Diasporic Participation in Homeland Democratic Processes: Democracy Beyond Border in The Internet Era

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Abstract

In many developing democracies, prior to the internet and social media, people living abroad had limited opportunities to engage in their home countries' democratic processes. Existing literature mostly addresses remittances, economic impacts, immigration laws, and the challenges faced by migrants. This paper reassesses the political contributions of the diaspora to the democratic development of their home countries.It explored how technology, particularly the Internet, aided the diaspora in sending uncensored messages to their home countries during electioneering campaigns and voting in countries. Despite being legally barred from voting while abroad, citizens in the diaspora use social media to influence elections and political opinions in their home countries. This paper highlights how diaspora engagement through social media shaped voting behavior and affected election outcomes in Nigeria and other nations between 2019 and 2024. Unfortunately, many developing democracies still do not allow their citizens living abroad to vote, limiting their participation despite their significant contributions.

INTRODUCTION

Citizen participation in political processes is the pillar of civic rights constitutionally guaranteed to citizens in all democratic societies. However, most of the Third World or, better say, developing democracies, particularly in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and former Soviet countries in Europe, are witnessing the flooding of their citizens to Western Europe and the United States of America in search of where pasture is greener, find it extremely difficult under extant electoral laws to participate in the democratic processes of the homeland from their destination in foreign countries where they are residing.

Kalantzi (2024) explained the Greek diaspora's political engagement by examining the influence wielded by homeland political parties and by conducting an in-depth analysis of the diasporic vote. He asserted that the influence of technology on the emergence of transnational political engagement and the establishment of novel diaspora networks has shaped democracy in Greece and other democratic countries in the world. The world has seen an unparalleled surge in the number of refugees and asylum seekers, with the worldwide refugee population reaching an estimated 19.5 million by mid-2015, up from 10.4 million in 2011 (IDEA, 2016). High levels of political participation are usually associated with democracy, which is beneficial to both the individual and the society (Das & Choudhury, 2002). Traditional democratic theory generally regards participation by the individual in political activity as a virtue in its own right. Participation has been characterized as a civic duty, a sign of political health, and the best method of ensuring that one's private interests are not neglected (Das & Choudhury, 2002).

The solid theoretical and methodological framework of comparative politics can sometimes best explain the behavior and election choices of foreign voters because they are nationals of their home countries and are frequently shaped and influenced by domestic disputes. Nonetheless, they continue to be a strange category of voters who are exposed to various life experiences and global political situations and who frequently move about and cross physical and social barriers (Szulecki, Erdal & Stanley, 2023). In the pattern, Caramani and Grotz (2015) explained that with the aid of technology, countries practicing democracy expand the right to vote and participate in another democratic process for their citizens living abroad. In the age of globalization, a significant population of people are moving or residing outside their country of origin, and they have the right to participate in their country's democracy.

Dominant research and literature are inundated with research on the economic impact of the diaspora on their host and countries of origin. Other studies in conflict-ridden countries focused on how to include Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the election process. Internally displaced persons' participation in Nigeria's political process raises a long-standing dilemma about the relationship between shelter and rights, which has dominated discussions about population displacement for the previous sixty years (Ibeanu, 2015). Therefore, it has become pertinent to turn the sociological lens to a very significant segment of the population who are not living in their countries of origin and their roles in entrenching and institutionalizing democracy in their countries of origin. More often than not, customary surveys and annual reports of the International Organization of Migration and other related

agencies have neglected the impact of the diaspora on the democratic processes of their home country, especially in the Third World, where citizens living outside the shores of their country are not allowed to vote during the election. Recent reforms of the electoral laws in Nigeria paved the way for the use of electronic devices during voting and allowed the IDPs in the identified camps to vote in the conflict-affected areas of Northeastern Nigeria, including Adamawa, Borno, and the Yobe states. The citizens in the diaspora are part of the electoral reforms.

In developed democracies of Europe and the United States of America, the rights of the diasporas to participate in the democratic election in their countries of origin has been recognized, partly due to their technological advancement, which enables the citizens to cast their votes from anywhere in the globe so long there is internet connectivity. The best available evidence on the distribution of users, hosts, and hardware around the globe indicates that in the emerging Internet Age, the information revolution has transformed communications in post-industrial states like Sweden, Australia, and the United States at the cutting edge of technological change, reinforcing their lead in the new economy. But in the early twenty-first century, so far, the benefits of the Internet have failed to reach most of the poorer nations in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East. Indeed, there are more users within affluent Sweden than in the entire continent of Africa.

Thus, the European diaspora in Europe does usually participate in the democratic processes taking place in their home countries. There are some advanced democratic countries where few diasporas are allowed to participate in the democratic processes of their host countries, but the overwhelming majority of the legal and illegal migrants face double tragedy. They neither participate in the election in their destination and homeland despite the significant importance of citizens' participation in civic duties. This is attributed to the fact that most of the migrants from developing countries are usually smuggled into their destination through illegal routes; hence, regardless of the length of time they spend, their host countries do not grant them the right to vote and to be voted for.

Karabegović (2024) has identified a compelling feature of diaspora engagement: the deliberate use of diasporic identity by politicians to influence the political discourse in the countries in which they serve while also calling for significant reforms in their home countries. It has illustrated how diaspora politicians can interact practically with multiple populations through social media engagement and media analysis in both countries, highlighting the dexterity with which diaspora politicians navigate both foreign and domestic political arenas, ultimately helping to change the landscape of political activism for their home countries and increase acceptance of diverse migrant identities in the political settings in which they were elected.

In problematizing the non-inclusion of the diaspora in active involvement in the democratic election of their countries of origin, it has been observed that most of the electoral laws do not recognize the significance of the citizens living abroad. Relatedly, the lack of technological advancement that enables virtual participation of the citizens in the democratic

processes from their host country has been adjudged as the greatest impediment until the arrival of the Internet and social media, which revolutionized communication and interaction mediums. It has shattered virtually all traditional communication barriers and demarcations of national boundaries. Similarly, the bias of the electoral umpire in most of the Third World countries in Africa has further discouraged initiatives that could enable the citizens in the diaspora to participate in the political activities of their home countries. Again, most of the incumbent political leaders in Africa often viewed the diaspora as anti-government or agents of opposition politicians, hence tagging them as opposition. It is not unfounded because most of the diaspora found the democratic system and governance in their new destination worthy of emulation, desirable, and a precondition for development which can hold back numbers of political asylum seekers, ethnic and politically related conflicts refugees, which has been pushing millions of people from Africa, Latin America, and Asia to embark on the dangerous journey to cross the Mediterranean Sea enter Europe. Attempts to enter Europe through illegal routes have claimed the lives of millions of people either in the sea or in the camps at the coastal areas of Italy, Malta, Spain, and Greece.

The majority of research has focused on voting in domestic elections, with far less attention paid to migrants' political participation in their native countries. A large portion of this research looks at the reasons behind migrants' political mobilization and turnout, their support for particular parties, or concerns about a more general feeling of local (in the country of residence) or national (about the place of origin) identity (Gherghina & Farcas, 2024).

The objectives of this study are to examine how citizens who live outside their home country participate in the democratic processes (voter registration, funding of political parties, crow-funding of candidates of political parties and casting ballots on election day). Another objective of the study is to assess the impact of the participation of diaspora in shaping the political behaviour and outcome of elections.

Brief Review of Related Literature: Internet and Participation Democratic Process

Gherghina and Farcas (2024) examined how Romanians in the diaspora affect election results, protests, and voting behavior in their native country. According to the data, the diaspora influenced the outcome of presidential elections twice: directly in 2009 and indirectly in 2014. On both occasions, they backed politicians who ran against the PSD, which is not very well-liked among the Romanian diaspora. Despite increasing voter turnout in the diaspora, their recent voting behavior (in 2020) did not result in a change in electoral results at the national level. Unlike in 2009, the voting preferences of the diaspora are now more in line with those living in Romania. In addition to voting, the diaspora has been actively involved in two major protests, with important consequences for domestic politics. The one in 2014 determined the outcome of the presidential election, while the one in 2018 divided Romanian society between those supportive of the diaspora's choice to return to Romania to protest the Government and those opposed to it.

In Kenya for example, voters at home are overwhelmingly in favour of direct diaspora involvement in presidential elections, but not in elections for lower-level positions. The results

of our poll also show that almost one in seven Kenyan eligible voters were urged to cast a ballot in the 2022 election by friends and relatives who live overseas and send money home. As a result, emigrants may have a greater impact on elections through their domestic contacts than through their actual voting (Whitaker & Wellman, 2024).

Ansar and Maitra (2024) examined how the Rohingya diaspora used Facebook to actively engage in political events in their country and shaped the public opinion and political behavior of their compatriots at home. Digital engagement has assisted those living in exile, separated from their homes, and leading a life of transition; social media has emerged as the modern memento. The contours in which displacement, nostalgia, memories of loss, and distance have long been imagined and experienced have changed, and digital proximity compresses time and space to bridge physical distances.

The way migrants interact with their home country has changed as a result of new communication tools that make it easier for them to stay in touch, globalization that increases host countries' cultural diversity, and nation-building in source nations that view expatriate nationals as valuable resources (Gsir, 2014). Chekirova (2022) found that there are social media platforms that aid the participation of the diaspora in the political affairs of their country. The study revealed that in Kyrgyzstan, the citizens utilize VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, and Facebook to engage in political conversations on these platforms. The French abroad "stepped into the digital age," according to Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne, the undersecretary for the French abroad, in June 2021. Although 86.16% of voters cast ballots online, just 15.06% of all citizens did so (Guéraiche, 2023).

It has been observed that despite the disparities in political directions, diaspora organizations with Turkish origins in Germany and the UK exhibit commonalities in the ways their members show party loyalty to various Turkey-originating parties. Both situations demonstrate how once non-resident nationals gain the ability to vote outside of their place of residence, the diaspora profile as a whole plays a crucial role in determining the origin-country party's level of support. The advantage of the ruling party, which includes but is not limited to using state resources for its gain, is also evident in these circumstances (Yener-Roderburg & Yetiş, 2024).

However, the majority of the African countries are recent entrants into the League of democratic states because they were formerly under military regimes and seat-tight civilian despots, except Senegal and some countries in Southern Africa. The speedy spread of globalization, innovations in science and technology, and the growing influence of capitalism championed by the United States of America and other Western democracies have forced military and civilian dictators in developing countries to relinquish power to democratically elected leaders. This also forced long-serving leaders to succumb to the pressure from the West, thus holding periodic elections even without changes in some countries. The phenomenon becomes evident in Zimbabwe, Angola, Cameroon, Sudan, Chad, and Equatorial Guinea. The Internet facilitated interaction among these new social groups and enabled them to challenge the state by fostering cooperation among citizens from across the socioeconomic spectrum. In

Russia, the growing ranks of enterprises that use the Internet for business have improved Russian citizens' information technology skills; these skills were then used to document electoral violations after the 2011 legislative elections (Tkacheva et al., 2013).

In Africa, there are numerous examples of how social media have been affecting politics in similar ways. In Kenya, the Ushahidi platform, which was established by Kenyans living in the diaspora after the 2007 election violence, became instrumental in collating and mapping citizen reports of electoral misconduct and received 45,000 visits to its website. The success of the initiative resulted in the launching of Uchaguzi in 2013, a program designed to repeat citizen electoral monitoring for the Kenyan presidential elections. The website recorded over 3,000 incident reports in the days surrounding the elections, which included nearly 400 security reports and issues of voting irregularities, registration problems, and polling station difficulties. In 2012, Senevote was developed by the Senegalese Election Watch Coalition (COSCE), which resulted in the observations of the activities of 74,000 individuals at polling stations (Bartlett et al., 2015, p. 15).

In Ghana, social media has undoubtedly exposed the majority of Ghanaians to different interactive platforms that have a significant impact on political behavior, decisions, and judgment. Today, social media have become the battlefield for what was arguably the most competitive election in Ghana's history, as the application of social media tools in political engagement was unprecedented. Social media have opened a new wave of opportunities for citizens, politicians, and civil society organizations to engage in an open, transparent, and dialogical discussion that is relevant to the entrenchment of democratic values and aspirations. Today, there are more than five million (5,171,993) internet users in Ghana, representing 19.6 percent of the population, while Ghana's Facebook user base is about 1,211,760. The 2008 elections in Ghana were close to calling, with a difference of 40,586 votes between the then-candidate John Attah Mills of the National Democratic Congress and Nana Akuffo-Addo of the New Patriotic Party. Thus, politicians did not underestimate the power of social media to galvanize, canvass, and rake in floating voters and keep their loyal supporters up-to-date with information and news. In the 21st century, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are not only innovations in the internet world but also fast becoming influencers and opinion creators. The use of these tools in Ghana's politics has seen a phenomenal increase in recent times. Currently, 34 percent of the total number of Facebook users are between the ages of 25 and 35, with 41 percent between 18 and 24. The effect of social media could not, therefore, be brushed away in the 2016 elections in Ghana (Centre for European Studies, 2012).

Similarly, at the peak of campaigns for the 2016 elections, the political parties have significantly extended their social media activities, and the public seems more receptive to the efforts than it had been before the beginning of the campaigns. The political parties use the platforms constructively to engage party members, respond to any queries as swiftly as possible, and connect to the general public as part of their campaign strategies. However, it could be noticed that the individual accounts of the Presidential candidates are much more prominent than the parties' accounts – making the latter almost look less relevant. As of January 2016, two Presidential candidates were among the top ten Twitter profiles in Uganda. President

Museveni (NRM) came in third with about 180,000 followers, while candidate Amama Mbabazi (Go Forward) was seventh with about 125,000 followers. The intense activities on social media platforms have provided channels to quickly reach out to the public, more specifically to supporters and potential voters. They allow for easy and instant updates on the events of the campaign trail (Kamp et al., 2016).

In 21st-century Africa, elections and democracy are witnessing an unprecedented transformation as a result of technological innovations. Africa's elections and democracy are changing due to emerging technologies, which offer both opportunities and difficulties. The widespread nature of misinformation and disinformation, online gender-based violence (GBV), the possible influence of artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain technology, big data, and the role of big tech companies in online political discourse are a few examples of these new trends and technologies that could have a significant impact on African elections (Omondi et al., 2024).

Concerns regarding diaspora populations' impact on domestic election results have been raised by their growing political inclusion worldwide. Emigrants in Kenya have pushed for direct influence through external voting rights, but their potential to indirectly influence elections through economic remittances has received less attention (Whitaker & Wellman, 2024).

METHODS

The researchers have adopted an explanatory research design for the study. The data for this paper were secondary data elicited from documented research articles and organizational documents that are related and relevant to this study. Data were sourced from different parts of the world line with the objectives of this study. The secondary data sources were presented and analyzed thematically based on the objectives of the paper.

Diasporic participation in the democratic process in the country of origin: Nigeria

Statistics from IDEA (2008) showed that 115 nations and territories worldwide presently permit external voting. Two-thirds of those nations permit all of their people to vote from abroad, while the other third somewhat restricts this option. If, for this reason, we take the criterion for being a democracy to be the "lowest common denominator" of the holding of multiparty elections and the assurance of universal suffrage, then 115 countries, or more than 50% of the world's democracies, allow external voting. There are external votes in twenty-eight African nations and sixteen American nations. It is permitted in 41 European nations, 10 Oceanian nations, and 20 Asian nations. However, the trend has changed with the advancement in technology and increased awareness among the citizens who live outside their home countries. Even in countries like the Niger Republic, citizens who live in the diaspora part from sending financial contributions to the development of political parties and financing electioneering campaigns; the electoral law permits the citizens living abroad to cast ballots during the election from where they are residing.

A significant majority of the migrants leave their ancestral land because of the unconducive political terrain at home, unhealthy educational system, and bleak future for the young generation seeking a job. Life in most of the Third World Countries is miserable; hence, citizens are confronted with Hobson's choice – to stay at home in poverty and misery or embark on a journey to unknown destinations, a horrible journey, and the dire situation in the foreign country. In this connection, migration and diaspora are the results of a multitude of social, political, and economic circumstances which, in turn, result in social, economic, and cultural marginalization (Zepetnek, Wang, Chung & Sun, 2010, 5). Apart from the people from Third World countries of Africa, another contingent of migrants or diasporics in Europe are people from Central European Countries. Economic and political instability after the demise of the USSR and a separatist movement in Eastern Europe forced people to enter economically and politically developed and stable parts of Europe like Italy, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. People from Poland, Austria, Slovenia, and Lithuania preferred living outside their territory, which greatly affected their participation in politics in the diaspora and at home. Individual peoples' cultures had centrifugal, separatist tendencies; they preferred to look to England, France, or Russia rather than one another, and if they resembled one another despite (or perhaps because of) this, it was without their consent or against their choice (Zepetnek, Wang, Chung & Sun, 2010, 86).

Despite the non-recognition of the diaspora in voting during the election in most of the developing countries of Europe, Asia, and Africa, the diasporas have proved to be vital players in the democratic processes of their countries of origin. In some instances, they serve as an agent of political socialization and change. Expressing the significant role played by the diasporas in influencing the political decision of electorates in their country of origin (Rigoni, 2013) succinctly put it that diasporas also contribute to the shattering of pre-existing negative stereotypes held in either the origin or destination countries. The diaspora is a reconciling force that helps us overcome the political traumas of the past. In the context of Maghreb countries, the diaspora transformed people's image of Europe from French or Spanish colonial power into that of a modern and democratic Europe full of opportunities for individual success and economic prosperity. This sort of thought shapes and reshapes the political thoughts of the citizens to demand political development and economic opportunities to make life better, similar to what is obtainable in developed countries.

Similarly, this social category from developing countries living in developed democratic countries is usually eager to promote the Western type of democracy in their countries of origin. Generally, migrants in their majority are carriers of universal values, creating a plural discourse that promotes peace and dialogue between diverse civilizations and traditions (Rigoni, 2013). Despite their lack of voting rights in their country of origin in developing democracies, such restriction has not dampened their zeal for the institutionalization of democracy and deepening good governance. Corroborating the foregoing assertion, Rigoni's (2013) diasporas in the last two decades, diaspora became one of the driving forces in bringing democratic experience to their countries of origin. Diaspora organizations were very active in establishing and developing civil society in many Central and Eastern European countries. They contributed a lot to the nation-building process. In Latvia, Lithuania,

and Georgia, to take a few examples, the representatives of the returned diaspora actively participated in the political leadership of these countries. The diasporas also provided democratic leadership in building the post-American invasion of Iraq and the Western coalition in the overthrow of Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Foreign-based politicians were brought to establish democratic structures that would ensure the continuity of the system among the people who lived under dictatorship and cruel governments for almost their entire lives.

Diaspora in African Politics

The institutional framework of the host countries, particularly the democratic heritage and the degree of economic independence, has an impact on immigrant voting behavior. Along with this, as immigrants adjust to the customs and values of the host nation, their political preferences also alter dramatically. This transformation away from home could serve as the impetus for an equivalent change there (Fidrmuc & Doyle, 2005)

Desirous of bringing change and improving civic engagement, members of the diaspora visiting their countries of origin expect the same civil treatment they enjoy in their countries of residence: transparency, accountability, gender equality, equal opportunity, and fair justice. Their exposure to democratic values turns them into advocates for democracy and human rights. Their political and social participation in their communities of origin also leads them to fight discrimination and economic disparities (Rigoni, 2013). The orientation and socialization that migrants received served as a catalyst for democratic change in most of Africa since the time of independence in Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Most of the Pan-Africans who led the struggle for independence studied abroad. The likes of Amilcar Cabral of Cape Verde studied in Portugal, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Herber Macaulay, and Sir. Abubakar Tafawa Balewa of Nigeria studied in England, and Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal received his advanced studies in France. The impacts of these nationalists on the political landscape in their respective countries and their struggle for a democratic society in the Third World are still visible, and they are a reference point for patriotism and politics based on ideology.

Series of military incursions into the political turf of African countries except Senegal, which has never experienced a military regime, have dwarfed democratic development in the continent. However, with the turn of the 21st century and general acceptance of democracy as the best system of Government in the world championed by the United States of America and other capitalist superpowers such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, undemocratic regimes were compelled to either relinquish power to democratically elected Government or metamorphose from military to civilian. This pressure from the global community has forced Nigeria to return to a democratic system of Government in 1999 since 1983 when the military ousted the civilian Government. From 1999 to 2015, four General Elections were conducted in Nigeria: 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, and 2015. But none of the elections felt the impact of the technology like the 2011 and 2015. Apart from the use of electronic machines for voter registrations, in 2015, an electronic device (card reader) was introduced to ensure voter

accreditation before voting. It was part of the measures to sanitize the voting process and reduce results manipulation and rigging votes by the politicians, which led to the post-election violence after the 2001 General elections.

Similarly, technology has ushered in tremendous changes in the democratic processes in Nigeria by the Nigerians living abroad. The Internet is the chief priest, which led the changes through social media. The notable social media blog that played an influential role championed by the Nigerian migrants living in the United States of America is called 'Sahara Reporters .'The role of the diaspora in the democratic processes of both their destination and home country has been underscored by international organizations such as IDEA. Refugees have the potential to make an impact on the political life of both their host and origin countries, as they often maintain transnational links with their homelands while at the same time becoming part of the host society (IDEA, 2016).

In Nigeria, for instance, during 2015, 2019, and 20223 General Elections, Nigerians in the United States of America, the United Kingdom and other parts of the world used an online newspaper and TV Station called Sahara Reporters, the media outfit served as the watchdog, uncovering the misdeeds and shoddy projects and policies of the then ruling party (Peoples Democratic Party in 2015) and All Progressives Congress (APC) in 2019 and 2023. Sahara Reporters is a New York City-based online news blog founded in 2006 by a Nigerian, Omoyele Sowore. It is supported by grants from the Ford Foundation, which has donated $175,000 to the organization over the past two years. Sahara Reporters has also received a $450,000 grant from The Omidyar Foundation, aside from being an online community of international reporters and social advocates dedicated to bringing you commentaries, features, and news reports from a Nigerian-African perspective. Different programs were initiated that reawakened the Nigerians at home and from abroad for political liberation and emancipation. This helped the opposition All Progressives Congress (APC) at their triumphant victory over the ruling Government. In this connection, (Bartlett et al., 2015) found out that the use of social media in elections initially became noticeable in the preparations for the 2011 Nigerian elections and now receives widespread media attention for its role in informing, engaging, and empowering citizens in Nigeria and across Africa.

The media outfit served as the alternative voice for the opposition politicians in Nigeria in the wake of the 2011 and 2016 General Elections. It received wide currency among the young and educated Nigerians at home and abroad, which served as a meeting point for discussing pressing democratic and governance issues. Its online TV shows like Keeping It Real, anchored by Adeola Feyeun, and Doctor Damages, Madmen and the Specialist, presented by Rodolph Okonkwo. Thus, Sahara Reporters and other social media sites became the voice of the opposition politicians. Notably, political programs aired on foreign radio stations such as Voice of America, DW Germany, Radio France International (RFI), and BBC London are among them. All these internationally established media broadcast in one of the largest languages in Africa, which is Hausa, and the language has millions of speakers in Nigeria.

Mila, Wildan, and Siti (2020) examined how youth used social platforms in the 21ˢᵗ century to promote and sustain their religious practices and identity. The use of social media

aided by internet connectivity enabled the youth to connect with their like-minded despite being separated by time and space, and advancements in information communication technology (ICT) have eliminated such barriers. In the digital era, people who live thousands of miles apart can use the Internet to interact and communicate, hence making collective decisions for collective action for social, political, and religious reasons or goals.

The Nigerians in the diaspora have actively engaged with their culturally rich roots, particularly through their reliance on a small transistor radio that has been a staple in Northern Nigeria, a region predominantly populated by Hausa speakers. This form of media has emerged as a vital conduit for information, offering a reliable and authentic source of news and facilitating a reawakening of political consciousness among both adults and youth. Listeners have found that foreign radio stations are particularly trusted, as these outlets often provide an alternative perspective on local and national issues, thus fostering an environment where democratic traditions and customs can be discussed and revived.

In addition to traditional media, there has been a significant expansion of social media platforms among Nigerians in the diaspora. This shift has been largely driven by the increased use of the Internet by the youth and educated adults, who utilize platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Skype to maintain connections with their homeland and engage in civic discussions. These platforms have become crucial for disseminating information, mobilizing citizens, and encouraging political engagement. The Department for International Development (DFID) has documented the profound impact that the Internet, especially through social media, has had on civil rights and democratic activism in Nigeria.

A pivotal moment in this digital activism was the protests that arose in January 2012 against the Nigerian government's announcement to remove the fuel subsidy, which led to a staggering 120 percent increase in the per-liter pump price of petrol. Citizens took to the streets and online, fueling a nationwide and international mobilization characterized by the hashtag '#Occupy Nigeria.' This unprecedented level of civic engagement reflected the populace's growing dissatisfaction with governmental policies and ultimately played a significant role in the reinstatement of subsidy payments by then-President Goodluck Jonathan's administration. The protests highlighted how social media could serve as a powerful tool for citizens to voice their grievances and demand accountability from their elected officials.

Another notable instance of social media's influence in Nigeria is seen in the global response to the actions of Boko Haram, the Islamist militant group. The #BringBackOurGirls campaign emerged in the wake of the abduction of over 200 schoolgirls in Chibok in April 2014. Initiated by Nigerian lawyer Ibrahim Abdullahi, this campaign quickly gained traction and garnered international attention, with the hashtag being used in over 4.5 million tweets worldwide. The movement not only galvanized support for the kidnapped girls but also brought to the forefront the critical issues surrounding civilian security and terrorism in northern Nigeria. The raised awareness and pressure from both local and global communities led to a significant impact on the political landscape, with the issue becoming a focal point during the election campaigns of the All-Progressives Congress (APC), particularly for its presidential candidate, General Buhari. Overall, the interplay of traditional media and modern social media has empowered

Nigerians, particularly those in the diaspora, to engage more actively with their political environment. It underscores the importance of accessible information and communication technologies in fostering a more informed, connected, and politically aware citizenry capable of advocating for their rights and demanding change in governance. As a result, the experience of Nigerians illustrates the transformative potential of digital platforms in shaping political discourse and activism, emphasizing that civic engagement can flourish through both historic and contemporary means of communication.

The use of social media, specifically during the elections, first became noticeable in the preparations for the 2011 general elections. In a review of these elections, the Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre documented at least three main ways in which Nigerians at home and abroad used social media. First, share information relating to the elections. This includes the development of novel technologies that allow people to access data and information in real- time. One example was *Revoda,* a mobile application that enables a parallel vote count, access to polling unit results, transmission of collected results, and additional information about the entire electoral process. Second, social media platforms are used by political parties, candidates, and governmental organizations to campaign and raise awareness. The Independent National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (INEC) used the opportunity to develop its communication channels and engage with citizens through Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter (Ajayi 2011,1). INEC's Situation Room was established to enable people to contact the organization directly and report misconduct and concerns about the poll. The Commission received about 4,000 tweets in the three days during the presidential election. Finally, Nigerians used social media "to improve the efficiency of election observation (Ajayi 2011,1).

Citizens were able to share information and pictures, such as results from their polling units. Although it would not have prevented malpractice and falsification of results, at least the public was aware of the trends in different locations, and there is a likelihood they would challenge any falsified results. Civil society organizations were also instrumental in leading campaigns for transparency and accountability through the Internet, as demonstrated by projects such as *Reclaim Naija,* an election incident reporting system that allows feedback to be easily aggregated and analyzed. The system allows Nigerians to report incidents of violence and electoral malpractices through text messages. Between the National Assembly elections of April 9, 2011, and the presidential election of April 16, 2011, citizen observers submitted 6,000 incident reports to the platform. Another project, The Social Media Tracking Centre, harvests social media reports from the elections before mapping incidents and monitoring the process of the polls over time. At the end of that election, the Chairman of INEC, Attahiru Jega, stated that the use of social media enhanced transparency in the electoral process and made the INEC more accountable to the public for the conduct of elections.

With the aid of technological advancement in communications, the Internet has found a strategic place in Nigeria's democracy. This is evident by the utilization of internet connectivity by individuals, Government, and corporate bodies in discussing political issues and debates about government policies that were not obtainable with traditional media. By 2015, citizen journalism and observation had often found their way into mainstream news as media organizations increasingly invited their subscribers to report on online platforms (Aljazeera, 2015). One noticeable feature was the expanded use of hashtags as flashpoints for political discussion and advocacy. On the eve of the 2015 elections, between 40 to 50 active hashtags linked Nigerians

and discussed that the elections were identified. 'Hashtagging' in this way also becomes a way of identifying political affiliation and support for candidates among the electorates (Premium Times, 2015). 2015 witnessed an increase in the use of social media by political parties. For example, StateCraft, a Lagos-based communication company, was responsible for APC candidate Muhammadu Buhari's digital drive, which was intended to appeal to younger people (Akwagyiram, 2015).

In recognition of the integral role of social media, former President Goodluck Jonathan appointed Obi Asika, the chair of Social Media Week Lagos (an international conference focused on change in social media technologies), as his Senior Special Assistant on social media. Political parties have also branched out to other mediums to engage voters. Preparatory to the 2015 General Elections, both front-running parties staged 'Google Hangouts', in which candidates answered questions from young Nigerians. The APC also tried to crowdsource funding using a mobile platform designed to tap the social media networks of its supporters to raise money for campaigns. The APC designed a card with a PIN where party supporters purchased and donated the money to the Presidential campaign using mobile phones. This further explains the level of mass participation of Nigerians in the democratic process and how technology has reduced the gap between party supporters living in rural areas and the top political elites who are mostly urban-based.

Additionally, the importance of social media extends beyond polling day. Following the presidential inauguration on May 29, 2015, Nigerians posted tweets that included the hashtag #BuhariFixThis to offer their suggestions for the priorities of Buhari's first term in office. The Centre for Democracy and Development West Africa also developed an app, 'the Buharimeter,' designed to track the progress of electoral promises and provide a forum for political discussion. Civic Technology Organization BudgIT began the social media campaign #OpenNASS, which calls for transparency and publication of the full details of the expenditure by the National Assembly to encourage openness in the new Government (Bartlett et al., 2015,15). Following the advocacy and legal victory that led to the existence of the current 30 political parties in Nigeria, it has become critically important to review the role of the media, especially the broadcast media, in the electoral process. This is imperative given the capacity of the media and, in particular, the broadcast media to influence and shape public opinion. The failure to carry out such a process in the past has led to violent conflicts triggered in part by the use of broadcast media to undermine election outcomes and democratic principles (Bartlett et al., 2015, p. 15).

Before the arrival of the Internet and its application in the democratic process, electioneering campaigns in Nigeria were often limited in reach, particularly in rural areas where a significant portion of the population resided. This resulted in many citizens being uninformed or misinformed about the electoral process and candidates. The traditional methods of campaigning, primarily reliant on face-to-face interactions and print media, did not effectively extend to these remote communities. Consequently, the absence of modern communication technologies posed a considerable challenge for election observation and monitoring by the citizens. Without real-time connectivity, it became nearly impossible for election observers and party agents to coordinate and share information instantly, making it easier for rigging and other election malpractices to flourish. This lack of transparency and accountability often led to widespread election violence in Nigeria, eroding public trust in the democratic process.

The documented history of elections in Nigeria highlights significant issues arising from inadequate media coverage and biased reporting. For example, the infamous "Verdict 83" election program aired by the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) attracted considerable cr

Criticism for its highly partisan presentation of the 1983 elections. The program heavily favored the incumbent National Party of Nigeria (NPN) government, showcasing the pronounced influence that the ruling party had over public broadcasting. This situation underscored the critical need to avoid the repetition of such biased coverage, especially regarding Nigeria's tumultuous political history—most notably following the fateful June 12, 1993 elections and the subsequent turmoil that ensued. It serves as a harsh reminder of the lessons learned from other African nations, such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Zimbabwe, and Cote D'Ivoire, where similar electoral challenges have resulted in devastating consequences (Bartlett et al. 2015,15).

One of the core issues contributing to these challenges is the pervasive tendency among those in power, at both federal and state levels, to manipulate public broadcasting stations. These entities are often viewed as extensions of their government, primarily serving as propaganda tools to promote partisan agendas while sidelining opposing voices. This practice not only stifles diverse viewpoints but also systematically denies access to media platforms for other stakeholders, including opposition parties and the citizenry, thereby undermining democratic engagement (Bartlett et al. 2015,15).

In contrast, the introduction and widespread adoption of technological innovations—especially the Internet has played a transformative role in Nigerian elections. These advancements have significantly increased mass participation in the electoral process and governance, enabling citizens to mobilize, organize, and disseminate information more widely than ever before. Consequently, technology has begun to challenge the authority and influence of traditional media outlets, which have often operated under the thumb of the government. With social media and online platforms, individuals and political groups can now voice their opinions, share critical information, and engage in lively discourse, all of which contribute to a more vibrant democratic culture.

Moreover, technological advancements have played a pivotal role in enhancing the scope of freedom of speech and association, which were previously throttled by government censorship. In Nigeria, opposition parties historically struggle to secure equitable airtime to publicize their programs and messages effectively. At times, they face numerous barriers to access; not only are they challenged in courts when they attempt to engage the public through the media, but they are also often subjected to exorbitant fees that are well beyond their financial capacities. This financial barrier continues to disenfranchise many potential candidates and political organizations, stifling robust participation in the democratic process and perpetuating a cycle of inequality.

As such, the interplay of political power, media access, and technological innovation presents both significant challenges and opportunities for Nigeria's democracy. The ongoing evolution of how information is disseminated and consumed will continue to shape the political landscape, and it is imperative that the structural dynamics surrounding media access are addressed to foster a more inclusive and participatory democratic environment. By leveraging

technology, Nigeria can work towards a more transparent electoral process, ultimately honoring the will of the people and paving the way for a more stable and prosperous future.

Inclusive Democracy and Electoral Reforms in Nigeria

The findings presented in this discourse suggest a vital and pressing need for electoral reform in developing countries, particularly to enhance participatory democracy. This necessity arises from the understanding that integrating citizens living in the diaspora into the democratic processes of their countries of origin is crucial. The involvement of diaspora populations is essential for fostering a sense of inclusion and representation, which is a cornerstone of any democratic system. In this context, it has been noted that Niger Republic stands out as a notable example within West Africa for recognizing and facilitating the voting rights of its citizens residing in Nigeria. They have established platforms at their embassies in Abuja and Kano, allowing Nigeriens to cast their votes during presidential elections. This proactive measure underscores the importance of ensuring that citizens living abroad are afforded the opportunity to engage in their homeland's political affairs.

In contrast, recent statistics highlight that approximately 15 million Nigerians live in the diaspora, with substantial populations residing in Sudan and Cameroon, amounting to four million individuals. Despite this significant demographic, electoral reforms introduced in preparation for the 2015 General Elections have largely overlooked the rights of these Nigerians to participate in elections. The reforms have primarily been focused on administrative changes, such as the integration of electronic devices for voter accreditation and the establishment of polling units in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) affected by the Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria. While the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has publicly committed to fostering an inclusive electoral process, the reality is that the complex logistics and resource challenges involved in organizing such participation for the diaspora have not been adequately addressed.

This situation is indicative of a broader systemic issue where Nigerian policymakers have, regrettably, appeared to neglect a substantial portion of the citizenry, thereby depriving them of an essential democratic right—the right to vote and influence the selection of leaders in their home country. This neglect becomes even more glaring when considering the emphasis placed on IDP voting amid the pressing challenges they face. While the plight of IDPs is undeniably crucial, the focus on their electoral inclusion should not come at the expense of the rights and voices of Nigerians living abroad. This imbalance creates a troubling situation in which policies reflect a limited understanding of citizenship that excludes significant segments of the Nigerian population.

Moreover, according to statistics from the International Office of Migration, a majority of Nigerian emigrants are based in Sudan (24%) rather than in traditionally popular destinations like the United States (14%) or the United Kingdom (9%). Also noteworthy is the fact that other neighboring countries such as Cameroon and Ghana host a sizable portion of Nigerian emigrants as well. This demographic reality demonstrates the necessity for the Nigerian government to broaden its perspective and consider the needs and rights of its citizens beyond its borders. With over 836,832 emigrants representing 0.6 percent of the Nigerian population, and projections indicating that this number is expected to quadruple in the next decade, it becomes increasingly critical for the Nigerian government and its electoral bodies to take proactive steps in their electoral reforms to address the rights of the diaspora.

It is indeed disheartening that despite the size and potential impact of this diaspora population, the electoral reforms implemented in 2015 largely ignored their voting rights. Although the introduction of voting provisions for specific internally displaced persons was a step toward advancing an inclusive electoral process, it falls short of addressing the widespread disenfranchisement faced by Nigerian citizens living abroad.

Statistics underscore the relevance of the diaspora in shaping political outcomes in their countries of origin. A recent study by the Peace Research Institute Oslo has analyzed the impact of the diaspora vote on determining election results, particularly in European countries that have also experienced significant emigration. In presidential elections characterized by close runoffs between just two candidates, the influence of diaspora votes can be pivotal. Given that some nations, such as Lithuania and Latvia, have seen nearly one-fourth of their populations emigrate, the electoral mobilization of these diaspora populations creates situations where their votes could very well determine election outcomes. The recent Romanian presidential election has been cited as a pertinent example of how émigré votes can sway results, although statistical analyses are still forthcoming.

This discourse highlights the critical intersection between diaspora rights and democratic participation and calls for urgent attention to the need for comprehensive reforms that embrace all segments of the citizenry, ensuring that every Nigerian, irrespective of their geographical location, has a voice and stake in shaping their nation's future. Without such reforms, the principles of democracy remain unfulfilled, leaving millions of citizens' perspectives and votes unaccounted for in the political landscape of Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

The majority of the developing countries in Africa and Latin America are classified as sending countries of migrants to Europe and the USA. These migrants, either illegal or legal, with the aid of the Internet, are kept in touch with the political developments in their home countries. Some of these migrants from some countries are allowed to vote while abroad, which is called external voting, while in some, like Nigeria, the 2022 Electoral Act has no provision for external voting. However, despite being disenfranchised, the majority of those living abroad are exploring different social media platforms, apart from telephone calls, to influence and shape the political behavior of their compatriots at home. Additionally, those in the diaspora also help candidates of their choice by providing funds to finance the electioneering campaigns and the election logistics. In the era of the Internet, Nigerians organize real-time conversations that include citizens living at home and abroad to discuss developmental issues that affect the livelihood of Nigerians. Some engage in sending recorded video messages and livestreaming messages on social media to targeted audiences. In these different forms and levels of participation, the diaspora constitutes an important segment of the population that contributes to the development of their home countries.

The most celebrated principle of democracy is the freedom of citizens to freely elect or select who governs them. The system provides avenues for mass participation and popular representation of the citizens in the governance of their society. Information Communication Technology has simplified almost everything. It has reduced substantially the challenges posed by time and space before the development of the Internet as a means of communication and

other electronic devices that unified the world as a global village. The history of the world is synonymous with migration; therefore, it is an inevitable phenomenon among human beings.

Some countries have recognized this phenomenon and provided a means or platform where their citizens or nationals living or residing on the shores of their country of origin could actively participate in the democratic process of their home country while abroad. However, migrants from most of the developing democracies are not taken into cognizance of the importance of their citizens in the diaspora and initiate reforms that could enable vote during elections while in their countries of destination to deepen democratic development and stability. Developing countries like Nigeria need to amend their electoral laws to make provisions for external voting so that those living abroad can participate. Given their level of socialization, experience, and exposure to democratic ideals abroad, they will influence the citizens at home to vote for competent and credible candidates who will develop the country.

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