

Nigeria's National Assembly And Public Participation In The Law-Making Process: An Analysis Of the 8th Assembly (2015–2019)

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ABSTRACT: Public participation in the law-making process is a fundamental pillar of democratic governance, ensuring citizens have a voice in shaping the laws that govern them. Despite constitutional provisions and established mechanisms for public engagement, Nigeria's legislative process, particularly during the 8th National Assembly (2015–2019), has been characterised by low public involvement. This paper investigates the extent of public participation in Nigeria's law-making process with a focus on the 8th National Assembly. It examines the effectiveness of existing participatory channels, the administrative capacity of the legislature and the structural challenges hindering public engagement. The study is anchored on Deliberative Democracy Theory, which emphasises that legitimate law-making arises when citizens and legislators exchange reasoned public arguments. Using a mixed-methods approach combining questionnaire surveys administered to 380 respondents in the FCT and qualitative interviews with stakeholders from civil society, media and non-governmental organisations, the paper finds that while constitutional provisions for citizen participation exist, structural and institutional barriers including administrative inefficiencies, limited access to legislative information, digital inequality, and socio-political constraints continue to undermine meaningful engagement. The paper recommends institutional reforms to enhance transparency, public awareness, and accessibility in Nigeria's legislative processes.

Keywords: *Public Participation, Law-making, National Assembly, 8th Assembly, Nigeria, Deliberative Democracy.*

I. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The law-making process serves as the pathway by which the collective desires, needs, and aspirations of the people are formalised into binding rules. Through legislative deliberations, consultations, and approvals, public interests are carefully shaped into statutes that reflect societal values and priorities. As observed by Oni, Olanrewaju and Deinde-Adedeji (2019), the law-making process is a vital mechanism through which the will and aspirations of the people are translated into enforceable regulations and statutes that govern society. It is crucial for establishing a just and equitable society, protecting individual rights, promoting economic growth, and maintaining public order and safety (Audu, 2021). Public participation in this process is not merely desirable but constitutionally mandated, providing the bedrock for democratic legitimacy.

In Nigeria, citizen participation in the law-making process is primarily governed by the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended). The Constitution establishes the bicameral National Assembly consisting of the Senate and the House of Representatives, whose members are elected by Nigerian citizens. It guarantees freedom of expression and the right to petition the legislature, while also empowering the National Assembly to hold public hearings on important bills. These formal avenues, however, have not translated into substantive citizen engagement, particularly during the 8th Assembly (2015–2019), which was inaugurated on 9 June 2015 and dissolved on 9 June 2019.

The 8th Assembly represents a pivotal period in Nigeria's legislative history. It introduced 2,166 bills, passed 515, and recorded landmark legislation including the Not Too Young to Run Act and the North East Development Commission Act. Yet, concerns about transparency, public consultation, and the responsiveness of the legislature to citizens' inputs persisted throughout its tenure. The return to democracy in 1999 generated high expectations of active citizen participation in shaping laws, but the persistent gap between constitutional provisions and actual public engagement raises fundamental questions about the quality of Nigeria's participatory democracy.

The challenge of low public participation is not unique to Nigeria. Studies from other developing democracies reveal that participatory mechanisms often exist on paper without being operationalised effectively. However, within the Nigerian context, the structural, institutional, and socio-economic factors that inhibit citizen engagement are particularly pronounced. It is against this background that this paper investigates the

extent, effectiveness, and challenges of public participation in the law-making process of the 8th National Assembly.

II. CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

Conceptualising Public Participation

Kamlage and Nanz (2017) defined public participation as the various channels through which members of the general public voice their opinions and, ideally, exercise some level of influence over a variety of political, economic, and managerial decisions. For De Piccoli and Rollero (2010), any process that directly involves the public in decision-making and considers all public input qualifies as public participation. Denhardt and Denhardt (2015) further conceptualised participation as an ongoing activity — a series of actions carried out by a sponsoring organisation to both inform the public and obtain input throughout the lifecycle of a project or policy.

According to Giannetti (2017), public participation is an essential component of democratic societies, enabling citizens to communicate preferences, influence decision-making, and hold their representatives accountable. From these conceptualisations, public participation may be understood as the active engagement of citizens through various channels to express views and influence decisions on political, economic, and social matters. It is structured, ongoing, and fundamental to democratic governance because it fosters accountability, responsiveness, and shared governance (Fung, 2015).

Conceptualising Law-making

Lawmaking refers to the procedural and deliberative process involved in the creation and formulation of legislation. In its most fundamental form, it serves as the foundation of governance (Sanyaolu, Sanyaolu & Segun, 2017). In contemporary democratic societies, legislative bodies operating at national, regional, and local levels are responsible for formulating laws that compel compliance and reflect collective public interests (Mikva, Lane, Gerhardt & Hemel, 2022). The lawmaking process is intricate and multifaceted, involving stages of conceptualisation, drafting, committee review, deliberation, amendment, and executive assent. As Zander (2015) observed, lawmaking transforms an initial idea into a legally binding statute, drawing from multiple sources including legislation, executive orders, judicial precedents, and legal conventions. The legitimacy and quality of laws produced through this process are directly influenced by the degree to which the public is involved at critical stages of deliberation.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Deliberative Democracy Theory, which holds that legitimate law-making arises from public deliberation in which citizens and their representatives exchange reasoned arguments in a public sphere. Habermas (1996), one of the leading proponents of this theory, argued that democratic legitimacy is achieved not merely by majority vote, but through discursive processes in which all affected parties have the opportunity to present and contest reasons. For Cohen (1989), deliberative democracy emphasises that decisions are legitimate only when they emerge from free and reasoned deliberation among participants who are bound by no authority other than the force of better argument.

Applied to the Nigerian legislative context, Deliberative Democracy Theory provides the analytical lens for interrogating the extent to which the 8th National Assembly created genuine spaces for public reasoning and deliberation. Where public hearings are convened but citizens' contributions are ignored, where legislative language alienates ordinary Nigerians, and where feedback mechanisms are absent, the deliberative democratic ideal is fundamentally undermined. The theory thus informs both the diagnosis of failure and the prescriptions for reform advanced in this paper.

IV. MECHANISMS AND CHANNELS FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE NIGERIAN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) establishes several formal avenues for citizen participation in the law-making process. These include: electoral participation in the selection of legislators; public hearings organised by legislative committees on proposed legislation; the right of citizens and civil society organisations to submit petitions to the National Assembly; and the constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression, which enables public advocacy and commentary on proposed legislation. Beyond these constitutional mechanisms, the National Assembly has institutionalised additional participatory channels including town hall meetings, constituency outreach programmes, digital and social media platforms, traditional media broadcasts of plenary and committee proceedings, and engagement with civil society organisations and professional bodies. The 8th Assembly also experimented with online consultation portals and e-participation initiatives, reflecting a broader global trend toward technology-enhanced public engagement (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010).

Notwithstanding these formal structures, empirical evidence consistently demonstrates a significant gap between the existence of participatory mechanisms and their effective utilisation. Audu (2021) documented that public hearings in the National Assembly are often poorly publicised, inadequately funded, and attended by a narrow stratum of urban elites and civil society activists rather than the broad citizenry whose interests are at stake. Similarly, Daudu and Fagbadebo (2019) found that public hearings frequently function as procedural formalities rather than genuine consultative exercises, with citizen contributions rarely incorporated into final legislative outcomes.

V. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative survey methods with qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive analysis of public participation in the law-making process of the 8th National Assembly. The quantitative strand involved the systematic administration of structured questionnaires to 384 respondents drawn from the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, using stratified purposive sampling. A retrieval rate of 98.96% (380 questionnaires) was recorded, providing a robust dataset for analysis.

Questionnaire items were designed using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, enabling numerical coding and statistical analysis. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and linear regression analysis conducted with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The qualitative strand involved semi-structured interviews with representatives from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), and media organisations, whose responses were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis to complement and contextualise the quantitative findings. Content validity of the instruments was ensured through review by supervisors and field experts, while internal consistency was established using Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Analysis. The study was conducted in accordance with standard ethical guidelines, including informed consent, confidentiality of respondents, and voluntary participation.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	172	45.3
	Female	208	54.7
	Total	380	100.0
Age	18–20 years	126	33.2
	21–30 years	122	32.1
	31 years and above	132	34.7
	Total	380	100.0
Education	No formal education	50	13.5
	Primary	150	39.5
	Secondary	120	31.6
	Tertiary	60	15.8
	Total	380	100.0
Geopolitical Zone	Northwest	75	19.7
	Northeast	50	13.2
	Northcentral	65	17.1
	Southwest	65	17.1
	Southeast	50	13.2
	Southsouth	75	19.7
	Total	380	100.0

Source: Field Survey (2022)

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 380 respondents. Female respondents constituted the majority at 54.7% (208), while males accounted for 45.3% (172), broadly reflecting Nigeria's population gender distribution. The age distribution was fairly even, with respondents aged 31 years and above constituting 34.7%, followed by the 18–20 age group at 33.2%, and the 21–30 cohort at 32.1%. In terms of educational attainment, 39.5% had primary education, 31.6% secondary, 15.8% tertiary, and 13.5% had no formal education. All six geopolitical zones were represented, with the Northwest and Southsouth zones each contributing 19.7% of respondents, ensuring geographic diversity in the sample.

VI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Level of Public Participation in the Law-making Process of the 8th National Assembly

Table 2: Level of Public Participation in the Law-making Process of the 8th Assembly

S/N	Statements	SA F	SA %	A F	A %	D F	D %	SD F	SD %	Total
1	The 8th National Assembly actively sought public input in the formulation of legislative proposals	25	6.6	28	7.4	93	25.0	234	51.6	380
2	The 8th National Assembly effectively communicated proposed legislation to the public for feedback	15	3.9	19	5.0	110	29.0	236	62.1	380
3	The 8th National Assembly was responsive to public concerns and feedback during the law-making process	20	5.3	18	4.7	139	37.0	244	64.2	380
4	The 8th National Assembly was transparent in the law-making process	19	5.0	22	6.0	155	40.8	182	47.9	380
5	Overall, the 8th National Assembly was inclusive in its law-making process	9	2.4	31	8.2	166	43.7	174	45.8	380

Source: Field Survey (2022). SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree; F = Frequency

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics on the extent of public participation in the law-making process of the 8th Assembly. The findings reveal a troubling narrative of low and ineffective public engagement. On the first statement — whether the 8th Assembly actively sought public input in legislative proposals — a combined 61.6% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed, while only 14% agreed or strongly agreed. Similarly, 67.1% of respondents disagreed that the Assembly effectively communicated proposed legislation to the public, and 69.5% held that the Assembly was unresponsive to public concerns. On transparency, 68.7% disagreed that the legislative process was transparent, and 65.5% considered the Assembly insufficiently inclusive in its law-making.

These findings are consistent with the propositions of this study that there is no significant public involvement in the law-making process of the 8th National Assembly. Linear regression analysis confirmed this position, with the overall model showing that factors of public input, communication, responsiveness, transparency, and inclusivity were statistically insignificant in influencing the outcome variable of public participation. The null proposition was therefore accepted. This aligns with Audu (2021) and Tullah (2014), who documented the persistence of exclusionary legislative cultures in Nigerian assemblies despite constitutional mandates for engagement.

Effectiveness of Channels for Public Participation in the 8th National Assembly

The study examined five principal channels: traditional media (television, radio, newspapers), digital platforms and social media, public hearings and town hall meetings, citizen engagement initiatives (surveys, feedback forms), and direct engagement with elected representatives through constituency outreach. Regression analysis revealed that none of these channels had a statistically significant positive impact on public participation in the law-making process.

Traditional media, while widely accessible, operated primarily as a one-way information broadcast mechanism rather than as a platform for interactive dialogue between legislators and citizens. NGO respondents noted that radio and television broadcasts of plenary sessions did not enable citizens to respond or contribute to legislative debate. Digital platforms and social media, despite their transformative potential, were severely constrained by Nigeria's pronounced digital divide. As Ragnedda and Muschert (2020) observed, technological inequalities marginalise already disadvantaged groups, and this study's findings confirm that rural communities were largely excluded from digital engagement with the legislature due to limited internet access and low digital literacy.

Public hearings, which represent the most direct formal channel for citizen input, were consistently described by stakeholders as poorly publicised, inadequately resourced, and tokenistic. CSO respondents characterised them as "performative rather than consultative" — forums conducted to satisfy procedural requirements rather than to genuinely shape legislative outcomes. This corroborates Voß and Amelung's (2016) finding that participatory processes lacking genuine inclusivity undermine public trust and deter future engagement. Constituency outreach programmes similarly suffered from low visibility and weak institutionalisation, with constituents rarely informed of legislative activities until after key decisions had been made.

Administrative Capacity of the 8th National Assembly for Public Participation

The administrative capacity of a legislature — encompassing its human resources, technical infrastructure, financial allocation, and organisational procedures for public engagement — is a critical determinant of the quality of public participation (Pegan, 2015; Sudhipongpracha, 2023). This study assessed administrative capacity in terms of four dimensions: clarity and accessibility of legislative information; responsiveness of legislators to public input; utilisation of technology for citizen engagement; and citizen sensitisation and outreach initiatives.

Regression analysis revealed that none of the four dimensions had a statistically significant positive impact on public participation, leading to the acceptance of the proposition that the administrative capacity of the 8th National Assembly was inadequate for public participation. Qualitative evidence from CSO and NGO respondents reinforced this conclusion. Legislative documents were described as complex, jargon-heavy, and inaccessible to ordinary citizens, effectively excluding the majority of the Nigerian public from meaningful engagement. The absence of plain-language summaries, multilingual communication, and effective feedback mechanisms compounded this exclusion.

Media respondents also noted that restricted access to certain legislative sessions and committee proceedings significantly diminished transparency, undermining the ability of journalists to serve as conduits between the legislature and the public. As Madanipour (2022) highlighted, accessible and transparent communication is indispensable for fostering a vibrant public sphere in which citizens can engage meaningfully with legislative processes.

VII. CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE LAW-MAKING PROCESS

The study identified five systemic challenges that significantly hinder public participation in the Nigerian National Assembly's law-making process. Regression analysis confirmed that all five variables were statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

First, lack of awareness and information ($B = 0.250$, $\text{Beta} = 0.321$, $p = 0.002$) significantly reduces citizens' ability to engage with the legislative process. The majority of Nigerians — particularly in rural and under-served communities — are unaware of the timing, substance, or procedural requirements for participation in legislative activities. This is compounded by the legislature's failure to proactively disseminate legislative information in accessible formats and languages.

Second, the complexity and technicality of legislative language and procedures ($B = 0.300$, $\text{Beta} = 0.240$, $p < 0.001$) constitute a major barrier. Parliamentary procedures, Standing Orders, and legislative drafting conventions employ specialised terminology that alienates ordinary citizens and deters engagement, even where the motivation to participate exists.

Third, socio-economic disparities and inequalities ($B = 0.350$, $\text{Beta} = 0.350$, $p < 0.001$) significantly limit the capacity of marginalised populations to engage in public policy and legislative processes. The costs of travel to the Federal Capital Territory, limited access to internet and digital devices, and the opportunity cost of participation for citizens engaged in subsistence economic activities collectively exclude a large proportion of the Nigerian public from legislative engagement.

Fourth, political polarisation and partisan interests ($B = 0.280$, $\text{Beta} = 0.260$, $p = 0.001$) hinder participation by transforming legislative discourse into partisan contests that alienate non-aligned citizens and discourage contributions from independent civil society actors.

Fifth, and most significantly, lack of transparency, accountability, and public trust ($B = 0.400$, $\text{Beta} = 0.370$, $p < 0.001$) emerges as the dominant challenge. When citizens perceive the legislative process as opaque, unaccountable, or captured by elite interests, they disengage. The perception that public contributions are

ignored and that legislative decisions are predetermined compounds this trust deficit and creates a self-reinforcing cycle of disengagement and institutional unresponsiveness.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has demonstrated that public participation in the law-making process of Nigeria's 8th National Assembly was significantly inadequate. Despite constitutional provisions establishing mechanisms for citizen engagement, structural and institutional barriers — including ineffective channels, inadequate administrative capacity, and systemic challenges of awareness, complexity, inequality, polarisation, and trust deficits — consistently undermined meaningful public involvement. The findings validate all four propositions of the study, confirming that the 8th National Assembly failed to achieve the participatory democratic ideal as theorised by Deliberative Democracy Theory.

The paper concludes that the quality of Nigeria's democratic governance is directly imperilled by this failure of legislative inclusion. Laws made without substantive citizen input lack the democratic legitimacy and social acceptability necessary for effective implementation. As Nigeria continues to consolidate its democratic institutions, strengthening public participation in the legislative process must be treated as a strategic governance priority, not a procedural afterthought.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are advanced:

The National Assembly should adopt more inclusive and transparent mechanisms for public participation. Public hearings must be well-publicised, adequately funded, and genuinely focused on incorporating citizen input into legislative decisions rather than fulfilling procedural requirements.

Legislative language and procedures should be simplified, with plain-language summaries of proposed bills made available in major Nigerian languages to ensure broad citizen access. The National Assembly's website and public communications should be redesigned around citizen accessibility rather than institutional formality.

Investments in internet infrastructure and digital literacy programmes are essential, particularly in rural and underserved areas, to enable broader participation through digital platforms and reduce the exclusion of marginalised groups from the legislative process.

Traditional and digital media should be mobilised more effectively to foster interactive dialogue between citizens and lawmakers through televised debates, town hall-style discussions, and interactive radio programmes that enable direct engagement.

Clear, transparent, and publicly accessible systems should be implemented to demonstrate how citizen input influences legislative outcomes. Citizens must be able to trace the journey from their public submission to the final legislative product in order for participatory mechanisms to build, rather than erode, public trust.

The administrative capacity of the National Assembly should be strengthened through adequate funding, training of legislative staff in public engagement, and the appointment of dedicated citizen-liaison officers within committees to ensure that participation is institutionalised rather than ad hoc.

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