

Measuring Citizen Attitudes Towards Civic and Political Participation in Nigeria: A Descriptive Approach

by

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Abstract

This study measures the extent that Nigerians are actively involved in the political process and how much they are politically engaged either through exposure to media content, voting or community participation and membership. Thus, the paper analyses the result of part of the data collected by Afrobarometer (a non-partisan, non-partisan research and research project in Africa that measures the attitudes of citizens on democracy and governance, economy, civil society, and other topics) on civic and political participation in Nigeria in 2011/2012. The analysis was descriptive. Responses to questions are presented in percentages showing each response and an analysis of how the highest response relates to the question, and its implications. The data analyses show that although citizens appreciate democracy, civic and political participation is low in Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria, like every other developing country, is striving toward nation building. “Nation building is a multifaceted process of building the socio-political and economic preconditions that would be instrumental to the continued sustenance, development and growth of the society” (Esere, Omotosho and Arewa 2008, 26). Nigeria has been a country in a perpetual state of transition. After independence in 1960, there were a series of political transition from parliamentary democracy to military regimes, and civil war to presidential democracy (Omotola, 2010). The political atmosphere in the country remained unstable. In 1999, following the death of the last military dictator, General Sani Abacha, a presidential election was held that ushered in democratic rule in Nigeria.

Consequently, as Nigeria transited to democracy in 1999, expectations were that the new democracy would usher in a new era of peace, stability, and development (Omotosho, 2008). Contrary to expectations, the country has witnessed several incidents of political turbulence along with communal and religious violence across the country. Proponents of democracy will argue that this transition should bring about significant progress in the areas of personal freedoms, liberties and nation building. Since democracy cannot be taken for granted, it requires collective will and the commitment of society for the desired effect to be accomplished (IDEA, 2003). This begs the question of how committed citizens of Nigeria are to the survival of democracy.

For democracy to exist, citizens should be able to participate in different ways. Bratton (2009) asserts that democratic attitudes and democratic behaviors are related. But little is known about precisely which attitudes are connected to exactly which behaviors. Brady, Verba and Schlozman (2012) argue that political interest and political efficacy certainly facilitate political activity, but activity presumably enhances interest and efficacy as well. According to the book *Mozambique: Democracy and Political Participation* (2009) “citizens participation in the political process, their capacity to influence the formulation of public policies, the openness of the government to the demands of the population and the transparency with which the government handles public matters are indicators of the quality of democracy”(p. 12). Apart from voting, which is political participation at its basics, “citizens should be able to be involved in other forms of participation that relate to the political process” (p. 12).

This participation not only “depends on the freedoms and rights formally established by a Constitution, but also on the real organizational, mobilization and advocacy capacity of civil and political society” (*Mozambique: Democracy and Political Participation* 2009,13). This means that civic participation also enhances political participation. Robert Putnam (2000) asserts that the decline of social capital is responsible for so many problems in American society. He asserts that social networks and capital are instrumental to the performance of representative government. According to him, social networks of civic engagement affect voter turnout and exposure to media content which in turn affect the electoral process. Putnam claims that "life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital" (p. 3). His thesis is that when people are a community, social capital is high, democracy thrives, and society is better off. Putnam’s argument does not apply to the American situation alone.

One would assume that citizens of Nigeria, eager to have their rights and freedom stable, will be interested in making their democracy stable through active civic and political participation. This work examines how citizens are actively involved in the political process, and in building a stable democracy that will in turn lead to nation building.

The Role of the Media in Participatory Democracy

This paper builds on participatory democratic theory which emphasizes the importance of political participation for a viable democracy (Gbikpi 2005, 109). According to Zaller (1992), political awareness “refers to the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics and understands what he or she has encountered.” The key according to Zaller is the absorption of “political communication” (p. 21). The press in a democracy is assumed to be free from government and economic control. There are certain characteristics of a free press that is found to be important to political participation and socialization, such as acting as an “intermediary” between citizens and the elites, providing information essential for the stability of democracy and providing a “forum for diverse views” (Clawson & Oxley, 2008). Furthermore, Clawson & Oxley argue that a free press should present opinions from elites and citizens across the spectrum, act as the “watchdog”, and provide citizens with “information necessary to hold government accountable” (p. 61). Participatory democratic theorists are of the view that citizens should be actively involved in the political process and by “providing accurate information, the media will create knowledgeable citizens ready to participate in the give-and-take of politics” (p. 61). Participatory democratic theorists argue that citizens should be highly informed so they can figure out their interests and recognize policies that serve those interests, and identify which political party and interest group serves those policies.

Being informed is important so citizens can decipher when elites misrepresent the facts (Clawson & Oxley, 2008). The implication herein is that paying attention to the media is a kind of political engagement. Zaller (1992) developed a model of how elite discourse impacts political choices, a model that infers that recent events or information may increase the importance of existing consideration, thus, changing people’s attitude. Exposure to persuasive communication changes the balance of people’s consideration. What all these means is that, for attitude to change, a particular consideration should dominate people’s mind. Zaller argues that elite-driven communications do influence public opinion. The public forms attitudes in response to the political communication in the media, and the more an individual is politically aware, the greater the chances that he or she will receive these messages or accept or reject information not consistent with his or her values (Zaller, 1992).

Attitude is difficult to measure, therefore, researchers’ measure public opinion, which determines political attitude at a given time. Clawson & Oxley (2008) define public opinion as “the sum or aggregation of private opinions on any particular issue or set of issues” (p. 13). And Ugwu & Ngbo (2010) assert that public opinion is grounded on values, derived from socialization, via a complex process through which individuals become aware of their environment and their culture and form values. Socialization helps people transfer and preserve their cultural values from generation to generation. This process prepares people for society and the roles expected of them for integration into society. In this exercise, the researcher used the attitude change model to examine the effects of media exposure on political participation in Nigeria.

Okoye, Chukwuemeka and Egbo (2012) assert that the democracy as currently practiced in Nigeria falls short of many principles enunciated by Jones, Newburn and Smith (1996). These shortfalls are a lack of equality, alternative choices, regular consultation, regular elections, and a lack of majority rule, which most democratic societies value, and finally an uneducated electorate. Notwithstanding, in the shortcomings of the kind of democracy practiced in Nigeria, Lewis & Bratton (2000) assert that the majority of Nigerians strongly support democracy and its ideals, and that there is a clear and consistent preference for democratic values and behavior.

Lewis & Bratton explained that the intensity of Nigerians' attitude toward democracy can be interpreted in two ways. "First, observers of Nigerian politics have discerned an enduring, deep-seated commitment to democratic ideals, despite the country's extended interludes of authoritarian rule", and second, that "Nigerians are still basking in the euphoria of democracy", thus they have "temporarily set aside their feelings regarding government performance and their social and economic conditions" (p. 14). Based on this, I assume that the people's interest in democracy should translate to political participation.

Political participation in a democracy can take many forms. It can be voting for representatives in elections, forming political groups, belonging to civic organizations or engaging in legal or illegal protest. When citizens participate in politics, the expectation is that it will have some bearing on government policies (Wertz-Shapiro and Winters, 2008). Ekanem & Ikpe (2001) agree that the willingness of citizens to be involved in political activities aimed at influencing the decisions of government whether implicit or explicit is a form of political participation. These influences on the government in various countries are legal, illegal and sometimes extra-legal acts are also subject to political actions. There are some questions as to whether, unsuccessful attempts to influence the government and involuntary action should be included in the definition of political participation (Ekanem & Ikpe 2001). Political participation can be classified as conventional and unconventional. Conventional participations are those activities that are generally accepted as appropriate by dominant political culture such as "voting, seeking elected position, and working for a candidate or a political party, writing letters to public officials and so on."(4) Unconventional forms of political participation include political protest, etc. (Ekanem & Ikpe, 2001). A high trust in state institutions leads to conventional participation while frustrations and lack of trust in state institutions and authority leads to unconventional participation (Babor n.d). This work investigates the level of conventional political participation in Nigeria.

Participatory democratic theory emphasizes the importance of political participation by the public. According to Clawson & Oxley (2008) the theory promotes greater political involvement as a way to restore equality because participation has been associated with social class and wealth. Based on these literatures, I present the following research questions:

RQ 1: Are citizens more likely to participate in the political process, if they are exposed to the media?

RQ2: Will the introduction of democracy in Nigeria, lead to a high rate of civic engagement?

Data Analysis & Findings

This paper analyzed the results of part of the public opinion data collected by Afrobarometer, a non-partisan, non-partisan research and research project in Africa that measures the attitudes of citizens on democracy and governance, economy, civil society, and other topics applied to civic and political participation in Nigeria in 2011 and 2012. The study is designed to generate a sample that is a representative cross-section of all citizens of voting age in Nigeria. A randomly selected sample of n=2400 cases allowed for inferences to national adult populations with a margin of sampling error of no more than +/-2.0% with a confidence level of 95 percent. This analysis revealed levels of media exposure and attitudes towards political participation and civic engagement. Participation is measured by voter turnout, community participation and membership, contacting public officials and participation in civil actions. The analysis was descriptive, and the responses to questions were presented in percentages, followed by a discussion of responses as it relates to the question and its implications.

Media Exposure

A significant number of respondents get political information from the media. When they were asked how often they get their news from the radio, 48% of the 2,400 people in the sample said every day, while 5% said they never get their news from radio. With regard to television news, 30% said they receive their news from television a few times a week, while 28% did every day. Eighteen percent said they never get their news from TV. In the study, newspapers were not a popular medium for news as 58% said they never get their news from a newspaper, while only 5% got their news there every day. Seventy two percent of the sample said they do not get their news from the internet, and 8% said they get news from the internet every day. This statistic may have something to do with the economic and technological development of the country. However, the statistics show that irrespective of where people get their news, a significant number in the sample pay attention to the media.

Participants were asked how much interest they have in public affairs, 29% said they were very interested, while 13% said they were not interested at all. Fifty eight percent agreed that they discuss politics occasionally with family and friends, while 21% said they never discuss politics, and 23% agree that they frequently discussed politics with their families and friends. This shows that most citizens discuss politics occasionally.

Community Participation and Membership

In terms of community participation, 49% agreed they were not members of a religious group, 34% were active members and 11% were inactive members, while 6% of the sample were official leaders. When asked if they were members of a community group or association, 64% were not members of any group, 22% were active members, 10% were inactive members, while 4% were official leaders in some organizations. Ninety percent agree that religion was very important to them, and 6% said it was somewhat important. Fifty six percent of the sample said they don't attend community meetings (26% never, 30% would if they have the chance). Eleven percent agreed that they go once or twice; another 11% agreed they go all the time and 22% say they went several times. These statistics show that community and social capital is low. The majority of participants do not participate in community groups, although they agreed that religion is very important to them, most did not belong to any religious group, however, a few were active members in religious associations.

Participation in Civil Action

Gauging civil actions, participants were asked how often they join others to raise issues. The majority said they don't (56%), and the others agreed they do at varying degrees. When asked if they have attended a demonstration or protest, 74% said they would never participate in such activity, 16% said they have never but would if they had the chance; and the rest said they have with various degrees of agreement. Seventy percent of participants said they would never pay taxes, and 19% said they would if they had the chance. Eighty eight percent of participants said they would never use violence for a political cause, the clear majority. Seventy eight percent agreed that they voted in the most recent election. When asked if they attended a campaign meeting or rally, 78% said no and 22% said yes. Seventy eight percent said they did not persuade others to vote for a certain candidate, and 22% said they did. Eighty four percent said no when asked if they worked for a candidate in the last election, and 16% said yes.

Analysis of the civil action questions shows that the majority of participants voted in the last election, and although the majority of the respondents voted, they do not participate in other activities such as attending campaign rallies, paying taxes, or participated in persuading people to vote for a candidate. Thus, overall, voting seemed to be the only way they participate directly in democracy.

Contacting Public Officials

The majority of the participants agreed that they had never contacted any kind of government official to give their view about an important problem or issue. Eighty seven percent said they never contacted a local government councilor, 93% said they have never contacted any member of parliament, 88% said they had never contacted any official of a government agency, and 84% said they never have contacted any political party official. When asked how much they agree that government and politics is complicated, the majority agreed that politics is complicated.

Discussion

These analyses partially answer the first research question. Respondents agree that they pay attention to the media and thus, they are exposed to political communication. However, voting seemed to be the only way the majority of the participants participated in politics. People seem not to be actively involved in civic associations. A small percent of the respondents actively belong to groups and of those that belong, a smaller percent of them participate in group related activities. 87% in the sample had never contacted public officials, and 74% said they have never participated in a protest and 76% said they have never gone to a political rally.

The data analyses reveal that civic and political participation is low in Nigeria. The only kind of political participation people actively engaged in was voting and interpersonal political discussion. Although Nigerians support democracy, according to Lewis & Bratton (2000), deliberative and participatory democratic values is lacking in the process. This raises more questions that future research should answer. For example, is the press in Nigeria really free from economic and government control and do they provide the needed information for the stability of democracy? Thus, I and others contend that when the media provide accurate information, it creates knowledgeable citizens ready to participate in politics (Clawson & Oxley, 2008).

Conclusion and Further Research

The lack of trust in the democratic process can account for a low political participation in Nigeria. According to Clawson & Oxley (2008) “the more trust in government citizens have, the more likely they will participate in politics throughout life.”(p.51) Furthermore, Ekanem & Ikpe (2001) assert that some of the factors that affect political participation in Nigeria are the pattern of political socialization, culture, military rule, the commercialization of politics, and the political structure of the country, claims that should be the focus for further studies.

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