
**FROM PUBLIC DISCOURSE TO POLICY CHANGE: A
DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION STUDY OF CITIZENS'
INFLUENCE ON NIGERIA'S 2026 ELECTORAL ACT
AMENDMENT**

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Abstract

Credible electoral processes are fundamental to democratic governance, yet Nigeria's electoral system continues to be bedeviled by transparency issues, lack of public trust, technological shortcomings, and compliance with electoral laws. This study examined the influence of public discourse on the amendment of the 2026 Electoral Act in Nigeria, with special focus on citizen participation, the role of civil society and the media, legislative decision-making, and the relevance of development communication. The study was anchored on Participatory Communication and Individual Differences theories and adopted the survey research design. The population comprised residents of Enugu Metropolis, from which a sample of 385 respondents was drawn. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics. Findings revealed that public discourse contributed substantially to citizens' awareness and participation in debates surrounding the electoral reform, with social media emerging as a major channel of political information and engagement. The study also found that citizens perceived their opinions as having some influence on legislative deliberations, while stakeholder consultations were considered important in promoting accountability and trust. However, concerns were identified regarding the adequacy of public understanding, balanced media coverage, and the effectiveness of strategic communication in building trust. The study concludes that public discourse and participatory communication are important mechanisms for strengthening citizen engagement and democratic reforms. It recommends greater

inclusiveness, transparent communication, balanced media reporting, and sustained stakeholder engagement in future electoral reform processes.

Keywords: Public Discourse; Electoral Reform; Citizen Participation; Development Communication; Electoral Act 2026.

Introduction

Democracy can be understood as a system of government in which political authority is derived from the people, exercised through the people, and directed toward serving the interests of the people (Epstein, 2011). It is an administration acting in accordance with the desires of the people (Council of Europe, 2005). As a set of ideals and guidelines that should be adhered to for increased participation, equality, security, and human development, the United Nations (UN) supports democratic governance, knowing fully well that democracy offers an atmosphere that upholds Fundamental Human Rights and allows people to freely express their opinions unhindered (Epueke, 2024). Election is the cornerstone of every democracy because it allows citizens the opportunity and constitutional right to elect or remove their leaders through a democratic process. It gives citizens the power to influence outcomes of elections (Blais, 2019). In several democracies of the world, elections are not perfect. In most case, elections are characterized by electoral misconducts such as voter inducement, violence, fake news, widespread rigging, harassment of electorates and prolonged post-election court cases (Birch, 2020).

In Nigeria, the case is not different. The nation is confronted with several electoral challenges stemming from the lack of trust in electoral commissions to conduct free, fair and credible elections, to other factors such as culture, ethnicity and religion. Nigeria gained independence from the British empire in 1960. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the National Assembly have reformed election laws and regulations before and after every general election. These amendments are designed to address the flaws

experienced in previous elections (Itodo, 2024).

However, as more reforms are introduced in the electoral process, efforts by political actors to circumvent the reform also intensify. The 2023 election produced the most politically diverse National Assembly, and several electoral upsets were recorded across states. Notwithstanding, the election failed to meet public expectations due to several reasons ranging from operational inefficiencies, technological challenges, voter suppression, and non-compliance with electoral laws, amongst others. These flaws recorded in the 2023 general elections necessitated the call from Nigerians for the tenth National Assembly to carry out a thorough and holistic amendment of the laws guiding the electoral system of the country. Needless to emphasise that public discourse has increasingly become a critical driver of policy reform. This reform cut across different sectors ranging from education, health, agriculture, economic and electoral reforms. Therefore, the amendment of Nigeria's 2026 Electoral Act represents a significant case where citizen engagement intersected with legislative processes.

The 2026 Electoral Act Amendment was as a result of controversies, public protests, and intense debates about electoral transparency and credibility. Nigeria's electoral system has historically been plagued by irregularities such as vote manipulation, poor result collation, and lack of transparency. Reforms have often followed public dissatisfaction and advocacy. The 2026 Electoral Act introduced provisions such as biometric accreditation systems and openness in voting procedures. However, contentious issues—particularly real-time electronic transmission of results, sparked nationwide debates. This study explores how public discourse and pressure from the public influenced the amendment process, situating the analysis within development communication frameworks.

Statement of the Problem

Credible elections are essential for democratic governance, public trust, and political stability. However, despite several electoral reforms

introduced since Nigeria's return to democracy, the country's electoral process continues to face challenges such as electoral violence, voter suppression, manipulation of results, technological failures, and lack of transparency, thus weakening citizens' confidence in the electoral system. The controversies that trailed the 2023 general elections, particularly issues surrounding electronic transmission of results and non-compliance with electoral laws, intensified public demands for comprehensive electoral reforms. Consequently, the amendment of the 2026 Electoral Act became a major subject of national debate, attracting widespread reactions from citizens, civil society groups, the media, and political stakeholders. Although public discourse played a visible role during the amendment process, there is limited empirical attention on how public opinion and citizen engagement influenced the legislative decisions that shaped the 2026 Electoral Act Amendment. This study therefore seeks to examine the influence of public discourse on the amendment process, with a view to understanding the role of development communication in promoting democratic reforms and citizen participation in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

1. Examine the role of public discourse in shaping debates surrounding the 2026 Electoral Act Amendment in Nigeria
2. Determine the extent to which citizens, civil society organisations and the media influenced the amendment process
3. Assess the impact of public engagement on legislative decisions regarding electoral reforms in Nigeria
4. Explore the relevance of development communication in promoting democratic participation and electoral accountability during the amendment process

Research Questions

1. What role does public discourse play in shaping debates surrounding the 2026 Electoral Act Amendment in Nigeria?

2. To what extent did citizens, civil society organisations and the media influence the 2026 Electoral Act amendment process?
3. What impact did public engagement have on legislative decisions regarding electoral reforms in Nigeria?
4. How relevant is development communication in promoting democratic participation and electoral accountability during the 2026 Electoral Act amendment process?

Review of Related Literature

Development Communication and Democracy

Development Communication (DevCom) emphasizes participatory processes where citizens engage in decision-making (Servaes, 2008). It shifts from top-down information dissemination to inclusive dialogue. This implies that development communication, which usually comes in form of public discourse, is crucial in conscientizing, enlightening and educating the masses of the government's policies. Without this kind of communication, it will be practically difficult, if not impossible, for government to get the support of the citizens implement any of its policies. Development communication in Nigeria has increasingly moved beyond conventional top-down approaches to embrace participatory and dialogic models that promote citizen involvement, community empowerment, and social change (Servaes, 2008; Ibuot et al., 2021). The relationship between development communication and democracy is symbiotic: while it provides the tools and processes for social change, a democratic framework ensures the freedom and participation for those processes to be effective. In the last decade (2016-2026), scholarly focus has shifted from seeing communication as a mere support for policy change to viewing it as a fundamental requirement for democratic consolidation and citizen agency.

Public Opinion and Electoral Reform in Nigeria

The importance of electoral governance, defined as the wider set of activities that creates and maintains the broad institutional framework in

which voting and electoral competition take place (Mozaffar & Schedler 2002), to democratic transition and consolidation cannot be overemphasised. This explains why the role of public opinion in shaping electoral reforms has gained increasing scholarly attention. Evidence suggests that citizen dissatisfaction with electoral outcomes often triggers calls for reform, which are amplified through media and civil society advocacy. In Nigeria, public demand for credible elections has consistently influenced the introduction of new electoral measures, particularly those aimed at enhancing transparency. For instance, the 2022 Electoral Act was widely welcomed by citizens due to its provisions for technological innovation, including real-time result transmission and improved voter accreditation systems. However, the gap between public expectations and actual electoral outcomes has also fueled further public discourse and demands for additional reforms (Itodo, 2025).

Recent developments surrounding the 2026 Electoral Act amendment illustrate the growing power of public opinion. Reports indicate that public advocacy by civil society organisations and other stakeholders has contributed to sustained demands for electoral reforms, including the statutory provision for real-time electronic transmission of election results (Itodo, 2025). This suggests a shift from elite-driven policymaking to a more participatory model where citizen voices increasingly shape legislative outcomes.

2026 Electoral Act Amendment

The Electoral Act 2026 repealed and re-enacted aspects of the Electoral Act 2022 in order to create a more comprehensive framework for the conduct of elections in Nigeria. One of the most notable changes involves statutory recognition of electronic transmission of election results through the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV). Section 60(3) reportedly mandates the electronic transmission of polling unit results, thereby reducing the discretionary powers previously exercised by INEC under the 2022 Act (Okeke & Tosu, 2026).

The amendment also introduced reforms relating to Political party primaries and internal democracy; Electoral dispute resolution; Campaign finance regulation; Technological integration in election administration; Electoral offences and penalties; and Judicial intervention in electoral matters (Opeyemi, 2026). The National Assembly described these reforms as necessary for improving transparency, institutional independence, and electoral accountability ahead of the 2027 elections (Shittu, 2026). Okeke & Ugwuezi (2026) hint that major conceptual issue within the amendment concerns electronic transmission of election results. The controversy reflects broader debates about technology and democratic accountability in emerging democracies. Advocates argue that mandatory real-time electronic transmission reduces opportunities for manipulation during manual collation.

The statutory recognition and expanded use of the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) reflect continuing efforts to address concerns about transparency and credibility in Nigeria's electoral process. The deployment of electoral technologies such as BVAS and IReV in the 2023 elections was intended to improve the credibility of electoral processes by strengthening transparency and reducing opportunities for human manipulation (Agunyai, 2026).

Empirical review

Ekwujuru & Obi-Emeruwa, (2026) in their study Citizens' Participation in Elections in Nigeria: To What Extent Do Citizens Participation Influence Elections Outcomes in Nigeria examined the relationship between citizens' participation and election outcomes in Nigeria, aiming to determine the extent to which citizens' engagement affects electoral results. Finding revealed a positive correlation between citizens' participation and its influence in election outcomes in Nigeria. While Ekwujuru & Obi-Emeruwa, (2026) dealt with the outcome of election results, the current study deals with citizen influence on Nigeria's 2026 electoral act

amendment.

Epueke, (2024) did an evaluation of Public Opinion Mainstreaming in the Drafting and Passage of Legislative Bills in Enugu State, critically examined how public opinion has been mainstreamed in the process of lawmaking in Enugu State. The study used survey research design and was anchored on Participatory Democracy Theory and Two-Way Communication Model. Finding from the study revealed that public opinion plays a crucial role in the formulation of public policy and legislation with the added benefit that opinion can be expressed in favour of or against legislation. While the study under review is focused on public opinion mainstreaming, the current study intends to highlight the influence of Nigeria citizen in the amendment of 2026 electoral act, which was undertaken by the National Assembly. However, both studies deal with public opinion.

Ukwu et al, (2025) in their study Electoral Reform and Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria, examined the extent to which electoral reforms have contributed to establishing a stable democratic process capable of addressing electoral challenges, sustaining free and fair elections and uphold rule of law. Finding revealed that Nigerian electoral political system continues to suffer from flawed electoral principles, ethnic-based politics and resistance from political elite to transparent electoral processes. It is instructive that both the study under review and the current study deal with electoral reforms. While Ukwu et al deals with how electoral reform has helped to sustain democracy in Nigeria, the current study deals with the influence of the citizen in the 2026 electoral act amendment.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Participatory communication and Individual differences theories. The participatory communication theory, propounded by Paulo Freire in 1960s, posited that communication should be a horizontal, dialogic process that empowers stakeholders and communities to actively engage in decision-making and development, rather than

receiving information top-down.

Wogu (2008) argues that individual differences significantly influence perception, as individuals within the same social environment possess distinct psychological characteristics and experiences. These differences shape how people interpret and respond to news, information, social constructs, issues, situations, and other social phenomena. Participatory communication and individual differences were relevant to this study because the research sought to determine the influence of the citizens on the recent 2026 electoral act amendment.

Methodology

Survey method was used in this study and instrument of data collection was questionnaire. The population for this study is the residents of the Enugu metropolis. The population of residents of Enugu Metropolis as at 2006 census is 722,664. However, to determine the current population in 2025; the researcher used the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) 3.2% growth rate in Nigeria. The projection formula is as follows:

$$N_0 = (1 + K \times n) = N_1$$

$$722,664 = (1 + 0.032 \times 19) = 439,380$$

Then, estimated population for residents of Enugu metropolis is 439,380 + 722,664 = 1,162,043. Using Australian sample size calculator, a sample size of 385 was derived. To ensure the reliability of the research instrument, the researcher did both pretest and retest but found no disparity. The population was clustered into the three Local Government Areas that make up the metropolis. Purposive sampling was used to choose the Local Government Area, while random sampling was used to select one community from each Local Government Area where the questionnaires were distributed.

Presentation of Data

Here, data generated from the field using 385 copies of the questionnaire that were dully filled and returned were used for the analysis.

Role of Public Discourse in Shaping Debates on the 2026 Electoral Act Amendment

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD
1	I am aware of public discussions surrounding the 2026 electoral act amendment	69 19.9%	116 33.6%	90 26%	71 20.5%
2	Social media played a key role in informing citizens about the amendment	126 36.4%	163 47.1%	36 10.4%	21 6.1%
3	Public discourse encouraged citizens to participate in electoral reform debates.	84 24.3%	161 46.5%	74 21.4%	27 7.8%
4	Public debates increased my understanding of the electoral reforms	60 17.3%	48 13.9%	168 48.6%	70 20.2%
5	Discussions surrounding the amendment reflected the concerns of ordinary Nigerians.	91 26.3%	103 29.8%	66 19.1%	86 24.8%

Influence of Citizens, Civil Society Organisations, and the Media

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD
1	Citizens actively participated in discussions concerning the amendment process.	100 28.9%	128 37%	56 16.2%	62 17.9%
2	Media coverage increased transparency during the amendment process.	65 18.8%	80 23.1%	108 31.2%	92 26.9%
3	Journalists and media organisations provided balanced information about the amendment.	42 12.1%	50 14.5%	136 39.3%	118 34.1%
4	Citizens' opinions were adequately considered during the amendment process.	132 38.2%	98 28.3%	76 22%	40 11.6%

Impact of Public Engagement on Legislative Decisions

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD
1	National Assembly considered public input before making decisions on the amendment.	98 28.3%	132 38.2%	91 26.3%	25 7.2%
2	Public engagement improved the quality of the Electoral Act Amendment.	64 18.5%	68 19%	106 30.6%	108 31.2%
3	Stakeholder consultations promoted accountability in the amendment process.	162 46.8%	94 27.1%	60 17.3%	30 8.8%
4	Public participation increased trust in the electoral reform process.	146 42.2%	100 28.9%	56 16.2%	44 12.7%
5	Legislative decisions reflected the views expressed by the public.				

Role of development communication in the 2026 Electoral Act Amendment

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD
1	Communication strategies helped bridge the gap between citizens and lawmakers	69 19.9%	116 33.6%	90 26%	71 20.5%
2	Development communication tools enhanced public engagement in the reform process.	126 36.4%	163 47.1%	36 10.4%	21 6.1%
3	Information dissemination improved transparency in the amendment process	84 24.3%	161 46.5%	74 21.4%	27 7.8%
4	Strategic communication increased citizen trust in electoral reforms	60 17.3%	48 13.9%	168 48.6%	70 20.2%
5	Development communication facilitated inclusive participation in policymaking	91 26.3%	103 29.8%	66 19.1%	86 24.8%

Discussion of Findings

The study reveal that public discourse played a significant role in shaping debates surrounding the 2026 Electoral Act Amendment in Nigeria. Responses obtained from participants indicate that discussions across social, political, and media platforms contributed to awareness creation, citizen participation, and public engagement in the electoral reform process. No wonder, Oke and Awoyemi (2024), argue that effective communication improves citizens' access to information and support public understanding of governance reforms.

It showed that a considerable number of respondents were aware of public discussions concerning the amendment, as 19.9% strongly agreed and 33.6% agreed with the statement. This implies that debates surrounding the amendment gained substantial public attention. However, the proportion of respondents who disagreed (26%) and strongly disagreed (20.5%) suggests that awareness was not evenly distributed among citizens. This may be attributed to limited access to information in some areas or inadequate communication strategies by stakeholders.

The findings further revealed that social media played a major role in informing citizens about the amendment process. Majority of respondents agreed that social media significantly contributed to public enlightenment.

This can be attested by the growing influence of digital platforms in political communication and democratic participation in Nigeria. In fact, social media platforms such as Facebook, X, and WhatsApp have become important channels for political mobilisation, dissemination of information, and engagement in national debates. Okunnu and Lawal (2026), however, disagreed that social media enhanced citizen participation. They said although digital platforms lowered barriers to political participation and amplified citizens' voices in Nigeria, it has also increased declined democratic trust. This suggests that participation through social media does not necessarily translate into greater confidence in democratic institutions.

In addition, the study established that public discourse encouraged citizens to participate in electoral reform debates. About 24.3% strongly agreed and 46.5% agreed that discussions surrounding the amendment motivated public involvement. This finding demonstrates that open dialogue creates opportunities for citizens to express opinions and contribute to governance processes. Public engagement in democratic reforms is essential because it strengthens inclusiveness and promotes participatory democracy. This finding suggests a distinction between being consulted and actually influencing policy outcomes. It partly agrees with Audu (2021), who identified institutional and participatory challenges that can limit the effectiveness of public hearings in Nigeria. The implication is that the existence of consultation mechanisms does not necessarily guarantee that citizens' contributions will substantially alter legislative decisions.

Regarding the influence of citizens, civil society organisations, and the media, the study found that a majority of respondents believed that citizens' opinions were considered during the amendment process and that the National Assembly considered public feedback before making decisions. The agrees with Audu (2021), whose study of public hearings in Nigeria found that citizen participation through legislative public hearings could

contribute to sound policy decisions. However, Audu also identified mistrust, inadequate civic education and irregular public hearings as barriers to effective participation. Thus, while the present finding indicates a perceived link between citizens' views and legislative decision-making, it also suggests that such influence may be constrained by institutional and participatory limitations.

The findings also showed that many respondents believed citizens' opinions were adequately considered during the amendment process, with 38.2% strongly agreeing and 28.3% agreeing. This implies that public consultations and stakeholder engagements may have provided opportunities for citizens' voices to influence legislative deliberations.

On the impact of public engagement on legislative decisions, the majority of respondents agreed that the National Assembly considered public feedback before making decisions on the amendment. Specifically, 28.3% strongly agreed and 38.2% agreed with the statement. This indicates that public participation had a measurable influence on policymaking and legislative outcomes. However, perceptions regarding the quality of the amendment remained mixed. Although some respondents acknowledged improvements resulting from public engagement, many disagreed (30.6%) and strongly disagreed (31.2%) that public engagement improved the quality of the Electoral Act Amendment. This may suggest dissatisfaction with certain provisions of the amendment or perceptions that public contributions were not effectively incorporated into the final legislative decisions.

Concerning the role of development communication in the 2026 Electoral Act Amendment, the findings indicate that communication strategies helped bridge the gap between citizens and lawmakers. Respondents generally agreed that development communication tools enhanced public engagement and improved information dissemination during the reform process. The finding that development communication helped bridge the gap between citizens and lawmakers is strongly supported

by Dikeocha (2024), who argues that participatory communication provides mechanisms for effective stakeholder engagement.

Similarly, Agena (2024) maintains that participatory communication can facilitate community involvement in decision-making and offers an alternative to top-down communication approaches. This suggests that strategic communication mechanisms such as media campaigns, public enlightenment programmes, and digital communication platforms were effective in facilitating interaction between policymakers and the public.

Recommendations

1. Government and electoral stakeholders should strengthen public enlightenment on electoral reforms through radio, television, community-based communication, and social media to address gaps in citizens' awareness and access to information.
2. The National Assembly should institutionalise meaningful citizen participation by ensuring that inputs from public hearings, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders are documented, considered, and reflected where appropriate in electoral legislation.
3. Stakeholders should promote credible and responsible social media communication by providing timely and accurate information on electoral reforms while addressing misinformation that could undermine informed participation and public trust.
4. Development communication should be integrated into electoral reform processes to promote continuous two-way engagement, transparency, and feedback between citizens and policymakers, thereby strengthening accountability and confidence in electoral institutions.

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