

Citizenship Education: Enhancing Young People's Participation In Politics In Nigeria

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Abstract: Research has shown that young people are showing increased interest in the political process in their respective countries. However, in Nigeria, and perhaps globally, there is the belief that the young people are lazy and politically indifferent, preferring instead to be allowed to live as they deem fit. The young people view politics as essentially the exclusive domain of the old people, who, soon after they are elected into political office, tended to focus on enriching themselves, and frantically seek to perpetuate their stay in office, thereby forestalling any hope of them (youth) becoming political leaders in the society. Using empirical documents and other available literatures sourced online this paper reinforces the need for citizenship education in order to promote a culture of active citizenship and democratic participation by the youths in Nigeria. The study showed that young people were not apathetic to politics and that citizenship education was considered to be imperative to enhancing their active participation in the political processes. It concluded that youth participation in the political process could be enhanced by educating the citizens to imbibe moral and ethical values in line with democratic tenets, through the family, schools, the mass media, as well as the political parties; for the overall development of the society.

Key Words: Citizenship, Citizenship Education, Political Participation, Politics, Young People/Youth

1. Introduction

The young people in most democracies have been branded as lazy, politically apathetic and unwilling to assume leadership roles (UNDP, 2013). However, recent studies indicated that the youths are beginning to show greater interest and actively playing very significant roles in politics and the political processes in their respective countries, as the socio-political up-risings in the Arab countries in 2011/2012 have demonstrated (Mengistu, 2017). The seeming disinterest of the youths in the political process has been attributed to unfavourable legal frameworks, low socio-economic status, and other discriminatory practices (UNDP, 2013; Mengistu, 2017). Young people between the ages of 15 and 25 constitute a fifth of the world's population, but their level of political participation is insignificant because they are not informally represented in political institutions such as parliaments (UNDP, 2013; Mensgistu, 2017, ThisDay, June 19, 2018). Globally, the average age of parliamentarians is 53, while the minimum age for vying for elective post in parliament is 25 years (Mengistu, 2017). While the World Bank and the UNDP reports have indicated that the youth accounted for more than 70% of Africa's population, the young people have remained neglected and excluded from main-stream politics. The consequence is they have become disorganized, unemployed, and vulnerable to radical ideas including spear-heading major demonstration in most parts of the African continent for example in Sierra Leone, leading to the formation of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), and in Rwanda, where young people were implicated as major players in the genocidal war (Mengistu, 2017). Youths in Nigeria constitute about half of the country's population, but they have hitherto been ostracized from engaging in politics at the state and federal levels (National Democratic Institute, Wednesday, May, 10, 2017). It has now become obvious to the youths that the older generation of politicians are unwilling to handover the mantle of leadership to the younger breed; therefore to demonstrate their interest in the democratic process and political participation, the Youth Initiative for Advocacy

Growth and Advancement (YIAGA), Youngstars Development Initiative (YDI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) partnered to launch the "Not Too Young To Run" (NTYTR) campaign, which led to the submission of a bill to the Nigerian National Assembly by the youth coalition. The bill which has been passed into law by the Eight National Assembly is a testimony to the fact that the Nigerian youths' clarion call to be allowed to play their role now and not later, in shaping the destiny of their country, has been heeded. The age requirements are now 35 years old for president, senator 30 years old, and federal and state representatives 25 years old (National Democratic Institute, Wednesday, May, 10, 2017). The role of citizenship education in enhancing young people's participation in the political process cannot be underestimated. Studies (European Youth Forum, 2013; Soule, 2001), have shown that civic education which targets youths creates awareness in them and facilitates their increased participation in politics, and also enables them to make informed decisions on who should lead them when they go out to cast their votes during elections. Thus, this paper aims to examine the role of citizenship education in promoting active participation of youth in the political process in Nigeria.

2. Youth, Citizenship, Citizenship Education, and Political Participation: Conceptual Analysis

2.1 Who is a Youth?

The concept of youth is understood differently depending on individual or group perception. It is a social construct which meaning and comprehension varies from society to society (Obed, 2018). The United Nations defines youth as the age between 15 and 24 years (cited in Obed, 2018); whereas, the African Youths Report, 2009, defined youths as people between 15 and 39 years of age (UNECA, cited in Obed, 2018). The 15-39 age limit for the youth provided by AYR, has been justified by some scholars, for example, Gyampo, who argued that, the lower age limit (15) was a critical period in the human developmental

stages when most young people experience puberty; while the upper age limit (39) was the threshold of adulthood for young men and women (Obed, 2018). The age limit for youth or young people in Nigeria, is a subject of debate. The divergent views held by scholars on the exact age limit for youth or what constitutes a youth, led Uzunmwangho and Oghator (2013) to state that:

The growing commitment to the involvement of the youth in global development process is a clear recognition of their potentials as change agents within the civil society. This awareness has attracted scholarly attention in an attempt to clarify and articulate a conceptual category for youth. In most literatures, scholars have often employed the criterion of age to define youth. However, sociological studies have shown that this criterion is fluid and therefore vary from one society to another (cited in Ukommi, n.d).

Thus, Ukommi (n.d) aligning his position with that of the National Youth Policy of 2001, pegged the age limit for youth in Nigeria at 18 – 35 years, noting that “this category represents the most active, most volatile, and yet most vulnerable segment of the population, socio-economically and in other respects.” Citing Suleiman, Ukommi (n.d) concluded that irrespective of the age limit, youths are men and women considered to be young, energetic, vibrant and resourceful, who are often engaged in social enterprises that require physical strength and mental capacity. This paper, too, adapts the National Youth Policy definition to describe the youth as those between the ages of 18 – 35 years old. Constitutionally also, the voting age limit in Nigeria is 18 years. In this paper, as in current literature, the terms youth and young people are used interchangeably (Onwughalu, 2018).

2.2 Citizenship

Citizenship is an essentially contested concept that has been explained variously by different scholars. However, this paper attempts an explanation of the concept of citizenship from the perspective of T. H. Marshall. Marshall’s conceptualization of citizenship involves three elements, civil rights, political rights and social rights, developed in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century correspondingly (cited in Beck, 2006). The social element however, was adjudged novel among the three elements in Marshall’s analysis of the concept of citizenship, when it first emerged (Beck, 2006). According to Beck, another scholar, Barry Hinders, had pointed out how the social element was indispensable to Marshall who viewed it as the capacity of citizenship in modern ‘welfare societies, to generate “a direct sense of community membership based on loyalty to a civilization which is a common possession” (cited in Beck, 2006). Beck expatiated noting that the extension of welfare relates to all citizens who on equal basis enjoy a minimum level of protection against risk, illness and insecurity, thereby enabling them to participate holistically and effectively exercise their civil and political rights. In other words, people’s social rights presuppose their civil and

political rights which are required in furtherance of the social and economic rights of citizens in the society.

2.3 Citizenship Education

Citizenship education comprises passive citizenship education and active citizenship education. Citizenship education aside promoting passive citizenship – usually expressed in the uncritical acquisition of information about historical, legal and institutional facts – also promotes active citizenship, which involves revitalizing democratic public life. Promoting active citizenship through education expands community service programmes and activities as well as active involvement in democratic institutions and effective engagement in the political process through deliberation and decision-making (Schugurensky and Myers, 2003). In this way, citizenship education can be used as a tool for not only maintaining the status quo (by accepting existing social structures, developing moral character and ensuring social cohesion or unity) but also for empowering the young people to struggle for societal transformation and social justice. Citing Bernard, a prominent proponent of citizenship education in British Schools, Yusuf (n.d) averred that citizenship education as subject should actually inculcate in the young ones political knowledge by using real life issues or examples. This became imperative because, as he argued, “... being taught to respect the law without learning how bad laws can be changed and better ones promoted tends to create apathetic subjects rather than active citizens” (cited in Yusuf, n.d). On the whole, the objective of citizenship education would be to emancipate the citizens by developing active, informed and critical citizens who are capable of participating actively and effectively in public life and in the affairs of the state irrespective of gender and/or class (Schugurensky and Myers, 2003).

2.4 Political Participation

Again, like all the above concepts, this too, has different conceptualization by different authors. An early classical definition by Verba and Nie, referred to political participation as “legal acts by private citizens directed to influence on the election of their governments and the actions these take” (Castillo, 2008). But Robertson (2009) noted that Verba and Nie’s definition lacked broadness in view of current events, for excluding non-legal participation such as, protest actions and passive forms of participation such as civil disobedience. Therefore, a wider definition of political participation (non-conventional in nature) provided by Barnes and Kaase, included protest actions by citizens aimed at influencing political decisions at different levels of the society or system (Castillo, 2008). Studies conducted by scholars such as Henn, Weinstein and Wring (2002), in Britain, indicated that contrary to findings from many studies of political participation, young people were interested in political matters, hence do support the democratic process even if indirectly as through protest; despite that sometimes they were put off by the attitudes and actions of those elected to positions of political power. In this light, Conge conceptualizes political participation as “. . . any kind of action (or inaction) of an individual or a group of individuals that intentionally or unintentionally oppose, support, or change any or some characteristics of

a government or a community” (cited in Castillo, n.d). Also, Robertson (2009) observed that most studies on political participation focused on voter turnout as the main activity, whereas, there were other variety of acts undertaken by citizens intended to influence politics. Such activities include but not limited to party activism, signing a petition, attending a demonstration, contacting an official or wearing a campaign badge. As a matter of fact, at the time of writing this paper (Tuesday, January 8, 2019), the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) is embarking on a nation-wide protest to pressure the Federal Government to implement the long-over-due new minimum wage. This action by the NLC is a good example of a non-conventional political participation by the citizens as earlier averred by Robertson (2009).

3. Objectives of Citizenship Education

The general objective of citizenship education is to train ‘good’ citizens, who are aware of the human and political issues inherent in their society and ensure that each citizen imbibes ethical and moral qualities. Also, citizenship education, in whatever form, aims to imbibe or inculcate respect for others and recognition of the quality of all human beings; combat all forms of discrimination based on race, gender, religion, etc; the promotion of a spirit of tolerance and peace among human beings (UNESCO, 1998). Specifically, citizenship education has three main objectives which correspond both to educating the individual as a subject of ethics and law, and to educating citizens. They are:

- i. Educating people in citizenship and human rights through an understanding of the principles and institutions (which govern a state or nation);
- ii. Learning to exercise one’s judgement and critical faculty; and
- iii. Acquiring a sense of individual and community responsibilities.

UNESCO stated that the objectives above suggest four major themes for citizenship education which include:

- i. The relations between individuals and society: individuals and collective freedoms, and rejection of any kind of discrimination.
- ii. The relations between citizens and the government: what is involved in democracy and the organization of the state.
- iii. The relations between the citizens and democratic life.
- iv. The responsibility of the individual and the citizen in the international community.

How can these objectives and themes be applied to the teaching of citizenship education in the relevant institutions, for the enhancement of young people’s participation in the political process in Nigeria, and to strengthen the democratic culture?

4. Citizenship Education for Enhancing Young People’s Participation in Politics in Nigeria

Political participation is the right and responsibility of every citizen regardless of gender or social class; though women or females are seen to be more alienated from formal political process in almost all democracies, even

when the only restraining factor, really, should be age. The youths who are between the ages of 15 and 24 years, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), have the statutory rights to not only participate in politics, for example, through demonstrations, protests, etc., but also vie for elective offices and to vote for candidates of their choice in elections. They young people can be encouraged to discharge this political right through proper education, otherwise referred to here, as citizenship education. Despite findings that people below age 25 constitute more than half the population of most developing countries, the general view in both developed and developing countries of the world, particularly developing countries, is that political participation is the exclusive right of older citizens because political parties hardly ever field younger candidates for elective positions during elections, thereby disenfranchising the young people from politics (UNDP, 2013). Studies have shown that the young people lack political knowledge therefore, impacting on the level of political participation of this age group. In the same vein, scholars have found empirical evidence suggesting that a sense of civic duty propels young people who hitherto lack political knowledge or were unfamiliar with political affairs, to vote in elections. Apart from that, young people would rely on individual party’s internal political efficacy to make them to participate in elections (Beck, 2006). Is this a justified position or assertion, that political participation is solely an “old man’s” affair? If yes, what needs to be done? What needs to be done, therefore, is effective citizenship education that inculcates democratic values and principles in the younger generation, so as to enable them to have an informed conscience and knowledge and understanding of the entire political process that involves voting and being voted for in elections. The more knowledge they acquire of the legal framework, laws, rights, and responsibilities that regulate the interaction between all relevant entities, stakeholders, and all citizens (European Youth Forum, 2013), and about politics and democracy, the more they would engage in the political process in their society either directly (as party candidates) or indirectly (by demonstrating or protesting to bring about change in governance). Therefore, political participation and knowledge are complementary – one a prerequisite to successful political engagement in terms of pursuing and defending one’s interest in politics, and the other teaching the citizen about politics and increasing his or her attentiveness or interest in public affairs (Soule, 2001). Citizenship education is a panacea for youths’ participation in politics in any country; hence it is imperative for the content of citizenship education to be multidimensional with the aim of preparing young learners to actively participate as citizens in a multifaceted society, such as Nigeria. Therefore, there is the need to ensure that the agents of socialization, such as the family, school, and mass media, as well as the political parties, are involved in this endeavour.

The Family

It is generally believed that the family is the primary agent of socialization for the child, being that it exerts the first and enduring influence on the formation of individual values, and, in the case of young people, ensures their active participation in the political process in their

community at the early stage (UNDP, 2013; Soja, Innocent and Paul, 2014). The scholars emphasized that the family is responsible for shaping the individual child's future political attitudes as it defines a social position for the child; establishes ethnic, linguistic, class, and religious ties; affirms cultural values and influences job aspiration. Additionally, the level of political consciousness in any given society is determined by the degree of support the government gives to the family; the more support the family gets the higher the political consciousness of the citizens, especially the young people. A society that fails to do all this makes the youth vulnerable to all sorts of vices and abuses which might pose serious threats to democratic stability and provision of democratic dividends (Soja, et al., 2014). This situation, largely, explains why in the Nigerian political culture, as in most other African countries, the youths are rascally during political rallies, campaigns and voting. It is not uncommon to see the young people engaging in ballot snatching, fights, and other unethical, illegal and immoral actions during elections, both at the local, state and national levels. The consequence of such violent acts by the youths is that, it encourages the older generation to continue to maintain their grip on political power while dictating the pace of democratic and societal development; and also pursue their inordinate ambitions (Samuel, 2017).

The Schools

Further to the education acquired in the family, the school educates the young people in fundamental values and beliefs of their society; prepares and equips them to actively participate in political activities. Education acquired in schools tended to affect the political skills and resources of the young people, thus making them aware of the impact of government on their lives and pay critical attention to politics both locally and internationally (Soja, et al., 2014). The premium placed on education, particularly, youth education in Nigeria, is unarguably dismal. This has resulted in the young people not having sufficient knowledge and understanding of how politics is done right from the grass root, which is also why they appear uninterested in democratic institutions and the political process.

The Mass Media

The mass media is an agent of political socialization and continuing education of citizens (Soja, et al., 2014). News coverage has the tendency to encourage or discourage political participation or engagement in any democracy. It is pertinent, therefore, that the mass media effectively discharges its role of enlightening or educating the public on the activities of political parties and the actions of politicians so that the young people can make informed decisions on the direction of their choices, and on the future of politics in the society.

Political Parties

On the role of political parties in fostering youth participation in the political process anywhere, Alfa, and Almond, et al. noted that political parties as essential and conspicuous features of liberal democracies, play salient roles in political socialization; in addition to moulding issue preferences, arousing the apathetic, and finding new

issues to galvanise support for active political participation (cited in Soja, et al., 2014).

5. Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is evident that political participation amongst the young people is essentially dependent on the role played by citizenship education or education for citizenship traditionally carried out by the family, and constitutionally or formally carried on by the schools, the mass media and the political parties; all of which are expected to function effectively and in synchronization. It is when the young people, as citizens of their country, are adequately educated, politically informed and believed in, that they can deliberately perform their civic role by voting and being voted for; and contribute their quota in the overall interest of the society. As the former United Nations Secretary -General, Kofi Anan, has underscored, "No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts itself from its youth severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death." (UNDP, 2013).

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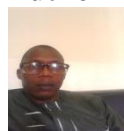
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