

Prioritising Rural Youth Participation in Democratic Governance for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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Abstract— The study is premised on the notion that existence and consolidation of democratic governance in any society are only possible through robust participation of the people, especially the youth who constitute the bulk of the citizenry. Though Africa has the youngest population in the world, many of them have been deliberately excluded from governance. The study examines the political participation of youth in selected rural Nigerian communities. Both quantitative and qualitative social survey data are obtained and utilized. The paper finds that political participation of rural youth has been relatively low and restricted to activities in the fringes of the democratic process, and that this largely accounts for the poor fortunes of the rural folk and the slow march of the democratic enterprise. Accordingly, the paper recommends that the democratic process in Nigeria should be digitalised; the rural youth should be massively mobilized and re-oriented through deliberate campaigns; and government should introduce affirmative action strategies with a view to encouraging youth, women and other marginalised segments of the population to meaningfully participate in governance and the democratic process.

Index Terms— Governance, political participation, rural, social media, Youth.

I. INTRODUCTION

As over a century long colonial rule implanted the seed of irresponsible governance that gripped African states, waves of military dictatorships, neo-imperialist exploitation, dysfunctional institutions and misguided economic strategies have exacerbated the myriad of daunting challenges now inhibiting their march to democratic governance, economic growth, and sustainable development, consequently leaving them on the brink of failure [5]. Though youth across the continent had championed the course of democratisation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, not a few African states today ironically thrive in large scale exclusion of the youth whose numerical strength make the continent the youngest in the world. As [2] asserted, the 'old-guard' politicians that continue to maintain firm grip on the levers of political power have virtually hijacked their efforts'.

Decades of poor human capital investment has left the African youth short of becoming the golden asset their western counterparts have been nurtured to be. Their exasperation at the state of things had manifested in the Arab spring that swept authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt among other north African states between 2011 and 2013. In the light of the prevailing African socioeconomic realities as portrayed in many development indexes—such as the Human Development Index of the United Nations Human Development Program (UNDP)—ref. [2] further observes that 'there is evidence to also suggest that young people are going to continue, and even intensify their contentions and secessionist aspirations against the state primarily because conditions have either not changed or have further deteriorated'.

The relatively poor participation of the youth in governance is in part a consequence of deliberate or institutionalised political exclusion, but it is often a result of factors rooted in weak political culture which induces indifference, fatalism and political inertia, as well as socio-economic variables such as poverty, illiteracy, violence, and lack of incentives [1]. To combat these towards achieving democratic survival, economic growth and sustainable development, [15] have examined the indispensability of digitizing public administration in Nigeria, Africa's largest democracy which also thrives in large-scale exclusion of youth in governance.

The intersection of e-governance and inclusive governance with social media and youth as their respective fulcrums is the subject of analysis in this study. And with rural youth being more at the receiving end of exclusion in virtually all African states than their urban counterparts, the study specifically focuses on rural youth in Nigeria.

II. STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Nigeria, the largest democracy in the world's youngest continent also has one of the youngest populations in the world with 18.1 median age [3]. Ironically, the country exemplifies the exclusion of youth in African democracies. As it has been prior, role of the youth in the country's longest democratic experimentation, the fourth republic, hardly goes beyond the

polls when politicians leverage on their active participation to gain electoral victory. Though ‘not too young to run’ act has in 2014 been enacted to remove statutory barriers on their way to the corridors of power, other glass ceilings rooted in god-fatherism ensure only a few chosen ones among them can.

However, the emergence of social media barely a decade into the fourth republic provides the youth an avenue for sustained and multifarious participation beyond election period. Accordingly, numerous studies have investigated the influence of social media on youth political participation in the country. Their participation in the electoral process since 2011 general elections was studied by [11], [21], and [17] all of whom found that social media are playing pivotal roles to the youths’ participation in the electoral processes.

The social media has also been a platform through which the Nigerian youth participate express their grievances with governance. For instance, shortly after the 2019 general elections, the youth’s use of the social media hashtag (#EndSARS) facilitated a large-scale anti-government protest which prompted [6], [18] and [20] among others to examine the role of social media on youth political activism in the country. Findings of these studies point to the spate of exclusion fueled by poverty and unemployment as the root cause of the youth’s disenchantment and the social media as ‘catalysts for creating a new culture that elicits change from the government’.

None of the aforementioned studies, however, considers the youth in a rural-urban divide. Their populations and or focal point of analysis were the urban youth and as such, their findings did not capture the depth of exclusion and grievances faced by the rural folks as well as their usage or lack thereof, of the social media for political activities. This study therefore specifically focuses on unraveling the participation of the rural youth in Nigerian democratic governance and their utilisation of social media to the course. Accordingly, the study answers the following questions: What is the prevailing attitude of rural youth towards Nigerian democratic governance? At what level do the rural youth majorly participate in politics? How have the social media impacted on their political participation in the fourth republic?

III. HYPOTHESIS

In line with the research questions stated in the foregoing section, this study tests the following hypothesis:

H1: There is no significant difference between rural youths’ attitude towards Nigerian democratic governance and their active participation in partisan politics.

IV. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

The concepts of youth, social media and political participation form the onus of this paper. As well as relevant theoretical perspectives, they are reviewed in this section.

A. Youth

Youthfulness is much like a bridge that connects childhood to adulthood. In the words of “...a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood’s independence and awareness of our interdependence as members of a community” [25]. Youth is therefore a person and youthfulness a ‘period in the life of the person when the society in which he functions ceases to regard him as a child and does accord him full adult status, roles, and functions’ [9]. This period is however subject to ‘the interpretation of cultural, sociological identities and the epistemological notion of an individual’ [16]. In fact, ‘it is difficult to see how this measures up in each locality since hormonal growth differs with impact on decision-making and reasoning [17].

For example, while UN consider 15 – 24 as the age bracket for youth, Nigerian government deem it too narrow and propose 18 – 35 which, due to the preponderance of socioeconomic uncertainties, better suits African topography [24]. For this reason, we as well deem it essential to further extend the upper limit to 40. The most distinguishing features of youth include vibrancy, daring, innovation, exuberance, enthusiasm, vulnerability and promise. These account for their entanglement with fads like the social media which particularly earned them the appellation ‘netizens’ [22]. However, due to the mechanical nature of rural communities—a ‘place with small population sizes/densities, areas where people are more likely to know each other’s business and come into regular contact with each other’ [29]—the youth there are less susceptible to the impact of social media trends than those in urban areas.

B. Social media

The term social media refers to “the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration” [27]. Focusing on the technology, [10] defines it as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.” In relation to traditional media, ‘the creation and exchange of user-generated content’ is the distinguishing feature of social media. Others are participation, openness, conversation, community and connectedness [13]. While the different types of social media shown in Table 1 vary in many respects, they all share these significant features.

Viewing through the lenses of adoption theory of [23], there are five categories of social media adapters. They are the

innovators, early adapters, early majority, late majority and laggards, whom Rogers described as innovators, venturesome, respectable, deliberate, sceptical and traditional respectively. While the youth form the bulk of the first three categories of social media adapters as [12] and [31] found, their decision to quickly embrace the new technology is, going by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) of [7], largely influenced by their perceptions of its usefulness, ease of use and the influence of friends.

C. Political participation

One definition of political participation common in the literature referred to it as the ‘legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions that they take’ [28]. Put differently, [19] define it as “citizens’ involvement in the acts, events or activities that influence the selection of and/or the actions taken by political representatives”. In modern societies, it often transcends merely giving political inputs to involve transforming the political system in particular, or the society in general [4]. The social media has since its emergence becomes an effective platform for enhanced political participation involving all of these functions. As politicians across the globe utilise it to convey messages, interact with the people, mobilize supporters and campaign for votes during elections, the people—majorly the youth—who were hitherto passive due to the inherent limitation of traditional media leverage it to trigger or resist social change in different aspects of the political system [27].

Two major elements that enable it become such are its provision of space for the people to freely and uniquely express themselves beyond the limits provided them by traditional media, and its provision of new social groups and varying opportunities for the people, especially the youth whose vibrancy is on constant demand [8]. Indeed, the technological determinism theory (TDM) of [14] postulated that transition from one technological age to another is propelled by new media technologies which shape the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of the people, and by necessary implication, how the society operates. This explains the necessity of transition from the 20th century bureaucratic-centered public administration to e-governance due to the 21st century digital revolution. According to the Web Presence Measurement Model of [26], the transition to e-government navigates five major phases—emerging, enhanced, interactive, transactional, and connected—with the first involving the application of simple technologies for more efficient service delivery and the last involving high level interaction with citizens using social media tools among other ICTs. Accordingly, in the last stage, ‘e-participation and citizen engagement are supported and encouraged by governments in the decision-making process’. This, in the words of [30], is a stage called ‘interactive democracy’.

V. METHODOLOGY

This study utilises both quantitative and qualitative social survey data obtained from a sample of 534 youths purposively selected from 319 rural communities across the 36 states of Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Criteria for the selection were current residence in a Nigerian rural area, falling within the youth age bracket (15 – 40) and digital literacy.

Structured questionnaire embedded in Google form was electronically administered to each of the respondents. The data collection process lasted for about five months (December 2023 – April 2024). While the quantitative data forms the crux of tabular and graphical presentations as well as hypothesis testing, the qualitative data provides reasoned lines of explanation and interpretation. The research hypothesis was tested—with the aid of SPSS software—using Kendal Tau-B correlation statistical technique.

VI. RESULTS

The social survey data are presented and analysed in this section. This is followed by hypothesis testing and summary of findings.

A. Data presentation and analysis

Table I: Demographic data of the respondents

Variable	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Age bracket	18 – 25	164	30.71
	26 – 35	225	42.13
	36 – 40	145	27.15
		534	100.00
Sex	Male	287	53.75
	Female	247	46.25
		534	100.00
States of origin and	Same	366	68.54
	Different	168	31.46

residence	Σ	534	100.00
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Source: The authors' online survey (2024).

The data in Table I shows that male youth in twenties and early thirties are the dominant users of social media among the youth in rural areas. It also shows that most of the rural areas are homogenous with only 31.4% of the respondents being outside their states of origin. And as all of the respondents self-identified as male or female, it is clear that gender identity is not an issue in the rural areas as it has become among urban dwellers.

Table II: Respondents active involvement in partisan politics

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Membership of a political party	Yes	116	21.72
	No	418	78.28
		534	100.00
Possession of Permanent Voters Card (PVC)	Yes	289	54.12
	No	245	45.88
	Σ	534	100.00

Source: The authors' online survey (2024).

The non-affiliation of over 78% of the respondents to any political party revealed in Table II implies that most of the youth in Nigerian rural areas are not actively involved in partisan politics. This is corroborated by the non-possession of PVC by over 45% of the respondents. Since without the latter one cannot vote (and without the former cannot be voted for) in an election, it is clear that the political participation of rural youth has been relatively low and restricted to activities in the fringes of the democratic process.

Table III: Respondents' involvement in various political activities (n = 534)

Activity	Frequency	Percentage
Advocacy	224	41.95
Informal discussion	379	70.97
Consultations	133	24.91
Vying for political positions	26	4.87
Voting	227	42.51
Campaign	235	44.01

Source: The authors' online survey (2024).

Though 21% of the respondents (see Table II) can be regarded as active participants in partisan politics owing to their affiliation to political parties, Table III shows that only about 5% of them vie for political positions. It also shows that the 54% of the respondents who have PVC (see Table II) are not all active voters. Since the PVC is regarded as a valid means of identity in formal organisations (like banks and governmental agencies), it is certainly being acquired by some of the youth solely for that purpose.

Table IV: Respondent's major activities on social media (N=534)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Uploading videos and images	122	22.85
Advocating for a course (like campaigning for or against something or someone)	204	38.20
Expressing opinion/thoughts via text, video and audio	223	41.76

Reading mass media reports	146	27.34
Reading experts' opinion articles	118	22.10
Watching/downloading videos and images	398	74.53
Endorsing contents posted by others (eg. commenting, liking, sharing etc.)	499	93.45
Engaging in debates/discussion	188	35.21
Connecting with unknown persons	241	45.13
Connecting with known family and friends	506	94.76
Buying and selling of goods	88	16.48
Teaching and learning	79	14.79
Contacting influential figures	64	11.99

Source: The authors' online survey (2024).

Table IV shows that social media users among youth in the rural areas do not majorly utilise various social media channels for activities that will enhance their political participation as less than 50% of the respondents indicate majorly using social media for debates/discussion, advocacy, reading of mass media reports/experts' opinion articles, or contacting influential figures. It is thus obvious that politicians do not effectively utilise social media to mobilize the rural youth for active involvement in political activities even as the respondents reported spending on daily basis, an average of 127 minutes surfing the various social media channels shown in Table V.

Table V: Respondents' most preferred social media channel

Social media	Frequency	Percentage
Facebook	37.64	201
WhatssApp	32.21	172
X	10.86	58
Tik-Tok	6.74	36
YouTube	6.37	34
Other	2.62	14
Instagram	2.25	12
LinkedIn	1.31	7
Facebook	37.64	201
Σ	534	100

Source: The authors' online survey (2024).

Furthermore, as 94% and 93% of the respondents respectively reported majorly using these social media channels to 'connect with family and friends' and to merely 'endorse contents posted by others' (see Table IV), it is clear that the rural youth are more social and informal in both their perception and use of social media.

Table VI: Respondent's major subject of interests on social media

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Politics and government	92	17.23
Sports and entertainment	148	27.72
Religion and spirituality	81	15.17
Business	64	11.99
Education	38	7.12
Social networking	111	20.79

Σ	534	100.00
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Source: The authors' online survey (2024).

The data in Table IV which shows that social media users in rural areas do not majorly utilise various social media channels for political activities is corroborated by that in Table VI which shows that such is a consequence of their low interest in issues on politics and government. The only 17% of the respondents who are more concerned with political and governmental contents than other subjects in the social media consist majorly of those who vie for political positions, and those who engage in advocacy, campaign and voting (see Table III) showing that the low participation in major political activities among the rural folks is a consequence of their low interest in politics as a whole. By juxtaposing Tables III, IV and VI, it is clear that there is, among the rural folks, monumental apathy and denial (including by self) of opportunities for political expression and participation in governance.

Table VII: Respondents' attitude towards the continuous existence of Democratic Governance in Nigeria

Question	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Despite challenges, Nigerian democracy is moving in the right direction	Strongly agree	49	9.18
	Agree	73	13.67
	Neutral	34	6.37
	Strongly disagree	111	20.79
	Disagree	267	50
	Σ	534	100
Military intervention will be a setback to Nigerian quest for development	Strongly agree	72	13.48
	Agree	54	10.11
	Neutral	52	9.74
	Strongly disagree	94	17.60
	Disagree	262	49.06
	Σ	534	100.00

Source: The authors' online survey (2024).

Table VII shows that the most prevalent attitude of youth towards Nigerian democracy is negative as over 70% of the respondents believe it is not moving in the right direction. The common reason they cited for this is the failure of leaders to address the insecurity and economic meltdown that have been in steady increase since the advent of the fourth republic in 1999 which further explains their low interest in politics as well as their low participation in it as revealed in Tables III, IV and VI. They however expressed more dissatisfaction with leadership at local government and national levels than that at state level as revealed in Fig. 1.

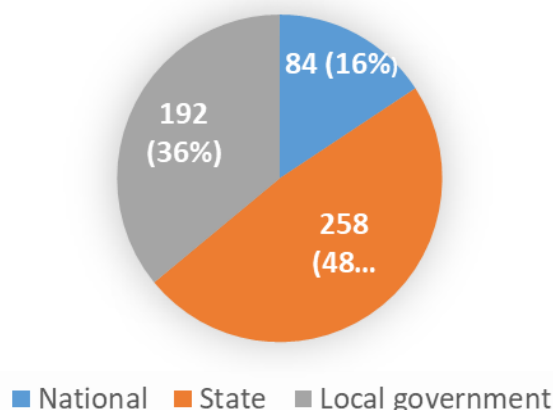


Fig. 1: Respondents preference of governance at different levels (n = 534).

Source: The authors' online survey (2024).

Their gross dissatisfaction with governance at the local government level, which is meant to bring both the government and the positive impact of governance closer to them, is clearly a manifestation of lack of capacity, accountability and good will by the government closer to them—partly because state governments, through joint accounts among other bureaucratic clutches, usually impede and overshadow the local governments. In the same vein, their preference for governance at the state rather than national level also shows their dissatisfaction with the impact of their elected federal representatives (senators and members of the house of representatives) as well as the overall impact of the country’s governance due to the failure of successive political regimes to combat the spate of poverty, illiteracy and insecurity among other human security threats. Consequently, about 67% of the respondents do not consider military intervention as a potential setback to the country’s quest for development.

B. Test of Hypothesis

The independent variable (attitude towards Nigerian democratic governance) is contrasted against the dependent variable (active participation in partisan politics). Responses to the question ‘despite challenges, Nigerian democracy is moving in the right direction’ in Table VII is taken as the measure of the independent variable. Accordingly, they are ranked as follows: ‘Strongly agree’ = 5, ‘agree’ = 4, ‘neutral’ = 3, ‘disagree’ = 2 and ‘strongly disagree’ = 1. On the other hand, the dependent variable is measured with responses to the question on ‘membership of a political party’ in Table II ranked as ‘no’ = 1 and ‘yes’ = 2.

Table VIII: Correlation between the respondents’ attitudes towards Democratic governance and their active political participation

Correlations			Attitude towards Nigerian Democratic governance	Active participation in partisan politics
Kendall's tau_b	Attitude towards Nigerian Democratic governance	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.704**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	534	534
	Active participation in partisan politics	Correlation Coefficient	.704**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000 (2.1208E-69)	.
		N	534	534

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: The authors’ computation based on data from online survey (2024).

The two-tailed Kendal Tau-B correlation statistical analysis revealed in Table 6. 7 is conducted at 95% confidence level and 0.05 level of significance. The calculated r value of 0.704 is greater than the critical value of 0.085 and thus show a strong positive correlation. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and we conclude that there is a significant difference between rural youths’ attitude towards Nigerian democratic governance and their participation in partisan politics.

C. Discussion of Findings

This study found that the prevailing attitude of rural youth towards Nigerian democratic governance is negative due largely to the developmental challenges and leadership failure bedevilling the country. Consequently, they are not much bothered about the prospect of military intervention. This supports the findings of [6], [18] and [20] who found that the spate of exclusion fueled by poverty and unemployment is the root cause of youth’s disenchantment with governance. However, while these studies found that this is a catalyst for the rise of social media activism like the #EndSARS massive protest in 2019, this study finds that the youth in rural areas do not utilise the social for such a purpose.

Furthermore, the paper found that the political participation of the rural youth is restricted to activities in the fringes of

the democratic process. They are therefore mere spectators in the political arena as an overwhelming majority of them do not vie for electoral seats despite the enactment of ‘not too young to run’ Act, or even affiliate with political parties. This is found to be a direct consequence of their negative attitude towards the Nigerian democratic process which is characterised by god-fatherism, nepotism and all sorts of barriers to good governance. And as this largely accounts for the poor fortunes of the rural folk, it in turn contributes to the slow march of the Nigerian democratic enterprise.

Nevertheless, the paper found that social media does not significantly enhance the political participation of the rural youth. This is a sharp contrast to the findings of [11], [21] and [17] all of whom found that social media are playing pivotal roles to the youths’ participation in the electoral processes. The rural youth have very little interest in issues related to government and politics and they consequently do not much engage in governance or politically related activities on social media, notwithstanding their addiction to it.

VII. CONCLUSION

The preponderance among rural youth, of negative attitudes towards Nigerian democratic governance is a bad omen deserving of urgent attention, especially as a large chunk of them are found to be receptive to military intervention. While the fourth republic democratic experimentation (now in its 25th year) almost doubled the life span of the three previous republics combined (14 years), eliminating the tendency of its demise in a like-manner to theirs is only reliant on inclusive governance—not the threats of economic and military sanctions resorted to by regional bodies (like the Economic Community of West African States) in response to the recent waves of militarisation in Mali, Gabon, sierra Leone and Niger. Therefore, formal authorities in Nigeria need to first and foremost come to the realisation that the existence and consolidation of democratic governance are only possible through robust participation of the people, especially the youth who constitute the bulk of the citizenry. And in the light of the global wave of digitization, e-governance through citizen engagement using social media channels is the gateway to inclusive governance. If the anomaly of exclusion affecting youth in general and rural youth in particular is not adequately addressed, the nation will continue to lag behind in the global race to true democratic governance.

Prioritising youth inclusion in governance is therefore instrumental to the country’s democratic growth and consolidation, as well as socio-economic development. Accordingly, this study recommends that the democratic process in Nigeria should be digitalised; the rural youth should be massively mobilized and re-oriented through deliberate campaigns; and government should introduce affirmative action strategies with a view to encouraging youth, women and other marginalised segments of the population to meaningfully participate in governance and the democratic process.

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