned with using the media to disseminate political messages to electorates in an attempt to influence them for votes (Froehlich & Rudiger 2005; Jackson, 2010). Likewise, the findings are consistent with McNair (2003, p.123) who claimed that, management of the media by the political PR practitioners seeks to control, manipulate or influence media organizations to respond to the political agenda. The most striking evidence that buttress the claim of McNair (2003, p.123) is the responses from the participants, which suggests an attempt to control and manipulate the media organization via monitoring of radio and television discussions and phoning in to ensure the interest of the political party they represent is realized.

Furthermore, the result has several similarities with McNair's (2011) findings that political public relations create an avenue for dialogue between the political elites and institutions (media), as well as the public (voters) for favorable publicity towards winning an election. In addition, the findings are consistent with Jones (1999) and Fairclough (2000) case study in the United Kingdom on media management where the labor government communicators seem to have control and manage the news agenda.

Besides, the findings on media management have been traditionally cherished among the political parties involved in the study and a sense of appreciation of their crucial role in shaping public opinion (Bennett & Entman (2001). The importance of media management and control throughout the campaign period during the 2020 election in Ghana was obviously a relevant task for the PR practitioners. The respondents made this clear when majority of them commented on the formation of media monitoring team by both political parties, as well as a delegation of PR practitioners to speak on various political programs in an attempt to whitewash their candidate. Clearly, there were no sharp differences or PR distinction of roles in the two political parties, although there seems to be some level of difference on issues.

### **5.2.2. Building of relationship with voters and persuasion of voters**

The responses of study participants also validates findings by Smith (2013) and Cutlip et al. (2000) that public relations, whether for political or for corporate reasons seeks to create public acceptance through a carefully crafted message. This is in relation to the information presented by the respondents on relationship building with the voters and persuasion of voters for self-gain. It was realized from the responses presented that there seems to be an intrusion or participation by the PR practitioners in the daily activities of electorates in an attempt to build trust and secure their votes. It was by observed (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Cutlip et al., 2006) that, trust is essential in the building of healthy relationships between the political party and the voters to influence vote. It is, therefore not surprising that the political PR of the political parties took it upon themselves to move from house to house and sell the campaign messages during the 2020 election campaign in Ghana.

To ensure they achieved their results, some respondents even said they assisted individuals in their daily home activities in an attempt to familiarize themselves with the electorates. This is consistent with Stroh (2007) who argues that public relations practitioners adopt skilled communication methods to build healthy relationships between an organization and its publics. Employing the assertion of the Stroh (2007) within the context of the work of the PR practitioners in the 2020 election, it was clear that the house-to-house campaign offered them the opportunity to interact with the voters and build trust for the policies of the political party.

### **5.2.3. Guardian of Information and Communication on issues and candidates**

Guidance of information and communication on issues and candidates was another role identified from the results. The qualitative finding is consistent with Grunig (2013) and Edwards (2016) study of the role of PR practitioners in politics as the manager and controller of messages disseminated to the public. The work of political parties to communicate directly to its target audience on policies and to promote their presidential candidate is taken up by PR practitioners who take it upon themselves to assess the necessary channels that will relay relevant information to their audience. A study by Jefkins (2016, p.7) observed that public relations within the political space in terms of guidance of information and communication cannot be organized in a hazardous manner. Findings of the study indicate that, PR practitioners monitor the happenings within the media space and creates necessary messages that resonates well with the target audience. This needs to be deliberate, planned and sustained within a given timeframe.

The well-coordinated manner and execution of the communication and information role played by the political PR practitioners is an evidence that, they are employed in the drafting of campaign messages, organizing of press meetings, and writing and releasing of press statement on behalf of their political parties. Such a role played by the PR practitioner as identified from the result is reechoed by scholarly studies that describes them as the “interpreters” for the political party. They are therefore tasked with the responsibility of explaining the party philosophy, policy and programs to stakeholders in a consistent manner (Skinner et al., 2006, p.6; Cutlip et al., 2000, p.6; Seitel, 2007). Findings of the study indicate that, the communication and information management role played by the PR practitioners ensures purposeful communication devoid of ambiguity is consistent with what was suggested in the literature. For instant, Rensburg & Cant (2009) maintained that the involvement of PR experts of an organization, such as a political party helps to purposefully manage communication and strategic initiative.

As earlier indicated, analysis of the findings show that information management and monitoring are essential roles of political PR practitioners during an election. Such specific roles are necessary in detecting patterns in the political environment that may affect the party’s image, then enables the political parties to timely, and accurately address such concerns. For instance, the respondents alluded to the fact that whenever an issue such as a party member making a controversial statement that has the potential to derail the electoral fortune of the party emerges, it becomes the responsibility of the PR practitioner to suggest appropriate response to the party leadership. This evidence is consistent with a key role of political PR practitioners as counselors to leaders of organizations as well as predictors of consequences of actions (IPRA, 1978; Fawkes, 2007, p.316; Harrison & St John, 1998). Likewise, the issue management role by the practitioners helps political parties to identify challenges and plan appropriate responses.

The challenges that mostly originate from moral, ethical, cultural and social beliefs as well as economic or commercial wants regularly confronts political parties during elections (Pal, 1997; Heath & Palenchar, 2008; Steyn, 2004). It then becomes a prerogative of the political PR practitioner to advise the party on the need for continuous adaptation with changes and management of the issue with varying strategies (Steyn 2002).

Analyzing such findings within the context of the employed theory, specifically the stakeholders and management theory by Freeman (1984, p.46), Thomson, (1967) Brenner & Cochran (1991), it is logical to assume that the roles of the political PR practitioner in an election are about engagement with the various interest groups in an attempt to influence them for electoral gains. This is because the management of communication and information flow on policies and other issues relevant to the electorate influences the voters' choice of political party or candidate (Freeman, 2010; Donaldson & Preston 1995, p.67). The numerous but essential roles of the PR practitioner in politics cannot be undermined during elections.

### **5.3 Strategies for Promoting & Protecting the Reputation of the Political Parties & Presidential Candidates.**

The arguments of the political PR practitioners of the two political parties studied specifically mentioned propaganda or spin and persuasive communication as strategies used at protecting and promoting their parties and candidates from allegations and unfounded statement that cast slur on the credibility of the political party and reputation of its candidate. The choice in strategy to employ however depends on the side of the divide you may belong to, i.e. the opposition divide or the party in government. Furthermore, the respondents from both political parties also introduced the terms “allegations” and “rationalization” to justify the reasons the accusers do not have the locus to label them corrupt and incomplete.

This is in agreement to studies that found propaganda or spin as mostly used whenever an accusation is labelled against parties or for an agenda and policy, as well as protection of reputations, especially in the political space. This assertion is consistent with a study in the United Kingdom where the Labor Government used propaganda to redeem the image and reputation of the Prime Minister (McNair, 2013).

However, the use of propaganda or spin means that the public relations practitioners' work to ensure publicity for their party and candidate, with very little regard to truth; and is based on simple one-way dissemination of information to indoctrinate the public (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). It is however important to note that, the respondents only assert the use of propaganda or spin when the allegations against their party or candidate seem too damaging and there is the need to debunk it and act faster than the accuser.

The qualitative study result made an interesting observation of the use of spin in promoting and protecting the political parties' image and their candidate. The study opined that spin may be jointly necessary for stable and effective narrations of the qualities of its candidates and achievement to the voters. When the political parties are confronted with endless allegations and facts, the only avenue to maintain credibility is to spin the issues. It can also be said that, persuasive communication has also been introduced into the strategies adopted to protect the image of the political party and its candidate. Similarly, when the electorate demanded accountability from the political parties, it was observed from the narrations there is the use of a press conference or release of a statement on a policy that had the ability to divert attention of the public from unpopular policy or action of the government or the opposition party. These findings are consistent with Gaber (2000) study that reported that, whenever a government is accused of wrongdoing it responds with political party announcements, publicizing speeches, interviews and articles, as well as reacting to breaking news events to redeem and control the public concerns.

Likewise, it was evident from the findings that there is a tendency of political leaders to make controversial statements or remarks that dissuade the attention of journalists and media houses from raging issues affecting the government. Such strategy of distracting journalists from a particular story, by planting another greater significance issue is described as fire-breaking (Gaber, 2000).

The analysis of the findings show that the political parties used various strategies as defined by the position of power, whether a ruling party or opposition party dictates the kind of strategy to be deployed at promoting and protecting the image and credibility of the candidate and political party in an election.

Relating the stakeholders' theory to the strategies employed by the PR practitioners in promoting and protecting the image of their party and candidates, it is logical to state that, the nature of key audience determines the approach to deploy. For instance, if a PR expert engages an elite or an educated group the strategy might be different from interaction with party supporters. In light of this, it makes sense to suggest that, the PR practitioner needs to understand the characteristics of the target audience or electorates before utilizing any of the strategies to harness maximum benefit.

## **5.4 Public Relations Practitioners Engagement with the Electorate**

### **5.4.1. Vote winning message to the electorates and Social Media as a major channel**

The findings from the qualitative analysis demonstrate that, greater engagement with the electorate focused massively on the party's political messages or manifesto drafted to influence and gain vote. This brings us to a very significant point made by (Perlof, 2013) that, getting the platform to speak with the electorate at political rallies or town hall meetings demands the party's political messages and provision of links to government policies in an attempt to influence voting pattern. The narration from the respondents show the increasing political awareness of the Ghanaian electorate which cannot be gloss over. In light of this, it is logical to opine that political PR practitioners need to be precise and concise on issues when engaging their electorates.

Additionally, the popularity of the use of social media in reaching the electorates in Ghana has increase after the 2020 general election. Evidence from the responses show that, all political parties relied extensively on the use of social media as an effective communication channel. Social media has become an important channels of messages distribution for political public relations and an expansion and great contribution to the media space as it has been noted to help communicate specific political views, solutions and interpretations to attract support for political policies or campaigns (Lilleker, 2006, Lasswell, 1936). As opined by Rideout (2015) that online can reach audiences of tens of thousands at a go, political actors have commenced competing for followers through social media.

The findings show that, PR practice have a very relevant place in our body politics. Strategic communication is important as it is not everyone who speaks eloquently that is communicating.

### **5.5. Limitations of the Study**

The information derived from the study did not reflect the past elections of Ghana. This is because the information gathered was limited to the 2020 election of Ghana and thus gives little opportunity to generalize the findings to entire elections organized in the history of the country. However, the focus on only the 2020 general election of Ghana was deliberate in order to narrow the study scope and provide in-depth information. Furthermore, the previous elections of Ghana were conducted in like manner from 1992 with National Democratic Congress (NDC) and National Patriotic Party (NPP) being the two major political parties utilizing communication experts or PR practitioners to handle the campaign on behalf of the parties.

Another limitation is that, the study conducted was limited to experiences and descriptions of participants from two political parties as opposed to including the many other political parties in Ghana. The implication is that, respondents from other political parties may have other views about the role of PR practitioners in Ghana's 2020 general election. However, the political parties engaged are the largest in the country and the results from the study tallies with those from other parts of the world as reviewed in the literature. It therefore may not have any substantial effect on the result.

Another limitation may be the number of study participants used. Ten participants may seem too small for the study and to adequately represent the population of political public relations practitioners involved in the 2020 election of Ghana. However, McKenzie and Crouch (2006) explains that, in qualitative study, frequencies are rarely important, as one occurrence of data is potentially useful as many understanding the process behind the phenomenon. Nembhard and Bradley (2009) also explained that adequate determination of a sample size reflects the principle of theoretical saturation. Ten participants were chosen because, the fewer the participants, the better it is for the researcher to go deeper with the interview.

The present study has provided some information needed to shape the dialogue on policy and strategies to be adopted for increased participation and acknowledgement of the roles of political PR practitioners in an election of a developing country.

### **5.6. Recommendations for Policies and Further Studies**

The study recommends increase research into the role of political public relations practitioners in developing countries considering the limited number of studies. Based on the reviewed literature, there is scant literature that deals with the roles of PR practitioners in political elections in developing countries. There is therefore the need for more research to be conducted on this topic for better understanding and appreciation.

The research participants which include only samples from National Democratic Congress (NDC) and National Patriotic Party (NPP) may not reflect the opinions of the other smaller political parties like Convention Peoples Party, Ghana Union Movement, Peoples National Convention, Liberal Party of Ghana, All Peoples Party, Progressive Peoples Party, National Democratic Party, Ghana Freedom Party, among other parties and Independent Candidates who participated in the 2020 elections of Ghana recommends. Further studies is therefore recommended that will include participants from these political parties.

In addition, the number of participants in this study seems to be relatively small and a study with more participants may produce different results. Future researchers on the role of PR practitioners in an election can draw on other approach and experiences like the quantitative approach to better understand and appreciate the roles of PR in an election of any developing country.

Finally, I recommend that political parties need to recognize the role of public relations practitioners as an important part of the political party structure and understand the many benefits associated with engaging of their professional services, which will inevitably reflect on electoral outcomes. To harness their full benefits, there will be the need to offer training on political public relations. The training of people on political public relations may help to reduce certain unguarded statements which have the potential to inflame tension during national elections.

### **5.7. Conclusion**

While the study is qualitative, its findings shed light on the role of political public relations practitioners within political parties in an election in Ghana.

Not only is the present study distinctive in this regard, but may also be the first to pursue the role of political PR practitioners within the Ghanaian election. The findings from the present study contribute to an important conversation among the political party leaders, civil society and advocates of a multiparty system, as well as other stakeholders in terms of analyzing the role PR plays in an election and political discourses within a fledgling democracy. In broader terms, the purpose of this study was to critically explore the role of PR practitioners of a political party in the 2020 election of Ghana, to explore the strategies of PR practitioners at promoting and protecting the image of the presidential candidate and political party in the 2020 election of Ghana and to explore the role of PR practitioners in the engagement of the political party with the electorate in the 2020 election of Ghana. Findings in this study were presented according to the recurring themes.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR THE PARTICIPANTS**

The following questions detailed in the interview guide are to generate a conversation about the role of PR Practitioners in the 2020 election of Ghana. However, to ensure an effective conversation on the issue, questions will be grouped into two categories. The first part will focus on general issues to put the participants at ease and also creating rapport. The second set of questions (main body of the questions) will focus on addressing the research objectives set by the study.

#### **Introduction & Demography**

1. Can you please tell me your age and a little bit about yourself?
2. Can you tell me a little about your education?
3. Can you please tell me how long you have been a member of your political party (NDC, NPP)?
4. Can you tell me how long you have been a member of the communication team of your party (NDC, NPP)?

#### **Role of PR Practitioners within the political party in the 2020 election**

5. Can you please tell me about your role as PR practitioner in your political party (NDC, NPP) during the 2020 election?

### **Strategies Used to Promote & Protect the Presidential Candidate and Political Party**

6. Can you please tell me the PR strategies you used to deal with information or propaganda from the media or opposing political parties that seem to tarnish the image of your presidential candidate and political party during the 2020 election?

### **Role of PR Practitioner & Engagement of the Political Party with the electorate in the 2020 election.**

7. Can you please tell me as a PR practitioner how did your political party engaged with the electorates in the 2020 election.

8. What are some of the challenges you faced in your work as a PR practitioner for your political party (NDC, NPP)?

9. What are some of the gains your political party (NDC, NPP) has made by engaging PR practitioners?

### **Closure**

10. Thank you for your views and your time. Do you have anything else to say?