



## Appraisal of Public Opinion in Foreign Policy Making: Nigeria and United States of America as a Focal Point

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**Abstract.** Public opinion plays an unprecedented role in foreign policy making in Africa as well as in other advanced and sophisticated nations in the international system. However, in the United States of America and Nigeria, empirical evidence shows that public opinion has little or no significant effects on foreign policy decision-making. Several reasons abound for this, some of these reasons are the unwillingness of the political elites to embrace transparency, accountability, and inclusive governance. The study therefore examines the views of scholars on the role of public opinion in foreign policy making in the United States of America and Nigeria. The secondary source of data collection was adopted, data include archival materials, periodical publications, books, and the internet. Most of these materials were sourced through an extensive use of specialized library facilities of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA). The research is descriptive and analytical. The study recommends that the American and Nigerian governments should encourage public opinion in foreign policy making. The researcher also recommend that scholars of International Relations should focus in their research on the role of Government in allowing the input of the public in both domestic and international politics.

**Keywords:** Public Opinion, Foreign Policy, policy, United States of America, Nigeria.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Conceptual Clarification

According to Keith, Legg and Morrison (1971) Foreign policy is a set of explicit objectives with regard to the world beyond the borders of a given social unit and a set of strategies and tactics designed to achieve those objects. In the contemporary

international system, foreign policy is important because it encourages bilateral and multilateral relations between states and therefore encourage friendship, growth and economic development amongst states in the international system.

In a democratic state, foreign policy decisions are expected to be made by the people and for the people. Kant (1970) in his work "To Perpetual peace" argued that governments are responsible to the people and the public would not go to war, since it is they the public who ultimately pay the price and suffer the most. The theory of "domocratic peace" argues that liberal democracies never fight between themselves. President Bill Clinton in 1994 stated that democracies don't attack each other.

The empirical evidence supports this theory since no war has been waged between states which have democratically elected governments over the last two centuries. Nevertheless, liberal democracies do go to war with non-democratic states, though again the public provides the soldiers regardless of the decision-making process particularly when national interests are at stake. Dina (2023) while reacting to the ongoing war in Ukraine explains the reactions of the public towards the conflicts in both countries, despite the views of the public, the governments of both countries have continued to attack each other,

Internal political pressures are some of the most crucial factors in the process of foreign policy decision-making in any country. Austin (1978) held that one would not talk of the existence of public opinion as a factor in African foreign policy. This is far from the true position, admittedly, there are no powerful pressure groups or lobbyists in Africa as found in Western Europe and North America, but this does not mean the total absence of various forms of

pressure and interest groups. Religious societies and powerful individuals in African countries have strived to influence their governments into taking some line of actions on the major international issue (Aluko, 1979:6) observed that not only do pressure and interest groups exist in different countries of Africa but that they are a continuing factor in the making of foreign policies in their different countries, they could not be easily ignored for long by their governments. Gasuku (2023) stated that polls are a major force in transforming societies. It is not only in liberal democracies that public opinion plays a decisive role in foreign policy decision-making. It does also in the military and authoritarian regimes though to a lesser degree only when it has become imperative that the wishes of the citizens must be adhered to. Public opinion has played a significant role in Nigeria's foreign policy decision-making under the military since 1966 but this changed under the regime of president Babagida in 1985. The newspapers, pressure groups and different interest groups have found it easy to try to influence the direction of government foreign policy and it can be said that public opinion has become a significant political factor which the Nigerian government, like any other government, takes note.

Claude (1965) stated that 'public opinion is a matter of great interest and importance to parliaments, prime ministers, presidents, to monarchs and dictators, to cabinets, party presidia and military juntas – that is to political leaders of every description. According to him, the foreign policy of a state is formulated and conducted within the limits set by the actual presumed, or potential demands of the public.

The democratic experiment which began on May 29, 1999, with the inauguration of the Fourth Republic under the leadership of President Olusegun Obasanjo witnessed a new foreign policy thrust which made Nigeria's foreign policy respond to the pressing needs of Nigerians and made Nigerians the first beneficiary of any foreign policy endeavour (Akinteruwa, 2004). President Obasanjo in his address to the then Foreign Affairs Minister Olu Adeniji said that:

*... Nigeria's foreign policy will serve the interest of Nigeria ...formulated based on the interest of the country ...to sustain the overall interest of the people ...and not just the interest of the regime of the elite... this is a system which can promote the sense of greater good for the greatest number of people in the country (Obayuwana, 2003:3).*

The successor to Obasanjo, President Musa Yar' Adua also through the ex-country's Foreign Affairs Minister Ojo Madueke declared that Nigeria has moved

towards democratizing its foreign policy as the administration wishes to take Nigerian foreign policy to the grassroots to speak the minds of Nigerians at the international arena. This is to ensure that the individual Nigerians are the ultimate beneficiary of Nigerian foreign policy. In this way, the people's ownership of foreign power in a democracy is being developed in Nigeria's foreign policy arena in what the minister aptly called "Citizens Diplomacy", a policy that was citizen-centered.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

Public opinion as exemplified by the numerous organs and institutions is one of the social determinants of a country's foreign policy direction. It has had a great impact and still does on any country's foreign policy decision-making. Public opinion has not impacted America and Nigeria's foreign policies. If the foreign policy of any country reflects its national interest, then public opinion becomes a very paramount factor because it is the determinant and measure of the citizens' demands and desires at a particular given time.

In a liberal democracy like Nigeria, public opinion is a veritable tool of good and responsive governance. It is one of the hallmarks of true democracy. Public opinion matters a lot in the making of foreign policy in every democratic system. This is because democracy according to Abraham Lincoln is a government of the people, by the people and for the people.

In Nigeria, public opinion as expressed by the press and pressure groups has not found it easy to influence the government's foreign policy decision-making and its implementation. For example, it took protests from university students, Action Group and other opposition and progressive elements for the Federal Government to abrogate its Defense Pact with Britain on January 21, 1962. This singular act provides the most concrete evidence of a democratic government claiming deference to public opinion in the formulation and implementation of its foreign policy.

Another such example of the role of public opinion in foreign policy decision-making was the refusal of Babangida's administration to take the International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan in 1985. Ibrahim Babangida during his reign as the President of Nigeria adopted a populist regime and avowed human rights posture. To consolidate its populism, the regime at the initial adopted a participatory and public-sensitive approach to decision-making on crucial issues of national significance. This took the form of prefacing the adoption or introduction of critical policies with

open debate and public choice. The nationwide debate sponsored by Babangida's regime in September 1985 on whether the country should take the 2.5 billion US dollars IMF loan and its condition or reject the loan but adopt the conditions were predictably resolved in favour of the latter. By so doing, the nationalist pride of not being a beggar-like or dependent country and the feeling of resistance and independence were kept intact (Osaghae, 2002: 93).

Babangida himself put these in perspective in his address on the outcome of the debate:

*...After the consideration of all the opinions expressed by Nigerians ...government has come to the conclusion that for now, the path of honour... lies in discontinuing the negotiation, with the IMF for a support loan (quoted in Logunju et al., 1993:83).*

Since 1999, there has been a serious effort by the Nigerian government to allow inputs by its citizens in the pursuance of its foreign policy. But to what extent has public opinion been allowed in foreign policy decision-making in the new dispensation? This forms the crux of this study. Put differently, under what condition has public opinion impacted the foreign policy decision-making in Nigeria between 1999 and 2008?

#### Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of the study is to explore the role of public opinion in foreign policy making in Nigeria and the United States of America

The objectives of the study include:

- To establish the place of public opinion as a foreign policy determinant in the United States of America and Nigeria
- To ascertain the influence of leadership idiosyncrasies over foreign policy decision-making viz-a-viz public opinion.
- To explore and identify the extent to which the United States and Nigeria gave credence to public opinion in foreign policy decision-making.

### 3. Research Methodology

The researcher in this study relied on secondary data. The secondary data include archival materials, periodical publications, books, and the internet. Most of these materials were sourced through an extensive use of specialized library facilities of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA).

The research is descriptive and analytical. The analysis of the data is historical. It means tracing events as they unfold and situating them in the context of the various factors that shape their development. Several literatures abound on how public opinion plays a vital role in foreign policy decision making, while some scholars attempt to present the veracity of this assertion, for others, the reverse is the case, the researcher therefore tires to scrutinize the views of various scholars in order to establish the true position of this issue. In other to achieve this purpose, events in Nigeria and America history were traced and situated in the context of the various events that occurred in their development.

### 4. Literature Review

An impressive body of literature has accumulated highlighting the connection between foreign policy decision-making, foreign policy goals of a state and the general conceptualization of its objectives. It is also admitted in the literature that the level or degree of political awareness and participation of the governed determines the mechanisms and institutions available for the articulation and implementation of foreign policy.

Northedge (1968) in his book "The Foreign Policies of the Powers" contends that the foreign policy of a state is a product of environmental factors – both internal and external. By environmental factors, he means those stimulus-response connections that prompt foreign policy decision-makers to perceive and interpret an issue, decide on what course of action to take, and recommend such to an appropriate quarter for execution.

Adeniyi (2000) in his work, *Essays on Nigeria's Foreign Policy, Governance and International Security*, notes that there is a tendency to narrowly define the national interest, particularly among third-world leaders who see national interest as regime interest.

The role played by public opinion in politics has seemingly been fully explored and the various responses have often led some authors not only to minimize its role but even, as in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, to call into question the very existence of public opinion. It is often claimed that issues of public opinion are overwhelmingly related to domestic affairs, thus leading a pioneering author such as Tocqueville to conclude that foreign policy; even in democracies is often unencumbered by parliamentary scrutiny. However small the impact of public opinion

on foreign policy, public opinion is first and foremost a form of representation and is socially constructed. It has become an axiomatic truth that the foreign policy of a country is largely determined by its domestic structure. Many scholars and diplomats have accepted this view and they have attempted to demonstrate that the various constituent elements in the political system – the government, the political parties, pressure groups, the civil service, the political and bureaucratic elites, public opinion, and the press operating within the democratic process provided by the constitution, exert direct or indirect influence in shaping a country's foreign policy (Nweke, 1986:34). He also argued that sub-Saharan African countries have to constantly reorient their foreign policies to reflect or accommodate domestic and external vicissitude. Such orientation shifts have rendered sub-Saharan African country's foreign policies innately malleable and pliable, deprived of coherence or consistency (Adegboyega and Ambe-Uva, 2007). Since the independence decade of the 1960s, shifts in the orientation of foreign policies of sub-Saharan African countries have been profoundly evident.

According to Russett and Oneal (2000), there are four possible interpretations of the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy. The first is that the public is controlling. Second, is the opposite of the first namely, that public opinion is itself controlled. The third considers that the two groups (leaders and public opinion) are mutually irrelevant. Finally, there is the view that opinion and policies interact: each influences the other depending on the political and social context. Russett and Oneal (2000) believe that the last interpretation is the one that most accurately describes the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy decision-making. Scholars refer to the public opinion/policy nexus as reciprocal, and leaders try to educate or manipulate public opinion, but such decision-makers also are sensitive to the preferences of the public.

### 5. Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of this research, the theory of decision making was adopted because of the centrality of the theory to the main thrust of the research. To understand the role played by a national leader operating in a particular form of government in the foreign policy decision making problem of the state, it is important to understand the theory and approaches provided by the theory of decision making.

Decision making is simply the act of choosing among alternatives about which uncertainty exists. Easton (1953) describes decisions as the “output” of the

political system by which values are authoritatively collated within a society. Decision making theory has at its point of departure, the fact that decisions are made by leaders on behalf of the state. Decision making theory marks a significant shift from traditional political analysis in which writers sometimes have been prone to rectify or personify nation states as the basic actors in the international system.

Decision making is not only an intellectual process involving the insight, insight and creative sensitivity of policy makers, but it is also a matter of social and quasi-mechanical processes. The decision-making process is a function of many different factors relating to the behavior of individuals and of large organizational structures. The decision-making role is shaped by both the system and the individual's perception of it and the influence of personality in comparison with social structure will vary markedly from one system to another.

### 6. Discussion

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In a democratic state, policies are expected to be made by the government, however the citizens are expected to contribute meaningfully to the development of the states by providing useful ideas to the government in order to build a vibrant nation, in Nigeria, the reverse is the case, in 1985 Ibrahim Babangida during his reign as president of Nigeria took IMF loan with a disregard for public opinion. Furthermore, in United States of America, the former president Bill Clinton stated that he doesn't consider public opinion necessary when taking decisions concerning foreign policy making and he wished other presidents should not consider public opinion too. Therefore, in Nigeria and United States, the government does not adequate pay attention

to public opinion when making foreign policy decisions.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, public opinion plays a major role in foreign policy decision making, however advanced societies including Africa countries such as Nigeria have not allowed the public to have a say in foreign policy decision making and this has brought neglect of the citizens in foreign policy making. The inputs of the citizens are likely to bring about good foreign policy objectives both for advanced and underdeveloped countries round the world.

## 8. Recommendations.

1. United States of America and Nigeria should encourage the views and opinions of foreign policy decision making.
2. Nigeria leaders and the government of United States of America should be more proactive in the area of foreign policy decision making.
3. The government of Nigeria should chart a new course in the area of foreign policy objectives.
4. World leaders should encourage and promote citizens diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

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