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ROLE OF CIVIC EDUCATION IN COMBATING POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN NIGERIA

BY

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Abstract

Political polarization has become an increasingly visible feature of Nigeria's democratic landscape, often manifesting through partisan divisions, ethnic and religious tensions and the spread of misinformation in political discourse. These dynamics posed serious challenges to national unity, democratic participation and effective governance. This paper examined the role of civic education in mitigating political polarization within the Nigerian context. Drawing on existing literature and theoretical perspectives on democratic citizenship, the study explored how civic education can promote political tolerance, critical thinking and informed participation among its citizenry. The analysis here highlighted the importance of civic education in equipping individuals with knowledge of democratic principles, constitutional rights, and responsibilities, while also fostering respect for diverse viewpoints in a multi-ethnic society such as Nigeria. Furthermore, the paper discussed how integrating civic education into formal schooling, community programmes and public awareness initiatives can help counter misinformation and reduce divisive political narratives. The study concluded that while civic education alone cannot fully eliminate political polarization, it remains a vital instrument for strengthening democratic culture, encouraging constructive political engagement and promoting social cohesion in Nigeria. The paper recommended that strengthening civic education curricular and expanding civic learning initiatives to support democratic stability and inclusive political participation be promoted.

Keywords: Civic education, Political polarization, Nigeria, Democratic participation and Social cohesion

Introduction

Political polarization has become an increasingly prominent feature of contemporary democratic societies including Nigeria. Polarization refers to the deep division of political attitudes, ideologies and identities within a given society. This often leads to hostility between opposing political groups and a decline in constructive democratic dialogue. In Nigeria, political polarization is frequently intensified by ethnic, religious and regional identities, which helped to shape political affiliations and electoral behaviour. These divisions often manifest during elections and public debates, contributing to tensions that undermine national unity and democratic stability before and even after the elections. Nigeria's democratic system since its return to civilian rule in 1999, has experienced significant challenges related to political competition, electoral violence, misinformation and distrust of political institutions. These issues are often exacerbated by weak political awareness among the citizens and limited understanding of democratic processes.

Scholars have argued that inadequate civic and political knowledge among citizens contributes to poor political participation, susceptibility to manipulation, and the persistence divisive political narratives (Nwankwo, 2019; Egbo, 2013). Civic education is thus an essential mechanism for addressing these challenges by equipping citizens with the knowledge, skills and values required for effective participation in democratic governance of their Country. Civic education can broadly be referred to as the process of educating citizens about their rights, responsibilities and roles within a democratic society. It aims to cultivate civic competence, political awareness, critical thinking and commitment to democratic values among citizens. According to Dah (2002), civic education equip individual citizens with democratic attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary to engage meaningfully in public affairs and contribute to the development of democratic institutions.

Within the Nigerian context, civic education further plays a crucial role in promoting national integration and fostering respect for diversity within a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. The subject also served as an important instrument for political socialization and the development of responsible citizenship through formal

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schooling, media engagement and community-based initiative. Civic education have similarly helped individuals to understand the principles of democracy, the functions of government institutions and the importance of peaceful political participation. Research carried out by Ugobueze (2024) suggested that education contributes significantly to political socialization by shaping citizens' understanding of governance, rights and civic responsibilities. By fostering political awareness and encouraging active participation in civic life, civic education can reduce the influence of misinformation and promote more informed political decision making. Notably, effective civic education can contribute to political stability by promoting tolerance, dialogue and respect for opposing viewpoints.

Scholars argued that civic education encourages inclusive political engagement and helps bridge societal divisions by fostering understanding among citizens from diverse backgrounds (Toye, 2023). In a country like Nigeria, where political discourse is often shaped by ethnic loyalties and partisan interests, civic education can help citizens priotize democratic values and national interests over narrow group identities. Despite its potential benefits, civic education in Nigeria faces several challenges, including inadequate implementation, limited resources and insufficient emphasis on political-civic engagement. In many schools, civic education is taught primarily as a theoretical subject without opportunities for students to engage in real - life democratic practices such as debates, community participation or civic activities. This limitation often reduces it effectiveness in developing active and critically engaged citizens. Given the persistent challenges of political polarization in Nigeria, there is a growing need to strengthen civic education as a tool for democratic consolidation and social cohesion. By promoting political literacy, critical thinking and civic responsibility; civic education can help mitigate the effects of polarization and foster a more informed and tolerant citizens. Therefore, this study examines the role of civic education in combating political polarization in Nigeria and explores how improved civic learning initiatives can contribute to democratic stability and national unity.

Conceptual Clarification

Civic Education

Civic education refers to the process through which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary for responsible participation in democratic governance and public life. It is designed to equip citizens with an understanding of their rights and responsibilities while encouraging active engagement in political and community affairs. According to Branson (1998), civic education helps individuals develop the intellectual skills and civic dispositions required to sustain democratic institutions and promote public accountability. It also emphasizes the importance of democratic values such as tolerance, respect for diversity and commitment to rule of law. Civic education can be received in both formal and informal settings. Informal contexts, it is often integrated into school curriculum where students learn about constitutional principles, governmental structures and democratic participation. Informally, civic education occurs through community programmes, civic society initiatives and media engagement that promote civic awareness and public responsibility. Dahi (2002) noted that effective democracy depends not only on institutional structures but also on citizens who possess adequate civic knowledge and the willingness to participate in public affairs.

In Nigeria, civic education plays an essential role in promoting national unity and democratic stability within a diverse society charactered by multiple ethnic, religious and cultural identities. The introduction of civic education into Nigeria basic education curriculum was aimed at fostering responsible citizenship, national consciousness and democratic values among young people. Scholars argued that civic education is a critical tool for addressing political apathy, misinformation and intolerance that may threaten democratic development (Egbo, 2013) by encouraging political awareness and civic responsibility. Civic education no doubt contributes to building a more informed and engaged citizenry.

Political Polarization

It refers to the increasing division of political attitudes, beliefs and identities within a society, often resulting in strong ideological or partisan differences between groups. Polarization typically manifests where political actors and citizens align themselves strongly with opposing viewpoints, reducing the possibility of compromise and constructive. According to MCcenty, Poole & Rosenthal, 2006), political polarization occurs when political preferences and ideological positions move towards opposite extremes, thereby widening the

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gap between competing political groups. In every democratic societies, some level of political disagreement is normal and even beneficial for political competition. However, excessive polarization can undermine democratic governance by fostering hostility, intolerance and distrust among citizens and political actors.

Lyengar, Swong and Lelkes (2012) argued that political polarization may also involve effective divisions in which individuals not only disagreed politically but also develop negative attitudes toward members of opposing political groups. In Nigeria, political polarization is often influenced by ethnic, regional and religious identities that shape political alliances and electoral behaviours. Political parties and elites sometimes mobilize these identities to gain support, thereby deepening societal divisions and reinforcing partisan loyalties. Such dynamics can lead to political intolerance, electoral violence and reduced public trust in democratic institutions. Scholars have noted that the spread of misinformation and inflammatory political rhetoric through traditional and digital media further intensifies political polarization by reinforcing existing biases and dividing public opinion (Porney - Purta, et. al., 2001). Understanding political polarization is therefore essential for addressing the challenges it poses to democratic governance. Within this context, civic education can serve an important mechanism for promoting political tolerance, critical thinking and respect for diverse viewpoints. By equipping citizens with the knowledge and skills necessary to engage constructively in political discourse, civic education can contribute to mitigating the negative effects of political polarization in Nigeria.

Civic Education and Political Polarisation in Nigeria

Political polarization has increasingly become a defining feature of contemporary democratic politics across many societies, including Nigeria. Political polarisation is thus referred to as the deepening division among citizens and political elites along ideological, ethnic, religious or partisan lines, often resulting in hostility, mistrust and reduced willingness to compromise. In Nigeria, political polarisation is largely shaped by ethno-regional identities, religious affiliations and partisan competition which frequently influence political attitudes and voting behaviour. Since Nigeria's transition to democratic rule in 1999, political participation has expanded significantly. However, democratic consolidation has been challenged by persistent political tensions, electoral conflicts and identity-based mobilisation. Scholars argued that the Nigerian political landscape often reflects strong ethnic and regional loyalties, which contribute to political fragmentation and polarised political discourse. This situation weakens national cohesion and undermines democratic stability.

Within this context, civic education has been widely recognised as an important instrument for promoting democratic values and responsible citizenship. Civic education could mean the process of equipping citizens with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary for effective participation in democratic governance. Its aims to cultivate civic virtues such as tolerance, respect for the rule of law, political participation and commitment to national unity. In Nigeria, civic education was formally introduced into the school curriculum as part of broader democratic reforms aimed at strengthening political awareness and responsible citizenship among young people. The subject was designed to inculcate democratic values, political literacy and civic responsibility in students. According to Adediran and Ogunleye (2024), civic education plays a crucial role in promoting civic virtues among Nigerian youths and fostering values necessary for nation building and social cohesion. Their study argued that effective teaching of civic education can help address several social and political challenges confronting Nigeria, including intolerance, corruption and political violence.

Similarly, Akinlabi (2022) noted that civic education enhances political knowledge and internal political efficacy among students, thereby increasing their ability to participate meaningfully in political processes. When citizens understand how political institutions function and recognise their civic responsibilities, they are more likely to engage constructively in democratic governance rather than adopt extremist or divisive political attitudes. Research indicates that civic education, particularly when integrated with social studies, education, can help inculcate moral values, democratic norms and responsible political behaviour among citizens. Such educational processes encourage citizens to prioritise national interest above narrow ethnic or partisan loyalties, which are often major drivers of political polarization in Nigeria.

Political polarisation in Nigeria is also exacerbated by misinformation, political propaganda and inflammatory rhetoric, especially during electoral periods. The increasing influence of social media in political

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communication has further intensified partisan divisions and the spread of hate speech. In such circumstances, civic education plays a critical role in promoting political literacy and critical thinking among citizens, enabling them to evaluate political information objectively and resist manipulative political narratives. Moreover, civic education promotes democratic tolerance, which is essential for managing political diversity in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria. By encouraging dialogue, mutual respect and understanding of democratic principles, civic education can help reduce antagonism among political groups and foster peaceful political engagement.

Despite its potential benefits, the effectiveness of civic education in Nigeria is often limited by several challenges. These include inadequate teaching methods, insufficient civic engagement programmes, lack of trained teachers and weak institutional support. Many civic education programmes remain largely theoretical with limited opportunities for practical democratic participation such as debates, community engagement and students leadership activities. Consequently, strengthening civic education in Nigeria requires a more comprehensive approach that goes beyond classroom instruction, educational institutions, civic society organisations and government agencies such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA) and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) must collaborate to promote civic awareness, democratic values and responsible political participation among its citizenry. In addition, effective civic education can serve as a critical mechanism for reducing political polarisation in Nigeria by promoting political tolerance, strengthening democratic culture and encouraging citizens to engage in politics in a constructive and peaceful manner.

Strengthening Civic Education to Reduce Political Polarisation in Nigeria

Notably, political polarisation in Nigeria has increasingly manifested through ethnic divisions, religious tensions, partisan intolerance and the spread of misinformation. Civic education thus plays a crucial role in promoting democratic values, political tolerance and responsible citizenship necessary for natural cohesion. Scholars argued that effective civic education encouraged citizens to respect democratic principles, engage in constructive political dialogue and develop a sense of national responsibility (Banks, 2008). Therefore, strengthening civic education remains an essential strategy for reducing political polarisation in Nigeria.

Integration of Civic Education in Schools: One important strategy for the effective integration of civic education across all levels of the educational system is to teach the subject beyond theoretical instruction. This include participatory activities such as debate, mock elections and community engagement projects. These approaches help students develop democratic attitudes, critical thinking skills and respect for diverse opinions. According to Igwe (2013), Civic education helps citizens understand their rights, responsibilities and the importance of tolerance in a democratic society. When students are exposed to these democratic values early in life, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward political participation and less likely to engage in extreme partisan behaviour.

Strengthening Teacher Training for Capacity Building: Another key strategy for improving teacher training and professional development of educators is for effective teaching of civic education. Teachers must possess adequate knowledge of democratic governance, political processes and conflict resolutions in order to effectively teach civic values. Research showed that teachers play a significant role in shaping students' political attitudes and civic engagement (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Therefore, regular workshops, seminars and training programmes should be organised to equip teachers with modern teaching methods that promotes open discussion, critical thinking and political neutrality in classrooms.

Promoting Media and Digital Literacy: In recent years, the rapid growth of social media has contributed significantly to the spread of misinformation and politically divisive narratives. False information polarisation by reinforcing stereotype and promoting hostility between political groups. Integrating media and digital literacy into civic education programmes can help citizens critically evaluate political information before accepting or sharing it. According to United Nations Organization (2015), media literacy empowers individuals to access, analyse and evaluate media content responsibly. By developing these skills, citizens become less susceptible to political manipulation and propaganda.

Community-Based Civic Education Programme: Civic education have also extended beyond formal educational institutions into communities. Many adults and out of school youths may not have access to formal civic education, yet they remain active participants in the political process. Community based civic education programmes such as town hall meetings, public enlighten campaigns and civic workshops can help educate

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citizens about democratic values and peaceful political engagement. Civic society organisations often played a critical role in promoting civic awareness and encouraging dialogue among citizens from different political backgrounds (National Democratic Institute, 2017).

Encouraging Youth Participation in Democratic Processes: Young people constitute a significant proportion of Nigeria's population and played an important role in shaping the country's political future. Civic education should therefore encourage youth participation in democratic processes through programmes such as youth parliaments, student government organisations and leadership development initiatives. These programmes provide opportunities for young people to practice democratic values such as dialogue, compromise and collective decision-making. According to United Nations Development Programme (2019) youth engagement in civic activities strengthens democratic culture and promote political tolerance among diverse communities and its members.

Challenges of Civic Education in Nigeria's Political Polarisation

1. Weak Institutional Implementation of Civic Education: One of the major challenges confronting civic education in Nigeria is weak institutional implementation. Although civic education is recognised as an important tool for democratic socialization and political awareness, its delivery in many Nigerian schools and public institutions remains inadequate. Civic education programs are often limited to classroom instruction without sufficient practical engagement or community-based learning. This reduces the ability of citizens to internalize democratic values and civic responsibilities. Studies show that civic education plays a crucial role in political socialization by equipping citizens with knowledge about governance rights and participation in democratic processes (Ugobueze, 2024). However, poor curriculum implementation, limited teacher training and inadequate resources undermine its effectiveness in shaping democratic attitudes.

2. Manipulation of Ethnic and Religious Identities: another major challenge is the persistent manipulation of ethnic and religious identities by political elites. Nigerian's multiethnic and multi-religious nature often becomes a tool for political mobilization, particularly during elections. Political actors frequently exploit identity-based divisions to secure electoral support which intensifies political polarisation and undermines civic education efforts aimed at promoting national unity. Scholars argue that identity politics has been weaponized by elites to fragment political opposition and maintain power structures (Ejiofor & Udeogu, 2018). Such practices weaken civic education messages that promotes tolerance, democratic participation and national integration.

3. Misinformation and the Influence of Digital Media: The rapid growth of digital media has introduced new challenges to civic education, social media platform have become important channel for political communication but are also widely used to disseminate misinformation, propaganda and inflammatory political content. The spread of false information can distort political perceptions and reinforce ideological divisions among citizens. Scholars note that democratic consolidation requires citizens who are politically informed and capable of critically evaluating political information, however, misinformation often undermines this objective (Offur, Offiah & Onunkwo 2023). Without adequate media literacy, citizens may become more vulnerable to manipulations thereby deepening political polarization.

4. Low Political Literacy and Educational Inequality: Educational inequality and low political literacy also limit the effectiveness of civic education in Nigeria. In many rural communities access to quality education remains limited, reducing opportunities for citizens to develop critical thinking and political awareness. Political participation and civic engagement are often strongly influenced by levels of education and access to political information (Owusu, 2024). Consequently, citizens with limited educational opportunities may rely on ethnic, religious or patronage based political cues rather than issue-based political evaluation which reinforces polarization.

5. Weak Democratic Institutions and Public Distrust: Public distrust in political constitutions is another obstacle to the successes of civic education. Electoral malpractice, corruption and weak governance structure have contributed to widespread skepticizim toward democratic institutions in Nigeria. Research on electoral participation indicates that institutional weaknesses, elite dominance and electoral irregularities continue to undermine democratic participation and trust in the political process (Chiamogu & Chiamogu 2024). When citizens perceive democratic institutions as ineffective or corrupt, civic education messages about participation, accountability and democratic norms may lose credibility.

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Suggestions

The following suggestions are made for the study:

1. The government should strengthen civic education policy frameworks by mandating the compulsory teaching of civic education at all levels guided by standards from the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC).
2. The government should ensure political neutrality by establishing independent oversight bodies to review civic education content and prevent political bias or manipulations.
3. Schools should adopt experiential learning methods by incorporating debates, mock election and civic engagement projects to make learning practical and impactful.
4. Youth engagement leadership training should be organised in town halls as well as peace-building workshops to empower young people as agents of change in societies.

Conclusion

The need to reduce political polarisation in Nigeria is not a onetime intervention but a continuous, and multi-level processes. When government policies are aligned with effective school practices and supported by active civil society engagement, civic education can become a powerful tool for building a more cohesive, tolerant and democratic society.

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