

## PUBLIC POLICY AND PUBLIC OPINION

**JOHN O. ASOGWA, ph.D**  
**Department of Public Administration**  
**Enugu State University of Science and Technology,**  
**(ESUT) Enugu**  
**E-mail: [asogwajo@yahoo.com](mailto:asogwajo@yahoo.com)**  
**Phone: +2348037244396**

### **Abstract**

*The process of making public policies is often influenced by a number of factors and consideration, one of which is public opinion. But the relationship between public opinion and the public policy is a difficult one. This paper critically assessed the role of public opinion in the public policy making process in Nigeria, and while it is acknowledged that responsive and genuinely democratic governments are hugely sensitive to the opinions of the citizens on issues of public policy, it is argued that this is not the case in Nigeria. It is contended that the opinion of the Nigeria masses sometimes impinge on the public policy-making process, and the public policy churned out of this process are often designed to promote, and protect the class interest of those who control the Nigeria State. It is concluded that the extreme poverty and illiteracy which pervade the Nigeria society have emasculated and disempowered the majority of the people and made them inconsequential observers in the policymaking process in the country.*

**Key words:** public policy, public opinion, Nigeria and democratic government

### **Introduction**

There is no gain saying that public opinion directly and/or indirectly influences public policy and vice versa. Public opinion, which is the aggregate of public attitude or beliefs about government or politics, is considered to be the factor that guilds an indirect democratic government (Bianco et al, 2013). It is only through the approval of the public that a government gains the authority to function. Public opinions is though to develop from these main sources: Political socialization, education. Life experience, political party, the media and the government '(Bianco et al 2013). Public opinion is considered a dynamic part of the today government continually changing; it has the power and influence to shape the government in a new way even renegeing on an existing policy and making new policies.

Public policy, which is the principle guild to action taken by the government in a manner, consisted with law and institutional customs is no doubt many at times a product of public opinion. On the reverse, public policies sometimes shape the opinion of the

people, it should be noted that there are public policies on virtually everything, foreign policy, monetary/fiscal policy, economic policy, etc. The foreign policy a state towards her neighbor will to large extent define its opinion and relations to the state.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Discourse**

For the purpose of analytical tidiness, and in order to deepen the understanding of the major issues of interest in this paper, it is appropriate for a key concept used in the analysis to be properly defined and clarified. This would also help to highlight the contexts within which these concepts are to be understood. The theoretical basis of the paper also needs to be considered; and these are the issues with which this part of the paper is concerned.

### **Understanding Public Opinion**

Defining public opinion is a difficult task as it is a concept surrounded by a large amount of confusion and controversy. As V O Key Jr.(Anderson, 1997,p. 147) has reasoned, to speak with precision of public opinion is a task not unlike coming to grips with Holy Ghost. In the word of Rowe (Agi, 2006, p. 223)

Much confusion surrounded the concept of public opinion and while both the supporters and the opponents of a policy may agree that public opinion should prevail, it is probably that they have little awareness of the complexity of the phenomenon ... The confusion lies mainly In the implication that there is a public and that there it has an opinion

The above assertion is reinforced by the view that public opinion can be seen as a congeries of all sorts of discrepant notions, belief, fancies, prejudices, and aspirations. It is confused, inherent, amorphous, varying from day to day and week to week. But in the midst of this diversity and confusion every question as it rises into importance is subjected to a process of consolidation and clarification until there emerge and take definite shape certain views or set of disconnected views, each held and advocated in common bodies of citizens..(Bryce,1981, p. 571)

According to Idang (1973, p. 77-78) public opinion may simply be taken to mean any collection of opinions on specific political issues held or expressed by individuals and groups outside the government, and I this sense, public opinion may be synonymous with mass opinion, with the collective opinion of the voting public, or with any collection of individual opinions. It may be informed, mature and rational, but it may also be uninformed, prejudiced or emotional. Public opinion can also be referred to as the commonly held attitudes by the individuals or groups of individuals regarding specific issues, policy outputs of the government and it usually reflects peoples thinking or feelings on political subjects of local, state, national and international interest (Akindele, Obiyan, & Owoeye, 2000, p. 82)

There is no doubt that opinions are product of an individual's personality, social characteristics, and interests. But opinions are also shaped by institutional, political, and government forces that make it more likely that citizen will hold some beliefs and less likely that they will hold others. An opinion is normally the outcome of a process that takes place in the human mind and only human beings are equipped by nature with the means

which is the mind by which opinion can be formed. Public opinion can thus be regarded as the totality of the political orientations beliefs values and attitudes expressed by member of a group about current issues, actors, and event in their political environment. (Lowi, Ginsberg & Shepsle, 2004, p. 367: Ayeni-Akeke, 2008, p. 104).

The point has been made that public opinion can be defined operationally as those public perspectives or viewpoints on policy issues that public officials consider or taken into account in making decisions, and they may be expressed in many ways-letter to the editor and to public officials, meeting, public demonstrations, editorials, election results, legislators meeting with constituents, plebiscites and radio talk shows (Anderson, 1997, p. 146)

It has also been opined that while the term “public” means the people in a normative sense and its only intelligent part in an empirical sense, the term “opinion” refers to a belief which reflect their attitude and personality on a matter of great national importance, That is, public opinion is not the opinion of the whole population. It is a view of the capable segment of the population. It includes those who are intelligent enough to think rationally and then express their view in a detached manner (Johari, 2005, p. 596). And in the words of McKee (Agi, 2006, p. 225) by public opinion, we mean the end products of a “process of public discussion leading to the formation of one or more widely shared opinions as to the advisability or desirability of a public policy or mode of action by government”.

However, regardless of how public opinion is defined, it is generally agreed that at least four factors are involved in public opinion, namely:

- There must be an issue
- There must be a significant number of individuals who express opinions on the issue
- There must be some kind of consensus among at least some of these opinions; and
- This consensus must directly or indirectly exert influence (The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 1980, p. 210).

## **A NOTE ON PUBLIC POLICY**

Public policy has been conceptualized in various ways by different scholars and authors. That is, there is no unanimity among analysts as to what the correct definition of public policy should be. The controversy is over the boundary of what should constitute public policy: should it be posited at the level of decision making, intention, or action of government? (Egonmmwan, 1991, p. 1) argues that what may be called public policy is actually the equilibrium reached in the group struggle at any given moment, and that it represents a balance which the contending factions or groups constantly strive to tip in their favour. As he put it, the legislature referees the group struggle, ratifies the victories of the successful coalitions, and records the terms of surrenders, compromises and conquests in form of statutes. This view is supported by Grindle and Thomas (Jega, 2003, p. 23) who have noted that public policy results from the conflict, bargaining and coalition formation among a potentiality large number of societal groups, organized to protect or advance particular interest common to their members”.

According to Abdulsalami (Ezeani, 2006, p. 289), public policy refers to hard pattern of resource allocation represented by projects and programmes designed to respond to perceived public problems or challenges requiring government action for their solution. Implicit in this view is the fact that public is what government actually do and not what they intend doing. Thus, mere declaration of intentions, wishes, principle, or expression of desires cannot be regarded as public policy (Ezeani, 2006, p. 289). While Dunn regard public policy as “ a long series of more or less related choices, including decisions not to act, made by governmental bodies and officials, “ Waldt sees it as “the formal articulation, statement, or publication of a goal that the government intends to pursue in order to address a need or a problem (Jega, 2003, p. 22)

In his own analysis, Anderson (1997, p. 10) regards public policy as a relatively stable, purposive course of action followed by government in dealing with some problem or matter of concern. Few points can be gleaned from this definition. First, policy is linked to purposive or goal-oriented action rather than to random behavior or chance occurrences. Second, public policies consist of courses or pattern of action taken over time by governmental officials rather than their separate, discrete decisions. Third, public policies emerge in response to policy demands or those claims for action or inaction on some public issue made by other actors-private citizens, group representatives, or legislators and other public policy officials-upon government officials and agencies. Fourth, public policy involves what government actually do, not just what they intend to do or what they say they are going to do. Fifth, a public policy may be either positive or negative. Some form of overt governmental action may deal with a problem on which action is demanded (positive). Or governmental officials may decide to do nothing on some matter on which government involvement was sought (negative), Finally, public policy, at least in its positive form, is based on law and it authoritative (Anderson,1997, pp. 10-12)

From the foregoing, it is clear that public policy is distinct from other forms of policies and it emanates from the actions or proposed actions of governments. As Waldt (Jega, 2003, p. 23) has stated;

Public policy differs from the policy of the private organization in the sense that it is authoritative. This feature of public policy means that it can be enforced through instruments of coercion. Public policy involves the participation of government institutions and fragmented structures of semi-independent groups and organization through a complex system of formal and informal delegation of responsibility and control. At the very least, such policies must be processed, authorized, or ratified within the frame work of government. Thus, in order to be authoritative, a policy must be approved and promulgated by an institution that is authorized by statute or the constitution.

## **PUBLIC POLICY-MAKING PROCESS IN NIGERIA: WHAT ROLE FOR PUBLIC OPINIONS?**

The history of public policy-making in Nigeria clearly shows that the process has generally lacked the essential attribute of openness, inclusiveness, transparency, participation and consultation. “On the contrary, as Jega (2003, p. 30) aptly puts it,

... the process is essentially driven by officialdom, in the sense that government officials both the elected and unelected, arrogate to themselves the wisdom, prerogative and expertise of controlling and managing the policy making process, with little if any reference to, or interaction with, the overwhelming majority of the citizens. Thus, the process is not people-driven, transparent, consultative, or participatory, it is restrictive, closed, exclusive, insensitive, unresponsive and often irresponsible...

As Rosenau (Suberu, 1991, p. 83) has shown, the relationship or linkage between public opinion and policymaking involves three different but closely interrelated processes taking place at three distinct levels. At the lower level, we have the opinion-making process, which involves the formation and circulation of opinions and ideas on public issues through the action and interaction of various publics and agencies in the society. At the intermediate level, we have the opinion-submitting process through which the influential opinion groups and leaders attempt to seek governmental support for their preferred opinions on public policy matters. And at the highest level, we have the decision making itself. Here the institutionally designated decision-makers will attempt to formulate policies in the light of among other considerations, the opinion of the relevant publics.

There is no doubt that, as Suberu (1991, p. 83) has reasoned, the relationship between public opinion and policy-making is a complex one. According to him, most people are not usually informed about an issue and cannot therefore participate effectively in shaping public policy; the few that are informed about, and are interested in, an issue may hold divergent opinion and may not be able to convince the government to adopt their preferred position, and the government itself is not a disinterested actor in the opinion-policy process as it may take several steps to shape, organized or mobilize public opinion in support of its own policies.

Ideally, public policies are meant to benefit the citizens who could be considered as the core actors for some reasons. First, they constitute the human environment and their perceptions, values, preferences and demand constitute a major environmental influence on public policies. Second, the citizens make the demand for public policy and constitute the clients and targets. Third, the citizens contribute the resources for the provision of policy goods and services through public taxes and other means. Finally, the citizens have the power of electing, supporting or rejecting the major governmental actors and the policies they stand for (Ikelegbe, 1996, p. 100). However, the reality in Nigeria and other underdeveloped countries is different. While the resources used to fund government policies belong to the citizen, the opinions of these vital components of the society seldom influence the policy-making process. As Egonmwan (1991, p. 164) puts it

The situation is worse in developing countries where policy making is not made explicit but dictated. In most cases by men at the top due to low level of literacy of the masses, the weakness or ineffectiveness of the mass media (where they exist), centralization of authority and the ineffectiveness of interest-aggregating structures (where they exist) because of the thin of distinction between them and the ruling class...

It is generally believed that since sovereignty lies with the citizens, it is in the interest of the government to be guided by the opinions and preferences of the majority of the citizenry in the policy-making process. It is reasoned that public opinion is a significant

factor in the policymaking process as no government interested in its own survival can consistently and completely ignore the opinions of the publics (Suberu, 1991, p. 83). This, the argument goes, is because governments are expected to derive their mandates from the people and they can only retain their offices at the instance of the citizens. This implies that elected public officials who totally ignore public opinion and do not include it among their criteria for decision, should any be so foolish, are likely to find themselves out of luck at election time” (Anderson, 1997, pp. 147-148). Unfortunately, this analysis does not capture the situation in Nigeria.

In present-day Nigeria, for example, parties candidate for elections are not elected in transparent and credible primaries; rather, they are mostly imposed on the parties by few people who are variously described as “Godfathers” Stakeholders, Party Elders, and Caucus Leaders etc. The general elections themselves have never truly reflected the wishes of the masses. For instance, as pointed out elsewhere (Obo & Williams, 2007, p. 8) if the electoral process of 2003 was a sham, then what took place in April 2007, which people inappropriately describe as “elections” was a monumental fraud and a calamity to democracy.

It is also important to remember that Nigeria spent the greater part of its post-colonial years under brutal and extremely corrupt military dictatorships, and it is a known fact that these regime-types are hardly responsive to public views and opinions. By their very nature, they are unaccountable and intolerant of dissenting views. And under these regime,” the policy making process became increasingly restrictive, closed, arbitrary and authoritarian” (Jega, 2003, p. 32).

The point has to be made that due to the crippling poverty which permeates the Nigerian society, majority of the people do not only lack the resources and empowerment to effectively participate in the policy-making process, they are also more concerned and preoccupied with the struggle for survival. To them, expressing an opinion on public policy issues is regarded as an irrelevant and unimportant venture.

In one of his insightful essays, Eskor Toyo (2000, p. 47), while focusing on government economic policy-making, observes that Nigerian economic policy-making since 1960 has basically served parasitism and has been borne in a vehicle of misguided theories and prescriptions misguided when judged from the standpoints of basic social and national interests. And deploying the Marxist class analytical framework, Toyo (2000, p. 48) states:

In a class society, the main focus of economic policy is driving interest or interests of the ruling class or alliance of classes, and the angles from which policies are judged arise from the positions and interest of the various classes, strata or groups involved in sharing the national income in Nigeria, since 1960, this has also been the case.

It should be reiterated that Nigeria is a class and an exploitative society, and the Nigeria is a neocolonial one, firmly controlled and dominated by a few wealthy Nigerians and their foreign collaborators in whose interests the policy-making process in Nigeria is primed. The history of public policy-making in Nigeria is replete with cases which show the Nigerian government’s disregard for public opinion. A few examples would suffice. After overthrowing his boss in a military coup, General Ibrahim Babangida, in his quest for legitimacy and popular acceptability, presented Nigerians with the opportunity to express their views on the government’s economic policy and Nigeria’s relations with the

international monetary fund (IMF). The opinions of the people which were aggregated via what became known as the Great Debate were overwhelmingly opposed to the conditionality of the IMF and its policy prescriptions. But the Babangida's military junta ignored the opinions of the Nigerian people, accepted the IMF's conditions of economic subjugation. As Osundare (Obo, 2001, pp. 68-69) stated then,

Nigerians... decided overwhelmingly to reject the international monetary fund and its enslaving conditionality. However, in the end the people had their say; the government had its way. The international monetary fund was smuggled in through the backdoor in the guise of a contraption called the ... SAP... is anyone asking why Nigerians should have been so cunningly deceived by their rulers.

In the Fourth Republic, the Olusegun Obasanjo regime (1999-2007) increased the pump prices of petroleum products several times- in contradistinction to the opinion of the majority of the Nigerian people who were clearly opposed to that policy. Obasanjo never pretended to care about public opinions in the course of designing and implementing his mainly class-inspired and anti-people policies. On January 1, 2012, the regime of Good luck Jonathan elevated official wickedness and sadism to higher level by raising the price-per litre of petrol from sixty-five naira (65) to one hundred and forty-one naira (141), an increase of over a hundred percent. President Jonathan even arrogantly and tyrannically declared that the increment was irreversible. But the point that Nigerians were totally united in their opposition to and rejection of that policy was evident in the fact that millions of people thronged the streets of different cities of the country to protest against it. In fact, the country's economy was paralyzed for a week before the government grudgingly reduced the price from one hundred and forty-one naira (141) to ninety-seven naira (97) per litre, which still represented an increase of thirty-two naira (32).

It is instructive to note that the public opinion on the above-named issue was unequivocal: the price should not be increased. Indeed, the numerous revelations by probe panels-of massive corruption involving government officials and their friends in the management of the oil industry in Nigeria shows that the government's policy of increasing prices of petroleum products is designed to promote the interest of those who control the Nigerian state.

Another example is the government's policy of privatization of public enterprises in Nigeria which was formulated and implemented without any consideration for the desires, feelings, and opinions of the majority of the masses. And as most of its outcomes have shown, the policy tends to "accentuate the collective pauperization of majority of the people on the one hand, and enhance the continuous **bourgeoisification** of the privileged few, on the other". (Obo & Obo, 2013, p. 244)

## **CONCLUSION**

There is no doubt that it is proper "that governors shall seek out popular opinion, that they shall give it weight, if not the determinative voice in decision, and that the persons outside the government have a right to be heard" (Key, 2006, p. 230). But as pointed out earlier, in Nigeria, the governors hardly seek or accept popular opinion which is contrary to theirs-and Nigerians outside the government are rarely heard in the opinion-making process, three main groups of "publics" have been identified; they are

**The mass public:** this is the largest public, but the least capable of articulating coherent opinions on public policy or exercising any influence on governmental decisions or policies. Members of this public lack the informational and evaluative resources necessary to adequately comprehend the complexities of public policy

**The attentive or interested public:** this is smaller in size than the mass public, but it plays a far more decisive and consistent role in opinion formation and policy formulation. Members of this public are educated, informed, and highly motivated participants in public affairs and

**The opinion-elite or opinion-making public:** this group is made up of the confirmed or recognized opinion leaders in the country. These are those persons who, because of their social position, communication resources, organizational ability and political leverage, are able to exert a strong influence on public moods as well as public policy. The main difference between the last two publics is that although both are informed and interested in public affairs, the latter has the additional quality of having a more or less direct access to the centre of decision making in the society (Suberu, 1991, pp. 75-76)

It is appropriate to state that the majority of Nigerians belong to the mass public, and they do not have the requisite competence and financial resources to influence the policy-making process. Apart from the fact that different governments in Nigeria have always been unresponsive and insensitive to the people's yearnings, to the vast majority of the population (who are mostly poor and uneducated), the phrases "public opinion" and "policy-making" mean very little or nothing.



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