

Political Groups as Important Element in Political Decision Making in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines political groups as an important element in political decision making particularly in plural and democratic societies. It aligned and relied heavily with the group politics behavioural model of political analysis. It argues that politics generally involves the struggle for the control and exercise of political power within the complex dynamics of group politics. Similarly, it maintains that in a plural democratic society, individual citizens can only best realize their ambition of influencing government policies through group participation in politics. The paper found that political groups influence political decision making through variety of ways including public education campaigns, civil disobedience and violence, civil litigation, lobbying, protests, demonstration and strikes, electoral activities as well as control of information and expertise. The paper concludes that through these activities, political groups greatly contribute to the strengthening of democracy and democratic process by setting agenda on development issues, informing political decision makers about the needs of the people, conscientizing citizens on public matters, encouraging political participation and providing platform for collective action, which leads to socio-political transformation and improved living conditions for the general public.

Key words: *Political Group, Political Decision Making, Pluralist Theory, Anomic Groups, Institutional Groups, Associational Groups.*

Introduction

The beginning of the 20th century and precisely 1908 is considered as a disciplinary watershed in the study of political science as it marked the beginning of a scientific revolution pioneered by the work of Graham Wallace who set ablaze the trail for methodological individualism. Wallace in his seminal work acknowledged the role of modern psychology in man's political behavior and argued that the study of politics is nothing without the study of man for man's personality and behaviour dominates the arena of politics and the development of political action. With this background, Wallace laid a socio-psychological foundation of political behaviour approach.

Similarly, in the same year, another scholar Arthur Bentley went further to pioneer the group methodological approach and argued that the group is the single most important factor in political process. To him, "when the group is adequately stated, everything is stated; because the society is nothing other than the complex of groups that compose it". Bentley's argument was based on his conviction that the raw material we

study (in politics) is neither found in one man by himself, nor can it be stated by adding men to men but must be taken as it comes in many men together.

Detailed discussions on these methodological approaches is beyond the scope of this paper, however, Wallace methodological individualism and Bentley's group methodological approach both published in 1908 apart from providing alternative levels of analysis (individual/group) were instructive in the emergence of a new approach based on behaviouralism and scientific positivism in the study of political phenomenon. The innovation in this approach is the conception of politics in terms of an enduring processes rather than the institutional, formal legalism, descriptive methodological and non-scientific preoccupation of the traditional approach. It is against this background that this paper examines the concept of political group and its use in the study of political decision-making.

Conceptual Issues

(a) Political Group: The concept of political group is not easy to define. Just like many other concepts in the field of social sciences, there are as many definitions as there are scholars or commentators in the field. But for the purpose of this paper, we will utilize Truman's (1971) definition. To him, a group is a collection of individuals which on the basis of one or more shared attitudes makes certain claims upon other groups in the society for the establishment, maintenance, or enhancement of form of behaviour that are implied in the shared attitude. He contended that groups, however, assume their true significance in relation to other groups, pursuing the same kind of interests or antagonistic interest.

From this definition, it is clear that all groups are involved in a continuum of competitive and or antagonistic relationships to affect the behaviour or responses of other group in a way that they desired. This means that all groups are in a way political. However, since the primary goal, interests, size, organization and effectiveness of groups and the extent of their influence on political decision-making process differs, it is deemed safer to in this work regard political groups as those body of organized individuals who share common values and organizes their activities mainly for the purpose of influence political decision-making.

(b) Political Decision Making: Decision making as a concept has so many definition like the concept of political groups. However, Richard C. Snyder defines decision making as a process which results in the selection from a socially defined, limited number of problematical, alternative projects of one project intended to bring about the particular state of affairs envisaged by the decision maker (Sidjanski, 1973: 3). One can therefore infer from this definition that political decision making has to do with process involving the selection of alternative courses of action resulting in a preferred set of possible outcomes by officials in government position. Thus, Stone (2001) argues that in political decision-making 'facts' are not objective as they are strategic representations of the interests of stakeholders in the public decision-making process. In politics, the decision centre and the moment when decision is made are not always the same as the place and time formally defined. For example, many decisions appear as output of parliaments. In

fact, it is well known that those often amount to a mere endorsement of decisions already made elsewhere-by groups, parties or executives.

Theoretical Framework

Pluralist Theory: The intellectual roots of pluralism can be traced to a number of early twentieth century English writers- particularly by John Faggis, F., W. Maltland and G. D. H. Cole. The theory is based on the assumption that all interest in the society is organized and competes freely to influence policy without a single group having an upper hand over others. The theory argues that, the political system is operated in an open fashion and politics consist largely of the competition between these groups to see that the policies they favoured are adopted by the government (Truman, 1951). Pluralist writers see pluralism as an ideal way to reach the common ground of society. The various interests in society pull in their varying directions and the government response to their pressures by ending up in a kind of equilibrium where the pressure balances. With a minimum of distortion, the most desired mix of policy is reached (Shively: 294). Those who favour a pluralist system of politics point out that, with numerous groups operating, there is a good deal of spontaneity. It is relatively easy for new ideas to appear from the grassroots, and there is a great deal of flexibility. Furthermore, the government is simultaneously influenced by many competing groups, negotiations and compromises should be the order of the day.

It must be noted that, there no state that is truly 'pluralist' in the term described in this theory. However, in practice, the set of political groups cannot adequately represent the people of the state very well because not all interests are equally able to "organize and compete freely". Therefore, policy based on pluralist could be expected to slant systematically in favour of those groups that can operate effectively.

The Concept of Political Groups

Any meaningful discussion or analysis of the concept of political group must of necessity proceed with an adequate understanding of the term politics. The term politics has been defined differently by different scholars and these definitions have often reflected the philosophical, ideological, social and political context and background of their authors. This has made the possibility of attaining a single universally accepted definition of the term politics illusive. Notwithstanding this, scholars have made impressive attempts to define the concept in a way that would be acceptable to many. A good example of this attempt is one offered by Lantham (1971) who identifies politics with the processes in a society leading to the allocation of values through structures of power. In the same vein, Truman (1971) defines political activities as those activities in which the group makes their claims through or upon the institutions of government; but does not define government. It is noteworthy that at the heart of the foregoing and indeed most definition of the term is the centrality of power. Therefore one can say generally that politics involves the competition for the acquisition, control and exercise of political power. Since politics is about the struggle for the control of power and its exercise, it is therefore logical to infer or reason that human society would be characterized by a perpetually complex struggle for power among groups that composed it. For Bentley (1908)

especially, society and politics consist of nothing but the ceaseless struggle among groups.

If politics is all about ceaseless competition for power among groups in order to exercise control over scarce societal values as argued by the likes of Bentley, then all groups are to a lesser or greater extent political. However, to conclude that all groups are political is to be reductionist or in the least simplistic. But in other not to risk this, it is safer to define the boundaries between a nominal group and a political group. This is important because the defining interest and goals of groups differs and these interests shape the character and nature of the group. While some groups evinced and engage in activities directed at influencing government policy some are strictly concerned about other things such as sport, recreation, religion, art, trade etc. such groups cannot be regarded as political group. Therefore, I see a political group is an organized body of individual who share common values and have a vested interest in the political system and committed to activities aimed at affecting positively or negatively political processes and institutions in a way desired by the group. Interest groups are therefore a form of political groups and the distinctive feature of all political groups from nominal groups is their vested interest in the political system and their activities that are aimed at influencing government policy.

All state whether democracy or non-democracies have political groups even though some system may not allow a wide diversity of formally organized politically active groups to exist, since this would seem threatening to their government (Shively, 2008: 279). However, even in such states, organizations set up for other purposes- such as the universities, scientific associations, sport clubs, factories- exert political influence to help mold government policies.

Why People Form or Join Political Groups

To understand why people join or form political groups, it is necessary to examine certain point of views or some scholarly perspectives who attempted to provide answers to the question why people form groups, join or why some groups thrive and survive better than others. Pluralist, for instance, believe that the existence of a common need and a sense of group identity and consciousness create a sufficient condition for the formation of effective political group. This means that formation of new political groups arises in response to needs in the society. This view point was further strengthening by the work of David Truman, who observed that group formation “tends to occur in waves” and is greater in some periods than others. When individuals are threatened by change, they band together in an interest group. He argued that existing groups stand in equilibrium until some type of disturbance (such as falling wage or declining farm prices) forces new group to form (Truman, 1951: 59). This view conceives political group formation as a cause-and-effect relation. Similarly, another scholar Robert Salisbury on his part explained that even if there are disturbances or changes that adversely affect some people in the society they do not automatically organize themselves into political groups. A critical factor according to Salisbury for a political group to form or become viable depends on the quality of leadership. In a similar vein, Mancur Olson initiated his analysis by first attacking those factors that militate against people joining groups. He argued that man is ‘economically rational’, and that even when individuals share



substantial cleavages among them, they are not likely to join groups that are committed to solving their common problems because they are unwilling to bear costs (time, money etc.) that may come as result of their participation. This to him is the free-rider problem, a major barrier to group participation because whether or not they participate they will enjoy the group benefit. Groups that pursue “collective” benefits which accrue to all members of a class or segment of the society regardless of membership status will have great difficulty forming and surviving (Cigler and Loomis, 1998:8).

Accordingly, Olson (1965) observed that for people to join, form or ensure the survival of a group there must exist what he termed as the provision of ‘selective’ benefits. Benefits such as increase wages and allowances, provision of housing, car loan and other incentives for labour union. He contends that some others join professional groups because membership of such professional body is a precondition for occupational advancement. These so called ‘selective’ benefits become a source of attraction for people to join, form or survive. Olson (1965) identified three types of benefits individuals can derive from group membership as follows:

- (i). Material benefits: this is tangible rewards of participation such as income or services that have monetary value
- (ii). Solidary incentives: this is socially derived, intangible reward created by the act of association such as fun, camaraderie, status, or prestige.
- (iii). Expressive (also known as purposive) rewards- those derived from advancing a particular cause or ideology.

This model sees man as a rational decision maker interested in making the most of their time and money by choosing to participate in those groups that offer benefits greater than or equal to the cost they incur by participation (Cigler and Loomis, 1998: 8). It is to be noted that the foregoing views are not without their short-comings. Notwithstanding, the foregoing views will help us to understand why people form, join or why some group fair better than others.

Types of Political Groups

(i). **Anomic Groups:** These are spontaneous groups that suddenly form when many individuals react to an event that stimulates frustration, disappointment, or other strong emotions (Almond et al, 2008:64). They are flash affairs, rising and subsiding suddenly without previous organization or planning. Frustrated individuals may suddenly take to the streets to vent their anger as news of a government action touches deep emotions or as the rumour of new injustice sweeps the community (Almond et’ al, 2008: 64). Anomic group sometimes degenerates into flashpoints of violence especially when organized group are not involved. In both advanced and developing countries, spontaneous anomic group action is often replete with records of violence.

(ii). **Non-associational Groups:** These groups like the anomic group are not well organized. But they are still different from anomic group because they are usually based on cleavages and identities such as ethnicity, religion, kinship, region, occupation etc. this group unlike the anomic group have more continuity because of their common economic, cultural or religious ties. However, anomic groups may spring up occasionally from a larger non-associational group such as some of the religious violence witnessed in

some northern parts of Nigeria, communal violence between the Tivs and Jukuns in the recent past and the Middle East protest against the Danish cartoons of Mohammed in 2006. Throughout the world, ethnicity and religion, like occupation, are powerful identities that can stimulate collective activity (Almond et' al, 2008:65). Almond et' al (2008:65) identified two types of non-associational groups. One is a large group that is not formally organized, although members may perceive common interests. Many regional and occupational groups fit into this category. A second type is the small village, economic or ethnic sub-group whose members knows each other personally. This type has some advantages and may be highly effective in some political situation.

(iii) **Institutional Groups:** These are groups set up primarily for purposes other than political activity and would certainly exist even if they did not deal with politics; they become politically active only to defend their own interests in the state's policy decisions (Shively, 2008:286). Political parties, bureaucracies, churches, armies, legislative bodies, business corporations, educational institutions such as the universities etc., are all examples of institutional groups.

(iv) **Associational Groups:** These are groups formed with the main objective of representing the interest of its members. They include such groups as trade or labour union, ethnic associations, manufacturer's association, legionnaires, pensioners, university lecturers associations etc. Members of associational groups are usually professionals employed on full time basis and are often active in ensuring that the interest of its members are articulated and protected in political decision making process. A special subset of this group consists of citizens who are united not by a common economic or individual self-interest but by a common belief in a political ideology or policy goal (Almond et' al, 2008:67). Civil society groups such as voluntary association, community groups, environmental movement, religious groups, and women groups among others are common examples. Increased global interdependence and interrelationship has led to the development of international cross cultural phenomenon like global civil society.

The Use of Political Group in the Study of Political Decision Making

According to Truman (1951) group is at the heart of policy making in a complex; large and increasingly specialized governmental system. Greenwald (1977: 305) in his highly optimistic perspective on group politics summarized this view as follows:

...within the public arena there will be countervailing centres of power within governmental institutions and among outsiders. Competition is implicit in the notion that groups, as surrogates for individuals, will produce products representing the diversity of opinions that might have been possible in the individual decision days of democratic Athens.

While the above views may appear to be too optimistic a statement about the influence of political groups in decision making process, it is however instructive of the usefulness of political groups in policy making process in any given society. This paper has identified the following uses of political groups in the study of political decision making:

(i). **Public Education Campaign:** One of the most important way to understand the use of political group in the study of political decision making is the organization of public education campaign by concern group about the specific issues of policy. Groups often find that one of the biggest obstacles to achieving their goal is the public's general

ignorance of the issues. In turn, group calculates that if they can raise public awareness about an issue, voters might demand government action (Lindsay et' al, 1977:316). This is against the backdrop of the general feeling by political groups that public backing or sympathy would add strength to their cause. To achieve public education, political groups most rely on the mass media such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines and more recently even internet. Public education campaign can also involve the publication of research studies on issues with the hope that the members of the public will read themselves; hear about it in the media. Others may include hand bills, fliers, banners etc, in order to promote or mobilize support for their cause.

Public education by political groups is important in the study of political decision making because it helps to understand how group help in political socialization. This facilitates awareness and consciousness of the general public to respond to a particular policy issues. It also helps in influencing the mind of the general population in favour of a particular policy issue. When such a cause receives national media attention, the message to policy makers carries added weight if politicians know that millions of voters are interested in the issue (Almond et' al, 2008:71). Even in non-democracies, the possibility that certain issues of public interest if unattended to could generate public uprising can influence policy process. It is noteworthy that the reaction and inaction of the general public to public issues serve as input to the political system which will be processed as political decisions (output) in the chain of communication between the political system and the various groups that the society is composed. In a system where there is limited press freedom, political groups usually find it difficult to perform this very important social function. Again, the financial capabilities of political groups as well as accessibility to the media are very important factors in the effectiveness of groups in influencing political decision making.

(ii) **Civil Disobedience and Violence:** The manner in which political groups can organize civil disturbance and violence are useful in understanding how political groups influence political decision making through disregard for law and order. Political groups may engage in the breaking law and order and in extreme cases be involved in the organization of violence in order to pressure government into changing its decision or to greatly impact on policy process. Political groups may adopt this means hoping to attract or draw attention to their cause or what they see as unjust government policy. Martin Luther King Jr., during the civil rights protests by blacks in the United States of America in the 1960s advocated the practice of civil disobedience. Political groups may also adopt the use of violence or disruptive activity to send message to the decision making class that the system will pay a higher price in turmoil by not yielding to the group demand. Ted Gur gave reasons why group may take to violence in their attempt to influence policy process. To him, relative deprivation motivates people to act aggressively. He defines relative deprivation as a "discrepancy between people's expectations about the goods and conditions of life to which they are entitled, on one hand, and on the other, their value capabilities-the degree to which they think they can attain these goods and conditions" (Gur, 1969:62-63).

The persistent and recurrent violence by the different faction of militant groups in the Niger Delta (Nigeria) is a good case study of the usefulness of organized group

violence in the study of political decision making. For instance, the unending violence in the Niger Delta is a 'national Question' in Nigeria and has drew considerable concern of most Nigerian, most importantly; it has been an issue of continuous concern for successive policy makers. Thus since the last two decades persistent violence in the Niger Delta has become a permanent policy issue in the Nigerian policy making circle. This in turn has elicited policy responses ranging from the onshore-offshore dichotomy to the 13% derivation formula for the Niger Delta region and the grants of Amnesty to Niger Delta militants by the late President Yar'adua to the ad hoc and other coercive policy responses inter alia. Shively (2008:291) argues that violent terrorism may work well when one region is united in its opposition to the rest of a state and wishes to separate from it or at least to change the legal relationship to the government. He further opined that violence is likely to bring harsher regulation and police activity in their region, which will serve to further strengthen local support for the separatist cause. The Irish Republican Army in Britain, the Basque separatists in Spain, Muslim separatists in the Philippines and also international terrorist groups like al-Qaeda are all handy reference point of political groups decisive influence on political decision making process through the employment of organized violence.

It must be emphasized that while the use of organized violence by political groups may be decisive in attracting policy responses (not necessarily in favour of the group), it is usually at a very high cost to the society as violence can result in deaths, destruction of economic infrastructures, slowdown in economic progress, political instability among others, may in some cases lead to withdrawal or loss of public sympathy for the cause of such group.

(iii). **Litigation:** The use of litigation political groups in affecting political decision making can take the form of going to court to influence public policy. A political group or consortium of groups in conjunction can decide to go to court to challenge or change the interpretation of laws that are already in existence. Shively (2008: 291) observed that court procedures can be so slow and expensive that the mere threat of tying a governmental agency up in court may get the agency to compromise. In recent years litigation as means of influencing government policy has become a common practice in Nigeria. Litigation appeals mostly to political groups that have few memberships and the success or otherwise of litigation as a group strategy for influencing government decisions depends on the nature of the laws operated in the society, the financial resources available to the group and the sympathy of the presiding judge to the cause of the group.

(iv). **Lobbying:** personal lobbying is a day-in, day-out process (Janda et' al, 1998:187) and it requires personal contact with those in position to take decisions. Political groups in their meeting with policy makers may convey their argument by providing facts and data on the specific issue they are interested in. usually political groups must maintain close contact with policy makers on a constant basis and supply such fact as may be needed. A political group could present it views at parliamentary committees or at public hearing on specific issues. The recent demand by various ethnic groups in Nigeria for the creation of additional state in the on-going constitutional review has actually seen the use

of extensive lobbying of national legislators and members of the federal executive council by these groups to have their request considered as one of the 10 proposed additional states to be created.

(v) **Protest, Demonstration and Industrial Strike:** a protest or demonstration is usually carried out by political groups to attract media attention on a specific issue of concern to them. Protests may be either spontaneous actions of an anomic group or a planned use of unconventional channels by an organized group. Protest or demonstration may be a result of failed attempt to influence political decision making through legitimate institutional means. Protest and demonstration are especially appealing to youth groups and political groups with relatively low financial resources and have the capability to influence government policies through institutional channel. A group that has economic significance may influence government policy by threatening to or outrightly withdrawing its economic contribution to the state. Historically, labour union used the general strike to pressure the government or employers on fundamental issues. The influence of strike and obstructions has varied, however depending on the legitimacy of government and coercive pressure from other groups (Almond et' al, 2008:73). The November 10 2010, Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), warning strike pressing for the enactment of N18,500.00 national minimum wage law that was supposed to last for three days was suspended barely after 24 hour after it started because of government intervention is instructive of the power of groups influence on public policy. Mass action like a national strike is usually difficult to accomplish, because it requires a large number of people to make an economic sacrifice by stopping work, finding an alternative to riding buses, or whatever. It requires large and unusually devoted membership (Shively, 2008:289). The political group must be able to turn on or turn off a large enough part of the economy threatens dire result. This can be accomplished either by a single large corporation, for which it is usually fairly easy, or by a large number of people who, though they are not individually that important to the economy, are willing to coordinate economic disruption (strike or boycott) so that their combined impact is important (Shively, 2008:289).

(vi) **Electoral Activity:** Political groups with a large number of committed membership may raise money from its members and support candidates in election or even work for the candidate during campaign or in the process of election. Political groups may do this with the hope that if such candidates are successful, they may appoint people sympathetic to the group's cause to political office or better still, for such elected public officers to be favourably disposed to the groups view on important policy issues. Labour unions, large religious organizations as well as ethnic groups have a successful history in the use of this method in order to influence political decision making process.

(vii). **Control of Information and Expertise:** Groups whose membership is composed of professionals and experts, and controls specialized information in an area which government is interested or attaches high premium to, the tendency is for the government to depend on the group for the necessary information needed for the purpose of policy making. This gives the group a great deal of power and at the end of the day whatever that may appear to be the state policy or decision in this regard would be a mere

endorsement of the preferences of such a group. This may work well where the relevant information and skills needed by government is scarce. Put differently, if members of a particular group are the only people with the technical information and skills and are the only ones giving the government analysis and interpretation about a particular area of government policy interests, their views, preferences will certainly find its way in the policy in the final analysis.

Criticism of the Group Approach in the Study of Political Decision Making

In spite of the usefulness of political group in the study of political decision making, it is not without weaknesses and criticisms. One of the outstanding criticisms against the group politics approach is the tendency for some political group to become more powerful than others to the extent that their interest is almost habitually represented in policy process at the expense of other competing groups. Political groups that have more resources such as access to media, money and information will be able to exert more influence and obtain better result than those that are less endowed. This means that contrary to pluralist conviction interest cannot be evenly and fairly represented in political decision making process.

A second line of criticism is that the proliferation of political groups and their growing access government is not healthy for a democratic system of government. This is because most groups' interest is usually a representative of the interest of the active few within the group. Thus group politics in most cases only provide what can be termed as 'appearance of representation'. Edelman (1971) summarized this point when he averred that a single set of policies can provide two related types of rewards: tangible benefits for the few and symbolic reassurances for the many.

Concluding Remarks

Political group tremendously contribute to the strengthening of democratic systems of government and in non-democracies contributes at least to political participation. They are means through which interests are organized and represented in the political system supplementing individual political efforts. Political groups are of significant use in the study of political decision making in a number of important ways: they set agenda on development issues that affect their societies; inform political decision makers about the needs of the people; they conscientize the public and express political opinions on matters affecting the public; they encourage their members as well as members of the public to participate in political processes such as voting in elections, take stand public issues and generally providing a platform for collective action. Political groups influence on policy maker has in many cases translated into improved living conditions for the general public; and in many societies have served as pivot for social and political transformations. Notwithstanding this, group politics has its weaknesses like those outlined above.

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