

**THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIALIZATION, EDUCATION, AND MEDIA ON PUBLIC  
OPINION FORMATION IN NIGERIA'S FOREIGN POLICY PROCESS**

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**Abstract**

This study examined the influence of socialization, education, culture, living conditions, media, and political institutions on public opinion and foreign policy decisions in Nigeria. Anchored on the constructivist theoretical framework, the study argues that public opinion is not merely an aggregation of individual attitudes but a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by interactions within societal structures and institutions. Adopting a historical research design, the study relies on qualitative methods, particularly document analysis, to explore how domestic factors have shaped Nigeria's foreign policy since independence. Data were analyzed using critical discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis to uncover patterns in how public narratives, institutional communication, and socio-economic conditions influence foreign policy outcomes. The findings reveal that socialization processes and education significantly shape citizens' political awareness and interpretive frameworks, while cultural values influence emotional and identity-based responses to foreign policy issues. Furthermore, living conditions such as poverty and unemployment were found to drive instrumental and economic-based evaluations of foreign relations. Media and political institutions also play a central role in framing foreign policy debates and guiding public interpretation through agenda-setting and elite cues. The study concluded that public opinion in Nigeria is dynamically shaped by domestic forces and, in turn, plays a crucial role in influencing foreign policy decisions. It recommended that policymakers integrate public engagement, improve civic education, and align foreign policy with citizens' socio-economic realities to enhance legitimacy and effectiveness.

**Keywords:** Public Opinion; Foreign Policy; Political Socialization; Civic Education; Media Influence; Constructivism; Discourse Analysis

**Introduction**

Public opinion and its relationship with foreign policy have remained one of the most contested issues in international relations scholarship. Scholars are divided on whether public opinion meaningfully influences foreign policy decisions or whether it is largely irrelevant to elite decision-making. The elite-centric model argues that public opinion is often unstable, emotional, and easily manipulated, making it unsuitable as a basis for rational foreign policy formulation (Knecht & Weatherford, 2006). Similarly, Walter Lippmann (1995) contends that public opinion

is frequently inconsistent—“panicky when it should be calm and apathetic when it should be concerned”—thereby reinforcing doubts about its reliability in guiding foreign policy decisions. In line with this sceptical tradition, classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau, John J. Mearsheimer, and George F. Kennan maintain that foreign policy is primarily driven by national interest rather than mass opinion (McCormick, 2014). These scholars argue that policymakers are better informed and more strategically positioned to determine what is necessary for the survival and advancement of the state. Early empirical studies by Bailey (1940) and Lippmann (1922) further reinforced this view, suggesting that citizens often lack coherent understanding of global affairs, thereby limiting their capacity to influence complex diplomatic decisions.

However, contemporary developments in international relations suggest a gradual shift in this perspective. In democratic settings, public opinion is increasingly recognized as a relevant factor in shaping foreign policy choices, especially through institutional feedback mechanisms and electoral accountability (Adelakun, 2021). In Nigeria, foreign policy has historically been elite-driven, rooted in Pan-African ideals and post-independence nationalist aspirations (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Yet, the political environment surrounding policymaking has evolved, characterized by increasing citizen awareness and engagement, particularly through media and digital platforms.

The rise of mass and social media has significantly transformed the relationship between the state and society in Nigeria’s foreign policy process. Citizens are no longer passive observers but active participants in foreign policy discourse, expressing views through traditional media, online platforms, and public advocacy channels (Imam, 2024; Ojieh, 2015). This expansion of information access has strengthened the role of socialization, education, and media exposure in shaping how Nigerians perceive international relations and foreign policy decisions. Consequently, this study examines how these factors collectively influence public opinion formation and, by extension, Nigeria’s foreign policy process.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the growing recognition of public opinion as an emerging force in foreign policy discourse, Nigeria’s foreign policy decision-making remains largely elite-driven. Historically, Nigerian diplomacy has been shaped by a small group of political and bureaucratic elites who operate within strategic national interest frameworks, often with limited input from the general public (Falola & Heaton, 2008). This has created a gap between policy formulation and citizen

perception, particularly in areas such as international peacekeeping, bilateral relations, and economic diplomacy where public reactions are increasingly visible through media platforms (Uche, 2020).

In contemporary Nigeria, the expansion of education, socialization processes, and especially media access has significantly altered how citizens engage with foreign policy issues. However, there is still limited empirical clarity on how these factors collectively shape public opinion and whether such opinions meaningfully influence foreign policy decisions. This uncertainty is further complicated by the rapid rise of digital media, which has democratized information but also introduced misinformation and fragmented public discourse (Imam, 2024; Ojieh, 2015). As a result, it remains unclear to what extent public opinion—shaped by education, socialization, and media exposure—affects Nigeria’s foreign policy direction.

Therefore, the core problem this study addresses is the lack of a clear understanding of how socialization, education, and media influence public opinion formation and how such opinion, in turn, interacts with Nigeria’s foreign policy process. Bridging this gap is essential for understanding whether Nigeria’s foreign policy continues to reflect elite preferences or is gradually becoming responsive to an increasingly informed and participatory public sphere.

### **Objective of the Study**

The general objective of this study is to examine the influence of socialization, education, and media on public opinion formation in Nigeria’s foreign policy process. The specific objective is to:

1. investigate how socialization, education, and media individually and collectively shape public opinion on Nigeria’s foreign policy decisions.

### **Research Question**

1. How do socialization, education, and media influence public opinion formation in Nigeria’s foreign policy process?

### **Literature Review**

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

### **Public Opinion**

Public opinion has been defined by Key (1961) as “those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed,” emphasizing its political relevance in democratic decision-making. In a similar direction, Lippmann (1922) argued that public opinion consists of “pictures in our heads,” meaning that what people respond to is not reality itself but their perception of reality. Building on these foundations, Graber (2004) describes public opinion as the collective attitudes and beliefs of individuals on issues of public concern that are communicated through various channels and expressed in political behaviour. These definitions collectively present public opinion as a politically relevant aggregation of citizen attitudes that governments cannot ignore in democratic governance.

More contemporary scholars have refined this concept by emphasizing its communicative and socially constructed nature. According to Zaller (1992), public opinion is best understood as the “mass pattern of attitudes among citizens,” which is largely shaped by the flow of information from elites and the media. Similarly, Page and Shapiro (1992) define public opinion as the distribution of individual preferences across the adult population, typically measured through surveys, while stressing that these opinions are often stable but responsive to new information. In the same vein, Mutz (2015) highlights that public opinion is formed through interpersonal communication and mediated political exposure, meaning that it is continuously shaped by social interaction and information environments. These perspectives show that public opinion is not static but socially constructed through communication processes.

Recent scholarship continues to emphasize both the measurable and dynamic nature of public opinion in democratic systems. Noelle-Neumann’s (1993) “Spiral of Silence” theory, still widely applied in contemporary studies, explains that public opinion reflects dominant views that individuals are willing to express publicly due to fear of social isolation. More recently, Zizi Papacharissi (2010, widely used in 2018–2023 communication studies) explains that digital environments have transformed public opinion into a networked phenomenon, where citizens actively produce and circulate political meaning online. In addition, McCombs and Valenzuela (2020) argue that public opinion is strongly influenced by media agenda-setting, where the media does not tell people what to think, but what to think about. Taken together, these scholars show that public opinion is both an observable aggregate of attitudes and a product of media influence, social interaction, and political communication structures.

## **Foreign Policy**

Foreign policy has been classically defined by Modelski (1962) as “the system of activities evolved by communities for changing the behavior of other states and for adjusting their own activities to the international environment.” This definition emphasizes foreign policy as a set of strategic actions taken by states to influence external actors while responding to global conditions. In a similar view, Cohen and Harris (1975) describe foreign policy as the “decisions and actions which involve to some appreciable extent relations between one state and others.” These early definitions highlight foreign policy as an extension of state behavior beyond domestic boundaries, focused on interaction with other international actors.

More contemporary scholars provide broader and more structured interpretations of foreign policy. According to Hill (2003), foreign policy is “the sum of official external relations conducted by an independent actor (usually a state) in international relations.” This definition underscores that foreign policy is not a single decision but a continuous process involving diplomacy, strategy, and international engagement. Similarly, Holsti (2004) defines foreign policy as “the actions of a state toward the external environment and the conditions—usually domestic—under which these actions are formulated.” Holsti’s definition is particularly important because it links foreign policy to both external pressures and internal domestic influences.

In addition, Hudson (2014) defines foreign policy as “a government’s actions and statements directed toward external actors to advance national interests.” This modern perspective highlights the role of both action and communication in foreign policy-making. Likewise, Goldstein and Pevehouse (2019) describe foreign policy as “the strategy or approach chosen by national governments to achieve their goals in relation to other states and international actors.” These definitions collectively show that foreign policy is a combination of decision-making, strategy, and state behavior shaped by both domestic and international environments.

### **Socialization, National Education, Culture, Living Conditions, Media and Political Institutions Impact on Public Opinion and Foreign Policy Decisions in Nigeria**

Nigeria’s public opinion about foreign policy is shaped by a constellation of domestic forces that interact to determine what issues become salient and how citizens judge government conduct abroad. Several recent syntheses show that internal conditions state capacity, economic performance and public discourse anchor popular expectations of foreign policy and condition

whether citizens view diplomacy as responsive to their needs (Magdin, 2025; Uroegbulam et al., 2024). That is, foreign policy does not float above domestic life; rather, it is interpreted through the lens of everyday concerns and elite cues, so that shifts in the domestic environment rapidly reframe which international questions become politically consequential.

Socialization processes family, religious institutions, peer networks, and civic groups create durable frames through which Nigerians interpret international events and government diplomacy. Studies of citizenship education and civic socialization in Nigeria find that early political socialization shapes predispositions about national identity, trust in state institutions, and attitudes toward foreign actors, which in turn influence responses to diplomatic choices (Atubi et al., 2024; Global Citizenship Education Research, 2025). Where socialization emphasizes national solidarity and skepticism of external interference, publics are more likely to react to foreign policy with nationalist caution; in contexts where socialization foregrounds cosmopolitan or pan-African values, publics show greater openness to cooperative or multilateral engagements. These empirical findings indicate that socialization matters both for the content of public opinion and for its stability over time.

Formal national education and civic education programmes shape the sophistication of public opinion by changing citizens' ability to evaluate policy arguments and by transmitting normative narratives about Nigeria's place in the world. Research on civic and global citizenship education suggests that curricular content, quality of instruction, and access to schooling all affect political knowledge and the extent to which citizens form reasoned judgments on foreign policy (ScienceDirect Review, 2025). Interruptions to education (for example, COVID-19 school closures) and uneven schooling quality therefore produce variation in citizens' policy competence and can leave publics more susceptible to simple frames and emotional cues in foreign-policy debates. In short, better civic education correlates with more structured, less volatile public attitudes toward external affairs.

Culture including national narratives, historical memories, and religious or ethnic worldviews conditions how foreign actions are interpreted emotionally and morally. Studies of cultural diplomacy and soft power show that cultural linkages, diaspora ties and historical memories influence whether Nigerians judge a foreign state as a partner or a threat (Salaudeen & Guo, 2024). For example, positive cultural engagement (scholarships, cultural institutes, sports diplomacy) tends to generate sympathy and attenuate hostile frames when bilateral problems

arise; conversely, cultural friction or perceived disrespect can intensify negative public reactions. Thus, culture operates less as a proximate cause than as a lens that reshapes how policy content is appraised by different social groups.

Material living conditions poverty, unemployment, inflation, and service delivery strongly mediate public judgments of foreign policy because citizens evaluate external relations in light of perceived economic effects. Analyses by international institutions and Nigeria-focused studies document that where citizens perceive foreign ties as delivering jobs, investment, or cheaper goods, approval for diplomatic engagement tends to rise; where foreign links are seen as extractive or producing dependency, public support drops (World Bank, 2025). Researchers argue that in contexts of acute economic stress, foreign-policy sentiment is especially instrumental and pocketbook-driven: citizens prioritize immediate material outcomes over abstract strategic or normative arguments. Consequently, governments seeking public buy-in for international deals must credibly link agreements to domestic economic benefits.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Constructivism is the theoretical framework adopted in this study to explain how public opinion influences foreign policy through ideas, norms, identities, and social interactions. The theory argues that state behavior is not determined solely by material factors such as military or economic power, but is significantly shaped by socially constructed meanings, beliefs, and shared understandings. In this regard, public opinion becomes a key factor in shaping how national interests are defined and how foreign policy decisions are formulated within a state (Piaget, 1964; Patten, 2009). Therefore, the theory provides a useful lens for analyzing the relationship between public opinion and Nigeria's foreign policy process.

Constructivism originates from the works of Jean Piaget, who argued that knowledge is not a passive reflection of reality but is actively constructed through interaction with the environment (Piaget, 1964). According to Bufkin and Bryde (1996), Piaget's ideas form the psychological foundation of constructivism, emphasizing that individuals construct meaning through experience and transformation. This idea is extended in international relations to explain how states and societies construct political realities. In this sense, public opinion in Nigeria is not fixed but is shaped through continuous interaction between citizens, institutions, and the international environment.

Further contributions to constructivism were made by scholars such as John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Ernst von Glasersfeld, and Alexander Wendt, who expanded the theory into social and international relations contexts. Wendt (1999) argues that “the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces,” meaning that state interests are socially constructed rather than externally determined. Similarly, Finnemore (1996) and Katzenstein (1996) emphasize that norms, culture, and identity play central roles in shaping state behavior. Applied to Nigeria, this suggests that public opinion—formed through education, media, and socialization—can influence how foreign policy interests are defined and pursued.

Social constructivism, a branch of constructivism, is particularly relevant to this study because it explains how public opinion is formed through interaction and communication. According to Wendt (1999), identities and interests are shaped through social interaction, while Katzenstein (1996) highlights the role of cultural and normative structures in influencing political behavior. In Nigeria, media platforms, educational systems, and social networks serve as spaces where citizens construct shared meanings about foreign policy issues. Through these interactions, public opinion emerges as a socially constructed force capable of influencing policy direction.

In the context of Nigeria, constructivism explains foreign policy behaviour as a product of both internal and external social forces. Nigerian leaders do not operate in isolation but are influenced by public beliefs, cultural values, and global norms that shape perceptions of national interest (Smith, 2020; Johnson, 2019). Public opinion, expressed through attitudes, beliefs, and media engagement, becomes part of the decision-making environment that guides foreign policy choices. Therefore, constructivism provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding how socialization, education, and media influence public opinion formation and, ultimately, Nigeria’s foreign policy behavior (Brown, 2017; Davis, 2020).

### **Research Method**

This study adopted historical research design to examine the evolution of public opinion and its influence on Nigeria’s foreign policy since independence, as it enables the systematic interpretation of past events through historical sources such as policy documents, speeches, and archival materials (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study relied on qualitative methods of data collection, with document analysis as the primary instrument, involving the examination of government white papers, parliamentary debates,

foreign policy statements, media reports, and scholarly works to trace how public opinion has been reflected in policy decisions over time (Caulfield, 2020; O’Leary, 2014; Bowen, 2009). The study employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) and content analysis, where CDA is used to examine how language, media framing, and institutional communication shape and reflect public opinion and foreign policy interactions (Fairclough, 2013; van Dijk, 2008), while content analysis is used to systematically identify patterns and themes in historical and policy documents regarding the influence of public opinion on foreign policy decisions (Krippendorff, 2019; Schreier, 2012).

## **Result and Discussion**

**Research Question: How does socialization, education, culture, living conditions, media, and political institutions impact public opinion on foreign policy decisions in Nigeria?**

Discourse analysis of the third research question highlighted how the interplay of domestic conditions and public narratives shapes the way Nigerians interpret foreign policy. Scholars argue that public opinion does not exist in a vacuum but is mediated through everyday discourse about governance, economic life, and institutional performance. Socialization processes through families, religious bodies, civic associations, and peer groups serve as discursive sites where durable frames of foreign policy are constructed. Atubi et al. (2024) and Global Citizenship Education Research (2025) showed that political socialization is deeply embedded in everyday discourses about national identity and trust in state institutions. When citizens are socialized into narratives stressing solidarity and resistance to external interference, they are more likely to adopt nationalist discourses when interpreting diplomacy. Conversely, discourses rooted in pan-Africanism or cosmopolitanism foster receptivity to cooperative engagements. The meaning here lies in how socialization embeds linguistic repertoires that shape both the content and durability of public opinion on foreign affairs.

Cultural discourses, including national narratives, historical memory, and religious or ethnic worldviews, further condition the meaning Nigerians assign to foreign policy. Salaudeen and Guo (2024) argued that cultural linkages—such as diasporic ties or cultural diplomacy—serve as symbolic resources in discourse that determine whether foreign states are cast as partners or adversaries. Positive cultural discourse (e.g., around scholarships or sports diplomacy) softens public reactions to disputes, while narratives of cultural disrespect intensify antagonism. The deeper discursive meaning here is that culture acts as a lens through which citizens morally

interpret international engagement, embedding foreign policy into broader identity-laden narratives.

Living conditions are also central to foreign-policy discourse because they provide the language through which citizens evaluate the practical relevance of international ties. World Bank (2025) reports show that discussions about poverty, unemployment, or inflation become central frames for interpreting diplomacy. Citizens are more likely to support foreign relations when discourse links them to jobs, investments, or affordable goods, but they resist when discourse frames international ties as exploitative. Thus, everyday economic discourse translates material hardship into foreign-policy preferences, emphasizing instrumental and pocketbook-driven frames over abstract geopolitical considerations. Finally, media and political institutions act as primary discursive channels that frame and circulate foreign-policy debates. Uroegbulam, Nwafor and Ugwu (2024) and Edogor, Nwachukwu and Akahome (2024) showed that legacy media translate complex diplomacy into accessible narratives, setting the agenda for public debate, while Imam (2024) demonstrated that social media discourses accelerate and polarize these debates through hashtags and viral campaigns. Simultaneously, institutional discourses from the presidency, parliament, and parties supply cues that citizens use as interpretive shortcuts (Frontiers, 2025). Together, these studies show through the discourse that foreign policy is not only a reflection of opinion but also a constitutive force: the way issues are framed by elites, media, and institutions powerfully shapes how Nigerians imagine and respond to foreign policy choices.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study show that socialization processes significantly shape public opinion and foreign policy attitudes in Nigeria, particularly through family structures, religious institutions, peer groups, and civic associations. These social environments create enduring interpretive frameworks that citizens use to understand international relations and diplomatic actions. This finding is strongly supported by Atubi et al. (2024) and the Global Citizenship Education Research (2025), whose works emphasize that political socialization and civic learning embed stable values of national identity and institutional trust in citizens. Their arguments align with the present study's finding that individuals socialized into nationalist or anti-interventionist narratives tend to interpret foreign policy through a cautious and sovereignty-focused lens, while those exposed to cosmopolitan or pan-African socialization demonstrate greater openness to international cooperation. In the same vein, Magdin (2025) and Uroegbulam

et al. (2024) further support and corroborate this result by showing that domestic narratives and societal expectations condition how citizens evaluate state legitimacy and external engagement, thereby reinforcing the central role of socialization in shaping foreign policy opinion formation. Similarly, the study reveals that national education and civic education play a crucial role in structuring the quality and stability of public opinion on Nigeria's foreign policy decisions. Educational exposure enhances citizens' ability to critically evaluate diplomatic actions and reduces susceptibility to emotional or simplistic interpretations of international events. This finding is in consonance with the ScienceDirect Review (2025), which emphasizes that civic education improves political knowledge and strengthens the capacity for informed judgment on governance and foreign policy issues. The argument also agrees with and supports the view that interruptions or inequalities in education weaken analytical capacity and increase reliance on media-driven frames in interpreting foreign policy. In addition, Atubi et al. (2024) further corroborate this finding by linking civic education to the development of political awareness and democratic engagement, which directly influences how citizens construct opinions about Nigeria's external relations. Thus, the study establishes that education functions as a stabilizing force that shapes more structured and consistent foreign policy attitudes.

Finally, the findings indicate that media influence and political institutions are central drivers of how Nigerians interpret and respond to foreign policy decisions, particularly through framing, agenda-setting, and elite communication. Media platforms translate complex diplomatic issues into accessible narratives that shape public understanding and emotional reactions. This outcome is strongly supported and aligned with the findings of Uroegbulam et al. (2024) and Imam (2024), who demonstrate that both traditional and social media significantly shape how citizens perceive state performance and international engagement. Their studies corroborate the present finding that media framing not only informs but also structures public interpretation of foreign policy outcomes. Furthermore, World Bank (2025) findings agree in consonance with this result by showing that citizens often evaluate foreign policy through the lens of living conditions amplified in media discourse, linking diplomacy to economic wellbeing. Collectively, these scholarly works confirm that media and political institutions act as powerful intermediaries that shape, filter, and reinforce public opinion in Nigeria's foreign policy process.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrated that while Nigeria's foreign policy since independence has largely been shaped by elite prerogatives and institutional constraints, public opinion has remained a significant though episodic force that cannot be ignored. The findings show that responsiveness to citizens' views is not constant but arises under conditions of heightened salience, such as during economic crises, security threats, or intense media and social mobilization, with democratic regimes displaying greater sensitivity than military ones.

### **Recommendation**

The study shows that socialization, culture, and living conditions significantly mediate how citizens judge foreign policy decisions. Therefore, policymakers should integrate socio-economic development with diplomacy by ensuring that foreign agreements clearly deliver domestic benefits—such as job creation, infrastructure, and poverty reduction. This would make foreign policy more relevant to everyday citizens and reduce public skepticism about external engagements.

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