

ANALYZING THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF PUBLIC OPINION IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

SEGUN LAKIN ODERINDE

oderindesequn@yahoo.com

Department of Political Sciences, Osun State University, Osogbo (Nigeria)
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3572-8363>.

OLAGOKE OLUWAFEMI AWOTAYO

olagoke.awotayo@uniosun.edu.ng

Department of Political Sciences, Osun State University Osogbo (Nigeria)
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9768-8910>.

AFISU OLUWOLE AKINPELU

afeezcootunba1@gmail.com

Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, Osun State University, Osogbo (Nigeria).

IDRIS BABATUNDE ADETUNJI

adetunjiidris001@gmail.com

Department of Political Sciences, Osun State University, Osogbo (Nigeria).

Abstract

This study explores the evolving public opinion in Nigeria's democratic society, highlighting its significance in shaping policy decisions and democratic governance. Nigeria's transition to democracy, marked by the end of military rule in 1999 and the introduction of the Fourth Republic, provides a crucial context for understanding the country's democratic development. Public opinion plays a vital role in democratic governance, as it reflects citizens' preferences, values, and concerns. Ignoring public opinion can have severe consequences, as evident in the #EndSARS movement. This research examines the interplay between democratic governance and public opinion, considering factors like technology, public discourse, and socio-economic developments. Using a qualitative approach and secondary data sources, the study reveals significant changes in public opinion driven by societal, economic, and political shifts. To foster an informed and inclusive public opinion, the study recommends enhancing civic education, ensuring access to objective information, and promoting candid communication. By exploring the dynamics of public opinion in Nigeria's democratic society, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of democratic governance and its implications for policy-making.

Keywords

Public Opinion, Democratic Government, #EndSARS Movement, Nigeria.

Resumo

Este estudo explora a evolução da opinião pública na sociedade democrática da Nigéria, salientando a sua importância na definição das decisões políticas e na governação democrática. A transição da Nigéria para a democracia, marcada pelo fim do regime militar em 1999 e pela introdução da Quarta República, constitui um contexto crucial para



compreender o desenvolvimento democrático do país. A opinião pública desempenha um papel vital na governação democrática, uma vez que reflete as preferências, os valores e as preocupações dos cidadãos. Ignorar a opinião pública pode ter consequências graves, como é evidente no movimento #EndSARS. Esta investigação examina a interação entre a governação democrática e a opinião pública, tendo em conta fatores como a tecnologia, o discurso público e a evolução socioeconómica. Recorrendo a uma abordagem qualitativa e a fontes de dados secundárias, o estudo revela mudanças significativas na opinião pública, impulsionadas por alterações sociais, económicas e políticas. Para fomentar uma opinião pública informada e inclusiva, o estudo recomenda o reforço da educação cívica, a garantia de acesso a informações objetivas e a promoção de uma comunicação franca. Ao explorar a dinâmica da opinião pública na sociedade democrática da Nigéria, este estudo contribui para uma compreensão mais profunda da governação democrática e das suas implicações para a elaboração de políticas.

Palavras-chave

Opinião pública, governo democrático, movimento #EndSARS, Nigéria.

How to cite this article

Oderinde, Segun Lakin, Awotayo, Olagoke Oluwafemi, Akinpelu, Afisu Oluwole & Adetunji, Idris Babatunde (2024). *Analyzing the Changing Dynamics of Public Opinion in Nigeria's Democratic Society*. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. VOL 15 N.º 2, November 2024-April 2025, pp. 371-388. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.15.2.16>.

Article received on 5th December 2023 and accepted for publication on 8th August 2024.





ANALYZING THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF PUBLIC OPINION IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

SEGUN LAKIN ODERINDE
OLAGOKE OLUWAFEMI AWOTAYO
AFISU OLUWOLE AKINPELU
IDRIS BABATUNDE ADETUNJI

Introduction

Nigeria is a large and diversified nation in West Africa that has gone through several governmental transitions over the years. Because public opinion is so important to democratic governance in the country, academics, researchers, and policymakers have been interested in studying it. The formation, measurement, and consequences for democratic processes of public opinion in Nigeria have all been the subject of numerous scholarly investigations, research papers, and reports. Public opinion, which expresses people's views, preferences, and values, is vital in forming the nation's democracy. For a considerable time, public opinion has been considered an essential component of any democratic society, serving as a catalyst for social change, policy shaping, and government accountability. But there seems to be a growing belief in Nigeria's democratic system that the voice of the people is becoming less important. This is consistent with the argument made by Wlezien and Soroka (2016) that public policies ought to reflect the goals and desires of the majority, but that this has not always been the case in Nigeria.

Because there is typically little citizen participation into the policy-making process, the "public policies" that come out of the Nigerian process are solely meant to further and protect the class interests of the few elites that control the country (Aliyu, Ikedinma, & Alabi, 2018). They further state that public opinion and public policy are related; however, people are not always aware that their opinions are used to shape public policy. A bad political culture, unemployment, education, and poverty are only a few of the factors that affect how people use and shape their attitudes about public policy.

Moreover, an opinion often results from a process that occurs in the human mind, and only humans are endowed by nature with the mental faculties necessary for the formation of opinions. Therefore, Lowi, Ginsberg, and Shepsle (2004) and Ayeni-Akeke (2008) agree that the entirety of a group's political orientations, views, values, and attitudes



regarding current topics, players, and events in their political environment can be considered public opinion. Effective public opinion-based policy-making is one of the main forces behind good governance in government. The collective beliefs and viewpoints of the general public regarding a range of issues are referred to as public opinion.

In the same vein, Aliyu, Ikedinma, and Alabi (2018) describe public opinion as the culmination of the diverse viewpoints, attitudes, and beliefs that a sizable segment of a community has expressed regarding a given subject. To effectively address citizens' concerns and make informed decisions, policymakers, politicians, and researchers must have a thorough understanding of public opinion. A number of factors, including political parties, the media, socioeconomic circumstances, religion, ethnicity, and education, all have an impact on the formation of public opinion in Nigeria. The perspectives of individuals and groups within society are shaped by the interaction of these factors.

However, since returning to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria's democracy has undergone substantial changes. The rise of social media platforms and technological advancements has increased the voice of public opinion. More people are able to freely express their opinion, which encourages activism, advocacy, and political involvement. Providing a means of regularly connecting public opinion is one of the main purposes of representative democracy (Aliyu, Ikedinma, & Alabi, 2018).

A Brief Overview of Nigeria's Journey towards Democracy

On October 1, 1960, Nigeria declared its independence from British colonial rule, ushering in a democratic era. But Nigeria's early years were marked by a number of difficulties in creating a democratic society that was both inclusive and stable.

1960–1966: Transition from Colonial Rule to the First Republic

Nigeria was freed from British colonial rule on October 1, 1960. Nigeria adopted a federal system of government with a parliamentary structure during this time. The nation was led by Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the prime minister. The transition to independence marked a significant milestone in Nigeria's democratic journey. However, the inability of the federal government to address regional and ethnic tensions led to political unrest and ultimately, a military coup. This transition highlighted the challenges of managing diversity and the need for inclusive governance. The failure of the First Republic set a precedent for military interventions in politics, undermining democratic institutions and the rule of law.

1966-1979: Military Government and Civil War

Nigeria's first civil war, which started in 1967 and ended in 1970, was caused by a sequence of events that began with the military takeover in 1966. When the Eastern Region, led by Lt. Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, proclaimed secession and established the Republic of Biafra, hostilities broke out. General Yakubu Gowon led the federal government's efforts to bring about peace and end the conflict, which led to



Biafra's defeat and Nigeria's reunification. Gowon was overthrown in a nonviolent coup headed by Brigadier General Murtala Ramat Mohammed, who vowed to bring democracy back and hand the nation back to civilian governance. In fact, in 1979, following the drafting of a new constitution and elections, Alhaji Shehu Shagari became the president of the first civilian government in thirteen years.

The military coup and subsequent civil war had devastating consequences for Nigeria's democratic trajectory. The conflict resulted in significant human suffering, economic devastation, and a prolonged period of military rule. The civil war and military rule led to a culture of impunity, weakened institutions, and a legacy of ethnic and regional tensions that continue to affect Nigeria's politics today.

1979-1999: The Second and Third Republics

There was a transition in the Nigeria government from military rule to democratic governance in 1979. This period saw the rise and fall of various political parties and leaders, as well as the implementation of different political structures. The first democratic government was established in 1979, following the end of a military regime led by General Olusegun Obasanjo. This marked the beginning of the Second Republic, which saw the emergence of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) as the dominant political parties. Therefore, the return to democratic rule in 1979 marked a significant milestone in Nigeria's democratic journey. However, the short-lived nature of the Second Republic due to another military coup in 1983 highlighted the fragility of democratic institutions. The failure of the Second Republic reinforced the need for stronger institutions and effective governance to sustain democratic rule. This event was followed by several years of military rule and political instability until the establishment of the Third Republic in 1992/1993.

During the Third Republic, Nigeria experienced a surge in political activism and the formation of two-party system, including the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC). However, the Third Republic was aborted because the military head of state did not allow it to see the light of day. According to Akinwale (2022), Tinubu bemoaned the fact that the Ibrahim Babangida transition had, in turn, transformed the entire political elite into test subjects for political experimentation, adding that the Third Republic was never supposed to endure. Moreover, public opinion had little bearing on the military head of state between 1993 and 1998. In 1998, Gen. Abdulsalam Abubakar demonstrated his commitment to democratic governance by demonstrating his willingness to listen to the yearning and opinion of Nigerians. The Fourth Republic was founded in 1999 as a result of this endeavour, with the election of President Olusegun Obasanjo, a former military ruler who became a civilian politician. This marked a significant milestone in Nigeria's journey towards democratic governance and led to the emergence of several political parties, including the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP).

The emergence of a two-party system and increased political activism during the Third Republic marked a positive development. However, the military's refusal to hand over power and the eventual abortion of the Third Republic highlighted the challenges of



military disengagement from politics. The administrations of newly formed democracies, like Nigeria, "struggle to maintain constitutional rule and electoral processes that are threatened by conflicts, military coups, or aspiring dictators waiting in the wings" (Lewis, 2006). These countries face an urgent risk to their survival. The Third Republic's failure underscored the need for a genuine commitment to democratic governance and the importance of civilian oversight of the military.

1999-2023: The Fourth Republic and Beyond

The establishment of the Fourth Republic marked a significant turning point in Nigeria's democratic journey. The election of President Olusegun Obasanjo and the emergence of multiple political parties signaled a new era of democratic governance. Additionally, efforts have been made by the government and civil society organisations to support good governance and fortify democratic institutions. But there have been difficulties along the way for Nigeria's democratic transition, such as conflicts between ethnic and religious groups, electoral violence, and corruption. Concerns have also been raised concerning the need for more diverse representation in government and the consolidation of power. However, Fourth Republic has seen significant progress in democratic consolidation, including the conduct of regular elections, the strengthening of institutions, and increased political participation.

In general, Nigeria's government transitions have been marked by a mix of progress and regression. According to Oke (2010), official government practices in Nigeria have been taken over by the military, to the extent that citizens now face hopelessness instead of optimism, security instead of safety, premature death instead of long life and high life expectancy, illusion instead of expectation, deficits instead of dividends, militarisation instead of civility, dictatorship instead of rule of law, political selection instead of election, and other issues. Consequently, it appears that Nigeria's political system is doomed.

The long-term impacts of these changes include: fragility of democratic institutions, need for stronger institutions and effective governance, importance of civilian oversight of the military, challenges of military disengagement from politics, and progress in democratic consolidation, but persistence of challenges. To further consolidate democratic gains, Nigeria needs to address these challenges and work towards strengthening institutions and promoting good governance, encouraging political participation and representation, addressing ethnic and religious conflicts, promoting electoral integrity and reducing violence, and consolidating power and promoting accountability.

The Analysis of Public Opinion in Nigeria's Democratic Society

Public opinion in Nigeria's democratic society has undergone significant changes throughout the nation's transition, evolving through distinct stages.

For instance, the first stage, which is known as the post-colonial era, was characterized by nationalist movements and calls for independence, shaping public opinion and influencing the rise of political parties and the fight for self-governance (Oyelaran-Oyeyinka, 2015).



However, during the military rule era, public opinion was severely restricted and suppressed, hindering its ability to influence decision-making due to the suppression of dissenting voices and political opposition (Mozaffar & Kiewiet, 2003). Despite this, popular opinion persisted and contributed to the case for the ultimate return to democratic rule.

The transition to democracy in 1999 marked a significant turning point, as public opinion underwent a sea change with the move from military rule to democracy. Nigerians could now engage in elections and freely express their opinions (Ate, 2015).

In the subsequent democratic consolidation era, public sentiment was increasingly shaped by media coverage, civil society organizations, and public opinion polls. The development of democratic institutions and procedures also enabled public opinion to significantly influence election results, policy discussions, and elected officials' accountability (Ekeanyanwu, 2021). Social media platforms and online discussions further amplified public opinion.

Throughout these stages, Nigeria's changing public opinion landscape reflects the hopes, worries, and demands of its people, serving as a vital tool for developing a participatory democracy, impacting governance, and directing the democratic transition of the country.

As described above, public opinion in Nigeria has evolved significantly throughout the country's transition from colonial rule to democracy. From the nationalist movements of the post-colonial era to the suppressed voices of the military rule era, public opinion has played a crucial role in shaping Nigeria's political landscape. The transition to democracy in 1999 marked a turning point, allowing Nigerians to freely express their opinions and participate in the democratic process. Today, public opinion continues to be shaped by media coverage, civil society organizations, public opinion polls, and social media platforms, influencing election results, policy discussions, and elected officials' accountability. As Nigeria continues to navigate its democratic journey, it is essential to recognize the power of public opinion in driving participatory democracy, good governance, and democratic consolidation. By listening to the hopes, worries, and demands of its people, Nigeria can build a more responsive and accountable government, ensuring a brighter future for all citizens.

Relevance of the Public Opinion in Democratic Governments

The following are some of the crucial roles played by public opinion in democratic governments. It is important to note that the democratic representation is based on public opinion. Voters' opinions and preferences are supposed to be reflected in and represented by elected officials. The decisions made by policymakers and those in positions of authority are influenced by public opinion. In a representative democracy, the will of the people is manifested in the actions of elected representatives; this is based on public opinion. By guaranteeing that decisions and policies reflect the needs and preferences of the people, it gives the government legitimacy (Nwolise, 2019).

One way to keep governments accountable is through public opinion. Public opinion can be expressed through a variety of means, including protests, demonstrations, and media



outlets, when it is unhappy with the actions or policies of elected officials. By keeping checks and balances in place, this feedback helps guarantee that the government continues to be accountable to and responsive to the people it serves. According to Lawson and Merolla (2017), the general public keeps elected officials responsible for their actions by serving as a continual check on the government. Politicians are influenced by it because they are driven to take public opinion into account in order to stay in power and win reelection.

In a democratic government, public opinion shapes policy decisions. When making decisions on matters like the economy, foreign policy, healthcare, and education, elected officials frequently take the opinions of the general public into account. To create and carry out policies that reflect popular preferences, policymakers consider the attitudes, worries, and goals of the general public. Policymakers use public opinion as a guide to create effective policies and make well-informed decisions. It is easier to make sure that policies are suited to the needs and preferences of the public when public opinion is understood (Stimson, Mackuen, & Erikson, 1995). Public opinion is a crucial component of the policy-making process. When creating laws, rules, and public policies, policymakers take the opinions of the people into account. When it comes to tackling societal issues like infrastructure, security, healthcare, education, and economic development, decision-makers are guided by public opinion.

However, by expressing common values and encouraging group action, public opinion can strengthen social cohesion. It makes it easier to pinpoint shared social objectives and encourages conversation about matters that impact the entire neighbourhood. Public opinion fosters conversation, consensus-building, and dialogue by giving a voice to a range of viewpoints. This promotes social cohesion. It increases a sense of shared values and enables citizens to participate in the democratic process (Nwolise, 2019).

Finally, democratic governments are stable and legitimate if people's opinion is count. The public views the government as having greater legitimacy when the majority of citizens approve of its decisions, policies, and actions. On the other hand, a broad dissatisfaction with the public can result in disturbances, demonstrations, or even a decline in trust in the capacity of the government to govern. In general, public opinion is a key component of democratic governance since it directs policy, holds governments responsible, and promotes stability and social cohesiveness.

Factors Affecting the Relevance of Public Opinion in Nigeria

There are several factors that can affect the relevance of public opinion in Nigeria. These factors include political, economic, social, and technological changes, as well as the level of civic engagement and the quality of information available to citizens. Here are some details on these factors:

Political factor has significance impact on peoples' opinion in as much there is change in politics and developments. For instance, Nigeria's political landscape underwent a dramatic change in 1999 when it went from military rule to democracy, with the public's view increasingly influencing the formulation of public policy (Ogundiya, 2016). Furthermore, the degree of responsiveness to public opinion can be impacted by changes



in political leadership and governance (Osondu, 2015). Political developments like election outcomes and accountability in governance have influenced public opinion in the country. According to Jinadu, Oyediran, and Suberu (1991), political parties and their campaigns function as forums for the expression and formation of public opinion. Political parties frequently express the hopes and complaints of the populace, influencing public opinion on a range of topics. Citizens have the opportunity to voice their opinions through voting patterns, protests, and other political engagement activities during elections and campaign processes.

The significance of public opinion can also be impacted by economic factors. Nigeria has experienced a number of economic difficulties, such as poverty, unemployment, and inflation. Public opinion on matters like social welfare, government spending, and economic policies can be influenced by these economic conditions (Ijewereme, 2019). For example, the nation's 2016 economic recession resulted in a generalised discontent with how the government was managing the economy. According to Osaghae and Suberu (2005), Nigeria is confronted with a number of socioeconomic issues, such as inequality, unemployment, and poverty, all of which have a significant impact on the opinions of the populace about public policy, governance, and economic growth. The public's trust or lack thereof in government institutions and officials is frequently shaped by these variables.

Public opinion can be impacted by social transformations like cultural and demographic shifts. For example, the increasing number of young people in Nigeria has changed political preferences and prompted calls for greater youth participation and representation (Odinkalu et al., 2020). Public opinion on social issues like gender equality and human rights can also be influenced by cultural norms and beliefs within the community (Salawu & Okunade, 2017). Nigeria is a diversified nation with more than 250 ethnic groups and numerous regional identities. Because of these groups' varied political, cultural, and socioeconomic interests, public opinion in Nigeria is influenced by these identities, with discussions concerning power dynamics, resource distribution, and ethnic representation frequently taking center stage (Ogunbodede, 2015).

The emergence of social media is a major factor that has influenced public opinion in Nigeria in the area of technological advancements. A National Bureau of Statistics (2020) report states that there were 123.5 million internet users in Nigeria in October 2019, up from 98.39 million in December 2017. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have given citizens a platform to voice their opinions on political and social issues. According to Edozie and Ogbuagu (2021), the emergence of digitization and the internet has led to a significant expansion and diversification of Nigeria's media landscape. He goes on to say that while traditional media channels like radio, television, and newspapers still have a big impact, social media platforms are becoming more and more important because they give people a place to voice and share their thoughts.

Additionally, social media has given voice to groups that were previously marginalised, such as youth, women, and those living in rural areas. These technological advancements, especially the growing use of social media, are transforming public opinion. Social media platforms have developed into powerful forums where people can discuss politics, rally support, and voice their opinions (Adegoke, 2018). Notwithstanding,



there exist certain obstacles to the influence of social media on public opinion, such as the dissemination of false information and the manipulation of public opinion (Ekwueme, Adegoke & Ogunyemi, 2021). Thomas-Kuye and Adeyemi (2021) draw the conclusion from their research that people's views and opinions are shaped and influenced by mass media. The vast majority of people rely on the powerful mass media for their information. Because of this, most people believe anything they read or hear in the media to be true, even if they don't do any additional research. People's opinions about events are greatly influenced and shaped by the media because it is a medium for disseminating information to the public.

The importance of public opinion can also be influenced by the degree of civic engagement and citizen participation in public affairs. Policy decisions are more likely to be significantly influenced by a highly engaged and active citizenry (Arowosegbe, 2016). On the other hand, low civic engagement can impede the democratic process and reduce the influence of public opinion.

Public Opinion versus Democratic Government

A democratic society cannot function properly without a close relationship between democratic government and public opinion. These are how they interact:

Public opinion serves as a reflection of the views of the people. In the words of Almond (2013), "public opinion is the aggregate of individual attitudes or beliefs about government, policies, and political issues". Democratic decision-making is based on the representation of the various viewpoints and preferences held by the populace through public opinion.

The public opinion tends to influence policy-making. According to Jacobs and Shapiro (2017), "public opinion influences the policy-making process and shapes the political agenda." When formulating policies, elected officials take public opinion into account because disregarding it can cost them credibility and support.

The role play by public opinion as a check on government actions cannot be underestimated: Fiorina (2014) notes that public opinion serves as a check on government actions, holding leaders accountable for their decisions. Opposition to government actions by the public can result in protests, mobilisations, or electoral consequences, which put pressure on the government to change course or respond to the public's concerns.

The role of democratic governments in influencing public opinion: according to Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson (1997), "democratic governments engage in public deliberation, dialogue, and information dissemination to shape and influence public opinion." In order to influence public opinion, governments must frame issues, disseminate information, and encourage discussion.



Democracy Indicators

Several authors have connected democracy to a wide range of indicators, including gender equality, civil liberties and fundamental rights, government accountability, separation of powers, and electoral competitiveness and participation. For example, popular views and opinions on democracy, governance, and other social concerns in Africa are measured through the survey-based Afrobarometer research project. Courts and Security are its indicators. Civil freedoms and political rights are also measured by Freedom House. Every year, Freedom in the World is a thorough assessment that evaluates civil liberties and political rights in various nations, taking into account elements like free expression and the rule of law. The degree of liberal democracy is also gauged by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2020) with its Liberal Democracy Index. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project created this instrument with the intention of gauging the degree of liberal democracy in various nations throughout the globe. The index uses a variety of factors, including judicial independence, freedom of expression, and association and association freedom, to assess how much each nation adheres to these liberal democratic ideals. V-Dem's conception of democracy is based on the electoral principle. It alludes to the fundamental principle that governments should be answerable to the people by holding regular elections with wide voter turnout. Additionally, this score takes into account the freedom of expression, independent media, free elections, and the ability of civil and political communities to function (Moller & Skaaning, 2021). El Salvador, Nigeria, and Tunisia were among the nations that became electoral autocracies in 2021 (V-Dem, 2022).

However, the research undertaken by Moller and Skaaning (2021) showed that there are just a few disaggregate indicators on democratic electoral features that are utilised to differentiate between a number of distinct regime types arranged in a systematic scale. Furthermore, according to Moller and Skaaning (2021), V-Dem, Freedom House, and Democracy Index are mostly based on expert evaluations that are augmented by information from surveys of public opinion, such the World Values Survey.

It is easier to conduct business in a way that respects human rights in a democracy because civil society organisations are active and can raise awareness of issues, employees are more accustomed to speaking out without fear of reprisal, and governments contribute to creating an environment that is supportive of human rights. Companies find it more difficult to uphold human rights in practice in less democratic nations (V-Dem 2024 Democracy Report).

Furthermore, in sustaining Nigerian democracy, civil liberties and fundamental rights index are very important. The civil liberties and fundamental rights indicator is concerned with the acknowledgement and defence of fundamental rights and civil liberties, such as the freedom of assembly, association, press, speech, and expression. V-Dem, Freedom House, and Democracy Index assess how safe it is for people to protest, voice their thoughts, and get equal protection under the law. The Nigerian government has been noted for its inflexibility in ignoring the cries of its citizens, even when they are clearly expressing what they want. This flagrant contempt for the aspirations of the populace could lead to social upheaval and disorder, which would endanger the stability of the country. According to Kaufmann and Kraay (2023), development cannot occur without



effective government. It is unfortunate that the government's indifference to the opinions of the people and its disrespect for their rights frequently undermine Nigeria's democratic system, which is based on the ideas of fundamental human rights and civil liberties. In general, Ezeibe (2021) believed that the African political system denies people democratic freedoms, rights, and values and blocks off political space.

Incidence of #EndSARS and the Nigerian Government

The #EndSARS movement was sparked by numerous claims of extrajudicial killings, extortion, corruption, and police brutality linked to the SARS unit (The Guardian Nigeria, 2020). A viral video of SARS officers attacking civilians led to widespread outrage and demands for systemic police reform and the disbandment of the unit (Amnesty International, 2020).

Nigeria has a history of socio-political movements, including the "Bring Back Our Girls" campaign and the #EndSARS protests, which highlight citizen engagement and demands for government accountability (Aina, 2021). The #EndSARS movement brought attention to structural problems in Nigerian law enforcement, such as police brutality, corruption, and a lack of accountability, and demanded better national governance procedures and more extensive governance reforms.

Protests against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a branch of the police known for its brutality and human rights abuses, marked the start of the movement in 2018 (Thomas-Kuye & Adeyemi, 2021). Government reforms to SARS failed to address the purported injustice and human rights breaches. Ploch (2011) pointed out that there have been allegations of grave violations of human rights against the Nigerian security forces, especially the police, and that the government has not taken much action to address the problems of corruption and impunity in the Nigerian police force.

In October 2020, social media users shared accounts of SARS officials shooting an unprovoked boy in Delta State, leading to widespread outrage and protests (Thomas-Kuye & Adeyemi, 2021). The Nigerian government swiftly announced the disbandment of SARS, but this was not enough to placate the demonstrators, who had seen similar promises before.

The government's response to the protests was criticized, particularly after the Lekki Toll Gate incident on October 20, 2020, where nonviolent protestors were met with force (Reuters, 2020). The creation of the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) unit was seen as a rebranding of SARS, and calls for comprehensive police reforms and better governance continue (Premium Times Nigeria, 2020).

It could be drawn from the above analysis that the #EndSARS movement has brought to the forefront the deep-seated issues of police brutality, corruption, and lack of accountability in Nigeria's law enforcement. Despite the government's disbandment of SARS, the persistence of these problems highlights the need for comprehensive and systemic reforms. The movement has demonstrated the power of citizen engagement and demands for government accountability, echoing the calls for change in Nigeria's socio-political landscape. To truly address the grievances of the #EndSARS movement,



the Nigerian government must go beyond superficial measures and commit to meaningful reforms, including police reform, improved governance, and protection of human rights. Only then can the country begin to build trust between law enforcement and the citizens they are sworn to protect, and create a more just and equitable society for all.

According to Rotberg (2007), the Nigerian government must supply sufficient levels of the essential political goods-security, rule of law, political freedom, economic opportunity, access to infrastructure, health care, education, and empowered civil society-in both sufficient quality and quantity in order to achieve effective governance.

Implications of Neglecting Public Opinion in Governance

Neglecting or ignoring public opinion in governance can have significant implications for the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic systems. Therefore, ignoring public opinion has the following implications:

The general public opinion is an important source of feedback that the government uses to justify its actions. The legitimacy of governmental decisions and policies is undermined when public opinion is ignored, creating a rift between the ruling class and the ruled. As a result, there may be a decline in public confidence and in democratic institutions (Ujhelyi, 2016). In the views of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), "responsiveness to the opinions of citizens depends on the democratic legitimacy of governance." He further states that, when governments ignore public opinion, citizens feel disconnected from the decision-making process, leading to a perceived lack of representation. Also, when government actions are not in line with the needs and preferences of the people, it can lead to a policy disconnect (Page & Shapiro, 1992).

Unsatisfactory policies that do not reflect public opinion can cause social unrest, polarisation, and discontent. Similarly, Wlezien (2020) observes that ignoring public opinion results in a lack of understanding of the needs, goals, and demands of the populace. Consequently, laws and policies might not deal with the real problems that people face. Ignoring public opinion can have a detrimental effect on how effective policies are implemented, which can cause discontent, social unrest, and even protests. Ignoring public opinion can cause citizens to become more aloof and less inclined to engage in democratic processes" (Dalton, 2017). People are less likely to participate in political activities like voting, volunteering, or attending civic institutions when they believe their opinions are being disregarded. The foundation of democratic governance and the political participation culture is public opinion. Ignoring public opinion can impede the growth of democratic values and practices, deter citizen participation, and threaten the development of a vibrant democratic system (Dahl, 1971).

According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2020), "neglecting public opinion erodes trust in government, making it harder for governments to implement policies and enact meaningful change." Effective governance, cooperation, and regulatory compliance all depend on public trust in the government. A reduction in trust can be attributed to disobeying public opinion. A democratic society's diversity is reflected in public opinion. Ignoring public opinion can cause societal divisions to widen because some voices and groups may feel excluded from and marginalised within decision-making processes.



According to Norris (2011), this may intensify social unrest, obstruct social cohesiveness, and jeopardise initiatives for inclusive governance.

Norris (2011) further noted that the UK government's failure to respond to public concerns about EU membership led to a crisis of trust and the eventual Brexit referendum. In France, the government's neglect of public opinion on economic and social issues led to widespread protests and a crisis of trust in institutions (The Guardian, 2020). The failure of governments in the Middle East to respond to public demands for reform led to widespread unrest and regime changes (Teti & Gervasio, 2012). It could be seen from the above analysis that the failure of government to listen to people's yearning may result into chaos in the society. Therefore, bridging the gap between policies and public opinion is therefore essential because of the implications it can cause on Nigerian governance.

In order to bridge the gap between policies and public opinion, Fung (2006) suggested that the mechanisms should be established for citizen participation, such as town hall meetings, citizen juries, and online engagement platforms. Similarly, Wlezien (2020) maintained that the regularly solicit feedback from citizens through surveys, focus groups, and social media is very essential. Norris (2011) also states that the involvement of diverse stakeholders in decision-making processes to ensure representation and responsiveness to public opinion will help in addressing the gap between policies and public opinion. According to Dahl (1971) transparency in decision-making processes should be ensured and officials should be hold accountable for responding to public opinion.

Materials and Methods

The study adopts a qualitative method for data collection. Qualitative research can be used to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research. It is commonly used in humanities and social sciences. In this study, documentary method of data generation was used, and data was obtained from books, journal articles, conference papers, online materials, official documents, newspapers periodicals, and democracy indicators. The documentary method of data collection results in deep understanding of new ideas, and provides an opportunity to have in-depth study on public opinion and other related issues. The documentary study helps to discover knowledge gap (s) in the literature. This study also make use of a comprehensive approach in understanding democratic dynamics and public opinion in Nigeria, integrating data from the V-Dem dataset, Afrobarometer surveys, Freedom House reports, the Democracy Index, and the World Bank's Governance Indicators. The study however, synthesizes insights from scholarly literature, including journal articles, books, book chapters, online news sources, and democracy indicators, to provide a nuanced understanding of Nigeria's democratic landscape. Data collected were subjected to content analysis.



Conclusion

It can be concluded from the study that the changing of public opinion in Nigeria's democratic society has undergone significant changes since the country's transition to democracy in 1999. The study's conclusions demonstrate how public opinion is dynamic and always changing, greatly impacted by a wide range of variables, including political developments, economic hardships, and changes in society. Social media and online platforms are two examples of the traditional and modern mechanisms that influence public opinion in Nigeria. It is clear that public opinion has a significant impact on how policies are decided upon, elections are conducted, and the nation is generally run.

Recommendations

Several suggestions were made in light of the findings to promote an informed and inclusive public opinion in Nigeria:

The Nigerian government should establish regular forums for citizens, civil society organizations, and legislators to engage in constructive discussions on key issues, complemented by outreach programmes to engage marginalized communities and ensure their voices are heard. Online forums and social media groups should be created to facilitate inclusive discussions and reach a broader audience.

To promote unbiased reporting, the government should support independent journalism by providing funding and resources to independent journalists and media outlets. Transparency should be ensured through freedom of information laws and regular press briefings. Furthermore, the government should ensure representation of marginalized groups in decision-making processes through quotas or affirmative action and create a social media monitoring team to address hate speech, disinformation, and sentiment manipulation.

Public awareness campaigns should be launched to educate citizens on the risks of disinformation and hate speech, and regulatory frameworks should be developed to address these issues on social media. Regular surveys, participation tracking metrics, and impact assessments should be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive dialogues, civic education programmes, media literacy programmes, and fact-checking initiatives. The government should solicit feedback from stakeholders to identify areas for improvement and adapt strategies accordingly.

Additionally, comprehensive civic education curricula should be developed and integrated into schools, focusing on critical thinking, media literacy, and participatory citizenship. Teachers should receive training and resources to effectively deliver civic education programmes, and community-based programmes for adult civic education should be established, targeting marginalized groups and underserved communities.

Finally, the government should partner with civil society organizations to support civic education initiatives and leverage resources.



References

- Aina, T. A. (2021). #EndSARS: Mobilization and Political Activism in Nigeria. *Africa Spectrum*, 56(2), 95-105.
- Akinwale, A. (2022). *Third Republic Was Designed to Fail, Says Tinubu*. ThisDay Newspaper.
- Aliyu, M. K., Ikedinma H.A., & Alabi, W. A. (2018). Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy in South West, Nigeria. *Journal of Arts & Humanities*, 7(7), 12-22
- Almond, L. J. (2013). *Public Opinion and Public Policy in Democracies*.
- Amnesty International (2020). Nigeria: Time to End Impunity. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/9913/2020/en/>
- Arowosegbe, J. O. (2016). Public opinion in the local governance system in Nigeria. *Lagos Journal of Governance*, 5(1), 77-96.
- Ate, O. (2015). Democratic Transition and Consolidation: The Nigerian Experience. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(3), 197-204.
- Ayeni-Akeke, O. A. (2008). *Foundation of Political Economy*, Ibadan: Ababa Press Limited, 147-167.
- Dahl, R. A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and opposition*. Yale University Press.
- Dalton, R. J. (2017). *The Participation Gap: Social Status and Political Inequality*. Oxford University Press.
- Delli Carpini, M. X., & Keeter, S. (1996). *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*. Yale University Press.
- Economist Intelligence Unit (2020). Democracy Index, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/>
- Edelman Trust Barometer (2020). *Global Report*. <https://www.edelman.com/trustbarometer>
- Edozie, S. I., & Ogbuagu, B. O. (2021). Impact of Social Media on Political Participation in Nigeria: A Critical Discourse Analysis. *Journal of Media Critiques*, 6(21), 283-305.
- Ekeanyanwu, N. T. (2021). Social Media and Public Opinion in Nigeria's Democratic Process: A Critical Analysis. *Journal of Danubian Studies and Research*, 11(2), 189-200.
- Ekwueme, C. N., Adegoke, Y. A., & Ogunyemi, O. O. (2021). Social media and political participation: The Nigerian example. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 15(1), 1-11.
- Ezeibe, C. C. (2021). *Hate speech and election violence in Nigeria*. Conference Paper. University of Lagos.
- Fiorina, M. P. (2014). *Public Opinion and Public Policy*.
- Freedom House (2020). *Freedom in the World*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>
- Fung, A. (2006). Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance. *Public Administration Review*, 66(1), 66-75.
- Hibbing, J. R., & Theiss-Morse, E. (2002). *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work*. Cambridge University Press.



- Ijewereme, O. B. (2019). Economic determinants of public opinion in Nigeria. *Indian Journal of Finance*, 13(9), 79-91.
- Jacobs, L. R., & Shapiro, R. Y. (2017). *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media*.
- Jinadu, L. A., Oyediran, O. O., & Suberu, R. T. (1991). *Nigeria's Second Republic: Presidentialism, Politics and Economic Crisis*. Fourth Dimension Publishing Company.
- Kaufmann, D., & Kraay, A. (2023). *Worldwide Governance Indicators, 2023 Update*. www.govindicators.org
- Lawson, C., & Merolla, J. (2017). *Public opinion*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication.
- Lewis, P. (2006). 'The comparative importance of third elections in developing new democracies'. *Distinguished Guest Lecture Series*, No. 10, University of Lagos, Nigeria, August 22.
- Lowi, W.; Ginsberg, R. & Shepsle, Y. (2004). Nigeria's Government's Policy Dilemma: Flexibility without Laxity. *Journal of Research and Development*, 6, 32-43.
- Moller J., & Skaaning, S. (2021). *Varieties of Measurement: A Comparative Assessment of Relatively New Democracy Ratings based on Original Data*.
- Mozaffar, S., & Kiewiet, D. R. (2003). Electoral Contests, Incumbent Strategy, and Nonpartisan Elections in Africa: Lessons from Nigeria's Transition to Democracy. *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 15(1), 79-102.
- National Bureau of Statistics. (2020). *Active voice and internet subscribers - Q3 2019*. <https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/pdfuploads/Active%20voice%20and%20internet%20subscribers%20-%20Q3%202019.pdf>
- Nelson, T .E., Oxley, Z. M., & Clawson, R. A. (1997). *Toward a Psychology of Framing Effects*.
- Norris, P. (2011). *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nwolise, O. B. (2019). Public Opinion and Good Governance in Nigeria. *International Journal of Advanced Academic Research Social and Law Sciences*, 5(1), 118-126.
- Odinkalu, C., Ekwewuo, I., & Nweze, C. (2020). The youth bulge, generational shift, and Nigeria's politics: The least favored child?. *Journal of African Elections*, 19(2), 174-194.
- Ogunbodede, A. (2015). Ethnic Identities and Political Development in Nigeria: Implications for Democratic Governance. *Nigerian Journal of Political Science*, 43(3), 415-430.
- Ogundiya, I. S. (2016). Public opinion, political participation and governance in Nigeria's democracy (1999-2013). *International Journal of Political Science and Development*, 4(7), 216-224.
- Oke, L. (2010). Democracy and Governance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. *An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia*, 4(3a), 31-40.
- Osaghae, E. E., & Suberu, R. T. (2005). A History of Identities, Violence and Stability in Nigeria. In A. Hyslop & M. M. MacKenzie (Eds.), *African states and their histories* (pp. 170-199). Ohio University Press.



- Osondu, J. O. (2015). Democracy in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 4(4), 298-307.
- Oyelaran-Oyeyinka, B. (2015). Economic governance and growth challenges in Nigeria. *African Development Review*, 27(S1), 26-39.
- Page, B. I., & Shapiro, R.Y. (1992). *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*.
- Premium Times Nigeria. (2020). 'How we carried out massacre of #EndSARS protesters – Nigerian Army'. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/420419-how-we-carried-out-massacre-of-endsars-protesters-nigerian-army.html>
- Rotberg, R. I. (2007). *Nigeria: Elections and continuing challenges*. Council on Foreign Relations. New York
- Salawu, I. O., & Okunade, A. A. (2017). Public opinion and gender equality in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 18(1), 151-164.
- Stimson, J. A., Mackuen, M. B., & Erikson, R. S. (1995). Dynamic representation. *American Political Science Review*, 89(3), 543-565.
- Teti, A., & Gervasio, G. (2012). The Unbearable Lightness of Authoritarianism: The Rise of the "Arab Spring". *Mediterranean Politics*, 17(2), 149-164.
- The Guardian (2020). *France's Yellow Vest protests: what's behind them?*
- The Guardian Nigeria. (2020). 'Endsars Protests Swept through Nigeria'. <https://guardian.ng/news/endsars-protests-swept-through-nigeria/>
- Thomas-Kuye, O. A. & Adeyemi A. O. (2021). Mass Media and People's Opinion: A Review of Endsars Protest in Nigeria. International Journal of Women in Technical Education and Employment (IJOWITED). *The Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro Chapter*, 2(2), 38-43
- Ujhelyi, G. (2016). The Impact of Public Opinion on Policy Making. *Journal of Public Policy*, 36(2), 147-164.
- Varieties of Democracy Institute. (2022). *Country Brief: Uganda*. University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Country Brief 11.
- Wlezien, C. (2020). *Public Opinion and Policy Representation*. Oxford University Press.