

Determinants of Public Perception on Civic Participation and Social Cohesion in Nigeria, 2021-2026

¹Nweke Obinna Innocent & ²Israel Segun Olajonrin

¹Department of Political Science
and Public Administration, Baze
University, Abuja

²Africa Polling Institute

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Abstract

This paper explored the determinants of public perception of Civic Participation as a determinant of Social Cohesion in Nigeria. The paper hypothesized the findings of the Nigerian Social Cohesion Survey 2026 on Civic Participation and Social Cohesion as conducted by African Polling Institute. The Survey found high willingness to participate in civic activities by Nigerian citizens, even though there has been a sustained decline in the figures over the last two years. This paper was aimed at developing an elaborate toolkit for measuring civic participation beyond the willingness for intercultural cooperation and intermarriage as utilized by the Survey. The paper relied heavily on secondary sources from extant literature and the Nigerian Social Cohesion Survey 2026 data and was anchored on social capital theory. Findings show that the level individual and social trust, personal attributes, personal resources and Individuals' social values, ideological identities as well as personal influences, coming from parents are deterministic for civic participation and social cohesion, hence, the paper recommended that future Surveys should expand to include these other determinants of civic engagements in order to generate the perception of civic engagement on social cohesion that is reflective and representative of the Nigerian Society.

Corresponding Author:

Nweke Obinna Innocent

Background to the Study

World over, plural societies have struggled to form a formidable sense of identity that will eventually seal the divisive cracks caused by their diversities. Nations with homogenous cultural affiliations tend to achieve this noble height with relative ease than those with heterogeneity. The extent to which society members are glued to social bonds which generally manifests in being healthy, attaining high economic growth, committing to common course, and be less susceptible to external shock has been described as social cohesion (OECD, 2011). Conversely, a society where the social bond is weak generally suffer withdrawal, apathy, economic retardation etc. As a nation with a population of over 240 million people, grouped into more than 250 ethnic groups, speaking over 500 languages, sharing 3 popular religions, all living in little over 960, 000 square kilometers, Nigeria has acquired all the characteristics of a plural society.

Nigeria has a chequered history of social cohesion. Originally, the country was created through an assemblage of different sociocultural groups hitherto operating in kingdoms, emirates and chiefdoms. Colonialists, driven by their economic desires, were less concerned about social bonds of their subjects. This manifested in the adoption and sustenance of native authority system and the further balkanization of the country into three regions prior to independence beyond any other object of unification beyond political authority. Indigenous political leadership could not manage the country for more than six years before the cracks eventually exploded. Civil war occurred, further crystalizing the social discord between the various groups that make up Nigeria. Since the end of the civil war, successive governments across military and civilian divides have consciously made efforts towards achieving social cohesion in Nigeria. Unfortunately, political expression of desire is only one among many other deterministic factors of social cohesion. This paper interrogates these factors, majorly on the outcome of the Nigerian Social Cohesion Survey conducted by the African Polling Institute in 2026.

According to the Nigerian Social Cohesion Survey (NSCS) (2026) civic participation in Nigeria has been measured for a five-year period between 2021 and 2026 with exception of 2023 using the indicator of willingness of citizens to participate in the political process to make Nigeria better place for all. The survey report, which is a product of nationwide empirical research that evaluated citizens' perception of social cohesion in Nigeria, found that up to 84% percent of sampled respondents expressed high level of willingness to participate in civic activities. By conventional standards, this represents a good position for civic participation but when juxtaposed against 86% in 2025, and even 92% in 2022, it shows that the willingness to participate in civic engagements is gradually declining. Although, the NSCS also noted that the 84% high level of willingness to participate may be concerning because it represents continuous decline, it is also better than 80% in 2021.

A critical review of the NSCS report when compared to the palpable depth of social discord in Nigeria presents a convoluted discourse. On the one hand vast majority of the Nigerian populace are willing to participate in political activities to make Nigeria a better place, on the other hand, majorly in reality, there seems to be a harvest of cynicism and

apathy among the populace. This dichotomy was created by a mono-focus on political participation as the only variable of civic participation. Teorell, Torcal and Montero (2007) developed two dimensional typologies of civic participation: the channel of expression and the mechanism of influence, demarcating five modes of participation: voting, party or campaign activity, contacting, protest activity and consumer participation (which conflates donations, boycotting, political consumption and petition-signing).

In turn, Ekman and Amna (2012) advanced the framework by Teorell, Torcal and Montero (2007) to provide a fairly extensive classification with emphasis on the social elements of political and civic behaviour. These concern actions not directly aimed at influencing political outcomes but reflect involvement in society and public affairs. The suggested typology differentiates between manifest and latent modes of participation, along individual and collective aspects of engagement, identifying four types of action: formal political participation (campaign and contact activities), extra-parliamentary activism (either individual, such as petition-signing and political consumption, or collective, including participation in demonstrations, protests, riots, or building squats), social involvement (concerning attention to, or interest in, political and societal issues) and civic action (involving voluntary or charity work). These dimensions are also critical to public perception of social cohesion; hence, this study incorporates parliamentary activism, social involvement, and civic action into folds of civic participation. The core task of this paper is to examine the factors that shape the perceptions of the people on civic participation.

Methods

This is documentary research which drew extensively from documented reports and empirical findings to draw conclusion on the determinants of citizens' perception on civic participation and social cohesion in Nigeria. Primarily, the study hypothesized the findings Nigerian Social Cohesion Survey (2026) report. It also elicited data from relevant extant literature.

Conceptual Literature

Social Cohesion

Social cohesion basically refers to the presence of structural and attitudinal mechanisms of solidarity, cooperation and exchange between citizens in a society. These constituting networks can be either material or structural (exchange of goods, economic interactions) or immaterial (informal relations, shared identities) (Botterman, Hooghe and Reeskens, 2012). Over the last 30 years, social cohesion has received enormous attention in academia, as well as the political sphere. Typically, social cohesion is seen as a desirable feature of a social entity, but also as a feature that is currently deteriorating (Schmeets and te Riele 2014). The reasons for the alleged decline of social cohesion can be subsumed under the following three observations: (1) The process of globalization and its associated economic changes are assumed to undermine social cohesion (Jenson, 2010); (2) global migration movements and growing ethnocultural diversity is seen by many as a threat to social cohesive societies (Harell and Stolle 2014). Related to this increased ethno-cultural

diversity, severe social and ethnic unrests, such as in the United Kingdom in 2011, have put the preservation of social cohesion high on the political agenda (Ratcliffe 2011); and (3) the development of new information and (computer-based) communication technologies change social relationships, which are considered to be constitutive for social cohesion (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Ferlander and Timms 1999).

Scholars of social cohesion argue, however, that – beyond the emphasis on social cohesion as a desirable characteristic of a community, and the common narrative of social cohesion being in decline – there is little agreement on what social cohesion precisely entails. Subsequently, various authors suggested new definitions and frameworks of social cohesion, which in turn were picked up and criticized by other protagonists in the field (e.g., Ariely 2014; Klein 2013; Novy et al. 2012). As a result, Bernard (1999) described social cohesion as a "quasi-concept, that is, one of those hybrid mental constructions that politics proposes to us more and more often in order to simultaneously detect possible consensuses on a reading of reality, and to forge them". Furthermore, Bernard argues, it is the vagueness of such a hybrid construction that makes it adaptable to various situations, but also what makes it difficult to pin down what is exactly meant by the construct. Indeed, more than 26 years later, there seems to be a consensus most notably about the lack of a clear definition and conceptualization of social cohesion.

Despite this lack of consensus, recent decades have seen an inflationary use of the concept by scientists and policy makers as an instrument to monitor societal development and to adapt policies to face societal challenges, such as globalization or diversity. However, in order to do so, a precise theoretical understanding of the concept is indispensable. Only if we have a common idea of what the concept contains, we can empirically monitor the state and development of social cohesion in different societies, test the common assumption that social cohesion is in decline, identify weak spots, and develop policy recommendations. The goal of the current contribution is therefore to define the determinants of social cohesion, based on a literature review of recent approaches and the findings from NSCS 2026.

Civic Participation

The term civic engagement has been variously used to describe different aspects of citizenship, including electoral participation, organizational involvement, individual voluntarism and collective action (Adler and Goggin, 2005; Warren, Sulaiman, and Jaafar, 2014). These activities concern engagement in political, as well as social (community) affairs, through formal or informal organizations (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Although some scholars (e.g. Berger, 2009) argue 'the political' and 'the social' are different aspects and should be treated separately, others (Ekman and Amna, 2012; Jugert, Eckstein, Noack, Kuhn, and Benbow, 2013; Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins, 2002; Youniss et al., 2002) emphasize the common ground between them and advocate an integrated approach, since both aspects relate to citizens transcending the sphere of private and oriented towards the common good. Thus, civic engagement can be seen as efforts to directly address public concerns, through individual work, collective action, or involvement with democratic institutions.

Although we still lack a single agreed-upon definition of civic engagement (Adler and Goggin, 2005; Ekman and Amna, 2012), the literature converges on a more-or-less common understanding (based on the elements stressed above), serviceable as a working definition. Accordingly, civic engagement refers to how “an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future” (Adler and Goggin, 2005); including wide ranging activities undertaken alone or in concert with others designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Civic engagement exhibits certain characteristics (Gil de Zuniga and Valenzuela, 2011; Hilger, 2006; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). First, voluntarism: it concerns activities that are not mandatory or rest coercively on deliberate choice. Second, it is unpaid: there is no direct profit or monetary gain. Third, it strongly involves acting for others out of altruism or concern for the collective well-being and common good. Fourth, it concerns behaviour and action, rather than simply attitudes or cognition. Finally, it operates largely in the public sphere and thus is usually carried out with others. In that sense it is often collective and cooperative.

Civic engagement encompasses a wide range of actions and attitudes toward social and political participation that collaborate to improve the health of a democratic society (Banyan, 2023). Civic engagement alludes to people's entanglement and active involvement in their communities and society, particularly in actions that promote the general welfare (Zaff et al., 2011). It incorporates a broad variety of activities, from campaigning and volunteering to direct political action and organizational participation (Nishishiba et al., 2005). Within this broad framework, youth civic engagement emerges as particularly significant, as young people contribute fresh perspectives, energy, and innovation to social and political processes, helping drive progress in a rapidly changing world (Shah and Khan, 2023; Earl et al., 2017). It gives a variety of prospects to advance skills and knowledge, promoting demonstrative decision-making (CIRCLE, 2022). It also leads to jazzed-up academic achievement (Rochford and Hock, 2022), better emotional well-being (Fenn et al., 2021), and can enhance both individual (Altares et al., 2022) and community advancement (Ohmer et al., 2022). Young generation is less likely to participate in traditional civic activities, but they are more likely to interact with issues connected to lifestyle values, which include moral concerns and environmental quality (Henn et al., 2022; Ahrari et al., 2015). This shifting trend of civic involvement highlights the importance of education in bridging the gap between traditional and modern modes of engagement.

Theoretical framework

This study was based on Social Capital Theory. Coleman (1985) introduced the concept of social capital in the context of the theory of rational choice. He argued that social interdependence arises between people, because they are interested in events and resources controlled by others with the intention of maximizing their utility, rationally choosing the best solution for them. The establishment of permanent social relationships, such as relations of authority or trust, results in acts of exchange and transfer of control (Coleman, 1985). For Coleman, social capital remains optimally in relationships based on

mutual trust or authority. Both create family networks and appropriable social organizations. The relations are characterized by the potential of information and current standards. Both concepts define social capital as a property of social relations, as resources in a social network that exists not only between close relationships, but also among the most distant or weak.

Putnam developed his concept of social capital after Coleman's (1985) idea that social networks are invaluable for individuals. Putnam defined social capital as social networks that enable collaboration among individuals more effectively; social capital is a resource for both individuals and societies. Trust and norms of reciprocity, two basic aspects of social capital, arise from networks. Putnam argues that the existence of social capital allows the actors to act more effectively to achieve collective goals (Putnam, 1995). Under this idea, social capital is important for political stability, effectiveness and economic development. Putnam analyzes the impact of social capital at the macro level of countries and regions (Krätke 2001), and deals with the impact of social capital in politics and in society as a whole.

According to Putnam, social capital persists if confidence prevails in relationships. The trust itself is generated in networks of civic engagement and through norms of reciprocity. Trust is very important in civic life (Putnam and Goss, 2001; Putnam, 2000). The higher the level of trust in a community, the greater the likelihood of cooperation; cooperation itself builds trust. Social trust in a complex modern environment can grow from two closely related sources: norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement (Putnam 1993). The uses and contradictions of the model of Social Capital, have recently been revised by O'Kane (2015), concluding that the foundational concepts of this theoretical model (trust and connectedness), are highly relevant to understand the way in which society behaves when forced to cope with health catastrophes, particularly with epidemic diseases.

Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley (2003) developed a model of civic engagement or political activism, based on Putnam's social capital thesis. In this model, they posited that Civic Activism is positively correlated to: trust in other people and institutions, Membership in groups, Networks of civic engagement, Years people have lived in the current address, and whether people have family living nearby. Civic activism was unfolded in three dimensions: individualistic activism; contact activism; and collective activism. Individualistic activism comprised actions such as: donating money to an organisation; boycotting a product; buying a product for ethical reasons; among others. Contact activism included actions that entail getting in touch with a public official, a politician, the media, an organisation, and a solicitor. Collective activism, embraced the following actions: participated in a public demonstration; attended a political meeting; participated in an illegal protest; formed a group of like-minded people.

Trust was a two-fold construct: 1) trust in others, meaning trust in people they are in contact with; and, 2) trust in institutions (political and nonpolitical institutions). Trust in others required respondents to focus on people with whom they have contact with, and

indicate if they the level in which they could be trusted, helpful, and fair. Trust in institutions was measured through asking the respondents to indicate their level of trust in political institutions (government, politicians, and local government), and state non-political institutions (police, courts and civil service).

Membership in groups and Networks of civic engagement are variables related to social activity. Membership in groups was measured through asking respondents whether in the last 12 months they had participated in formal groups such as a Youth Organisation or an Environmental Organisation. Networks of civic engagement or informal networks was measured through asking respondents to indicate if they belonged to an informal network of friends or acquaintances with whom they have contact on a regular basis, such as Pub Quiz Team, Book Reading Group, Parent and Toddler group, Child Care group. The variables regarding the length of time people have lived in current address and whether they have family leaving nearby, were added to Putnam's model, since the authors argue that "...those who are settled in an area should also have more opportunity to build social capital than those who are recent arrivals" (Pattie et al., 2003). These variables measure social embeddedness in the local community.

Determinants of Civic Participation and Social Cohesion

While theories have been developed to explain behaviours such as political or social activism, few have related these determinants to civic engagement in general. Pancer and Pratt (1999) provided such a theoretical framework that integrates all these forms and explains civic engagement as a whole. The theory portrays the process of civic engagement occurring on two complementary levels: the individual and the systems. On an individual level, people become civically engaged as a result of factors concerning personal attributes, resources and values, as well as personal influences, coming from their parents (Kelly, 2006; Youniss et al., 2002), friends (McClurg, 2006), or even school teachers (McLellan & Youniss, 2003).

Additionally, demographic attributes (age, gender, ethnicity and geographic region) may influence willingness to join and participate in civic activities. For instance, it is argued older people are more likely to participate compared to younger ones (Moy, Manosevitch, Stamm, and Dunsmore, 2005; Putnam, 2000), since the latter seem to have shallower roots in their communities, make less money, move more often and have less of a tendency to become informed on local matters (Uslaner, 2003). Scholars also assert that the size of the community where one lives, or was raised, affects civic engagement prospects. Putnam (2000), for example, believes that social ties in smaller communities predispose their members to engage civically than those in big cities, and others (Becker and Dhingra, 2001; Reed and Selbee, 2002) find that town or rural residents are more likely to volunteer than those in more metropolitan locations. In contrast, Kurtz (2012) and Oliver (2001) indicate that many forms of engagement (e.g. working informally on community issues, contacting local officials, voting, etc.) are lower in rural areas than in big cities – although this might be due to the higher income and better education urban people have. On these grounds, Uslaner (2003a) argues that the degree of attachment people has to their community outweighs community size.

Personal resources are also important for civic engagement, with affluent and more educated people more likely to participate in civic activities than the less educated and less well-off (Reed and Selbee, 2002; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, and Delli Carpini, 2006). This may be because time and money are required to participate in such activities, while education increases awareness about public issues, which in turn lowers the barriers for participation, both political and social ones (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Interestingly, occupation (particularly the type of occupation) is also an influence on the likelihood of civic engagement (Egerton, 2002). As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) put it “teachers and lawyers are more likely to have opportunities to enhance civic skills – to organize meetings, make presentations, and the like – than are fast food workers or meat cutters”.

Individuals' social values, political ideologies, religious beliefs and life attitudes can also play a role in determining civic engagement. Pro-social values such as altruism, trust and sociality, reflect generosity, tolerance, sympathy and cooperation, and could be expected to increase civic involvement (Uslaner, 2004). Studies on altruism, for instance, find this plays a positive role in the decision to vote (Jankowski, 2007) and correlates with specific civic behaviours such as volunteering and informal helping (Beyerlein and Vaisey, 2013). Trust is another key ingredient of civic engagement because it lowers the barriers to participation by increasing feelings of security with others and their environment (Uslaner, 2003; Uslaner and Brown, 2005). However, others (Damico, Conway, and Damico, 2000) find no spillover effect from trust on engagement, and argue that this link is largely illusory. Finally, sociality: the intensity of social connections, is also associated with higher levels of civic participation (Gil de Zuniga & Valenzuela, 2011; Rojas, 2008), since it increases information about public matters (Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998) and lowers psychological and social barriers inhibiting collective forms of behaviour (Keller & Berry, 2003).

Another significant factor in civic participation concerns ideological identities. Scholars (Brooks, 2006; Gil de Zuniga, Veenstra, Vraga, and Shah, 2010) have suggested that conservatives and liberals are more likely to participate in civic (and political) activities than moderates; although it could well be that “the non-political nature of civic activities makes the effect of ideological extremity on participation moot” (Gil de Zuniga and Valenzuela, 2011). Religiosity, defined as religious belief and dedication, also seems to have a positive impact on activities like volunteering, donating and involvement in political and community affairs (Brooks, 2006; Driskell, Lyon, and Embry, 2008). However, the differences in core values and beliefs within religious traditions are likely to be reflected in the kind and level of peoples' civic engagement (Pancer, 2015; Smidt, 1999). Thus, several studies found that individuals belonging to churches espousing more conservative religious beliefs or that are more hierarchically structured are less likely to participate in secular community organizations or social activism (Chaves, Giesel, and Tsitsos, 2002) since, while they encourage participation in church activities, they do not foster similar engagement in the wider society.

At a systems level, research indicates that social structures (families, schools, communities, and societies in which people live, work and pray) have a substantial influence on civic engagement (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, and Keeter, 2003; Warren, Sulaiman, and Jaafar, 2014). The process and outcomes involved are similar to those at the individual level, with factors corroborating civic engagement at a systems level, including the presence of programs encouraging civic activities (covering service-learning in schools, or employee volunteering in businesses and corporations), or of community organizations which recruit members and mentor participants (Flanagan, 2009; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995), with the numbers of individuals involved correlated with the availability of these “opportunity structures” within a social system (Metz and Youniss, 2005; Watts and Flanagan, 2007).

This engagement will be sustained within social systems that have the values and norms that support and promote it. For example, communities with a strong sense of belonging, trust and solidarity between members will sustain and enhance civic involvement by providing a supportive environment and positive experiences to those who participate (Lewis, MacGregor, and Putnam, 2013). Conversely, neighbourhoods with little sense of community where residents are mistrustful or even fearful of one another inhibit sustained civic involvement (Norris, 2000). Income disparities can also affect civic engagement, either directly or indirectly, through their effect on trust, since high levels of inequality engender feelings of powerlessness in the poor, erode trust and discourage civic engagement (Uslaner and Brown, 2005; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Civic engagement is a critical aspect of social cohesion. The Nigerian Social Cohesion Survey which evaluated the perception of Nigerian citizens on their willingness to participate in civic responsibility as a metric for assessing the level of social cohesion in the country left the determinants of this willingness for more discussions and this could have accounted for high level of willingness by the citizens considering the perceived dearth of trust among the citizenry. Perhaps, the operationalization of civic participation as Cooperation with other ethnic groups to work towards a more united Nigeria, and intermarriage between two different ethnic or religious groups by the survey maintained a narrow view of the broad spectrum of characters that define the concept. This paper furthered the discussion by examining the factors that informed this willingness. Rummaging through the reflective thoughts of Coleman, Putnam, as well as Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley on the Social Capital theory, this paper drew out certain important deterministic factors which would influence the perceptions of the respondents. This study concludes that civic participation in Nigeria is not only reflective of the willingness for intercultural cooperation and intermarriage, it also determined by the level individual and social trust, personal attributes, personal resources and Individuals' social values, ideological identities as well as personal influences, coming from their parents. The study therefore recommended that future studies should focus on other determinants of civic engagements in order to generate the perception of civic engagement on social cohesion that is reflective and representative of the Nigerian Society.

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