

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION, RULE OF LAW AND DEMOCRATIC VIGILANCE: ENHANCING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

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Abstract: This study ascertained political communication, rule of law and democratic vigilance: enhancing citizen participation in Nigeria's democratic process. The deliberative democracy theory was anchored in this study. This study adopted a qualitative research methodology anchored on email interviews. The research design was a descriptive exploratory design, suitable for capturing in-depth, context-rich narratives and individual perceptions. The population of the study comprises politically active Nigerian citizens, including civil society actors, legal practitioners, journalists and social media influencers, estimated at 5,000 individuals across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, based on civil society engagement records and professional associations. These individuals were chosen due to their active involvement in political discourse and civic advocacy. From this population, a sample size of 30 respondents was selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured email interviews. The data were analysed using thematic content analysis, which involved coding responses, identifying recurring themes, and interpreting patterns in relation to the study variables. Findings revealed that political communication in Nigeria has the potential to influence citizen participation positively, especially, through social media and community engagement but its effectiveness is weakened by mistrust, elite control of narratives and widespread misinformation that often alienate and confuse the public rather than empower them. The study concluded that while political communication holds immense potential to mobilize Nigerian citizens and foster democratic participation, its effectiveness remains undermined by elite manipulation, lack of trust and the spread of misinformation revealing an urgent need for more transparent, inclusive, and citizen-centred communication strategies in the democratic process. The study recommended that The National Orientation Agency (NOA), in collaboration with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and media regulatory bodies such as the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC), develop and implement inclusive political communication frameworks that prioritise civic education, ethical political messaging, and media literacy. These institutions should also monitor and regulate political advertisements and campaign communications to reduce misinformation and promote issue-based engagement that encourages citizen participation

Keywords: Political Communication, Rule of Law, Democratic Vigilance, Citizen Participation, Nigeria's Democratic Process

Introduction

Political communication remains a cornerstone of democratic development globally, forming the medium through which governments and citizens interact in ways that shape public opinion, guide policy decisions and consolidate democratic institutions. In an era characterised by rapid technological advancement and a shift in communicative practices, political communication has evolved beyond traditional forms such as party rallies, print media and state-controlled broadcasts. It now encompasses social media, digital campaigns and participatory platforms that influence public discourse and citizen engagement. Countries with strong political communication strategies, such as the United States, Germany and Sweden have successfully used it to build inclusive governance structures, hold leaders accountable and ensure effective public participation (Chadwick, 2013).

The rule of law, on the other hand, functions as the foundational principle upon which democratic societies are built. It ensures that governance is carried out according to established legal frameworks that apply equally to all citizens, regardless of their status. At the global level, the rule of law is emphasised by institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union as essential for sustainable development, peace and justice (United Nations, 2019). In Africa, however, the application of the rule of law has remained inconsistent, often undermined by autocratic tendencies, corruption, weak institutions and impunity. The African Union's African Governance Architecture (AGA) has continued to advocate for the integration of rule of law into political governance, although many member states still lag in implementation (African Union Commission, 2022).

Democratic vigilance refers to the conscious and active participation of citizens in safeguarding democratic values, processes and institutions. It encompasses civil activism, political participation, media freedom, judicial independence and constant scrutiny of governmental power. In mature democracies like Canada and Denmark, democratic vigilance is institutionalised through civic education, strong civil society structures and open media systems. In Africa, however, democratic vigilance faces challenges such as state repression, voter apathy and political exclusion, although there have been notable improvements through grassroots movements, media activism and increasing youth engagement in political discourse (Gyimah-Boadi & Logan, 2020).

In Nigeria, the intersection of political communication, rule of law and democratic vigilance plays a critical role in determining the quality of its democracy. Since returning to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has made significant progress in liberalising its political space, enabling vibrant political communication, particularly, through digital media. However, challenges persist, including state-sponsored disinformation, election-related violence, media censorship and inadequate civic education. Despite a vibrant press and active social media landscape, the ability of political communication to genuinely enhance citizen participation is limited by elite capture of political discourse and deep-rooted ethno-religious divisions (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020).

The rule of law in Nigeria is often regarded as weak, characterised by selective justice, prolonged judicial processes and institutional decay. Though the Nigerian constitution upholds the separation of powers, judicial independence is frequently threatened by executive interference, lack of autonomy and political intimidation (Okeke, 2021). These challenges erode public trust in legal institutions and hinder the enforcement of citizens' rights, thereby, weakening the broader democratic framework. Without a credible and functional legal system, citizen participation cannot be effectively guaranteed or protected, as democratic rights and responsibilities must be anchored in legal certainty.

Democratic vigilance in Nigeria is a mixed reality. While there is evidence of a politically conscious citizenry, particularly, among the youth and civil society groups, this vigilance is often curtailed by institutional repression, insecurity and socioeconomic hardship. Protests such as the #EndSARS movement in 2020 reflect a growing demand for accountable governance and citizen empowerment. However, the subsequent governmental crackdown on activists, use of surveillance and judicial harassment have illustrated the fragility of Nigeria's democratic vigilance. The lack of institutional support for whistle-blowers, independent journalism, and public dissent further undermines the spirit of democratic oversight (Amnesty International, 2021).

Political communication, when properly harnessed, has the potential to bridge the gap between governance and the governed. In democratic settings, it enables the dissemination of political ideologies, encourages public debate and fosters political accountability. In the Nigerian context, however, political communication is often weaponised to polarise electorates, spread propaganda and suppress dissent. The proliferation of fake news and political misinformation on digital platforms further complicates efforts to use political communication as a tool for inclusion and participation (Udeze & Chukwuere, 2021). This reflects a need for media literacy, ethical communication practices, and regulatory frameworks that protect free speech while curbing harmful content.

At the heart of citizen participation lies the concept of civic engagement, which is nurtured by transparent communication, lawful governance and vigilant oversight. Globally, countries that prioritise civic education, open government data, and participatory budgeting have seen enhanced citizen trust and policy responsiveness (OECD, 2020). In Nigeria, however, civic education remains underfunded and politicised, leading to widespread political ignorance and disillusionment among citizens. Electoral processes are often marred by vote-buying, intimidation and low voter turnout, which are indicative of weak political communication strategies and an absence of trust in legal and democratic systems.

A robust democratic culture demands a synergy between political communication, adherence to the rule of law and active democratic vigilance. This triadic relationship creates a participatory political environment where citizens not only vote but also engage in ongoing political processes, demand transparency and challenge injustice. In sub-Saharan Africa, where democratic backsliding is becoming increasingly evident, reinforcing this relationship is vital for democratic consolidation. Nigeria, as Africa's largest democracy, holds a strategic position in shaping the continent's democratic trajectory, making it imperative to address these variables in an integrated manner (Freedom House, 2023).

Despite over two decades of democratic rule in Nigeria, citizen participation remains weak, inconsistent and largely reactive, raising significant concerns about the effectiveness of political communication, the integrity of the rule of law and the level of democratic vigilance in the country. Political communication in Nigeria is often top-down, dominated by elites and saturated with propaganda and misinformation, particularly, during election seasons. Social media have emerged as a new platform for political engagement, yet, it is frequently unregulated and vulnerable to disinformation, echo chambers and cyber repression. The rule of law, although constitutionally enshrined, is regularly undermined by selective justice, lack of judicial independence and executive overreach, creating a hostile environment for civil rights enforcement. While there have been isolated instances of democratic vigilance, such as the #EndSARS protests and court advocacy campaigns, the absence of sustained institutional mechanisms for civic activism and legal recourse has rendered such movements fragile. This creates a paradox where the presence of democratic structures does not equate to democratic substance. As a result, citizen participation in governance, policymaking and accountability remains minimal, uninformed or entirely excluded, especially, among rural populations, women and youth.

A critical review of existing literature reveals several gaps that this study intends to fill. Conceptually, there is a lack of integrated analysis linking political communication, the rule of law and democratic vigilance in a singular framework to explain and enhance citizen participation in Nigeria. Empirically, most studies have treated these variables in isolation, focusing either on media influence (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020), electoral behaviour or legal constraints without connecting them to systemic civic empowerment outcomes. Methodologically, there is a scarcity of mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative insights with quantitative assessments of citizen participation across different demographics and regions. Theoretically, there is limited application of intersectional frameworks that address how communication, legal rights and civic behaviour interact under Nigeria's unique socio-political conditions. There also exists a population gap, as much of the research centres on urban elites, neglecting grassroots citizens whose participation is most suppressed. Furthermore, the practical gap lies in the absence of actionable policy models that integrate ethical political messaging, accessible legal institutions and community-level democratic education. These interlinked challenges underscore a significant knowledge void in understanding how the triad of political communication, rule of law and democratic vigilance can be harnessed as a unified mechanism to strengthen democratic participation in Nigeria's fragile democracy. This study seeks to investigate how political communication shapes citizen participation in Nigeria's democratic process, particularly, across diverse social and demographic groups. It also assesses the extent to which the rule of law promotes or undermines civic engagement and participation in governance. Additionally, the study explores the role of democratic vigilance, expressed through civil society actions, public protests and institutional watchdogs in enhancing or limiting consistent and meaningful citizen involvement in Nigeria's democratic development.

Citizen Participation

Citizen participation refers to the active involvement of individuals and groups in political, civic and governance processes within a democratic setting. This includes voting, engaging in political discussions, attending public meetings, protesting, joining civil society groups and monitoring public institutions. Globally, citizen participation is regarded as a central component of a functional democracy, as it helps to ensure accountability, legitimacy, and responsiveness of governance structures (Verba et al., 1995). In Nigeria, however, participation remains uneven and often episodic, with high voter apathy, limited civic engagement and public distrust in political processes, especially among marginalised populations such as women, youth, and rural dwellers (Arowolo & Aluko, 2012).

The various forms of citizen participation exist, ranging from electoral to non-electoral engagement. Electoral participation includes activities such as registering to vote and voting during elections, while non-electoral participation comprises protests, advocacy campaigns, community organising and public commentary on policy issues. In the Nigerian context, while electoral participation is relatively measurable, non-electoral participation is less documented and under-researched (Omotola, 2010). This limits the ability to evaluate the full scope of democratic engagement and understand the mechanisms that facilitate or hinder it. Thus, this study adopts a broader conceptualization of citizen participation that integrates both electoral and non-electoral activities to provide a holistic view of democratic involvement.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of citizen participation is often mediated by structural and institutional factors such as political education, accessibility of governance, protection of civil liberties and public perception of efficacy. Where citizens feel that their voices do not translate into meaningful change, they tend to disengage from the political process (Dalton, 2017). In Nigeria, issues such as electoral malpractice, police brutality, economic disenfranchisement and judicial inefficiency contribute to low participation. Therefore, the study focuses on how political communication, rule of law and democratic vigilance can either enable or impede this vital aspect of democratic life.

Political Communication, Rule of Law and Democratic Vigilance

Political communication entails the exchange of political information among political actors, institutions, media, and the public. It includes campaign messaging, political advertising, debates, social media discourse, press statements, and other forms of public engagement that shape political perceptions and decision-making. Effective political communication fosters transparency, trust and civic participation by informing citizens of their rights and responsibilities and enabling informed decision-making (McNair, 2017). However, in countries like Nigeria, political communication is often compromised by misinformation, elite control, and poor media ethics, limiting its effectiveness in enhancing democratic engagement (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020).

The rule of law, the second independent variable, refers to the principle that all members of a society, including government officials are equally subject to the law. It encompasses legal transparency, judicial independence, access to justice, and the protection of fundamental rights. A strong rule of law enhances citizen participation by ensuring that democratic rights are enforceable and protected from arbitrary interference (World Justice

Project, 2023). In Nigeria, however, the rule of law is frequently undermined by political interference, corruption, prolonged judicial processes, and lack of institutional autonomy, which discourages citizens from engaging meaningfully with democratic institutions (Okeke, 2021).

Democratic vigilance, the third independent variable, involves citizens actively monitoring governance, demanding accountability and resisting anti-democratic tendencies. It includes activities such as public protests, social audits, civic education and participation in democratic advocacy. High levels of democratic vigilance signal a politically aware and engaged citizenry and act as a check on government excesses (Norris, 2011). In Nigeria, moments of democratic vigilance like the #EndSARS movement have shown the power of collective action. However, such efforts are often met with repression, limiting their sustainability and impact. This study examines how democratic vigilance interacts with political communication and legal frameworks to influence sustained citizen participation.

The Relationship between Citizen Participation and Political Communication, Rule of Law and Democratic Vigilance

The relationship between citizen participation and political communication, rule of law and democratic vigilance is both dynamic and interdependent. Political communication serves as a channel through which citizens receive and exchange information that influences their willingness and ability to participate. Where political communication is transparent, inclusive, and participatory, citizens are more likely to engage in democratic processes (Chadwick, 2013). However, where it is manipulative or exclusive, it can alienate the public and reduce engagement. In Nigeria, the weaponization of media during elections, the spread of political propaganda and the suppression of dissent limit the positive effects of political communication on citizen participation (Udeze & Chukwuere, 2021).

Similarly, the rule of law has a significant moderating effect on citizen participation. When citizens trust that the law protects their rights and that justice can be obtained without fear or bias, they are more likely to participate in political activities, challenge government excesses and seek redress through legal channels (Carothers, 2006). In contrast, when the rule of law is perceived as weak or biased, citizens become apathetic, disillusioned or even radicalised, opting out of democratic processes altogether. In Nigeria, the selective application of justice and government clampdowns on legal protests dissuade citizens from exercising their democratic rights, thereby, weakening overall participation (Amnesty International, 2021).

Finally, democratic vigilance acts as both an outcome and a driver of citizen participation. A vigilant populace holds governments accountable, demands reforms and fosters a culture of civic responsibility. When reinforced by effective political communication and legal protection, democratic vigilance becomes a tool for sustainable participation and democratic deepening. However, without institutional support, democratic vigilance can be easily suppressed or co-opted, leading to democratic fatigue or cynicism (Gyimah-Boadi & Logan, 2020). This study, therefore, explores how the synergy between these variables influences the quality and depth of citizen participation in Nigeria's evolving democratic landscape.

Deliberative Democracy Theory

A suitable theory for this study is Deliberative Democracy Theory, initially articulated by Jürgen Habermas in 1984. The theory emphasizes the central role of open, rational, and inclusive dialogue in democratic decision-making processes. According to Habermas, democratic legitimacy arises not merely from voting or representation, but from the extent to which public reasoning, free from coercion, shapes political outcomes. The core tenets of the theory include the public sphere as a space for civic discussion, communicative rationality where participants exchange ideas based on reason rather than power, and inclusive participation where all affected citizens have the opportunity to contribute to debates and decisions (Habermas, 1984). The theory assumes that citizens are capable of engaging in rational discourse, that equal access to communication channels is possible, and that democratic systems are strengthened when decisions are informed by deliberation rather than elite dominance. However, critics argue that Habermas's ideal public sphere is often unattainable in real-world contexts where inequalities in access to information, education, media, and institutional power distort deliberative processes (Young, 2000). Moreover, in pluralistic societies like Nigeria, ethno-religious divisions and structural inequalities challenge the possibility of achieving truly rational and inclusive discourse. Nonetheless, the theory remains highly relevant to this study as it provides a framework for understanding how political communication, rule of law, and democratic vigilance can collectively shape citizen participation. It highlights the importance of free expression, legal protections, and civic engagement in fostering deliberation, empowering citizens, and enhancing the quality of Nigeria's democratic process.

Empirical Review

Political Communication and Citizen Participation

A study by Ojebuyi and Salawu (2020), titled "Political Communication in Africa: Identifying Trends and Research Imperatives", sought to examine the dynamics of political communication in Africa and its influence on democratic participation. The objective was to identify how media and political actors communicate with citizens and the extent to which such communication impacts democratic engagement. The study used a qualitative content analysis of political communication research in selected African countries over a 10-year period. Findings revealed that political communication across Africa is largely elite-driven, propaganda-oriented, and often fails to empower citizens due to media control and lack of access to information. The similarity with the current study lies in the shared focus on political communication as a determinant of civic engagement. However, while their study provided a continental overview with a strong theoretical focus, the current study is Nigeria-specific and adopts an empirical approach with attention to demographic and contextual variations in citizen participation. Additionally, the present study expands beyond media systems to include legal and civic structures as intersecting variables.

Rule of Law and Civic Engagement

Okeke (2021), in a study titled "The Rule of Law and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria", explored the implications of legal institutions on democratic sustainability in the country. The study aimed to assess how

judicial processes, legal enforcement, and constitutionalism influence democratic outcomes. Using a doctrinal legal research method and supported by key informant interviews with legal experts and civil society actors, the study found that a weak rule of law, manifested in selective justice, executive interference, and delayed adjudication undermines citizen trust and participation. Similar to the present study, Okeke identifies the rule of law as crucial to democratic development and civic participation. The difference, however, is that while Okeke's work focuses primarily on legal theory and institutional failings, the current research investigates how the rule of law interacts with political communication and democratic vigilance to shape participation. Moreover, the current study includes a broader methodological scope by integrating both qualitative and quantitative data to measure citizen responses.

Democratic Vigilance and Sustained Participation

Gyimah-Boadi and Logan (2020) conducted a study titled "Vigilance and Voice: Citizens' Views on Democratic Governance in Africa" under the Afrobarometer project. The study's objective was to examine how citizens across African countries perceive their role in holding governments accountable and how that perception influences their participation. A mixed-method approach was used, drawing on data from over 34 African countries through structured interviews and public opinion surveys. The findings showed that although many Africans value democracy and believe in civic responsibility, fear of repression, corruption and lack of institutional support often suppress democratic vigilance and long-term engagement. The study is similar to the current one in its emphasis on democratic vigilance as a factor in participation. However, while Gyimah-Boadi and Logan's work offers comparative continental insights, the current study narrows the scope to Nigeria, allowing for more in-depth analysis of context-specific barriers and enablers of vigilance. Also, the current study places democratic vigilance in a three-variable framework alongside political communication and legal structures, providing a more integrated view of participatory democracy.

Gap Identification

The reviewed literature underscores the significance of political communication, rule of law, and democratic vigilance as core pillars of democratic participation in Africa, particularly in Nigeria. Studies by Ojebuyi and Salawu (2020), Okeke (2021) and Gyimah-Boadi and Logan (2020) have respectively highlighted the role of media-driven political messaging, legal institutions, and citizen activism in shaping democratic outcomes. While these studies provide valuable insights, they often treat these variables in isolation, lacking a holistic framework that examines their interdependence in influencing citizen participation. Additionally, most prior research adopts either a legalistic or media-centric lens, with limited empirical assessment of how citizens themselves perceive and navigate these democratic structures. There is also a methodological gap, as few studies combine both qualitative and quantitative data to capture the diverse experiences of Nigerian citizens across regions, age groups, and social classes. Furthermore, the literature shows a population bias toward elite or urban perspectives, often neglecting grassroots voices. Conceptually, there is limited integration of deliberative democracy theory in understanding the communicative and institutional dynamics of participation. This study fills these gaps by

adopting an integrated approach to analyse how political communication, rule of law, and democratic vigilance jointly influence citizen participation in Nigeria's democratic process, using both empirical evidence and contextual analysis.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology anchored on email interviews to explore how political communication, rule of law and democratic vigilance influence citizen participation in Nigeria's democratic process. The research design is a descriptive exploratory design, suitable for capturing in-depth, context-rich narratives and individual perceptions. The population of the study comprises politically active Nigerian citizens, including civil society actors, legal practitioners, journalists and social media influencers, estimated at 5,000 individuals across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, based on civil society engagement records and professional associations. These individuals were chosen due to their active involvement in political discourse and civic advocacy. From this population, a sample size of 30 respondents was selected using purposive sampling, targeting those with demonstrated engagement in democratic processes such as protest participation, legal advocacy, political commentary or civic education campaigns. Data were collected through semi-structured email interviews, allowing respondents to provide reflective, well-considered responses over time. The data were analysed using thematic content analysis, which involved coding responses, identifying recurring themes, and interpreting patterns in relation to the study variables. The choice of email interviews was justified by its ability to overcome geographical limitations, protect respondent anonymity, and promote thoughtful engagement, especially on politically sensitive topics in a context like Nigeria where freedom of expression can be threatened. The qualitative method was further justified for its strength in capturing the depth and complexity of experiences, perspectives, and institutional dynamics that quantitative methods might overlook.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Themes were drawn deductively from research objectives. The themes deduced included: Influence of political communication on citizen participation; role of the rule of law in enabling or hindering civic engagement and democratic vigilance as a driver of sustained participation. These were articulated and elaborated below:

Influence of Political Communication on Citizen Participation

Interviewer: Can you describe how political communication influences your participation in Nigeria's democracy?

Respondent: "Political communication plays a vital role in shaping my political awareness. During elections or national debates, I rely heavily on social media, press briefings, and public discussions to form an opinion. These platforms provide access to real-time information, manifestos, and analysis that inform my choices. However, I've noticed that the communication is often one-sided, mostly campaign promises with little focus on civic education. It helps, but it also leaves us with more questions than answers."

Interviewer: In your experience, how effective is political messaging in mobilizing citizens to act?

Respondent: From what I have observed, “Political communication has the power to spark mass action like protests or voting but its effectiveness depends on credibility and tone. For instance, the #EndSARS protests gained momentum largely due to digital storytelling and widespread sharing of police brutality incidents. That form of communication empowered people. But when political elites dominate the narrative, it quickly shifts from mobilisation to manipulation. So, effectiveness is tied to trust.”

Interviewer: What challenges do you face in accessing or trusting political messages?

Respondent: “Misinformation is a serious challenge. A lot of fake news circulates, especially close to elections. It is difficult to verify sources when there’s no regulation of online political ads or content. Also, media outlets are often biased depending on political affiliation, which makes it hard for people to trust what they hear. We need independent, people-centred platforms that prioritize verified and inclusive communication.”

Interviewer: How do ordinary Nigerians respond to political messages from government or opposition figures?

Respondent: “Most people are sceptical. You will hear people say, “Na lie, dem go still do wetin dem wan do.” That cynicism is a result of years of broken promises. The more deceptive or flashy the message, the less likely people are to believe or engage with it. But when messages come from grassroots movements or trusted community leaders, people listen and act. Trust is everything.”

Interviewer: Have you personally been influenced to participate in any political process because of communication?

Respondent: “Yes, several times. I have participated in online town halls, signed petitions, and even voted based on clear and consistent communication. One local candidate in 2019 used WhatsApp to directly engage constituents. That personal touch made many of us feel seen and heard, and I voted for him even though he was not from a mainstream party. So, yes, communication can drive participation if done right.”

Interviewer: What changes would you recommend to improve political communication for better engagement?

Respondent: “I think we need more issue-based discussions and less mudslinging. Politicians should be required to have regular media engagements with civil society and not just appear during campaigns. We also need media literacy programs so people can decode propaganda and identify false information. Lastly, more youth-friendly platforms should be created like podcasts and YouTube dialogues to reach the next generation of voters.

Role of the Rule of Law in Civic Engagement

Interviewer: How does the rule of law affect your participation in Nigeria’s democratic space?

Respondent: “The rule of law is supposed to guarantee equal access to justice and protection of civil liberties, which in turn encourages participation. But in reality, many people are afraid to participate because they know the legal system rarely protects them. I’ve handled cases where activists were detained unlawfully and courts issued orders that were ignored by the police. That sends the message that the law doesn’t work for everyone, especially not for the average citizen.”

Interviewer: Can you give an example of when legal uncertainty discouraged democratic involvement?

Respondent: “A classic example was after the #EndSARS protests. Many peaceful protesters were arrested, bank accounts frozen and passports seized, all without proper judicial process. That action not only silenced those individuals but also scared others from speaking out or joining future movements. When the law becomes a tool of repression instead of protection, it weakens democracy and silences voices.”

Interviewer: Do you believe the judiciary is independent enough to encourage civic participation?

Respondent: “No, I do not believe it is fully independent. Judges often face pressure from the executive and in some high-profile cases, judgments appear politically motivated. This undermines public confidence. Without a strong, neutral judiciary, citizens won’t feel safe challenging authority or demanding accountability. Participation becomes a risk, not a right.”

Interviewer: In your view, how should legal reform support democratic participation?

Respondent: “Legal reform should prioritize judicial autonomy, speedy dispensation of justice, and enforcement of citizens’ rights. For example, public interest cases should be fast-tracked and law enforcement should be held accountable when they disobey court orders. We also need more legal aid services to help ordinary citizens navigate the system. When people believe the law is accessible and fair, they’ll be more likely to engage politically.

Interviewer: What role do legal institutions play in promoting or stifling civil liberties?

Respondent: “They play both roles, depending on their independence. Institutions like the National Human Rights Commission have tried to defend civil liberties but they lack enforcement powers. Meanwhile, institutions like the police and some segments of the judiciary are often used to suppress dissent. A legal system that only favours the powerful cannot sustain democratic participation.

Interviewer: What would you suggest to improve the rule of law for civic engagement in Nigeria?

Respondent: First, “insulate the judiciary from political interference through independent funding and appointment processes. Second, enforce consequences for disobedience of court orders. Third, educate citizens about their rights and how to use legal mechanisms for redress. A well-informed population and a responsive legal system are the cornerstones of any functioning democracy.”

Democratic Vigilance as a Driver of Participation

Interviewer: Welcome. How would you define democratic vigilance in your own words, based on your experience?

Respondent: “Democratic vigilance, to me, means staying alert and active in defending democratic values not just during elections but every day. It is about questioning government decisions, demanding accountability, protesting injustice, and using every civic tool to ensure the system works for everyone. It is not a one-off action; it’s a continuous mind-set.

Interviewer: How have you participated in or witnessed democratic vigilance in Nigeria?

Respondent: “I was part of the #EndSARS movement in Abuja and also helped organise community dialogues after the protests. We didn’t just protest; we created platforms to discuss police reform, justice and citizen

empowerment. I have also participated in monitoring budget allocations in my local government and writing petitions. These small acts add up when people stay consistent.”

Interviewer: What barriers do you face in sustaining that kind of vigilance?

Respondent: “The biggest barrier is fear, fear of arrest, fear of losing your job, fear of being followed. Government surveillance is real. Another issue is fatigue. People get discouraged when they do not see results or when leaders make promises and fail to deliver. There’s also the problem of division, ethnic and political divisions make it hard for people to unite around causes.”

Interviewer: What makes people give up on being vigilant in democratic processes?

Respondent: “People give up when they feel powerless. When your voice does not lead to change, or when justice is delayed indefinitely, people retreat into survival mode. They say, “Let me just face my hustle.” The government counts on this silence, and that’s dangerous. We need to constantly renew our energy and support each other as citizens.”

Interviewer: Do you think institutions support or hinder democratic vigilance?

Respondent: “Most institutions hinder it, unfortunately. Whistle-blowers are not protected. Independent journalists are harassed. Even civil society organisations are sometimes branded as threats. Instead of being a partner in democracy, many government institutions see vigilant citizens as enemies. That mind-set needs to change for democracy to thrive.

Interviewer: What do you think needs to happen to strengthen democratic vigilance in Nigeria?

Respondent: “We need civic education in schools and communities, digital safety training for activists, and better collaboration between civil society and media. Citizens must be equipped with knowledge and tools to organise effectively and safely. Also, laws that protect free speech and protest must be enforced. A vigilant society is a resilient democracy.”

Discussion of Findings

The findings showed that, political communication in Nigeria has the potential to influence citizen participation positively, especially, through social media and community engagement but its effectiveness is weakened by mistrust, elite control of narratives and widespread misinformation that often alienate and confuse the public rather than empower them. Ojebuyi and Salawu (2020) supported this finding by asserting that political communication in Africa, including Nigeria, is heavily dominated by political elites who use media channels to promote self-serving narratives rather than facilitate informed citizen engagement. Ojebuyi and Salawu argued that the manipulation of political messages, coupled with media partisanship and a lack of civic-focused communication strategies, often results in public distrust and disengagement, thus, weakening the democratic value of political discourse. Deliberative Democracy Theory validated this finding by emphasising that meaningful citizen participation depends on open, inclusive and rational communication in the public sphere. The finding that elite-dominated and manipulative political messaging in Nigeria weakens trust and participation

aligns with Habermas's argument that, democratic legitimacy cannot thrive where communication is distorted, inaccessible or exclusionary.

The study revealed that, the rule of law in Nigeria is inconsistently applied and often undermined by political interference and weak enforcement, which discourages civic engagement, especially, when citizens see that legal protections and court decisions are routinely ignored by state actors. Okeke (2021) reinforced this observation by highlighting how Nigeria's rule of law is frequently compromised by executive interference, selective application of justice, and a sluggish judicial process. Okeke emphasised that the failure of the legal system to enforce court orders and protect citizens' rights undermines public confidence in legal institutions, leading many Nigerians to withdraw from civic participation due to perceived legal futility and fear of state repression. The theory reinforced the finding by asserting that the rule of law is essential to ensure that deliberation occurs in an environment of fairness, equal rights and legal protection. When judicial systems are compromised, as found in Nigeria, it undermines the safe space needed for public discourse and civic action, thereby disrupting the core conditions required for democratic deliberation to flourish. Findings indicated that, while democratic vigilance exists among Nigerian citizens, particularly, through protests, youth activism and watchdog efforts, it is often unsustainable due to fear of repression, lack of institutional support and public fatigue from unresponsive governance systems. Gyimah-Boadi and Logan (2020) aligned with this finding noting that, while African citizens increasingly value democratic participation and accountability, their efforts at democratic vigilance are often hampered by institutional resistance, fear of retaliation, and systemic governance failures. Gyimah-Boadi and Logan Afrobarometer research demonstrated that without sustained support from legal and political systems, civic activism and public scrutiny tend to wane, even in politically conscious populations. Deliberative Democracy Theory supports this finding by recognising that democratic vigilance expressed through protests, advocacy and citizen oversight is a critical form of participatory discourse that holds power accountable. However, the theory also acknowledged that, such vigilance must be supported by institutional openness and respect for dissent, without which public deliberation becomes unsustainable, as reflected in the Nigerian experience.

Conclusion

The research concluded that while political communication holds immense potential to mobilize Nigerian citizens and foster democratic participation, its effectiveness remains undermined by elite manipulation, lack of trust and the spread of misinformation revealing an urgent need for more transparent, inclusive, and citizen-centred communication strategies in the democratic process.

The research validated that without a credible and consistently applied rule of law, citizen participation in Nigeria's democracy is weakened, as many citizens lack confidence in legal protections and perceive the justice system as selectively enforced, discouraging them from engaging with governance structures meaningfully.

The research established that while democratic vigilance exists and has proven effective in sparking civic consciousness, its impact is limited by fear, institutional resistance and a lack of sustained support highlighting

the need for systemic reforms that protect activists, empower civic voices and promote long-term democratic accountability.

This study makes several important contributions to knowledge by offering an original and integrated perspective on how political communication, rule of law, and democratic vigilance collectively influence citizen participation in Nigeria's democratic process, an approach that has been largely overlooked in existing literature. Through the use of qualitative email interviews, it creatively captures first-hand civic experiences and perspectives across different sectors of Nigerian society, breaking away from the often-quantitative, urban-elite-focused models that dominate similar studies. Innovatively, the study develops a triadic conceptual model that connects communication, legal institutions, and civic activism as mutually reinforcing elements in participatory democracy. This offers a new pathway for understanding democratic engagement in fragile democracies. The research also contributes to theory by validating and extending Deliberative Democracy Theory within the Nigerian context, showing how distorted communication, legal inequality and institutional repression hinder rational public discourse and democratic participation. In terms of practical outcomes, the study informs policy and civic education product development by recommending institutional communication reforms, legal safeguards for activists, and grassroots civic training programs that can be adapted for public agencies, NGOs, and educational curricula. These contributions help bridge the gap between academic theory and real-world democratic practice in Nigeria and other developing democracies.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the work, the following has been proposed.

- 1) The National Orientation Agency (NOA), in collaboration with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and media regulatory bodies such as the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC), develop and implement inclusive political communication frameworks that prioritise civic education, ethical political messaging, and media literacy. These institutions should also monitor and regulate political advertisements and campaign communications to reduce misinformation and promote issue-based engagement that encourages citizen participation.
- 2) To strengthen the rule of law and restore public confidence in legal institutions, the National Judicial Council (NJC) and the Federal Ministry of Justice should prioritize reforms that guarantee judicial independence, expedite legal processes and ensure strict enforcement of court judgments. The National Assembly should also enact legislation that provides legal safeguards for civic actors and penalizes government agencies that violate constitutional rights, thereby creating a legal environment that supports active and fearless civic engagement.
- 3) To sustain democratic vigilance, civil society organizations in partnership with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the Federal Ministry of Education should invest in continuous civic education, grassroots mobilization, and advocacy training, especially targeting youths and marginalized communities. Institutions should also push for protective policies that shield civic activists and whistle-blowers from repression, ensuring that democratic watchdog efforts are both safe and effective in holding power accountable.

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