

Public Opinion and State Policies in Nigeria (1999-2024)

Paul Ogbonnaya Arochukwu

Centre for Politics

University of Port Harcourt

Email: arochukwulaw@gmail.com

Nelson V. C. Okene

Department of Public Administration

Faculty of Social Science

University of Port Harcourt

Email: nelson.okene@uniport.edu.ng

Abstract

Government in every state and especially in a constitutional democracy exists to maximise the will of the people, who are indeed the popular sovereign. It is thus important that the government, as agents of the state, gauge the people's response to its policies and programs. This paper, Public Opinion and State Policies in Nigeria (1999-2024), therefore aimed to measure the impact and outcome of public opinion on state policies in Nigeria for the stated period. This study used secondary data to analyse the nexus between public opinion and state policies qualitatively. Using social contract theory, the paper argued that the people's consent, measured through public opinion, is crucial to policy success in Nigeria. It was recommended that public opinion should not be suppressed but rather encouraged to play its role in stabilising and entrenching democracy.

Introduction

The concept of public opinion began to take off in the 18th century as the role of the public began to take a more active form. The phrase 'public opinion' was not used in England until the 18th century. The term opinion publique (public view) has its French roots in its legal system. It was first used by Montaigne in 1588. The evolution of the idea was caused by urbanisation and other political and social processes. The power holders rely on the opinion of the people to learn the mood of the people and how to utilise the state actors to achieve good governance. The best way to know how the people perceive the way their government relates to them and how it manages its foreign relations is to look at public opinion.

Laski (1919) argues that the state exercises the utmost form of coercion in any society. It does so to enhance good governance and to guard the interests of the people who possess the means of production. Following Aristotle literally, the state is the highest of the organisations, and the ultimate objective of the state is the pursuit of happiness. It should be noted that the state is an institution that was formed to control human behaviours (Idris, 2018, p. 7). Individuals inhabiting a sovereign state create an order to regulate the development and activity of their own society; this order is termed a state. Based on the above, it is easy to state that state policies are the actions performed by a government within its borders to solve certain problems or accomplish some objectives.

Such policies are the consequence of a complicated combination of political factors and political considerations, social norms and facts of the economy, and the goals and visions of people. Chapter 2 of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria, as amended, Sections 13 to 24, deals with

the basic role of government. According to Section 13, every organ of government, including the legislative, executive and judicial arms, should comply with the rules contained in this chapter of the constitution. The official policy objectives and tenets of Nigeria all fall in line with this.

In the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the principles involved will be social justice and democracy. In section 14, it is made clear that the people of Nigeria own the Nigerian sovereignty and that all the rights and powers of the government of Nigeria are provided by this constitution. The major service that the government can offer is the security and prosperity of its residents. This constitution guarantees the right to vote in a national election. Based on the above, the main aim of this study is to establish the overall effects of public opinion on state policy between 1999 and 2024.

Conceptual Review

The great utilitarian philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, argues that the king ought to rule to achieve the highest satisfaction of the majority. Bentham believes that the view of the crowd mattered. Schofield (2019) applied utilitarianism to explain such concepts as the opinion of the people. Sociologists have found that the ways of communication and interactions between people significantly influence global opinion. In their argument, they believe that the only way people can get their views on a certain issue is by discussing it with others. They hold the view that the decision of a few individuals cannot be held as representative of the opinion of the many unless it gets to a bigger audience through written or speech communication or some other form (electronic or otherwise) that amplifies the reach of that communication.

The other perspective of viewing public opinion is to regard it as the aggregate of several varying opinions of different people in a certain society on a given issue. Public opinion constitutes all the political opinions, values, and concerns held by all members of a group, which, according to Ayeni-Akeke (2008) and Lowi et al. (2004), is based on the political beliefs and values possessed by the group members. There are numerous versions where members of the population can air their views, and these include public forums, demonstrations, editorial writings, election results, plebiscites and radio and television talk shows (Johari, 2005).

Aliyu et al. (2018) refer to public opinion as the totality of all the views, opinions, and attitudes that a significant part of a community has expressed on a certain issue. Professional understanding of the mass mind is of prime importance to academics, parliamentarians and politicians who can then tackle the issues of the people and make sound decisions. Nigerians are influenced by a very large number of variables, including their political preferences, the reliability of the news sources, their income status, their religion, their ethnic affiliation, and their education status.

According to Jaja & Aba-Erondu (2000), public opinion is defined as the ideas, judgments, or views of the populace or the acts of the government that are believed by most of the residents of a particular country. On the other hand, the opinion of the people promotes free discussion, consensus-making, and dialogue because it raises awareness about various views. This makes people keep together. This enables the majority of the people to participate in government policies and gives a sense of belonging to the community (Nwolise, 2019). This definition of public opinion can include a diverse set of notions, such as mass opinion, the overall opinion of the voting population, and all the separate opinions, under this definition (Asogwa, 2017). In this general meaning, the perception of people and NGOs regarding certain political matters is included. It may be crazy, prejudiced, or grounded on ignorance, or it may be grounded on facts and sound reasoning. Akindele et al. (2000) also hold that much consensus exists among voters on significant

national, regional, and global political issues and significant government programs and policies. This agreement is also referred to as the popular feeling or the opinion of the population.

In liberal states, individual freedom and independence have high values. This implies that the government should remain unmoved and avoid over-interfering. To have authority, a state must be supported by the majority of its citizens. The major role States play is to ensure that there is a rule of law and that all individuals are treated with respect and justice without any discrimination. In other words, liberal states value reasonableness and the morality of their inhabitants. They have optimism that the government is supporting them to succeed in terms of the economy by providing them with favourable conditions. Itanyi & Frank (2019) report that liberals have always believed that the state is a valid public institution that fairly polices and guides society with the help of its monopoly of force. In essence, the state remains non-partisan and does not utilise its authority to impose a specific order, which means it does not take a position on anything. According to Ekekwe (1986), this nullifies the main thesis of the Marxist theory in that the state is merely a committee to administer the business of the bourgeoisie, the institution through which individuals of the ruling class manifest their shared interest. The use of the state is one of the means through which the ruling class keeps the lower class in check. An explicit expression of this power is the way state regulations and policies are designed in the interest of the dominant group. The executive orders, the legislative fiat, as well as the court system, all contribute to the capacity of the ruling elite that is already in place to hold on to power.

Considering that it is a living public power (Okolie, 2015), all states function to preserve their natural endowment and the territorially inherited cosmic order, and all that is under its guard, structures, and tools (human or other). The key role of this ruling institution is to organise and harmonise the activities and normative standards of the society, to dictate and advance shared values, and establish the currents and transactions of the behaviour of the given enclave.

This interpretation of the term invariably defines every aspect of government operation as public policy, whether fixed or variable. Public policy occurs when the government makes a decision on a course of action to be taken in dealing with issues (Lemey, 2006: p.9). Governments tend to employ this strategy to fulfil their objectives, manipulate the behaviour of their citizens, and maintain peace. Public policies determine the success of any community, hence the interest of many people in knowing the extent of their effectiveness (Ikelegbe, 2006). Many organisations, including governments, groups, and individuals, implement policies in furtherance of their objectives, which is a process or a course of action selected among options considering the given conditions to influence and, in most cases, to determine present and future decisions (Anyebe, 2018). A grounded but nuanced understanding of public policy is germane to the appreciation of this discourse.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this article is social contract theory as articulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Public approval, a key initial step, is based on this theory of social contract. To Rousseau, the foundation of a state is not force, but free will, i.e., the most valuable aspect of a government is its consent by the governed. The notion that the modern state originated from a contract was held by many social contract theorists, including Rousseau. People yield to the power of the state in exchange for decent government. Thus, man is a contracting party, and a government that contravenes this requirement could be overthrown by acts of disobedience, as it loses its legitimacy in the eyes of the people, according to Rousseau (Shafritz, 1988). Richard (2023) explains that the government is an outcome of a need by the people to cooperate and agree on certain policies in furtherance of their aspirations.

We discuss political reality in Nigeria and other African countries expressed in the opinions of the people through the prism of the social contract theory. It enables us to analyse how government officials regard or are otherwise indifferent to the opinion of the masses, and to majority opinion. It enables us to see how state policies, in a worst-case scenario, are often a reflection of the idiosyncrasies and vanities of the ruling elite. This is in keeping with the claim by Marx that the state is one of the tools through which the upper class controls and dominates the lower class.

Data Collection

The study relied on documentary sources, books, journal articles, magazines, newspapers, and other online materials as the sources of data analysed in this paper.

Evaluation of Public Opinion vis-à-vis State Policies in Nigeria (1999-2024)

This paper focuses on some selected government policies to ascertain the public opinion regarding their benefits and how the government responded to these public views.

In 1999, the Obasanjo government subtly proposed a third-term agenda in office. In other words, he demanded tenure elongation beyond the constitutional provision. Some of the reasons put forward to justify the extension of the tenure were based on the fact that it would spur the much needed reforms in the failing economy of Nigeria that was experiencing the problems of skyrocketing energy prices, mounting external debt levels, excessively high prices of imported refined petroleum products into the country, declining foreign investment and a steep decline in the value of the local currency and purchasing power among the locals. The proposal was vehemently resisted by opposition political blocs in the national assembly as well as the organised and unorganised civil society (Omotola, 2006). Eventually, the government denied the third-term agenda and abandoned the policy.

However, President Olusegun Obasanjo's shuttle diplomacy had a positive impact on both the economy and the people, as reflected in the public opinion. The diplomatic efforts and foreign relations of the Obasanjo regime, otherwise christened as his 'shuttle diplomacy', changed the perception of the nation and promoted direct investments by foreign nations, especially in the telecommunications industry. It was part of the rebranding effort and the positive public opinion that led to the formation of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) to increase the nation's standing in the fight against corruption. Consequent on the new image of the country, the debt of the Paris Club was reduced to less than 18 billion dollars and with the growth of the Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) through MTN and others. The Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), according to Ilemona (2020), has performed miracles for the image and recognition of the country among the mass audience. Whether this perception of ICPC and EFCC remains true is arguable, but beyond question was the mass appreciation of Obasanjo's shuttle diplomacy and the gradual readmission of Nigeria into the global system after years of military rule and the consequent diplomatic isolation of the country.

In another policy move, President Obasanjo's government gave control of the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon. When Obasanjo made the decision to relinquish the Peninsular to Cameroon, it was speculated that the reason behind the action was to impress the international community, maybe to win the favour of the international community over his agenda of extending his administration to a third term in office, which was conducted unofficially but denied publicly. This policy, the ceding of the Bakassi, did not please many Nigerians because of the richness of the Bakassi peninsula in terms of hydrocarbons (Inyang, 2018). According to records, in 1912, the King of England had entered an agreement with the Obong of Calabar, which recognised the

Obong as King of Bakassi; this preceded the union of Southern and Northern Nigeria by Fredrick Lord Lugard in the year 1914. Bakassi then remained the territory of the Efiks. Thus, the claim by the Hague and the international community that Bakassi is no man's land was contestable (Omoigui, 2012). The Nigerian Public opinion on the ceding of the Bakassi did nothing to sway the government of Olusegun Obasanjo into fighting for the oil-rich area, as it readily accepted the ruling of the ICJ over the disputed territory. The signing of the Green Tree Agreement remains controversial and is regarded by many Nigerians as one of the worst decisions of the Obasanjo regime. In a recent commentary that mirrored public opinion over the matter, a former Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, High Chief Etubom Ani, described the Obasanjo regime's decision as a "diplomatic & administrative blunder" (The Cable, 2015).

Another important policy worth considering is the Nigerian Federal Government's Amnesty programme under President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua/Goodluck Jonathan Presidency. The programme was conceived during the Niger Delta crisis to grant amnesty to militants in the Niger Delta region in exchange for their demobilisation and disarmament. It was a persuasive necessity to address militant agitation, kidnapping and sundry insecurities associated with the agitations in the oil-rich region (Ebiede, 2017). The process was tied to financial compensation, among other training and rehabilitation schemes, by the government over time. It was commended in the Niger Delta but received negative reaction from some Nigerian citizens from other parts of the country, especially from the northern part of Nigeria. This is principally due to ethnic colouration in Nigerian politics, which often influences public opinion (Ikenga, 2023).

Gasoline subsidy reduction has been directed towards the Nigerian people by the respective regimes in power in the period under study. Efforts to end such a subsidy, which was initially introduced in the 1970s, were made by previous administrations in Nigeria. Although the supply of crude oil is considerable in Nigeria, it cannot refine its crude oil in sufficient quantity to satisfy local demand. Petroleum subsidy meant that the price of the petroleum products in the country is artificial, as it is determined by the government, which imports the products at market price and sells at its own reduced price for local consumption, ideally speaking. However, the cost of financing the subsidy remained an enormous burden to the state. The general population was always in favour of an unlimited supply of petroleum products. The Occupy Nigeria strike took place in January 2012 as a direct response and criticism of the Goodluck Jonathan government's relaxation of the subsisting subsidy regime.

The recent subsidy removal by President Tinubu, immediately after he assumed office in 2023, did not go down well with Nigerians. Given the hardships being suffered by Nigerians, opinions were divided on the subsidy removal policy of the Tinubu administration. Although the government has argued that the subsidy is detrimental to national development, a few individuals have benefited from it by importing petroleum products into Nigeria and reaping homogeneous profits (Afrobarometer, 2024). Allegations of corruption have attended the subsidy programme over the years, yet its sudden removal without palliatives heavily impacted the cost of living in the country.

Other controversial government policies include the Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) settlement policy. The controversial policy may have been laid to rest, but it has not disappeared from the minds of people, and probably will not. The Buhari regime was determined to establish a rural grazing settlement throughout the country without consulting the people. According to Omednuwa (2019), the RUGA agenda was supporting the Fulani ethnic group of former president Muhammadu Buhari. It is okay that the government prefers some ethnic groups, but that is not the case when the program under consideration poses a threat to the lives and livelihoods of most of the people.

Opposition to the programme, especially in the south, was so fierce that even ‘politically correct’ southerners were against the RUGA agenda. The only groups which seemed to favour it were those in the north that were led by the government and the Fulanis, who control the political map of the country. In July 2019, the then-president temporarily cancelled the controversial Ruga program in response to a major wave of public protest. It was an immediate lifeline of public perception to the president, as it was perceived as rescuing the country from another outburst of unreasonable ethnic and tribal hatred, which the RUGA initiative was rapidly falling into before its suspension. Many were pleased by the fact that a leader who had been criticised on grounds of being too slow and being too rigid reconsidered his stance in response to public opinion.

Another very sensitive issue is that of public debt. Many citizens of Nigeria fear the way their government borrow funds from other nations and international creditor agencies. President Buhari justified borrowing for the reconstruction of infrastructure. To lure investors, we must borrow money to build infrastructure like roads, trains and power plants. It was the insistence of the previous president that borrowing of funds is the only viable means of financing infrastructure projects by the government. Despite the public opinion of most Nigerians on the negative impact of borrowing on the Nigerian economy, and concerns over its capacity to service these loans, as well as repay the debt, these were ignored by governments and authorities. The government continued in the tradition of taking further loans. It is estimated that the Buhari administration borrowed about N31 trillion in eight years of his administration, leaving the country with a total debt of one hundred and sixty-seven billion dollars as of May 2023 (Olatunji, 2022). From the inception of the Tinubu administration, more loans have been taken, raising concern among Nigerians about the piling external debt. As of June 30th, 2025, Nigeria's external loan debt surpassed 152 trillion, according to the Debt Management Office (Mbachu, 2023; Sahara Reporters, 2025).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Over time, public opinion shows that Nigerians recognise the wide array of worrisome problems, such as political cum financial corruption, ineffective governance policies, electoral sharp practices, poor technological state, epileptic power supply, insecurity, among others. These challenges are not given the required priority via government actions, as priority is sometimes determined by public opinion. Leaders of society and political office holders do not give the required consideration to the opinion of the masses. Though the power and influence of the masses are not completely lost on the governing elite, as can be seen from the response to the Third Term Agenda and the RUGA policy reversal.

Public opinion can be better regarded and more relevant to Nigerian politics and governance if the Nigerian political elite embrace enlightened self-interest and focus on the overall benefits to governance provided by an active, informed and engaged public. Jurist and historian, Englishman James Bryce, posits that well-established and sound governments founded on popular consent are beneficial to the nation. He believes that policies ought to be founded on popular views to reflect the wishes of the people. In democratic nations, public opinion should not be ignored. A situation where public opinion is significantly ignored, citizens become less politically engaged and degenerate into political apathy (Olmastroni, 2010).

The active engagement of public opinion in a plural society like Nigeria also helps the government to access the much-needed compromise, necessary for managing complex and competing interests for the effective governance of the state. This is because it often balances the often-skewed interests of the national parliament at moments of great controversy.

It is a common observation that the Nigerian political class consider public opinion when they seek public office to measure their popularity, but after that, the people are largely ignored. Thus, citizens must act via public opinion to monitor the actions of their political office holders, make them accountable for pursuing the appropriate policies that serve the goals and interests of the political community.

Civil society and its leadership must realise and embrace the sacred duty of holding the government and its agents accountable for their decisions and actions. This can be done by continuously mobilising the masses to hold and propagate their well-reasoned opinion of government policies as a counterweight to the parochial tendencies of the political class.

Democratic consolidation is better served when freedom of speech and the deliberate harvesting of public opinion by the government become a norm rather than an exception, especially in a democratising, post-military-authoritarian state. Therefore, the government should encourage the free reign of public opinion within the polity.

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