

## Public Opinion and Public Policy in the Context of Nigeria

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### Abstract

*Public opinion and public policy are reflective link between the masses and the government in democracies. This discourse examined the pertinence of public opinion in public policies from Nigeria's context. The methodology of the study is qualitative design with emphasis on documentary and observational sources of data which were presented and content-analyzed. The findings of the discourse revealed interesting trends in the significance of strident public protest in reversing arbitrary government's policy actions as public concerns failed to make meaningful impact in the formulation and administration of public policies in Nigeria. Based on these findings, the discourse recommends for public interactive forum for opinion expression in governance, the creation of national opinion poll survey institute, advocacy of the civil society organizations as among the fundamentals to mainstream public concerns in policy conception an administration in Nigeria.*

**Key words:** Government and Governance, Public Opinion, Opinion Poll, Public Policy,.

### Introduction

Government and governance are the key essentials in response to public plights and expectations. The classics of social contract theory of varied perspectives accentuate the expedience of government and governance in public safety and welfare. In credence, the behavioural theory of political system framework of David Easton aptly illuminates the processes of expression of concerns and outcome (input-output process) to underscore the matrix of interaction between the governing and the governed.

In assertive sense, public opinion and public policy drive and reinforce these communications. In a generic sense, public opinion represents concerns of people on policy decisions, prevailing realities and issues of state's interest. *What people say and how people feel about government's policy and action including pleasant or unpleasant events of the state represents public opinion.* And, the decision of the government in deference to the intent of these public reactions constituted what is regarded as public policy. In other words, public policy is subtly defined as the decision of the government in public interest. More explicitly, Ugwu (2006), stressed that government does not operate in a vacuum and must be responsive to the demands and needs of both mobilized interest groups and the public at large where the media play a key role. Government may ignore a policy for years until the media brings it to the public's attention, generating immediate demands for government action. Other matters receive little or no attention until interest groups bring their demands before government decision makers. Public Policy tilts towards satisfying organized interest groups often at the expense of the unorganized groups or the public at large.

Furthermore, the government cannot effectively respond to the yearnings of its citizens without knowing their attitude, needs and aspirations. Hence, the need for public opinion which is fundamental in governance (Madubuegwu, 2010). This is because, it directs the government to know what the masses think about its policies and actions. Public opinion also serves as a feedback for government to assess itself and make corrections where necessary (Ayogu, 2016). Obviously, scholars have over the decades

and years concluded that public opinion is pivotal in public policy formulation and administration. An insight into Nigeria's scenario revealed polemics of narratives and realities underscoring the essence and non-essence of public opinion in governance processes at the level of municipal administration, state authority and federal government (Bello & Yahaya, 2016; Johnson, 2018 and Ijenwagu, 2018). In other words, the pertinent question which this discourse aims to interrogate is *Does public opinion has significant impact in public policy making and administration in Nigeria? Again, what are the issues?* In this regard, this paper is streamlined in this introduction, conceptual analysis, public opinion and public policy in Nigeria's context, conclusion and recommendations.

### Conceptual Analysis

Public opinion is notoriously difficult to define. There are scores if not hundreds of variations on a definition. Key, Jnr famously defined public opinion as those held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed (Key, 1961 cited in Robert and Tedin, 2011). But what if government does not find it prudent to heed a particular a particular opinion held by the public? Is it then not a public opinion? (Robert and Tedin, 2011). From this rhetoric remarks, Biereenu-Nnabugwu (2014) defined public opinion as a complex collection of views of many different people. It centers on what people think or their response to particular questions or public issues. The concept of public opinion focuses on the aggregate of individual attitudes or beliefs held by the adult population which are expressed or known. In this sense, it does not only represent the views of the people on any issue of general interest, but also the fact that such views are expressed.

In Biereenu-Nnabugwu's submission, what constitute public opinion is the characteristic of "expression". This "expression" is invariably obvious in what is described as formation of public opinion where the media exert predominant influence. The media provides electronic (Television and Radio), and, print (Newspaper and Magazines) channels including modern social media platforms where people express their concerns, worries and expectations on government policy, action and unfolding events in the state. However, the term. "expression" as embellished may not be the only indicator of measuring public opinion. In other words, personal view expressed cannot be appropriately termed as public opinion.

Succinctly, it is argued that an opinion is not public except it satisfies the following conditions: (a) The opinion must represent the views of the majority or significant number of the people on an issue. (b) The opinion must revolve around a specific issue. (c) The specific issue upon which the opinion revolves must be a controversial issue of enormous importance to the extent of attracting wide attention. (d) There must be a complex of issues and wide range of opinion on the issue from which dominant opinion emerges as public opinion. (e) The divergent views on an issue from which public opinion emerges must be expressed in the mass media to allow easy measurability and for them to attain public status (Nwodu & Koga, 2009).

The submissions of these scholars undoubtedly indicated what constituted public opinion. However, issue or issues underlying public concern may not necessarily be controversial. Hence, public opinion may emanate from healthy or unhealthy situation that elicit public reactions either in commendation of government's action or public concerns for government's immediate response. A rehabilitated bridge that eases free movement of persons often elicit favorable public views in support of government's action while hike in the cost of public utilities, security lapses that threaten public safety, legislature-executive impasse that stifle governance process are among the unhealthy events or realities that stimulate people's reactions for immediate action.

Emphatically, what is fundamentally relevant and recurring in these scholarly views is the term "expression". In this sense, Robert and Tedin (2011), stressed that opinion is a verbal expression of an attitude. There are, of course, other ways in which attitudes can be expressed, such as marches, demonstrations, or riots. But we reserve the term, *opinion* as the manifestation of attitude in words or

writing. However, attitudes are latent; they cannot be directly observed. Although change is clearly possible, attitudes are mostly stable over extended periods. Opinions are imperfect indicators of the underlying, unobserved attitude. Second, opinions are disagreements about matters of preference, which cannot be resolved using the rules of science. No one has yet advanced a definition of public opinion that satisfies a substantial number of students in the field. We prefer to keep our definition short and simple. We define public opinion as the preference of the adult population on matters of relevance to government. The first implication is that not all opinions are public opinion.

Basically, not all opinions are public opinion in Robert and Tedin's submission which inextricably underlines the pertinence of the following characteristics of public opinion: (a) Public opinion is the reflection of public or people's thinking, attitude and disposition on public policies and actions of the government. (b) Public opinion constitutes the views of the majority segment of the society or views of a sizeable population of the state. (c) Public opinion is well informed, realistic and rational underlining public awareness. (d) Public opinion is institutional in process as articulated, organized and disseminated through the media, pressure groups etc. (e) Public opinion may be manipulated to express prejudiced and malicious views to discredit the image of the government. (f) Public opinion may be supportive of government policies and action not necessarily demanding or protesting in nature (Madubuegwu, 2010).

From these indications, the accuracy, frequency and essence of public opinion is assessed by polls perhaps what is appropriately termed as, *public opinion poll*. In this vein, opinion polls and opinion surveys include all systematic gathering, aggregating and interpretation of information about policy, electoral and other preferences and behaviour of individuals or organizations using the statistical and analytical methods and techniques of the applied social sciences in order to gain insight and support decision-making. In opinion research, as in all market research, the identity of respondents will not be revealed without explicit consent and no sales approach, or attempt to influence their opinion following the interview, will be made to respondents as a direct result of their having provided information (Gallup World Poll, 2007). In a different perspective, an opinion poll is a survey of public opinion obtained by questioning a representative sample of individuals selected from a clearly defined target audience or population. For example, it may be a survey of 1,000 UK adults aged 16 years and over. When conducted appropriately, opinion polls can add value to the national debate on topics of interest. Typically, individuals or organizations commission a research organization to undertake an opinion poll. The results to an opinion poll are either carried out for private use or for publication (BBC Editorial Report, 2016). From the process of opinion poll, the import of measurement illuminates. In this vein, Ayogu (2016), highlighted the essence of opinion poll, election, mass media and referendum as fundamental processes in the measurement of public opinion.

As aptly indicated in the submissions of scholars, public policy is a logical outcome of public opinion and, public policy elicits public opinion. What then is public policy? The concept of public policy presupposes that there is a domain of life which is not private or purely individual, but held in common. It is important to understand the concept of "public" for a discussion of public policy. It often use such terms as "public interest", "public sector", "public health" and so on. The starting point is that public policy" has to do with those spheres which are so labeled as "public" as opposed to spheres involving the idea of "private". The public comprises that domain of human activity which is regarded as requiring governmental intervention or common action (Eneanya, 2010). In an explicit sense, public policies in modern political systems are purposive or goal-oriented statements. Public policy may be positive or negative in form. In its positive form, it may involve some form of overt government action to deal with a particular problem. On the other hand, in its negative form, it involves a decision by public servants not to take action on some matter on which a governmental order is sought. Public policy has a legally coercive quality that citizens accept as legitimate. For example, taxes must be paid unless one wants to run the risk of fines or jail

sentences. This legally coercive quality of public policies makes public organizations distinct from the private organization (Sapru, 2010).

Subsequently, public policy is decision of the government in response to events and issues of public concerns. It represents decision and action of the government on issues of public interest, plights and expectations. Hence, unpleasant events and incidences in the state are addressed through public opinion. The nexus between public opinion and public policy is expository as illustrated by Okereke (1998), who posits that any group or community or individual that succeeds in attracting attention to its problem thus, transforming it to a problem, and succeeds in convincing government or policy makers that its problem is deserving attention and solution would have succeeded in pushing its issue on the policy agenda thereby enabling them to attain agenda status. Also, Ugwu (2006), remarked that for a social situation to become a policy problem, all or some of the following conditions need occur: (a) That a large number of people are in unfortunate condition, suffering deprivation, are dissatisfied with an undesirable situation. (b) Recognition of these conditions by policy makers who have responsibilities for coping with it. (c) People outside the immediate social problem must show concern. (d) A good number of people think something should be done about the situation apart from merely recognizing the undesirable condition. Public policies are therefore influenced by public opinion. Elected public officials or legislators cannot risk ignoring the views of the people who gave them the mandate to represent them.

More succinctly, it has been established that whatever their nature and character, governments take the feelings, attitudes and responses of the members of the public towards government personnel, institutions and policies seriously (Abah, 2014). Beside the ideals, it is therefore pertinent to examine the Nigeria's environment to establish the significant or insignificant correlation between public opinion and public policy. Generically, the literature on the impact of public opinion on public policy is organized around what is and what should be case. Almost everyone agrees that in a democracy, public policy should be strongly affected by public opinion. But there is no agreement about how strong the effect is. Is it strong as it should be, meaning that the democratic process is working well? Or is it much weaker, meaning that democratic process is working badly? Recent studies (Page, 2002 and Burstein, 2003). According to Childs (1965) public opinion influences public policy in two major ways: by showing disaffection with existing policies and by compelling policy makers to use their knowledge of public's tolerance to constrain policy options because the public would not accept some solutions.

In this sense, Abah (2014) argued that the extent of influence of public opinion on public policy depends on a number of factors including: the degree of agreement with the public, the intensity with which opinions are held, the extent of organized support for the public's position and the clarity and simplicity of the issue. If the issue is clear and simple to comprehend and the public is passionate about it. If, there is a reasonable support from organized interest, policy makers are compelled to consider public opinion. It is therefore pertinent to examine the environment of policy formulation to establish significant or insignificant correlation between public opinion and public policy in Nigeria's context.

### **Public Opinion and Public Policy in Nigeria's Context**

Basically, there are myriad of public policies from various tiers or levels of government in response to public issues and concerns. However, what is pertinent in credence to the thrust of this discourse is the extent public opinion has impacted on public policies in Nigeria.

There have been attempts by several scholars to examine the impact of public opinion on public policy (Lowi, *e tal*; 2004; Ugumanim, *e tal*, 2014; Akinleye, 2008 and Oludayo, 2016). This is not because there is lack of subject on which to research upon but because of the importance of this opinion to a democratic society. Most of the scholars are of the view that public opinion helps to determine how democratic a state is, however, policy makers often face the problem of how to balance what the people wanted and what the government actually do and have continue to struggle

to balance this limitation. The other problem relates to the weak power exercised by the citizen in knowing or influencing public policy decision (Aliyu, *e tal*, 2018).

A cursory look at the context of opinion process and policy formulation in Nigeria showed polemics of perspectives where some scholars and public affairs analysts have argued that public opinions have actually reversed unfavorable policies while others however argued that opinion of Nigerians are yet to have significant effects on public policies of the government. In a historic reminiscence, Ede (2012), recalled that Anglo-Nigeria Defence pact with Britain was dropped in 1962 because of the intense unfavorable views of Nigerians towards it. Again, the discontinuation of Structural Adjustment Policy, SAP and rejection of IMF loan scheme under military rule emanate from popular uproar of Nigerians. To add, the January 2012 massive protest against fuel subsidy removal forced down the hiked price of premium spirit (petro) including the popular #EndSars# protest in October, 2020 which led to series of policy statement and action by the government and police authorities.

These are incidences where strident views of Nigerians exerted predominant influence on unfavorable government's policies and actions. On the other hand, observations and scholarly submissions have showed that administration of most public policy statements in Nigeria does not reflect public opinion. In this vein, Aliyu, *e tal* (2018), observed that the playing down of public opinions often makes them ineffectual in the determination of public policy As a result of the fact that opinions of many Nigerian do not have influence on policy-making process in the country, "public policies" churned out of the process are only designed to promote and protect the class interests of the few elites who control the Nigerian State. In a similar sense, Adenike and Olusola (2019), opined that public opinion played less significant role in policy making and implementation. In Nigeria, officials of government hardly listen to the reactions and views of the public on what is intended to be done to ameliorate miserable situations. The people's needs does not actually reflect the policy actions of the government.

From Adenike and Olusola's submission, what then determine public policy of the government since there is gap between the intentions of the public and actions of the government? Abiki (2020), argued that government is aware of the challenges of the state which informed its policies to alleviate societal problems. Government is often alerted by the undesirable situation or deplorable condition of the state which motivate its policies. What brings such awareness or alertness to the government is however not explicit in Abiki's submission which arguably indicated that public reactions may not necessarily be a factor of consideration in the formulation and implementation of public policies. In other words, Abiki's assertion therefore elicit the need to find out reasons why most constituted political authorities in Nigeria often ignore public opinion in the process of administration of public policies. To this end, it is observed that in Nigeria's context, popular views may fail to make significant impact in the formulation of public policy on the basis of the following conditions: (a) When such concerns are not appropriately expressed to the attention of the government. For instance, such popular views can be effectively expressed to the attention of the government through press release/conference, official letter to the principal officials of the government, official communiqué issued for the attention of the government and public protest. (b) When such concerns are seen as misleading reactions manipulated to discredit or make mockery of the efforts of the government. For instance, opponent political parties and politicians often sponsor media advertorial/release (both in electronic and print) through few individuals or vulnerable civil society groups to unconstructively condemn government's action and misinform the public in guise as articulated public concern. (c) When such concerns place huge cost on governance. For instance, requesting a government struggling with resources to meet the needs of recurrent state expenditure (like personnel cost, overhead, subvention) to embark on a huge capital project may be ignored and considered irrelevant. (d) When such concerns do not reflect the vision and targets of the government. For instance, a

government that is in fervent effort to industrialize the economy of the state may find public request for construction of a sea port (in an area of 3, 124 square kilometers of land and 700 square kilometer of water area) as a misplaced priority. (e) When such concerns are considered as ill-advised and lacking in substance to serve as a plausible solution to an unpleasant situation. For instance, a public protest for government to close and withdraw operational licenses of private schools may be seen as unintelligent view to check excesses and sharp practices in the post-primary school system. (f) When such concerns plummet the sovereignty of the state. In a state challenged by incessant security challenges, strident public reaction to disband state security and invite mercenaries for public safety will be disregarded by the government. (g) When such concerns become politicized. A public demand for government to respond to challenges of infrastructural deficit in an area or region where the incumbent lost election may not be considered as exigent issue for state indulgence. (h) Lastly, there are governments that does not find public opinion and poll process as expedient for governance. The officials of such government display reasonable sense of confidence in understanding public plights and expectations to dismiss the relevance of public opinion in governance.

Scholars and observers have also stressed that docility of the people towards issues of public interest is also another factor why public opinion is yet to have a significant impact on governance. In attempt to illuminate factors responsible for this docility, Obo, *e tal* (2014), remarked that the extreme poverty and illiteracy that pervade the Nigerian society disempowered the majority of the people and made them inconsequential in the policy-making process in the country. Lack of awareness by the people of their role in policymaking makes it difficult for them to be involved in policymaking processes of the state.

However, the awareness of Nigeria public on issues of public interest has reached a very impressive height in the recent time. This pleasant development was obviously influenced by social media platforms and Radio. It is estimated that over 50 million Nigerians have smart phones while millions of rural dwellers relied on battery-radio (whose news and programmes are transmitted in local languages) for information concerning government's policies and events in the state. To this end, social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter), online news outlets and radio are very influential channels of public knowledge among over 100 million Nigerians to the significance of Television and Newspapers. What is however pertinent is the extent the awareness has been translated to add value to governance through opinion expression. The following constraints as observed militate against the efforts of the people to make significant input in policy conception: (a) People's lack of trust and confidence towards government and its institutions to consider valid public concerns for governance. (b) Unaware of appropriate channels of contact in government to present public petition or demand. (c) Inability to articulate views in form of proposal as concerned individuals, groups and community to elicit government attention. (d) Preference for disruptive actions such as public protest to get the attention of the government. (e) Preference for armed-chair critique of government policy and action in isolation of alternative option for result-oriented action.

It is also observed that most governments across states and rural settings in Nigeria are yet to initiate interactive avenues for public engagement on issues of general interests. Some officials of the executive arm of government often make reference to legislative-constituent relation as viable avenue for gauging concerns of the citizens amid its limitations (absence of constituent office, cynical attitude of law makers to expectations of constituency). However, other states in the country have demonstrated enthusiasm to accommodate public concerns in governance by providing platforms for contacts and expressions.

Again, it is observed that Nigeria government at every level of social engagement is yet to taker public opinion poll seriously. The country does not have a national opinion survey institute rather the government relied heavily on the data provided by National Bureau of Statistic and National Planning

Commission to have insight on demographics and economic indicators. However, opinion poll provides more insight on people's attitude, plights and expectations beyond statistics. At the level of state and local authorities, opinion poll mechanisms are non-existent. These limitations have over decades and years undermined efforts to ensure effective mainstreaming of public expectations in governance. Today, the crisis of governance in African most populous country, Nigeria stem from the failure of public opinion to make significant impact in public policies.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The nexus between public opinion and public policy is expedient in democracies. In Nigeria, the discourse revealed that public opinion stridently makes meaningful impact in reversing unfavorable policies and actions of the government and its institutions. Sadly, public concerns are yet to make significant impact in policy conception and administration. Most importantly, this discourse advanced reasons why public opinion failed to find relevance in the formulation and implementation of public policies in Nigeria. From these findings, the following recommendations are made: (a) Governments at every tier of Nigeria's governance should acknowledge the imperatives of public concerns in the realization of the will of the state. (b) The Nigerian people should also acknowledge value of public concerns and appropriate channels for its expression to elicit the attention of the government. (c) Government most especially the executive arm at every tier of Nigeria's governance should initiate and make functional public interactive forums for effective indulgence in plights and expectations of the people. (d) The urgent need for the establishment of national opinion poll survey institute to have adequate knowledge and insight on attitude, plights and expectations of Nigerians in their respective regions and states towards government and governance. (e) Advocacy of civil society groups on the need to mainstream public concerns in the formulation and administration of public policies in Nigeria. (f) Lastly, media advocacy on public opinion formation and expression to encourage participant attitude and drive in governance.

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