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AN EVALUATION OF PUBLIC OPINI-ON MAINSTREAMING IN THE DRAFTING AND PASSAGE OF LEGISLATIVE BILLS IN ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Globally, the continuous neglect of public opinion in any democracy underscores the indispensable role of citizen participation in policymaking, hinders the implementation of various policies and consequently poses policy, social-political, economic, institutional/legal consequences not only to the nation, States, but also to families and individuals. This study evaluated the extent to which public opinion is mainstreamed into the drafting and passage of legislative bills in Enugu State, Nigeria. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design complemented by interviews. The population comprised 1,363,953 residents of Enugu North, Nsukka and Udi Local Government Areas, from which a sample of 400 respondents was determined using Taro Yamane's formula. A multistage sampling procedure was employed, while 370 valid questionnaires were retrieved and analysed using frequencies and percentages. Three executive directors of civil society organisations with experience in legislative advocacy were also purposively interviewed. Findings showed a high level of awareness of the legislative functions of the Enugu State House of Assembly and considerable citizen participation in public hearings. Most respondents perceived public opinion as relevant to legislative decision-making and believed that public participation contributes to legislative acceptance, improves proposed laws through expert contributions and enables lawmakers to gauge constituents' views. Interview findings similarly indicated that civil society organisations and citizens influence legislation through advocacy, public hearings and constituency engagement. The study recommends strengthening post-hearing feedback mechanisms, intensifying civic education, and promoting citizen and stakeholder participation from the early stages of legislative processes.

Keywords: Public Opinion, Democratic Governance, Public Participation, Legislative Bills, Legislative Participation.

Introduction

Public opinion is one of the defining pillars of democratic governance because it reflects the collective attitudes, beliefs, and aspirations of citizens on issues of public concern. Baden et al. (2025) strongly opined that public opinion goes beyond peoples' behaviours or traits but ideas that are expressed in public which become essential to group decision-making and policy formulation. Philosophers such as John Locke emphasized the importance of opinion in shaping human conduct and governance. In his 1686 work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argued that human behaviour is influenced by civil law, divine law, and the law of opinion, stressing that societal opinion exerts a powerful influence on individuals and political institutions. Thus public opinion is perceived as democracy's course-correction signal.

Democracy, by its very nature, is anchored on the participation and consent of the governed. Epstein (2011) defines democracy as a government of the people, controlled by the people, and operated in the interest of the people. The United Nations also supports democratic governance as a system that guarantees participation, equality, accountability, and the protection of fundamental human rights (United Nations, n.d.). Democratic governance therefore provides citizens with the opportunity to contribute to decision-making processes that affect their daily lives. In representative democracies, public opinion serves as a critical link between citizens and public policy, ensuring that governance reflects societal needs and expectations (Aliyu, Ikedinma & Alabi, 2018; Persson, 2021).

In Nigeria, the responsibility of making laws is constitutionally vested on the legislature. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended (1999) provides for the establishment of Houses of Assembly in all States and empowers them to make laws. In line with democratic principles, State Houses of Assembly often incorporate public participation mechanisms such as public hearings and stakeholder consultations during the legislative process. The Enugu State House of Assembly operates within this constitutional framework by involving citizens and relevant stakeholders in the drafting and passage of legislative bills. Public hearings, consultations, and constituency engagements provide opportunities for citizens to express their views, contribute expertise, and influence legislative outcomes. Despite the recognized importance of public participation in democratic governance, concerns persist regarding the actual extent to which public opinion is mainstreamed into legislative processes in Nigeria, particularly at the State level.

No legislation, policy or development initiative targeted for social change can achieve its intended objectives without adequate public backing. However, recent research in Nigeria shows that while there are institutional structures for citizen engagement, real public participation in policy processes is still restricted, with citizens frequently limited to superficial engagement such as information exchange and consultation. (Jega, 2003; Abdullahi et al., 2026; Aig-Imoukhuede Foundation, 2025). As an illustration, Obo et al. (2014) pointed out that, in an effort to gain public support and legitimacy, General Ibrahim Babangida offered Nigerians an opportunity to express their views regarding the country's economic policies and its dealings with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Even though the general public's

opinions which were compiled through what became known as the "Great Debate" opposed the IMF's conditionalities and policy recommendations, Babangida disregarded them, accepted the IMF's terms of economic enslavement, and as a result, expedited Nigeria's economic enslavement.

This concern is relevant to Enugu State, where citizens and civil society organisations have demonstrated interest in the legislative process, including advocacy for proposed legislation. For instance, in November 2020, the Centre for Gender Economy Africa and Dewdrop Foundation advocated for legislation concerning elderly persons' welfare and social protection in the state. Yet, it remains unclear whether and to what extent citizens' views actually influence the drafting, deliberation, amendment and passage of legislative bills in Enugu State. This constitutes an important empirical gap, particularly given evidence that Nigerian subnational legislatures remain relatively closed to meaningful public engagement despite being institutions closest to the citizens (Odeyemi & Abati, 2021). The present study therefore seeks to examine the extent of public opinion participation and its influence on the drafting and passage of legislative bills in Enugu State.

Public Opinion and Legislative Participation

Public opinion is difficult to define precisely because it incorporates individual attitudes, group perceptions and collective judgments. Nevertheless, its democratic significance lies in its ability to communicate what citizens think about matters affecting society. In democratic governance, public opinion may perform informational, legitimising and corrective functions by providing government with feedback about public needs and dissatisfaction.

Public opinion becomes more influential when citizens are organised and able to communicate their concerns effectively. Civil society organisations, professional associations, community groups and other interest groups can aggregate individual concerns and present them to government in a more organised form. Oke and Iwu (2018) note that interest groups can influence legislative processes through lobbying, advocacy, direct engagement with government officials and participation in public hearings.

Public hearings are particularly relevant because they provide a formal opportunity for citizens and stakeholders to present their views on proposed legislation. However, meaningful participation requires more than an invitation to attend. Citizens should have reasonable access to legislative information, opportunities to express their views and mechanisms for knowing how their contributions were treated. This corresponds with the broader participation argument that citizens should exercise more than symbolic involvement in public decision-making (Arnstein, 1969).

In Nigeria, the relationship between public opinion and policy has remained contested. Aliyu et al. (2018) found that although respondents recognised a relationship between public opinion and government policy, fewer were convinced that public opinion directly influenced policy outcomes. Obo et al. (2014) similarly argue that public policymaking in Nigeria has frequently been influenced by elite interests and limited citizen participation.

The present study extends this debate by moving from general public policy to the specific legislative environment of Enugu State. It examines not only whether citizens participate but

also where participation occurs and how citizens perceive its influence on legislative outcomes.

Empirical Review

Aliyu et al. (2018) examined the relationship between public opinion and public policy in South-West Nigeria using a questionnaire administered to 150 respondents across Oyo, Lagos, and Ekiti States. The study found a significant relationship between public opinion and public policy, although public awareness of the use of citizens' views in policymaking was minimal; corruption, poor political culture, poverty, unemployment, and limited education were identified as factors constraining the influence of public opinion.

Audu (2021) researched citizens' participation in lawmaking through public hearings, focusing on the Senate Committee on Judiciary, Human Rights and Legal Matters during the 8th National Assembly (2015–2019). Using a descriptive research design, questionnaires, and purposive and random sampling, the study found that public hearings provide an important avenue for citizens to contribute to legislative decision-making and improve the quality of policy decisions. However, corruption, citizens' apathy and mistrust, irregular public hearings, inadequate civic education, and weaknesses in committee functions constrained effective participation. The study recommended regular public hearings and stronger public enlightenment to improve citizen involvement in lawmaking

Odeyemi and Abati (2021) examined digital public engagement by Nigeria's 36 State Houses of Assembly. Using content analysis of legislative websites and social media platforms, together with interviews with relevant officials, the researchers found that although most State Houses of Assembly had an online presence, the depth of information dissemination and citizen engagement was very low. The study is relevant because it demonstrates the limited nature of citizen–legislature engagement at the subnational level. However, its emphasis was on digital engagement, rather than whether citizens' opinions actually influence the drafting and passage of legislative bills, which constitutes an important gap addressed by the present study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Participatory Democracy Theory (PDT) and Two-way Communication Model.

The foundation of PDT is associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, particularly his conception of popular sovereignty and collective self-government in *The Social Contract*, originally published in 1762. This concept emphasized broad, direct involvement of citizens in collective decision-making, rather than relying solely on elected representatives (Rousseau, 2012). It noted that civic engagement should extend beyond infrequent voting to active policy formulation. Information is transmitted in both directions when there is two-way communication. According to this communication model, communication is negotiated, which means that in order to achieve harmonious understanding which is fortunately the fundamental component of communication, both the sender and the recipient must listen to one another, gather information, and be open to make adjustments and are willing to make changes for harmonious understanding, which fortunately is the essence of communication.

The PDT was adopted for this study, as it emphasizes the need for public participation in decision-making. Obviously, the public cannot influence drafting and passage of legislative bill, if they don't participate or air their opinions. This validates the saying that at the root of public opinion is public participation because one can't have an opinion on issue less interested to him or her. Communication is enhanced and effective when the sender and the receiver are actively involved. An important component of this model is that the public are informed and consent to the actions that members are taking.

The two-way communication model

The two-way communication model views communication as an interactive process in which information, ideas, opinions and feedback flow between communicating parties rather than moving exclusively from a sender to a receiver. It was adopted because without inequitable ground for interaction between the public and the government (lawmakers), it will be practical impossible for the former to influence the actions of the latter.

Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design complemented by qualitative interviews. The population comprised residents of Enugu North, Nsukka and Udi Local Government Areas, with a projected combined population of 1,363,953 based on the 2006 census figures and a 3.2% annual growth rate. Using Taro Yamane's formula, a sample size of 400 was determined and selected through multistage sampling, with proportional allocation of 105, 134 and 161 respondents to Enugu North, Nsukka and Udi, respectively. Respondents were purposively selected from professionals, academics, media practitioners, lawyers, civil society actors and other members of the public, while three civil society organisation executive directors were purposively interviewed. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews; the questionnaire was expert-reviewed and pilot-tested with 30 respondents. Of the 400 questionnaires administered, 370 were validly returned, yielding a 92.5% response rate. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies and percentages in SPSS, while interview data were analysed thematically.

Results/ Findings

Table 1: Respondents' awareness of the roles of public opinion on drafting and passage of legislative bills in Enugu State by Enugu State House of Assembly (ENHA)

S/N	Awareness of the following	Yes	%	No	%	Total (F)	Total (%)
1.	Are you aware of the existence of Enugu State House of Assembly?	370	100	0	0	370	100
2.	Are you aware that it is the responsibility of Enugu State House of Assembly to	348	94.1	22	5.9	370	100

	make laws for Enugu State?						
3.	Are you aware that members of the public can express their views and opinions on proposed legislative bills?	370	100	0	0	370	100
4.	Are you aware that public opinion can influence the drafting or passage of legislative bills?	295	79.7	82	22.2	370	100

Table 1 presented data on the awareness of ENHA and public opinion related issues. Majority of respondents indicated awareness of the existence and roles of public opinion on drafting and passage of legislative bills in Enugu State House of Assembly.

Table 2: Respondents' Responses on their participation in public hearing of the ENHA

S/N	Participation in Public hearing	Yes	%	No	%	Total (F)	Total (%)
1	Have you ever participated in a public hearing of the ENHA?	235	63.5	135	36.5	370	100
2	Did you express your opinions during the public hearing you attended?	228	61.6	142	38.4	370	100
3	Did some or all the opinion you shared reflect in the enacted law?	220	59.5	150	40.5	370	100
4	Do you think members of the public or stakeholder	315	85.1	55	14.8	370	99.9

	groups can initiate or contribute to the development of a proposed legislative bill?						
5	Can public outcry compel government to draft a legislative bill	190	51.3	180	48.8	370	99.9
6	Do you think law makers prioritize opinions of the masses during legislative processes?	200	54.0	170	45.9	370	99.9

The result of table 2 indicates that citizens are not merely aware of legislative processes but participate through identifiable channels and perceive public opinion as capable of influencing legislative agenda-setting and outcomes.

Table 3: Responses on Public participation outcome in lawmaking

S/N	Participation in Public hearing	SA %	A %	D %	SD %
1	Public participation in legislative process enhances acceptance of the law	83 (22.4)	127 (34.3)	83 (22.4)	77 (20.8)
2	Laws made with public participation are easier for citizens to accept and comply with.	45 (12.1)	217 (58.6)	64 (17.2)	44 (11.8)
3	Participation in public hearings gives citizens a sense of belonging in governance.	61 (16.5)	193 (52.2)	100 (27.0)	16 (4.3)
5	Public hearings assure citizens that their contributions are considered in governance	44 (11.9)	123 (33.2)	120 (32.4)	83 (22.4)

6	Experts' contributions during public hearings help to improve the quality of legislative bills.	59 (15.9)	263 (71.1)	40 (10.8)	8 (2.2)
7	Public hearings enable lawmakers to directly assess the views of their constituents	133 (35.9)	200 (54.1)	37 (10)	0 (0)
8	Public participation helps lawmakers to enact more effective and responsive legislation	73 (19.7)	100 (27.2)	143 (38.4)	54 (14.6)
9	Public participation helps to identify and correct weaknesses in proposed legislation	101 (27.3)	186 (50.8)	49 (3.2)	34 (9.2)

Table 3 interprets that public participation produces several positive outcomes in the legislative process. It suggest that public participation contributes to legislative responsiveness, access to expert knowledge, citizens' sense of inclusion and the quality of legislation. However, responses concerning whether participation enhances acceptance of passed laws were more divided, indicating that participation does not automatically translate into public acceptance and that stronger mechanisms may be needed to demonstrate how citizens' contributions are incorporated into final legislation.

Interview Findings

The three civil society leaders interviewed emphasised the importance of citizen involvement in lawmaking. They argued that legislation becomes more legitimate and easier to implement when the people affected by it have opportunities to contribute to its formulation.

The interviewees also observed that civil society organisations can influence legislative processes through advocacy, stakeholder meetings and direct engagement with lawmakers. They perceived the responsiveness of Enugu lawmakers as improving, particularly through constituency offices, meetings with constituents and consultations with civil society organisations.

Nevertheless, they identified limited access to lawmakers and inadequate opportunities for sustained engagement as continuing challenges. The interview responses therefore suggest that although participatory mechanisms exist, the quality and consistency of interaction remain important areas for improvement.

Discussion

The findings indicate that public opinion is an important component of legislative participation in Enugu State. The high proportion of respondents who reported participating in public hearings supports the central argument of Participatory Democracy Theory that democratic participation should extend beyond elections (Pateman, 1970).

The finding that 90% of respondents believed public hearings enable lawmakers to gauge constituents' views is particularly significant. It suggests that respondents perceive the hearing process as an avenue through which communication between citizens and legislators occurs. This is consistent with the two-way communication perspective, which emphasises feedback and mutual understanding rather than one-directional information transmission (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The finding that 87% of respondents recognised the contribution of experts to the improvement of bills also demonstrates that public participation has a technical as well as democratic dimension. Civil society organisations, professional bodies and other stakeholders may possess knowledge that legislators require when evaluating the potential consequences of proposed laws.

The study also found that more than 70% of respondents believed that laws developed with public participation are easier to implement. This perception is important because public participation can increase legitimacy and citizens' sense of ownership. When citizens perceive legislation as the outcome of an inclusive process, resistance to implementation may be reduced.

The Anti-Open Grazing Law provides a useful illustration. The Enugu State House of Assembly conducted a public hearing on the bill in August 2021, during which residents and stakeholder groups were invited to make contributions. The bill subsequently passed after the committee considered its public-hearing report. This sequence illustrates how public consultation can become connected to formal legislative decision-making.

The findings, however, reveal that citizen participation is more visible at the public-hearing stage than during technical drafting. This is an important limitation. If citizens become involved only after a bill has already been formulated, their capacity to influence the fundamental direction of legislation may be reduced. Public participation should therefore begin at the problem-identification and agenda-setting stages.

The findings are broadly consistent with Aliyu et al. (2018), who found that public opinion is related to public policy but that citizens may be uncertain about the extent of their actual influence. They also support Oke and Iwu's (2018) observation that interest groups can influence legislative processes through advocacy and direct engagement.

However, the findings differ somewhat from the more critical assessment of Nigerian policymaking offered by Jega (2003) and Obo et al. (2014), who emphasise elite dominance and limited public influence. The difference may partly be explained by the study's focus on

state-level legislative participation and the increased use of public hearings and stakeholder consultations.

Overall, the study suggests that public opinion is increasingly mainstreamed into legislative processes in Enugu State, but such mainstreaming is uneven. Participation is strongest at public hearings, stakeholder engagement and advocacy stages, while direct citizen participation in technical drafting remains limited.

Conclusion

The study concludes that public opinion constitutes an important component of legislative governance in Enugu State. Citizens demonstrate considerable awareness of the Enugu State House of Assembly and participate in public hearings and other forms of legislative engagement. Respondents also perceive public participation as contributing to legislative acceptance, improving the quality of proposed laws and enabling lawmakers to understand constituents' views.

The findings support Participatory Democracy Theory by demonstrating that citizens can participate in democratic governance beyond electoral processes. They also demonstrate the relevance of two-way communication because meaningful legislative participation requires interaction between lawmakers and citizens.

Nevertheless, the study identifies a gap between opportunities for participation and demonstrable legislative influence. The existence of public hearings is important, but participation becomes more meaningful when citizens can see how their contributions affect legislative decisions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that:

1. The Enugu State House of Assembly should strengthen and institutionalise feedback mechanisms after public hearings by informing stakeholders about how major recommendations and concerns raised during the hearings were considered and addressed in the legislative process.
2. Civic education should be intensified to enhance citizens' understanding of the legislative process, including how to monitor proposed bills, submit memoranda, participate in public hearings and communicate effectively with their elected representatives.
3. The Enugu State House of Assembly should provide opportunities for stakeholder and citizen participation from the agenda-setting and early drafting stages of legislative bills, rather than concentrating public involvement primarily at the public-hearing stage.

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