

PUBLIC OPINION AND PUBLIC POLICY MAKING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

There is a nexus between public opinion and public policy-making, in a truly democratic state public policies are made and implemented in response to public opinion on certain issues with a bid to satisfying the wishes and aspirations of the citizens. This paper examined the nexus between public opinion and public policy making. The responsibility of the state is to satisfy the wishes of the citizens and this is done through making and implementing relevant policies. The policies made can only be meaningful and achieve the desired result if they are done in line with public opinion on the issues the policies are made on. Making and implementing policies in line with public opinion to a very large extent have positive impact on the well-being of the citizens and when the well-being of the citizens are well taken care of there is the tendency that the citizens would be willing and ready to support the government through payment of taxes, obedience to law and order, respect for constituted authority, etc. This situation no doubt has the capacity to enthrone peace in the society which is what is needed for a country's development. But the reverse is the case when policies are made without regard to public opinion. Policies made without regard to public opinion hardly satisfy the wishes and aspirations of the citizens. This condition can bring about crisis which is antithetical to development. Secondary method of data collection was adopted in this paper and data gathered were analysed with the use of the historical method. This paper found out that the nature of the society in terms of peace and development is dependent on the extent public policies respond to public opinion. This explains why Nigeria has not been a peaceful and developed country because most government policies do not have citizens input in their making. The theoretical framework for this study is the social contract theory. The paper recommended among other things that public policy makers should try as much as possible to take public opinion on issues serious in order to make and implement policies according to the wishes and aspirations of the majority of the citizens.

Keywords: Public opinion, Public policy, Democracy, Development, Constituted authority

1. Introduction

In a truly democratic state, government is formed and activities of government are carried out based on public opinion. This explains why democracy has been defined as the government of the people by the people and for the people. When government acts in line with public opinion there is high tendency for the

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government to satisfy the wishes and aspirations of the people and when the wishes and aspirations of the people are satisfied the people will be happy and be ready and willing to support the government. Government needs the support of the citizens to succeed, the citizens support the government in various ways such as obedience to laws, payment of taxes, performing other civic responsibilities and respect for national symbols like the national flag and the national anthem.

Any responsible government that is ready to satisfy the wishes and aspiration cannot joke with the opinion of the people. This explains why even the military regime tends to claim to be democratic because they also need the support of the people to have a conducive atmosphere to govern. This explains why Agarwal (2012, p.29) opined that “public opinion occupies an important place in democracy. The democratic government derives its powers from the public opinion and it is based on it. Each government tries to keep the public opinion in its favour and it should not go against it at any cost”. When the government enjoys the support of the citizens the task of governance would be very easy. This situation to a very large extent would bring about peace which is highly needed to achieve the much needed development. Money would not be wasted unnecessarily to tackle security challenges. Investors would be willing to invest in a peaceful environment and the investment of the people both local and foreign would create employment which would help to reduce poverty.

The essence of public policy is to respond to the demand of the citizens in order to satisfy their wishes and aspirations. This explains why Egugbo and Salami (2021, p.45) asserted that “public policies are made and implemented to satisfy the needs of the citizens”. The needs of the citizens can only be achieved if their opinions are sought and taken into consideration in the making of public policy. Because of the apparent nature of political apathy among many Nigerians, the policy makers rarely seek the opinion of the people before making policies even in some cases when they pretend as if they seek the opinion of the people, they tend to abandon the views of the people along the line in the process of making and implementing policies. This explains why most policies in Nigeria do not favour the masses. If government is taking the citizens into consideration in all policies they are making the high level of poverty, unemployment and insecurity would not have been the order of the day as it is presently in Nigeria.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted in this paper is the social contract theory. The major proponents of this theory include Thomas Hobbes, J.J. Rousseau

and John Locke. The basic thrust of this theory is that the state came into being as a result of the agreement by the people to bring it about so that it would in turn protect their lives and property. This view was corroborated by Anifowose (2015, p.95) when he said that “according to the social contract theory, the state was created by number of individuals voluntarily entering into a contract, the terms of which provided a political authority. As a voluntary association however, it differed from any other because it provided for the exercise of sovereignty, the supreme power to control by coercive means, if need be, the conduct of its members. This shows that the state was created by the people and the people reserves the right to remove and replace officials of the state that are not living up to their expectation. If this scenario is the order of the day in Nigeria government officials would be trying as much as possible to seek the opinion of the people to determine what they want in order to accommodate them in the making of policies. When policies are made in accordance with the dictates of the people definitely the well-being of the people would be assured and guaranteed.

The relationship between the citizens and the government in Nigeria in terms of the ability of the citizens to perform their roles in holding government accountable and sanctioning it when it goes against their wishes and aspirations has been hindered by poverty, lack of political awareness and electoral malpractices among other factors. Many elections in Nigeria have been characterized by low voter turnout, vote buying and selling, stashing and stuffing of ballot boxes. This scenario has made it difficult if not impossible for the citizens to choose the leaders they prefer. This situation is favourable to the ruling class and this explains why they have not done much to change the situation. The end result of this is bad governance in Nigeria with its attendant negative consequences.

3. Conceptual Clarification

At this juncture, attempt would be made to clarify certain concepts that are central and relevant in this paper. The concepts include public opinion and public policy making. The clarification of these concepts would aid the understanding of this paper.

Public opinion is a concept that is devoid of precise and uniform definition, this is because of its complex nature. This explains why different scholars have defined the concept in different ways. Nwankwo (1990, p.123) explains that public opinion is one of those terms, which elude precise definition. In its common use, public opinion refers to the composite reactions of the general public on issues, which affect them. He further states that public opinion may be defined as not just what people think or even what they say in public, but rather what in practice they

want to bring into effect. Taiwo and Olaniran (1974) submit that public opinion refers to the sum total of citizens' views on matters of public policy at any time, reflecting the way people think on subjects of national interest. Public opinion has to do with the views and opinion of the people on certain issues particularly issues that revolve around public policy. To Afolabi (2008, p.104) "public opinion can only refer to the totality of the political orientations, beliefs, values and events in their political environment".

It is important to state that only opinions about public matters constitute public opinion. This explains why Cummings and Wise (2005, p.176) say that public opinion has to do with "expression of attitudes about government and politics". In a similar vein V.O. Key, Jr for example, defined public opinion as "those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed". This view was corroborated by Floyd Allport when he conceived of public opinion as enough people expressing themselves so strongly for or against something that their views are likely to affect government action. The place of public opinion in any governmental system cannot be overemphasized. This is because every government requires the support of the majority of the people to be stable and survive, the stability of the government gives it the required platform to be able to function as it should. This also explains why the government also ensures that it gets the people to support its policies. Any government that tends to ignore public opinion about it is bound to have serious problem with the people which can lead to its failure and eventual collapse.

According to Cummings and Wise (2005, p.176), "Private opinions become public- provided they are expressed- when they relate to government and politics". This shows that for private opinions to be regarded as public opinions they must be publicly expressed and they must be associated with government and politics. This is because public opinion is meant to influence government in such a way as to make the government to ensure the welfare and well-being of the people which is the primary responsibility of the government and the major reason it exists.

The concept of public policy is very important in a democratic society because it is the platform for service delivery. This explains why it has attracted the attention of many scholars. According to Barret and Fudge (1981, p.5) "we talk of 'public policy' when a policy emanates from the 'public sector' including both the institutions of central and local government and state created agencies such as water or health authorities, commissions and corporations- it may be implemented through and directed at a wide variety of individuals and organizations which may or may not be part of the state apparatus, and which may be to a greater or lesser degree independent of state influence or control". Public policy is a phenomenon

that takes place at the governmental realm; it guides government action in the process of service delivery to the citizens. This explains why Dye (2002) defined public policy as whatever governments choose to do or not to do. This to a very large extent shows that public policy takes place at the governmental realm and as such, it is binding on all within the governmental jurisdiction. This explains why public opinion is very crucial in public policy making to ensure that policies made or to be made affect the people positively.

According to Ikelegbe (2006, p.2), public policy is “a course of action or a programme of actions that is chosen from among several alternatives by certain sectors in response to certain problem”. Public policy is directed towards solving some existing problems as well as averting impending and imminent problem in the society ultimately for peoples benefit. Public policy is meaningful if they satisfy the wishes and aspirations of the people.

4. The Role of Public Opinion in Public Policy Making

Public Opinion plays very significant role in public policy making in a democratic state. This is because in a democratic state the opinion of the people is highly needed for public policy. This explains why the legislators carryout public hearing to harvest the views and opinion of the people for the making of policies and laws in the country. This explains why Cummings and Wise (2005, p.176) opined that “public opinion can be thought of as one of the inputs of the system that may affect the outputs, or binding decisions of the government”. It is very clear that public opinion influences public policy making, when policies made reflect the opinion of the people there is the tendency that the people would support the government in the implementation of the policies.

When there is people support for government, the government would have ample opportunity to engage in service delivery without hindrance. Government needs taxes to generate revenue from the people as well as people obedience to laws and policies made. When policies are not favourable to the people, the people will act in a way as to let the government know they are not in support of it. This happened in 2021 when there was removal of subsidy on Petroleum Motor Spirit (PMS) by President Goodluck Jonathan Administration, the protest that greeted that policy made the administration to reverse the policy.

The role of the people in electing leaders make it very important and necessary for political officers holders to take public opinion seriously in making public policies because failure to do that can make them loose elections because people whose opinion are disregarded and ignored can vote out such government in future elections.

5. Channels for the Expression of Public Opinion

Public opinion not adequately expressed cannot in any way be in a position to influence public policy. This explains why it is very imperative for the people to express their opinion in such a way as to be able to influence public policy. The channels and avenues for the expression of public opinion include but not limited to the following:

- a. **Town Hall Meeting:** This has to do with the gathering of people particularly constituents to discuss issues that affect them and proffer solutions to problems. This is particularly done in a democratic system of government where people have the right to participate in the political and governance processes. This gives the people the opportunity to have input in the decision-making processes of the government. For example in Nigeria, the lawmakers usually go back to their constituents to seek their views and opinions concerning certain aspects of the constitution to be amended as well as expressing their opinions on what they want government to do for them. When this practice is sustained and the representatives in government take serious the opinions of the people and respond to them accordingly and positively, it will bring about development and general well-being of the people.
- b. **Media:** There are basically electronic and print media. The people can express their opinion through either electronic or print media or both. The most important thing is that the people find available avenue to express their opinion particularly to policy makers for them to substantially accommodate the opinions of the citizens in policy-making and implementation. This is because public policies are meant to reflect the needs, wishes and aspirations of the citizens so that the government will be responsive to them. According to Okotoni (2017, p.40) "the press or media institution plays an important role in democratic governance, nation-building and development. It is little surprise therefore that the media are referred to as "the Fourth Realm of the Estate".
- c. **Rallies, Demonstrations and Protests:** This constitutes another way for the citizens to express their opinion. This has proven to be more effective means to get the attention of government. When the Jonathan Administration in 2012 partially removed subsidy leading to the increase in pump price of petroleum motor spirit, the rallies, demonstrations and protests that greeted it led the administration to rescind that decision. Also during the administration of Muhammadu Buhari, there was ENDSARS protest that rocked several parts of the country, this led to the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad of the Nigerian Police Force which was extorting members of the public and carrying out extra-judicial killings.

- d. **Political Parties:** Oji (1997, p.115) submits that “Political parties are those organizations under whose ambit people aspire to and acquire political power in a system”. These organizations serve for the aggregation of interests of the various groups and strive to embrace all facets of society. Leed (1968, p.125) views the political party as a group publicly organized with the aim of gaining political power so as to carry out policies which it feels will serve the national interest. There is no gainsaying the fact that political parties serve as a channel through which members of the parties express their opinions particularly on the state of the nation. Opposition parties do this mostly with a bid to expose the wrongs of the ruling party.
- e. **Pressure Groups:** This also is another avenue for the citizens to express their opinion. According to Cummings and Wise (2005, p.17) “when people belong to groups that share common attitudes and make these views felt, or when they organize such groups, they may be influencing government”. In a similar vein, Oji and Okafor (2000, p.41) opine that “pressure groups are organized group of people within a common set of objectives that have political undertones. Pressure groups can be tagged interest groups. They normally work towards influencing government policies with a view to actualizing the interest of their people”. For example, the Academic Staff Union of Universities have been making its views on national issues known over the years, sometimes the lecturers embark on strike as a way of drawing the attention of the Nigerian government to the ills in the country particularly in the educational sector so that the government can address them.
- f. **Elections:** The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in its Article 21(3) as follows:

The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government. This shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be made by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedure.

Election can be seen to be a strategy and platform put in place by the State through which the voters elect their leaders and as well take important decisions on issues affecting them. Apart from being an avenue to elect leaders it is also avenue for decision-making. According to Wanyanda cited in Egugbo (2015, p.154), “the key to mass participation in democracy is the electoral process. Elections represent a way of making a choice that is fair to all- one that leaves each member of the electorate reasonable hope of having his alternative elected”.

6. Challenges facing Public Opinion as a Tool for Influencing Public Policy Making in Nigeria

It is noted that public opinion plays significant role in public policy making but certain factors in Nigeria have made it difficult for public opinion to influence policy making effectively. The factors include but not limited to the following:

- a. **Problem of Ethnicity:** This is one of the challenges facing public opinion as a tool for influencing public policy-making in Nigeria. According to Ake (1996, p.25), ethnic problem “reflects to the antagonistic competition between the ethnic groups associated with the framing of politics in the mould of ethnic coalitions who see their claims as largely exclusive”. There are over 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria and most times there is lack of agreement in the pursuit of what is supposed to be of common interest to them. Many people from the same ethnic origin of the rulers tend to support them even when it is obvious they are not doing well. This situation has made it difficult most times for people from all the ethnic groups to come together to express their views and make demand from the government on issues that affect them. For example during the ENDSARS protest, majority of the states in the Northern part of Nigeria did not participate in it simply because their Northern brother in the person of Muhammadu Buhari was the President at that particular point in time.
- b. **Corruption:** Corruption is noted to be a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabric of virtually all the sectors of the Nigerian State. Corruption has greatly undermined the effective formation of public opinion as well as using public opinion as a tool for influencing public policy for the good of the people. Transparency International ranked Nigeria 154 out of 180 countries and territories in 2021, falling back five places from the rank of 149 in 2020. According to the ranking, Nigeria is the second most corrupt country in West Africa after Guinea.
- c. **Poverty:** This is closely related to the issue of corruption, this is because poverty is a breeding ground for corruption. According UNDP (1996) cited in Osuji (2020, p.12), “poverty is a multi-dimensional phenomenon characterized by deprivation of entitlements through lack of access to economic resources, social resources, political participation and consultation”. When people are poor, they can be easily manipulated with little inducement. This explains why some people are given peanuts to cast vote for those who induce them. The Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics said in 2020 that 40% or 83million Nigerians live in poverty. Nigeria is now known to be the world’s poverty capital. This situa

tion no doubt adversely affects the capability of the people to form opinion in order to influence policy makers in the process of making public policy.

- d. **Illiteracy:** Illiteracy is another factor that hinders proper public opinion formation as well as making it a tool to influence public policy for the good of the people. This is because illiteracy is associated with parochial political culture where people do not understand their role in the political and governance processes therefore not participate in them as they are supposed to. When people cannot read and write they cannot be in a position to understand the rudiments and nitty-gritty of democratic governance system.
- e. **Political Apathy:** This has to do with lack of interest in political activities and as such people desist from participating in them. When people are politically apathetic they are hardly to be involved in formation of opinion and cannot influence public policies. Political apathy can be found in not only uneducated people, but also educated ones. Many factors in Nigeria are responsible for political apathy and they include but not limited to the following: inclement political environment, electoral malpractice and electoral violence, unemployment, lack of independence of the electoral body that is the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), corruption and bad governance which lead to poverty, unemployment and insecurity.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Relationship exists between the governed and the government. They need one another to bring about peace, harmony, growth and progress of the society. This explains why it is very imperative for the government to take public opinion seriously and put it into consideration in making policies. The people are bound to support government if their wishes and aspirations are provided. Without the support of the people the government will not be able to function properly. There is need for people to take active part in politics and governance so that they can form formidable opinion that can be taken seriously by the government. The people also need political education to make them to be well informed about government and its activities to know the area and how to participate not only in the political but also the governance process. There is also the need for the people to shun ethnic politics and ethnicization of important issues that can be of benefit to all and sundry. When people are united and form common front to demand for their welfare and well-being from the leaders they are likely to get it and this ultimately will lead to nation building and development.

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