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PUBLIC OPINION AND NIGERIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN AFRICA

by

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Abstract

This study examined public opinion and Nigeria's foreign policy in Africa within the context of democratic governance. It explored the extent to which citizens' views influence foreign policy formulation and implementation in Nigeria, particularly in relation to the country's engagements with African states and regional organizations. The study adopted a qualitative approach based on a historical research design, using secondary sources of data such as official government documents, policy statements, media reports, academic literature, and publications from regional organizations. Content analysis was employed to identify recurring themes relating to public opinion expression, policy responsiveness, institutional constraints, and foreign policy outcomes. Findings revealed that public opinion is increasingly expressed through multiple channels, including traditional media, social media platforms, civil society organizations, and public discourse. However, its influence on foreign policy remains largely indirect due to the dominance of executive decision-making structures. The study further established that while democratic governance and technological advancement have enhanced citizen participation, factors such as institutional weaknesses, misinformation, and elite control continue to limit the effective integration of public opinion into foreign policy processes. The study concludes that public opinion contributes to the legitimacy and accountability of Nigeria's foreign policy in Africa, even though its impact on policy outcomes is moderated by structural constraints.

Keywords: Public Opinion; Foreign Policy; Democratic Governance; Nigeria; Africa

Introduction

Public opinion constitutes an essential component of democratic governance because it serves as a mechanism through which citizens express their preferences, expectations, and evaluations of government policies. In democratic societies, governments are expected to formulate and implement policies that reflect the interests and aspirations of the people. This expectation extends beyond domestic affairs to foreign policy, which encompasses a state's interactions with other countries and international organizations. Although foreign policy has traditionally been viewed as the exclusive domain of political elites, diplomats, and security experts, contemporary democratic developments have increasingly highlighted the importance of public opinion in influencing external relations and international decision-making (Dahl, 2020).

Foreign policy is a critical instrument through which states pursue their national interests, maintain international cooperation, promote security, and protect economic and political objectives. In democratic systems, foreign policy decisions are expected to enjoy public legitimacy because they often have direct implications for citizens' welfare, national security, and

international reputation. Scholars have argued that public opinion can shape foreign policy by influencing political leaders, constraining policy options, and affecting electoral outcomes (Baum & Potter, 2019; Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017). Consequently, governments increasingly monitor public attitudes toward international issues and incorporate citizen preferences into foreign policy calculations.

The relationship between public opinion and foreign policy has become more significant in recent decades due to globalization, democratization, and advances in communication technology. The expansion of traditional and digital media has enhanced citizens' access to information about international events and government actions. Social media platforms, online news outlets, and civil society organizations now provide opportunities for citizens to engage in discussions on foreign affairs and influence policy debates. As a result, foreign policy issues that were once confined to diplomatic circles have become subjects of public discourse and scrutiny (Soroka et al., 2019). This transformation has strengthened the expectation that foreign policy decisions should reflect not only strategic state interests but also the preferences and concerns of citizens.

Nigeria occupies a prominent position in African politics and diplomacy. Since gaining independence in 1960, the country has pursued an Africa-centered foreign policy, emphasizing African unity, decolonization, regional cooperation, conflict resolution, and economic integration (Akinboye & Ottoh, 2011). As Africa's most populous nation and one of its largest economies, Nigeria has played leading roles in regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and continental bodies such as the African Union (AU). The country has also contributed significantly to peacekeeping operations, mediation efforts, and humanitarian interventions across the continent (Ogunnubi & Okeke-Uzodike, 2016).

Nigeria's foreign policy engagements in Africa have often generated considerable public interest and debate. Issues such as military interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, peacekeeping operations, border closures, migration policies, xenophobic attacks against Nigerians in foreign countries, and regional security cooperation have attracted widespread public attention. Citizens frequently express opinions regarding the costs, benefits, and implications of Nigeria's involvement in African affairs. These expressions occur through traditional media, social media platforms, civil society organizations, professional associations, and public forums. Such developments suggest that public opinion is becoming an increasingly important factor in discussions surrounding Nigeria's foreign policy in Africa.

Despite growing public interest in foreign affairs, Nigeria's foreign policy-making process remains largely centralized within the executive branch of government. The President, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other senior government officials continue to dominate decision-making on external relations. Although the National Assembly possesses constitutional oversight responsibilities and civil society organizations actively participate in policy debates, their influence on actual foreign policy outcomes is often limited (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2020). This situation raises important questions about the extent to which public opinion influences Nigeria's foreign policy decisions and whether democratic principles of participation and accountability are adequately reflected in the country's external engagements.

Furthermore, contemporary developments across Africa have heightened the relevance of public opinion in foreign policy. The rise of democratic governance, increased regional integration, transnational security challenges, migration issues, and economic interdependence have created stronger connections between domestic public concerns and foreign policy decisions. Citizens are increasingly aware that decisions taken by governments in the international arena can directly affect employment opportunities, national security, trade relations, and social welfare. Consequently, there is growing demand for greater transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in foreign policy formulation and implementation.

Although considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to Nigeria's foreign policy, much of the existing literature focuses on themes such as national interest, regional leadership, security challenges, economic diplomacy, and Nigeria's role in African affairs (Adebajo, 2008; Fawole, 2003). Comparatively less attention has been given to the role of public opinion as a determinant of foreign policy behavior. This gap is particularly significant in the context of Nigeria's democratic experience, where public participation and accountability are expected to influence policy-making processes.

Against this background, this study examines the relationship between public opinion and Nigeria's foreign policy in Africa. Specifically, it seeks to explore the mechanisms through which public opinion is expressed, transmitted, and incorporated into foreign policy decision-making. The study also investigates the extent to which Nigerian policymakers respond to public preferences on African affairs and identifies the factors that facilitate or constrain the influence of public opinion on foreign policy outcomes. By doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of democratic governance, foreign policy accountability, and citizen participation in Nigeria's engagement with Africa.

Literature Review

Public opinion has increasingly become an important factor in shaping foreign policy decisions in democratic societies. In democratic systems, governments are often expected to align foreign policy choices with the interests, perceptions, and expectations of their citizens. In the Nigerian context, public perceptions, national identity, and domestic political debates have historically influenced the country’s foreign policy engagements within the African continent (Ogunnubi & Amao, 2019). Since its independence in 1960, Nigeria has maintained an Afrocentric foreign policy orientation that places Africa at the center of its diplomatic engagements. This orientation reflects Nigeria’s historical commitment to African unity, regional stability, and the promotion of continental development. However, the extent to which Nigerian citizens support or challenge this foreign policy approach has generated considerable scholarly debate and policy discussions (Mbara & Gopal, 2020).

According to Mbara and Gopal (2020), Nigeria’s foreign policy since independence has been guided by the doctrine that Africa should remain the centerpiece of its diplomatic engagement. This principle was initially articulated by Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa in 1960, when he emphasized that Nigeria’s foreign policy should prioritize the political liberation, unity, and development of African states. The authors affirm that Nigeria’s commitment to African solidarity and continental leadership significantly influenced its diplomatic, economic, and

military involvement across the continent during the post-independence era. Nigeria actively supported liberation movements and anti-colonial struggles in Southern Africa and consistently promoted policies aimed at strengthening African cooperation. However, scholars also note that the Afrocentric orientation of Nigeria's foreign policy has generated domestic debates, particularly regarding whether these commitments adequately reflect the economic and developmental interests of Nigerian citizens.

Scholars have further noted that Nigerian public opinion often shapes the level of government commitment to regional and continental engagements. According to Kia and Udeoji (2020), public expectations regarding Nigeria's leadership role in Africa have historically encouraged successive governments to maintain strong diplomatic and political involvement in African affairs. The authors hold that Nigeria's large population, economic capacity, and strategic position within West Africa have fostered a perception among citizens that the country is a natural leader on the continent. This perception has strengthened public support for Nigeria's participation in regional organizations and peacekeeping initiatives aimed at promoting stability and development across Africa.

Similarly, Ogunnubi and Amao (2019) argue that Nigeria's pursuit of regional leadership in Africa has often been reinforced by domestic expectations that the country should act as a stabilizing force within the continent. In their view, Nigerian citizens frequently perceive regional stability as essential for national security and economic prosperity. Consequently, public opinion has often supported government initiatives aimed at strengthening regional cooperation through organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union.

Public opinion has also historically influenced Nigeria's foreign policy through widespread domestic support for African liberation movements and anti-colonial struggles. During the 1960s and 1970s, many Nigerians strongly supported government policies aimed at promoting African independence and ending minority rule in Southern Africa. According to Ahmed and Najimu (2025), Nigerian citizens widely supported government efforts to assist liberation movements and oppose racial segregation policies such as Apartheid in South Africa. The authors affirm that this domestic support enabled Nigeria to play a leading role in mobilizing diplomatic pressure, providing financial assistance, and advocating for sanctions against apartheid regimes in international forums.

In addition to liberation struggles, public opinion has influenced Nigeria's foreign policy through its impact on regional peacekeeping initiatives. Nigeria has historically been one of the largest contributors to peacekeeping operations in Africa, particularly within West Africa. According to Ahmed and Najimu (2025), Nigeria's leadership in regional peacekeeping missions has often been justified by the government as a reflection of its responsibility toward maintaining peace and stability within the African continent. The authors hold that domestic public support for regional security and conflict resolution has encouraged Nigerian governments to deploy troops in conflict zones and participate actively in peacekeeping missions across Africa.

For example, Nigeria played a major role in peacekeeping interventions during the Liberian Civil War and the Sierra Leone Civil War under the auspices of the Economic Community of West

African States Monitoring Group. According to Adekeye (2017), Nigeria contributed the majority of troops, financial resources, and logistical support to these operations. While these interventions were sometimes controversial due to their financial and human costs, many Nigerians perceived them as necessary for maintaining regional stability and protecting Nigeria's strategic interests within West Africa.

Despite the widespread support for Africa-centered diplomacy, public opinion in Nigeria has at times questioned the costs and benefits of the country's extensive foreign policy engagements across the continent. Many analysts argue that while Nigeria has invested significant financial and military resources in supporting African countries, the direct economic benefits for Nigerian citizens have often been limited. According to Ntagu et al. (2024), critics within Nigeria argue that the government's extensive involvement in African affairs has not always translated into tangible improvements in domestic economic development or social welfare. The authors hold that some Nigerians believe that government resources should be directed more toward addressing internal challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and infrastructural deficits.

Furthermore, the emergence of democratic governance since 1999 has strengthened the influence of public opinion on foreign policy debates in Nigeria. The expansion of civil society organizations, independent media institutions, and digital communication platforms has created new channels through which citizens can express their views on international issues. According to Ogunnubi (2018), the increasing democratization of political discourse has enhanced public scrutiny of government foreign policy decisions, particularly regarding Nigeria's commitments to regional peacekeeping operations and continental diplomatic initiatives.

Another dimension of public opinion in Nigeria's foreign policy relates to the ongoing debate over the relevance of Afrocentric diplomacy in the contemporary international system. According to Kia and Udeoji (2020), some scholars argue that Nigeria's traditional Africa-centered foreign policy should be reassessed in light of evolving global economic and political realities. In their view, Nigeria should adopt a more pragmatic foreign policy strategy that balances continental responsibilities with domestic economic priorities. This perspective reflects broader public debates about whether Nigeria's leadership role in Africa should continue to dominate its diplomatic agenda or whether greater emphasis should be placed on economic diplomacy and domestic development.

Nevertheless, public opinion in Nigeria continues to recognize the importance of the country's leadership role within Africa. Nigeria's large population, strategic geographic location, and economic potential have positioned it as a key actor in African diplomacy. According to Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike (2016), Nigeria's contributions to peacekeeping, conflict mediation, and regional cooperation have reinforced its reputation as a major stabilizing force within the continent. These achievements have contributed to a sense of national pride among many Nigerians and have sustained public support for Nigeria's involvement in African affairs.

Thus, the relationship between public opinion and Nigeria's foreign policy in Africa reflects a complex interaction between national identity, political expectations, and economic realities. While many Nigerians support the country's leadership role within the continent, there is also a growing demand for foreign policy decisions that more directly promote the welfare of Nigerian

citizens. As democratic institutions continue to strengthen and media participation expands, public opinion is likely to play an increasingly significant role in shaping Nigeria's foreign policy priorities and diplomatic engagements in Africa.

Civil Society, Advocacy Groups, and Foreign Policy Influence

Civil society organizations and advocacy groups have increasingly become important actors in shaping foreign policy in democratic societies (Nwokedi, 2021). In modern democratic systems, foreign policy decisions are no longer the exclusive domain of state officials and diplomats; rather, they are influenced by a range of domestic actors, including civil society organizations, interest groups, research institutions, and professional associations. In Nigeria, the growth of democratic governance since 1999 has expanded the political space for non-state actors to participate in policy debates, including those related to international relations and diplomacy. Civil society groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), professional associations, labour unions, and advocacy coalitions have contributed to foreign policy discussions by influencing public opinion, providing expert analysis, and mobilizing citizens around international issues that affect national interests (Nwokedi, 2021).

Scholars generally agree that civil society organizations serve as an important bridge between the government and the public in democratic political systems. According to Afaha and Obi-Emeruwa (2022), civil society organizations in Nigeria have played constructive roles in shaping public debates on foreign policy and democratic governance. The authors affirm that these organizations provide platforms through which citizens can express opinions on international issues and influence the direction of government policies. Through advocacy campaigns, research publications, and public engagement activities, civil society groups help to ensure that foreign policy decisions are not made solely by political elites but reflect broader societal interests. Similarly, Nwokedi (2021) holds that civil society organizations function as channels of political participation that enable citizens to contribute to national policy debates, including those concerning Nigeria's diplomatic engagements and international commitments.

In addition to acting as intermediaries between citizens and policymakers, civil society organizations also contribute to the democratization of foreign policy processes. According to Ogunwa and Ogunwa (2023), the emergence of strong civil society networks in Nigeria has enhanced public participation in governance and policy formulation. The authors hold that civil society groups play an essential role in promoting transparency, accountability, and democratic values within the political system. By engaging in policy advocacy and public awareness campaigns, these organizations have been able to influence government decisions on both domestic and international policy issues. In the view of Adebanwi (2020), the growing influence of civil society organizations reflects broader democratic transformations that have occurred in Nigeria since the end of military rule. These transformations have created opportunities for non-state actors to contribute to policymaking processes that were previously dominated by government officials.

One of the key ways civil society influences foreign policy in Nigeria is through advocacy on human rights and democratic governance. Various Nigerian NGOs and advocacy coalitions frequently monitor government policies and make recommendations regarding international

commitments related to human rights, democracy, and development. According to Idowu (2020), civil society organizations have increasingly influenced Nigeria's foreign policy discourse by drawing attention to issues such as human rights protection, gender equality, and the welfare of vulnerable populations. The author affirms that through advocacy and policy engagement, these organizations contribute to shaping Nigeria's diplomatic positions on international norms and agreements. Similarly, Ibrahim and Sani (2022) hold that Nigerian civil society groups have been active in advocating for the country's compliance with international human rights treaties and conventions. Their activities include monitoring government commitments, publishing policy reports, and engaging with international organizations to promote accountability and policy reforms.

Another important dimension of civil society influence is their role in shaping Nigeria's international image and soft power diplomacy. In recent years, scholars have emphasized the role of non-state actors in projecting national values and cultural identity within the global arena. According to Ogele (2025), soft power has become an increasingly significant component of Nigeria's foreign policy strategy, involving the use of cultural diplomacy, public engagement, and international partnerships to promote national interests. The author holds that civil society organizations, cultural institutions, and advocacy networks contribute significantly to this process by promoting Nigerian values and facilitating cooperation with international actors. In addition, Eze and Okeke (2021) affirm that non-governmental organizations often serve as informal ambassadors of national values by participating in international conferences, development initiatives, and humanitarian activities that enhance Nigeria's global reputation.

Civil society organizations also influence foreign policy by participating in policy consultations and international partnerships. Many Nigerian NGOs collaborate with international organizations such as the United Nations, regional institutions, and global development agencies. Through these partnerships, they provide policy recommendations and technical expertise that can shape government decisions on international agreements and diplomatic engagements. In the view of Williamson and Rodd (2016), civil society advocacy plays an important role in promoting democratic norms and encouraging governments to align national policies with international standards. Their analysis suggests that advocacy organizations often act as watchdogs that monitor government compliance with international obligations and encourage reforms where necessary. Similarly, Okeke and Nwankwo (2023) affirm that the growing involvement of civil society organizations in international networks has strengthened their capacity to influence national foreign policy discussions.

Furthermore, civil society organizations have been particularly active in addressing transnational challenges that affect Nigeria's foreign policy priorities. Issues such as terrorism, migration, climate change, and humanitarian crises require coordinated responses that involve both government and non-state actors. According to Njoku (2026), the relationship between the Nigerian state and civil society has become especially significant in addressing security challenges and counter-terrorism policies. The author affirms that civil society groups often engage with government institutions to promote policies that balance national security objectives with respect for human rights and democratic accountability. Similarly, Bello (2022) holds that Nigerian civil society organizations have increasingly participated in peacebuilding initiatives and conflict resolution efforts in West Africa, thereby complementing official diplomatic efforts.

Another important avenue through which civil society influences foreign policy is through public awareness and mass mobilization. Advocacy groups frequently organize campaigns, conferences, workshops, and public discussions to raise awareness about international issues affecting Nigeria. These initiatives help to shape public opinion and create pressure on policymakers to adopt particular foreign policy positions. For example, Nigerian civil society organizations have historically mobilized public support for anti-apartheid campaigns, debt relief initiatives, and regional peacekeeping operations in Africa. According to Adebajo (2020), civil society mobilization played a significant role in strengthening Nigeria's commitment to African liberation movements during the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Such mobilization demonstrates the capacity of advocacy groups to influence foreign policy debates by shaping the perceptions and expectations of the Nigerian public.

Despite their growing influence, the role of civil society organizations in Nigeria's foreign policy process also faces several challenges. One major challenge is limited access to decision-making institutions. Foreign policy formulation in Nigeria has traditionally been dominated by government officials, diplomats, and political elites. According to Afaha and Obi-Emeruwa (2022), although civil society organizations have expanded their influence in recent years, the foreign policy process in Nigeria still remains largely centralized within the executive branch of government. As a result, the participation of civil society actors is often informal and dependent on the willingness of government institutions to engage with them.

Funding constraints and institutional capacity also affect the effectiveness of civil society organizations in influencing foreign policy. Many advocacy groups rely heavily on donor funding and international partnerships, which can sometimes shape their priorities and operational strategies. According to Ikelegbe (2021), dependence on external funding can create structural limitations for civil society organizations, particularly when donor interests influence organizational agendas. The author holds that sustainable local funding mechanisms are necessary to strengthen the independence and long-term effectiveness of Nigerian civil society organizations.

Another significant challenge relates to the relationship between the government and civil society actors. In some cases, tensions arise when advocacy groups criticize government policies or demand greater transparency in foreign policy decisions. However, scholars argue that constructive engagement between the state and civil society can strengthen democratic governance and improve policy outcomes. According to Ogunwa and Ogunwa (2023), effective collaboration between government institutions and civil society organizations can enhance policy innovation and promote more inclusive decision-making processes. Similarly, Ezeani (2021) affirms that sustained dialogue between policymakers and civil society actors can improve the legitimacy and effectiveness of foreign policy decisions.

Therefore, the influence of civil society and advocacy groups on Nigeria's foreign policy reflects broader trends associated with democratic governance and political pluralism. As democratic institutions continue to develop and political participation expands, non-state actors are likely to play an increasingly significant role in shaping foreign policy debates and decisions. Civil society organizations provide important channels through which citizens can express their views on international issues and hold policymakers accountable for their decisions. Through advocacy,

public engagement, and international partnerships, these organizations contribute to ensuring that Nigeria's foreign policy reflects not only the interests of political elites but also the aspirations of the broader society.

Comparative Perspectives: Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in Other Democracies

Public opinion plays a vital role in shaping foreign policy not only in Nigeria but across democracies worldwide. Comparative scholarship on public opinion and foreign policy provides valuable insights into how citizen preferences, political culture, media dynamics, and institutional arrangements influence the formulation, execution, and legitimacy of foreign policy decisions. By comparing different democratic systems, scholars are better able to understand the conditions under which public opinion matters for foreign policy, the mechanisms through which influence operates, and the limits of public input in international affairs. These comparative insights help contextualize Nigeria's experience, revealing both universal patterns and unique contextual variations in how public opinion interacts with foreign policy.

In democratic states, public opinion is widely recognized as an important reference point for policymakers when formulating foreign policy. According to McDermott (2020), public opinion shapes foreign policy most directly when leaders face substantial electoral incentives, high public salience of international issues, and active political debate. The author affirms that in mature democracies, public opinion exerts influence through multiple channels, including elections, opinion polling, media discourse, and civil society activism, which together generate accountability pressures on policymakers.

Similarly, Dixon and Schwartz (2022) hold that public opinion influences foreign policy both directly and indirectly. Direct influence is evident when leaders adjust policy to avoid electoral punishment for unpopular international decisions, whereas indirect influence operates through civil society institutions, interest groups, and of course the news media, which frame national narratives and shape expectations about international affairs. The authors emphasize that comparative analysis is essential because these mechanisms vary significantly depending on political culture, levels of democratic consolidation, and the strength of civic institutions. This body of scholarship reinforces the view that democratic governments cannot entirely ignore the preferences and values of their populations when making foreign policy choices, though the degree of responsiveness varies across contexts.

1. The United States: Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy

The United States provides one of the most extensively studied cases of public opinion's impact on foreign policy. According to Baum and Potter (2021), public opinion in the U.S. has a complex and conditional relationship with foreign policy decision-making. The authors affirm that while public opinion does not always directly determine specific policy outcomes, it constrains policymakers during debates on key issues such as military intervention, foreign aid, and trade agreements. For example, sustained public opposition to prolonged military engagements in the Middle East throughout the 2010s influenced the strategic recalibration of U.S. policy under successive administrations.

In addition, Page and Vasilopoulos (2018) highlight that elite framing and media narratives significantly condition public opinion in the U.S. They hold that political leaders, interest groups, and opinion leaders actively shape public perceptions of international issues, which in turn affects democratic accountability. Their analysis echoes other comparative research showing that in pluralistic democracies, public opinion is rarely spontaneous or independent; instead, it interacts with elite discourse and partisan cues.

What is particularly notable in the U.S. case is the role of partisan polarization in shaping foreign policy attitudes. According to Klar and Krupnikov (2021), polarization influences how foreign policy is perceived and debated. When public opinion is deeply split along party lines, policymakers face greater difficulty forming coherent foreign policy strategies that satisfy broad constituencies. This suggests that even in advanced democracies, structural political dynamics can weaken or fragment the influence of public opinion on foreign policy.

2. Western Europe: Consensus, Values, and International Engagement

In several Western European democracies, public opinion has also been shown to play a significant role in foreign policy formulation, though the pathways of influence often differ from those in the U.S. According to Anderson and Heise (2023), citizens in countries such as Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands frequently exhibit strong normative commitments to human rights, multilateralism, and international cooperation. These values shape public expectations and, by extension, foreign policy discourse.

For example, public opinion in Germany has increasingly supported a proactive European foreign policy in response to global crises such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In this context, public pressure contributed to Germany's shift toward higher defense spending and more assertive diplomatic engagement within the European Union, illustrating how public opinion rooted in normative values can influence strategic decision- making (Rathbun & Shane, 2022). This dynamic shows how democratic publics, even beyond the electoral process, can push state actors toward policy choices that reflect shared values such as collective security and cooperation.

In the United Kingdom, public opinion's influence on foreign policy has been especially visible on issues such as Brexit and the country's relationship with major international organizations. According to Hobolt and Edge (2021), the Brexit referendum in 2016 represented not just a domestic political choice but also a foreign policy turning point strongly shaped by public opinion. The referendum result effectively reoriented the UK's external relations, trade strategy, and diplomatic alignments. The authors hold that democratic engagement through referendum mechanisms demonstrates how public opinion can directly transform the direction of foreign policy in ways that are relatively rare in other democratic processes.

3. Asia and Latin America: Emerging Democratic Voices

Beyond established Western democracies, recent scholarship has also examined public opinion and foreign policy in other democratic contexts such as India, South Africa, and Brazil. In India, for instance, public opinion has played an increasingly visible role in shaping foreign policy

toward regional powers and in multilateral forums. According to Singh and Mukherjee (2021), Indian public support for economic nationalism and strategic autonomy has influenced policy debates on issues ranging from trade liberalization to regional security. The authors affirm that in emerging democracies, where public expectations for economic growth and national prestige are high, public opinion often pressures leaders toward policies that emphasize sovereignty and strategic independence rather than alliance dependency.

In Latin America, trends in Brazil demonstrate how public opinion interacts with leadership styles and institutional constraints. Pereira and Domingues (2020) document how shifts in public attitudes following political transitions can lead to significant changes in foreign policy priorities, including approaches to regional integration and cooperation within organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS). They hold that public opinion in Brazil has at times pressured policymakers to adopt foreign policy stances that reflect broader socio-political demands for equity and national autonomy, particularly during periods of populist political mobilization.

These cases highlight that public opinion's influence on foreign policy is not limited to the world's most economically advanced democracies. Rather, across diverse political systems, public preferences and normative commitments can shape both the substance of international engagement and the broader goals that democratic states pursue abroad.

4. Lessons for Nigeria: Insights from Comparative Dynamics

Comparative perspectives reveal several important lessons for understanding public opinion and foreign policy in Nigeria:

1. **Media and Information Flows Matter**: As seen in the U.S. and Western Europe, media narratives and elite framing shape public perceptions of international issues, which in turn influence policy debates. This is highly relevant for Nigeria where digital media and social platforms increasingly shape public discourse on foreign policy issues.
2. **Normative Values Influence Policy Expectations**: In European contexts, public opinion rooted in commitments to human rights and multilateralism has shaped foreign policy direction. Nigeria's own public debates around human rights, pan-Africanism, and continental leadership suggest that normative public expectations can frame foreign policy priorities.
3. **Political Structures Condition Influence**: Comparative research shows that the structural features of democratic institutions (e.g., federal vs. unitary systems, parliamentary vs. presidential systems) affect how public opinion is translated into policy. Nigeria's presidential system and centralized foreign policy apparatus influence the specific pathways through which public opinion exerts impact.
4. **Public Opinion Is Multifaceted**: Across democracies, public opinion is neither monolithic nor static. It reflects divisions, elite cues, and evolving political cultures. For Nigeria, recognizing the diversity and dynamism of public sentiment is crucial for understanding how foreign policy debates are shaped and how citizens engage with them.

Thus, comparative studies demonstrate that public opinion plays a meaningful role in shaping foreign policy across democracies, but the nature, extent, and mechanisms of influence vary widely depending on political context, media environments, institutional designs, and normative cultures. By examining how citizens and civil society influence foreign policy in established democracies like the United States and Western Europe, as well as in emerging democratic contexts like India and Brazil, scholars gain a richer understanding of the dynamic interplay between public preferences and foreign policy decisions. These comparative insights help illustrate both the potential and the limits of public influence in foreign policy, reinforcing the view that democratic foreign policy is best understood as a product of interaction among governments, publics, and their respective political contexts.

Case Studies of Public Opinion Influencing Nigerian Foreign Policy

Public opinion in Nigeria, while often mediated through elite channels, has historically played a role in shaping the country's foreign policy during periods of heightened moral salience or humanitarian concern. Three notable instances, including the Anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa, the Liberian Civil War, and the Sierra Leone Civil War, demonstrate how citizens' attitudes, media discourse, and civic mobilization influenced Nigeria's diplomatic posture.

1. Nigeria and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle in South Africa

Nigeria's opposition to apartheid represents a seminal case where domestic public sentiment reinforced an Afrocentric foreign policy. From the 1960s to the early 1990s, Nigeria consistently opposed South Africa's institutionalized racial segregation. While elite policymakers drove formal diplomatic initiatives, public opinion significantly amplified the government's activism.

Nigerian civil society, including student movements, church groups, labor unions, and media outlets, organized campaigns, rallies, and demonstrations advocating for the liberation of Black South Africans (Akinboye & Ottoh, 2011; Akindele, 2022). These grassroots efforts linked Nigeria's national identity with pan-African solidarity, generating sustained public pressure for government intervention in international forums such as the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity.

Adebajo (2020) highlights that public opinion helped legitimize sanctions, boycotts, and diplomatic isolation measures, creating political cover for costly foreign policy choices. Oloruntimehin (2023) emphasizes that the visibility and moral framing of anti-apartheid campaigns made it difficult for policymakers to ignore popular sentiment, illustrating that high salience and moral resonance amplify the influence of public opinion in foreign policy.

2. Nigeria's Role in the Liberian Civil War (1989–2003)

Nigeria played a central leadership role in the West African peacekeeping effort during the Liberian Civil War through the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). Public opinion, shaped by media reporting and civic engagement, helped sustain this commitment.

During the early 1990s, Nigerian newspapers and broadcast media extensively covered the humanitarian crises, highlighting images of displaced civilians and war atrocities (Adekeye, 2021). Public empathy and moral concern generated calls for intervention, particularly among student unions, religious organizations, and civic groups. Adekeye (2021) notes that public discourse reinforced the government's ability to intervene assertively without facing domestic backlash.

Onuoha and Uche (2022) found that civic forums and urban media campaigns in Lagos and Abuja amplified expectations that Nigeria should act as a regional leader. However, Nwachukwu (2024) cautions that while public opinion legitimized intervention, strategic and security considerations primarily drove decision-making, indicating that citizen preferences were often supportive rather than directive. This case illustrates that public opinion can play a policy-enabling role when issues intersect with humanitarian concerns, demonstrating the interplay between elite interests and citizen expectations.

3. Nigeria's Engagement in the Sierra Leone Civil War (1991–2002)

The Sierra Leone Civil War provides another example of how public opinion, civic mobilization, and media coverage can influence foreign policy. Widespread atrocities against civilians attracted national attention, prompting Nigerian civil society to demand government intervention.

From the mid-1990s, Nigerian NGOs, church organizations, and student associations organized protests, vigils, and public discussions advocating for intervention (Agbaje & Adebisi, 2023). Adesina and Ibe (2022) argue that public discourse framed Nigeria's role as a moral imperative, emphasizing African solidarity and collective security. Media outlets reinforced this framing, portraying Nigeria's leadership in Sierra Leone as both a regional responsibility and a moral duty.

Nigeria became the lead contributor to ECOWAS-mandated peacekeeping operations, with public opinion providing political legitimacy for sustained engagement (Adebiyi & Olayemi, 2022). Eze and Yusuf (2024) highlight that public sentiment shaped both the narrative and expectations around policy, expanding civic participation in foreign policy discourse beyond elites and bureaucrats. This case underscores that moral framing, public salience, and media amplification can jointly enhance the political influence of citizens on foreign policy. Several patterns emerge from these cases:

1. **Salience and Moral Framing**: Public opinion is most influential when foreign policy issues are highly visible and morally charged. Humanitarian crises and struggles for justice (e.g., apartheid, civil wars) elicited sustained public engagement.
2. **Media as an Intermediary**: National media play a crucial role in shaping awareness and framing public discourse. Consistent coverage strengthens public pressure and provides policymakers with political cover for intervention.
3. **Elite Mediation**: Public opinion rarely directly determines policy. Influence is often mediated through elites, civil society organizations, and bureaucratic institutions.
4. **Institutional Constraints**: Despite strong public sentiment, executive centralization and limited formal participatory mechanisms restrict direct public impact on policy formulation.

5. **Civic Engagement Enhances Legitimacy**: Active civic mobilization legitimizes foreign policy initiatives, particularly when interventions are costly or controversial.

Institutional Actors in Nigeria's Foreign Policy Formulation

Foreign policy formulation in Nigeria is not the responsibility of a single institution but rather a collective process involving several governmental actors and agencies operating within a constitutional and administrative framework. In modern states, foreign policy involves the articulation of national interests, the coordination of diplomatic activities, and the implementation of international commitments through established institutions. In the Nigerian context, the formulation and execution of foreign policy are shaped by interactions among the executive branch, legislative institutions, bureaucratic agencies, and policy research bodies. Key institutional actors include the Presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Assembly, the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, and other strategic ministries and government agencies. These institutions play distinct but complementary roles in shaping Nigeria's diplomatic priorities and external relations (Kirfi et al., 2025).

Scholars emphasize that foreign policy institutions serve as the structural mechanisms through which national interests are translated into diplomatic action. According to Okpevra and Usiemure (2024), Nigeria's foreign policy framework is supported by a network of institutions established to safeguard national sovereignty, promote international cooperation, and strengthen the country's position within the global system. The authors affirm that although several government agencies participate in the foreign policy process, the executive branch, particularly the Presidency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, remains the most influential actor in shaping Nigeria's diplomatic direction and strategic international engagements.

i. The Presidency

The Presidency occupies the most central position in Nigeria's foreign policy formulation and decision-making process. Under the Nigerian constitutional structure, the President functions as both the Head of State and the Chief Executive of the federation. This dual role gives the office considerable authority over the conduct of Nigeria's external relations. In the view of many scholars, foreign policy decisions in Nigeria are highly centralized within the executive branch, making the Presidency the dominant institutional actor in shaping diplomatic initiatives and international engagements.

According to Folarin (2013), the central role of the Presidency in foreign policy formulation can partly be traced to Nigeria's long history of military governance, during which foreign policy decisions were highly personalized and concentrated in the office of the Head of State. The author holds that even in the democratic era, the President continues to function as the principal architect of Nigeria's foreign relations by determining the general direction of diplomatic initiatives and international negotiations.

In practical terms, the President performs several key functions in the foreign policy process. These include approving bilateral and multilateral agreements, appointing ambassadors and high commissioners, and representing Nigeria at major international forums. The President also

presides over the Federal Executive Council, where major foreign policy issues are deliberated and strategic decisions are made. According to Obasogie and Nwosu (2024), interactions among executive officials within the Presidency often focus on ensuring that Nigeria's foreign policy decisions align with the country's national interests and security priorities.

Furthermore, the Presidency coordinates Nigeria's diplomatic responses to global crises, regional conflicts, and international negotiations. Through diplomatic engagements, bilateral visits, and participation in global summits, the President represents Nigeria at the highest level of international diplomacy. Consequently, the Presidency remains the most powerful institutional actor in the country's foreign policy process.

ii. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs constitutes the principal administrative institution responsible for the implementation and coordination of Nigeria's foreign policy. While the Presidency provides strategic direction, the ministry functions as the operational hub through which diplomatic policies are executed. According to Okpevra and Usiemure (2024), the ministry plays a critical role in gathering information from diplomatic missions, analyzing global developments, and advising the government on appropriate foreign policy responses.

In the view of Kirfi et al. (2025), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs performs several strategic functions that contribute to Nigeria's diplomatic engagements. These functions include articulating policy options on international issues, coordinating diplomatic missions abroad, organizing bilateral and multilateral negotiations, and facilitating Nigeria's participation in international organizations. The Minister of Foreign Affairs serves as the chief adviser to the President on matters relating to foreign policy and international relations. The minister also acts as the official spokesperson for Nigeria on diplomatic matters and oversees the country's embassies and consulates across the world. Through these diplomatic missions, the ministry promotes Nigeria's national interests, strengthens bilateral relations, and protects the welfare of Nigerian citizens living abroad.

In addition, the ministry supervises several specialized agencies involved in international cooperation and peacebuilding initiatives. One such agency is the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, which provides research and policy advice on issues related to conflict prevention, mediation, and post-conflict reconstruction. These responsibilities illustrate the central role of the ministry in translating Nigeria's foreign policy objectives into concrete diplomatic actions.

iii. The National Assembly

The National Assembly also plays an important role in Nigeria's foreign policy formulation through its legislative and oversight functions. The legislature consists of the Senate and the House of Representatives, both of which exercise constitutional authority that influences diplomatic activities and international commitments. Although foreign policy decision-making in Nigeria is largely dominated by the executive branch, the National Assembly performs important functions that ensure democratic accountability in the foreign policy process.

According to Talibu and Abdulrasheed (2025), the National Assembly contributes to foreign policy formulation through treaty ratification, legislative debates on international relations issues, and budgetary approvals for diplomatic missions and international engagements. The authors affirm that the legislature provides an important institutional platform for examining Nigeria's foreign policy priorities and ensuring that diplomatic decisions reflect the broader national interest.

The Senate plays a particularly important role in confirming ambassadorial appointments made by the President. This confirmation process helps ensure transparency and accountability in the appointment of diplomatic representatives. In addition, legislative committees on foreign affairs regularly review government policies and provide recommendations on matters relating to international relations and regional cooperation (Kirfi et al., 2025). Through these oversight mechanisms, the National Assembly contributes to the formulation of foreign policy by scrutinizing executive decisions and ensuring compliance with constitutional provisions and national priorities.

iv. The Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA)

Another important institutional actor in Nigeria's foreign policy formulation process is the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs. The institute serves as a research and policy advisory body that provides intellectual support for Nigeria's diplomatic decision-making. Established to promote scholarly research on international relations, the institute plays a significant role in shaping policy debates and providing strategic policy recommendations.

According to Talibu and Abdulrasheed (2025), the institute conducts research on global political developments, organizes conferences and policy dialogues, and publishes academic studies on international diplomacy. These activities provide policy makers with valuable insights into emerging global trends and regional security challenges.

In the view of Okpevra and Usiemure (2024), policy research institutions such as the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs help bridge the gap between academic scholarship and government policy-making. Their research findings often inform diplomatic strategies and contribute to more evidence-based foreign policy decisions.

v. Other Government Ministries and Agencies

Apart from the Presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the National Assembly, several other government ministries and agencies also contribute to Nigeria's foreign policy formulation. Modern diplomacy involves complex interactions among economic, security, and political institutions. Consequently, foreign policy decisions often require the participation of multiple government agencies.

According to Osondu-Oti and Tolu (2023), ministries responsible for defence, finance, trade and investment, petroleum resources, and information frequently participate in Nigeria's foreign policy process because their activities have international implications. For example, the Ministry

of Defence plays a major role in issues relating to peacekeeping operations, military cooperation, and regional security arrangements.

Similarly, the Ministry of Trade and Investment contributes to Nigeria's economic diplomacy by negotiating trade agreements, promoting foreign investment, and facilitating international economic partnerships. The Ministry of Petroleum Resources also plays an important role in Nigeria's energy diplomacy, particularly in relation to the country's participation in global oil markets and international energy organizations (Okpevra & Usiemure, 2024). These ministries and agencies provide technical expertise, policy advice, and administrative support that enhance the effectiveness of Nigeria's foreign policy formulation. Their participation reflects the increasingly multidimensional nature of contemporary international relations.

Therefore, Nigeria's foreign policy formulation is shaped by a network of institutional actors operating within the country's constitutional and administrative framework. Among these institutions, the Presidency remains the dominant actor due to its executive authority and its control over major diplomatic decisions. However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Assembly, research institutions such as the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, and other government ministries also play important roles in shaping Nigeria's external relations. The interaction among these institutions ensures that Nigeria's foreign policy reflects a combination of national interests, diplomatic considerations, and international obligations. As Nigeria continues to navigate the complexities of global politics, the effectiveness and coordination of these institutional actors will remain essential to the formulation and implementation of the country's foreign policy objectives.

Media, Institutions, and the Expression of Public Opinion

The media and formal institutions are central to the articulation and incorporation of public opinion into foreign policy processes in democratic systems. Media outlets not only provide information about international affairs but also frame foreign policy debates, influence the salience of issues, and contribute to the shaping and reinterpretation of public perceptions and attitudes (Soroka et al., 2019). In the contemporary information environment, traditional news organizations coexist with rapidly evolving digital platforms such as social media, blogs, and messaging apps, all of which have transformed how the public engages with foreign policy issues, how citizens evaluate state actions, and how policymakers perceive and react to public sentiment. At the same time, formal institutional structures, including legislatures, advisory bodies, and mechanisms for public consultation, mediate between citizens and executive agencies, shaping how public opinion is channel into the foreign policy arena (Côté, 2016).

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs (2025) argued that media serve as a primary conduit through which citizens learn about international events and form opinions about foreign policy. Through agenda- setting and framing, media outlets influence not only what citizens think about, but how they think about it. Recent research on media habits and foreign policy views in the United States, for example, shows that changes in how people consume news and information are linked with divergent views on issues like global leadership, defence commitments, and international cooperation. Younger generations increasingly rely on online platforms, where

algorithmic feeds and curated content create echo chambers that can intensify policy polarization and attitudes toward foreign engagement (Chukwu, 2024).

Digital media, moreover, accelerate the dissemination of foreign policy narratives and enable rapid mobilization around global events, offering citizens unprecedented opportunities to engage in public discourse. Social media platforms allow for instantaneous feedback, grassroots campaigning, and real-time commentary on diplomatic controversies, military interventions, or trade negotiations (Sani, 2024). This rapid communication expands the expressive capacity of the public, contributing to situations in which policymakers may feel directly accountable to expressions of public sentiment on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, or TikTok. At the same time, researchers have noted that algorithmic structures, which prioritise engagement over accuracy, can magnify polarize or misleading content, complicating the relationship between media consumption and informed public opinion (Alrached, 2024).

Nevertheless, the influence of the media is not always straightforward. Mainstream media and social platforms can both inform and distort; in some contexts, state-aligned outlets or partisan networks propagate narratives that obscure accurate reporting, reinforce ideological silos, or undermine deliberative debate. Studies of media coverage in Eastern Europe highlight how government control over mainstream outlets can spread illiberal ideas while social media serve as platforms of opposition, underscoring that media ecosystems are shaped by political power and regulatory environments as much as by technological affordances (Le Monde, 2025).

Alongside the media, formal political institutions play a crucial role in shaping how public opinion is expressed and considered in foreign policy. Democracies often rely on complex interinstitutional processes through which elected representatives, advisory bodies, and oversight committees provide structured channels for public input to reach decision- makers. Legislatures are particularly important in this respect (Sani, 2024). Parliamentary committees on foreign affairs, such as the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs in Nigeria, serve a dual function: they exercise oversight over the executive's diplomatic engagements and provide a forum where public concerns can be articulated, debated, and translated into legislative scrutiny. The Constitution of Nigeria empowers the National Assembly to legislate on external affairs, ratify treaties, and hold hearings on diplomatic activities, thereby placing an institutional check on executive control over foreign policy (Nigerian Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2025).

Legislative bodies also contribute to transparency by requiring public reporting, budget approval for foreign missions, and debates that can reveal citizens' priorities. Where legislative institutions are robust and independent, they offer a mechanism through which public opinion, expressed through elected representatives, petitions, and public hearings, can influence foreign policy deliberation (Edochie & Okri, 2025). In contrast, weak or executive-dominated legislatures may limit the scope for meaningful institutional mediation of public views. Advisory committees and civil society organizations similarly provide structured avenues for citizen involvement. Civil society organizations (CSOs), think tanks, and advocacy networks often work to aggregate public opinion, engage in policy critique, and foster dialogue between citizens and policymakers. In Nigeria, groups such as the *Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre* (PLAC) engage in legislative advocacy, promote transparency, and encourage public participation in policy

processes, enabling voices outside government to contribute to debates on national and international issues (Efebeh & Ikenga, 2025).

However, the capacity of these institutions to represent and channel public opinion effectively is shaped by political culture, resource availability, and institutional autonomy. In many developing democracies, institutional constraints, including limited transparency, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and executive dominance, can weaken the influence of civil society and dilute public demands. Where media freedom is restricted, or institutional channels are underdeveloped, public opinions may fail to reach policymakers in meaningful ways, or they may be dismissed as irrelevant to strategic considerations (Asogwa, Ibe & Orji-Egwu, 2025). In contexts like Nigeria, the interaction between media, institutions, and public opinion is especially complex. Nigeria's media landscape comprises both traditional outlets and vibrant online platforms that actively shape public discourse, but the environment also faces persistent challenges. Press freedom advocates, such as the *Nigerian Guild of Editors*, work to uphold journalistic standards and protect media practitioners, but regulatory pressures, political interference, and economic constraints can limit media independence and affect the quality of public discourse (Asogwa et al., 2025).

The broader institutional framework for Nigeria's foreign policy reflects a similar tension between theoretical capacity and practical limitation. Though the constitutional framework emphasizes democratic oversight and legislative participation in foreign affairs, the executive branch, including the presidency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, retains predominant control over decision-making. Recent analyzes point to bureaucratic competition, insufficient coordination among agencies, and resource constraints as significant challenges impeding the effective engagement of institutional actors with public opinion (Waminaje & Garba, 2025). For example, while the Nigerian Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs has the mandate to scrutinize treaties and diplomatic initiatives, coordination between this body and executive agencies is not always effective, in part due to overlapping responsibilities and limited institutional capacity. This gap between institutional design and operational reality can diminish the extent to which public perspectives, as articulated through legislative debates or public hearings, are factored into policy outcomes.

At the same time, civil society organizations and digital campaigns, through opinion polling, social media mobilization, and targeted advocacy, have increasingly shaped public perceptions of foreign policy issues such as regional security, migration, and economic partnerships. Social media, in particular, has enabled Nigerians to express collective concerns and attract attention to international matters that might otherwise remain obscure within elite circles (Edochie & Okri, 2025). Digital activism and online debates have at times compelled policymakers to respond publicly to citizen concerns, reflecting the growing interdependence of media expression and policy responsiveness.

One important emerging dimension involves the interplay of media literacy and information integrity. As social media and digital platforms become primary sites of foreign policy discourse, the spread of misinformation and disinformation has increased the complexity of public engagement (Jatula, 2025). False narratives, whether externally driven or domestically generated, can distort public understanding of international events and skew the expression of public

opinion. Studies on foreign policy disinformation highlight how such misinformation campaigns, involving both internal and external actors, can polarise public opinion and degrade the quality of democratic deliberation (Cugler de Moraes Silva & Vaz, 2024; Omojuwa, 2024). Addressing these challenges requires not only institutional reforms that enhance transparency and public access, but also media literacy initiatives that equip citizens to critically evaluate information sources. Strengthening media ethics, supporting independent journalism, and improving public education on digital literacy are essential components of a healthy democratic engagement with foreign policy.

Challenges of Public Opinion in Shaping Foreign Policy in Nigeria

Despite Nigeria's democratic framework, public opinion plays a limited and often indirect role in shaping the country's foreign policy. Several interrelated structural, institutional, and socio-political challenges constrain the ability of citizens' preferences to meaningfully influence foreign policy decision-making.

1. Elite Dominance in Foreign Policy Decision- Making

One major challenge is the elite-dominated nature of Nigeria's foreign policy process. In practice, foreign policy formulation in Nigeria remains highly centralized within the executive branch, particularly the Presidency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Scholars observe that decisions on diplomacy, security cooperation, international negotiations, and foreign commitments are typically made by a small cadre of political elites, technocrats, and career diplomats with minimal public consultation (Okoli & Nwosu, 2021; Orugbo & Onyechi, 2022).

According to Ezeani (2021), this concentration of authority fosters an environment where foreign policy is viewed as a "specialized, elite domain," effectively excluding ordinary citizens from substantive input. The author affirms that although Nigeria is constitutionally democratic, the architecture of foreign policy decision-making reinforces elite perceptions of national interest while sidelining popular viewpoints. This elite dominance weakens the democratic accountability of foreign policy because popular expectations seldom translate into policy priorities.

Furthermore, Asobie and Edewor (2023) argue that elite dominance is reinforced by institutional incentives that reward loyalty and discretion over public engagement. In their view, policymakers often justify limited transparency and consultation because diplomacy requires secrecy and continuity, even when such claims shield policies from democratic scrutiny.

2. Weak Institutional Channels for Public Participation

A closely related challenge is the weak institutionalization of formal channels for public participation in foreign policy processes. The Nigerian National Assembly has constitutional responsibilities, including the ratification of treaties and oversight of foreign affairs, yet its engagement with public opinion remains largely limited (Ogwu & Ezeani, 2019). Public hearings,

consultations, and debates on international matters are infrequent and rarely attract sustained citizen involvement.

In the view of Adegboye and Aremo (2022), the legislative oversight role is often reactive rather than proactive, addressing foreign policy issues only after they have become public controversies. This limits the capacity of public opinion to be aggregated and transmitted into formal policy processes, making citizen input episodic rather than systematic.

Ebegbulem (2020) holds that the absence of structured consultative mechanisms, such as regular public forums, participatory briefings, and institutionalized policy dialogues, impedes democratic participation. The author affirms that without such mechanisms, public opinion cannot effectively shape foreign policy priorities or hold policymakers accountable.

3**. Limited Access to Information and Transparency**

Limited access to information further undermines the influence of public opinion. Many foreign policy decisions are shrouded in secrecy, often justified on grounds of national security, diplomatic sensitivity, or strategic confidentiality. As a result, citizens have limited opportunities to access reliable information that could inform their views (Akinola & Uche, 2022).

Fawole and Akinlabi (2021) note that inadequate transparency reduces the ability of citizens to engage meaningfully with international affairs. Where information is scarce or selectively released, public debate tends to be speculative, reactive, or dominated by elite interpretations, diminishing its credibility and policy relevance. In their view, this lack of transparency reinforces the impression that foreign policy is distant from everyday concerns and inaccessible to ordinary Nigerians.

4. Low and Uneven Public Awareness of Foreign Policy Issues

Another significant challenge is low and uneven public awareness of foreign policy issues. For many Nigerians, daily socioeconomic concerns such as unemployment, inflation, insecurity, and poor public services take precedence over international affairs. Consequently, foreign policy often attracts limited public attention except during high-profile crises or controversial events (Adesina & Bello, 2023).

Arowosegbe and Ogunleye (2021) affirm that this episodic engagement weakens the consistency and coherence of public opinion on foreign policy. Regular and sustained public attention is necessary to shape long-term policy debates; in its absence, policymakers can more easily ignore or downplay citizen preferences without fear of sustained public challenge.

Furthermore, uneven awareness, where urban, educated, and media-connected segments are more informed than rural or marginalized populations, distorts the representativeness of public opinion (Ezeani & Nwankwo, 2022). This disparity further complicates efforts to aggregate a meaningful “public” voice on foreign affairs.

5. Fragmentation of Public Opinion

The fragmented nature of public opinion in Nigeria also poses a constraint on its influence. Nigeria's ethnic, religious, regional, and socio-economic diversity often produces divergent perspectives on international issues, making it difficult to articulate a unified national public opinion that policymakers can easily interpret and respond to.

Ojebode and Adegbola (2021) argue that in the absence of strong opinion-polling traditions or deliberative platforms, public views on foreign policy remain dispersed, poorly coordinated, and subject to elite framing. The authors hold that fragmentation weakens civic influence because policymakers encounter conflicting signals rather than coherent public demands.

In addition, ethnically and regionally segmented media consumption patterns can reinforce divergent interpretations of foreign policy matters, further complicating efforts to build consensus around national foreign policy goals (Ibrahim & Yusuf, 2024).

6. Challenges Associated with Social Media Engagement

While social media has expanded opportunities for expression, it presents its own challenges in shaping foreign policy discourse. Digital platforms amplify voices but do not guarantee meaningful policy influence. Social media debates on foreign policy issues are often dominated by urban, educated, and digitally connected populations, raising concerns about representativeness (Umar & Akindele, 2022).

Moreover, misinformation, sensationalism, and polarized discourse can distort public understanding of international affairs, weakening the quality of public input into policymaking. According to Musa and Adebayo (2023), viral misinformation campaigns and emotive narratives often overshadow informed debate, creating an environment where public opinion is reactive rather than reflective.

This phenomenon echoes broader trends in comparative research that highlight how digital media can amplify noise rather than substantive public insight when not coupled with critical media literacy and regulated information environments.

7. Weak Policy Responsiveness to Public Opinion

Finally, there is a persistent disconnect between public expression and policy responsiveness. Even when public opinion is vocal, through protests, media commentary, or online campaigns, it rarely translates into clear policy shifts. In many cases, public reactions influence government rhetoric more than substantive decisions (Adeola & Fayomi, 2023).

According to Odusanya and Aluko (2024), this weak feedback loop discourages sustained public engagement and reinforces cynicism about the relevance of citizen participation in foreign policy. Their study holds that when citizens perceive that their views do not matter, apathy increases and democratic accountability weakens.

This challenge is compounded by structural incentives in which foreign policy outcomes are evaluated by reference to strategic, security, and diplomatic imperatives rather than public preferences. As a result, public opinion remains secondary to elite formulations of national interest.

Research Methods

This study adopts a historical research design to examine the relationship between public opinion and Nigeria's foreign policy in Africa. Historical research involves the systematic collection, evaluation, and interpretation of past events and documents to explain contemporary issues (Babbie, 2021). The design is appropriate because Nigeria's foreign policy has evolved in response to changing political, economic, and regional realities. It enables the study to trace the development of Nigeria's foreign policy and assess the influence of public opinion on policy decisions over time (Best & Kahn, 2021).

Study Area

The study focuses on Nigeria, a leading African state that has played significant roles in regional integration, peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and continental diplomacy since its independence in 1960. Nigeria's longstanding Africa-centered foreign policy and democratic experience since 1999 make it an appropriate setting for examining the interaction between public opinion and foreign policy decision-making (Akinboye & Ottoh, 2011).

Sources of Data

The study relies exclusively on secondary data obtained from official government publications, presidential speeches, policy documents, reports from regional organizations such as ECOWAS and the African Union, newspaper articles, opinion polls, academic journals, books, theses, and publications of civil society organizations and research institutes. These sources provide relevant information on public opinion and Nigeria's foreign policy engagements in Africa.

Method of Data Analysis

The study employs content analysis as its method of data analysis. Content analysis is a systematic technique for identifying and interpreting themes, patterns, and meanings within textual materials (Krippendorff, 2019; Neuendorf, 2017). The method will be used to analyze government documents, media reports, policy statements, and scholarly literature relating to Nigeria's foreign policy in Africa. Data will be organized into themes such as public opinion, media influence, citizen participation, policy responsiveness, and foreign policy outcomes. This approach facilitates a systematic examination of the extent to which public opinion has influenced Nigeria's foreign policy and democratic governance processes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the relationship between public opinion and Nigeria's foreign policy in Africa within the context of democratic governance. The study established that although Nigeria's foreign policy has traditionally been dominated by political elites and executive institutions, public opinion has become increasingly relevant in shaping foreign policy discourse and influencing government actions. Through channels such as the mass media, social media, civil society organizations, public debates, and advocacy groups, citizens are able to express their views on Nigeria's engagement with African states and regional organizations.

The study further revealed that public opinion contributes to foreign policy legitimacy by promoting accountability, transparency, and responsiveness in decision-making. While public influence on foreign policy outcomes remains largely indirect, democratic governance, technological advancements, and increased access to information have expanded opportunities for citizen participation in foreign policy debates. However, challenges such as executive dominance, weak institutional mechanisms, misinformation, and limited public consultation continue to constrain the effective incorporation of public preferences into foreign policy decisions. The study, therefore, concludes that strengthening public participation in foreign policy-making is essential for enhancing democratic governance and ensuring that Nigeria's foreign policy in Africa reflects the interests and aspirations of its citizens. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

i. The Federal Government should institutionalize public participation in foreign policy-making by establishing regular public consultations, stakeholder forums, policy dialogues, and opinion surveys. These mechanisms will provide citizens, civil society organizations, professional associations, and other stakeholders with opportunities to contribute to discussions on major foreign policy issues affecting Nigeria's relations with African countries.
ii. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and relevant government agencies should enhance transparency and public communication through regular policy briefings, public awareness campaigns, official publications, and digital communication platforms. This will improve public understanding of foreign policy issues, encourage informed debate, and strengthen accountability in foreign policy decision-making.
iii. Government at all levels, particularly in Delta State and other sub-national units, should promote foreign policy education and civic awareness programmes through schools, universities, media organizations, and civil society groups. Such initiatives will enhance citizens' knowledge of Nigeria's role in Africa, encourage informed participation in foreign policy discussions, and reduce the effects of misinformation and public apathy toward international affairs.

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