

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT AND THE CRISIS OF GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: A ROUSSEAUIAN ANALYSIS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND STATE LEGITIMACY

Barnabas Obiora Idoko PhD
Faculty of Arts
Department of Philosophy
Nnamdi Azikiwe University
Awka, Anambra State
idokoobiora@yahoo.com

Abstract

Nigeria gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1960. Since then, the country has faced unresolved political challenges, particularly endemic corruption, limited civic participation and the problem of political legitimacy. These challenges are largely rooted in political corruption and crisis of leadership succession often orchestrated by the country's political elite have fostered widespread apathy among citizens. There is therefore tension between civic responsibilities and political authority especially regarding how the state reflects the collective will of the people. Deploying Jean-Jacques Rousseau's social contract theory as its theoretical framework, the study deploys the documentary method of data collection and hermeneutics analysis to explore how political corruption and weak civic participation undermine the legitimacy of the Nigerian state. According to Rousseau, legitimate authority does not only derive from the consent of the governed and but more importantly, on its continual alignment with the general will. In other words, any state that neglect the aspiration of its citizens or undermine their political participation faces fundamental crisis of legitimacy. Applying this Rousseau's insight to the Nigerian context, the study argues that governance in the country is punctuated by systemic disconnect between the ruling class and the populace resulting in persistent legitimacy crisis and political apathy. Based on this, the paper recommends the reconstruction of Nigeria's social contract through deliberate efforts toward participatory governance, civic reorientation, and institutional accountability. It concludes that such reform are essential for restoring public trust and accelerating Nigeria's democratic consolidation legitimacy as the hallmark of liberal democracy

Keywords: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Citizen Participation, State Legitimacy, Governance, Nigeria

1. Introduction

The question of governance and political legitimacy have been the central concern of Nigeria since its independence on October 1, 1960. The universally acclaimed Nigerian literary icon, Chinua Achebe (1983) underscores this point in his influential work *The Trouble with Nigeria*, where he argues that Nigeria's fundamental problem is, simply and squarely, a failure of leadership. Hence, despite the formal adoption of democratic institutions—particularly following the transition from military to civilian rule in 1999—Nigeria has continued to grapple with persistent challenges such as weak civic participation, widespread corruption, institutional inefficiency, and recurring episodes of civic unrest. These conditions raise fundamental concerns about the nature of political authority and whether the state genuinely reflects the collective will of its citizens. The issue, therefore, extends beyond institutional deficiencies to a deeper philosophical problem concerning the justification of state authority.

Political philosophy provides a critical framework for interrogating the problem of legitimacy. Among the many thinkers who have addressed this issue, the framework of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau is particularly compelling for analysing Nigeria's crisis of state legitimacy. In *The Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau contends that legitimate political authority derives neither from coercion nor from inherited tradition, but from a covenant among free and equal individuals who collectively constitute a political community governed by the general will. Crucially, Rousseau's distinctiveness lies not only in his justification of political institutions, but in his insistence on the continuous, reciprocal relationship between those institutions and active citizen participation. Legitimacy, in this sense, is not a static achievement but an ongoing process sustained through the alignment of state authority with the general will of the people.

Rousseau (1762/1997, p. 41) captures this tension between political authority and general will in his well-known assertion that "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains," highlighting the paradox between natural freedom and political constraint. He resolves this tension through the idea of the social contract, which transforms natural freedom into civil freedom under laws that individuals prescribe for themselves. As he further explains, the social contract establishes a form of association that protects individuals while ensuring that each person "obeys only himself and remains as free as before" (Rousseau, 1762/1997, p. 49). This formulation introduces the principles of popular sovereignty and the general will as the foundation of legitimate governance.

When applied to the Nigerian context, these principles reveal a significant gap between democratic form and practice. Although institutions such as elections, representative bodies, and constitutional frameworks are in place, they often fail to produce meaningful citizen participation or genuine accountability. Recent scholarship (Ojo & Kugbayi, 2024; Suleiman, 2025; Oluyemi, 2024) notes that in many postcolonial states, including Nigeria, democratic structures coexist with practices that undermine popular sovereignty, resulting in a persistent crisis of legitimacy. This is reflected in widespread voters apathy, declining trust in public institutions, and episodes of civic resistance such as the #EndSARS protests. Against this backdrop, the paper argues that despite the presence of democratic institutions, governance in Nigeria is characterized by a structural disconnect between the state and the general will, leading to weakened legitimacy and limited citizen engagement. To address this problem, the study applies Rousseau's theory of the social contract as an analytical framework for examining citizen participation and state legitimacy in Nigeria.

Given the theoretical and contextual orientation of this study, a qualitative methodological approach is adopted. The documentary method is employed for data collection, as the study relies on secondary sources including scholarly literature, policy documents, and historical records. The hermeneutic method is used for analysis to enable a careful interpretation of Rousseau's concepts—particularly the general will, civil freedom, and popular sovereignty—and their application to contemporary Nigerian realities. This combined approach allows for rigorous conceptual analysis while maintaining sensitivity to context.

The paper is organized into seven sections. Following this introduction, the next section examines Rousseau's theory of the social contract, outlining its central concepts and their relevance to modern democratic thought. Attention then shifts to the Nigerian context, where patterns of citizen participation and the limits of popular sovereignty are analyzed, with particular focus on electoral processes and forms of civic engagement such as the #EndSARS movement. The discussion subsequently interrogates the crisis of state legitimacy, tracing its roots to the misalignment between governance practices and the general will. This is followed by an exploration of the structural constraints that hinder the realization of the social contract, including corruption, federal dynamics, and the enduring influence of traditional authority. The penultimate section advances pathways for reconstructing the social contract through participatory governance, civic education, and strengthened institutional accountability. The final section concludes with a synthesis of the key arguments and a critical reflection on the enduring relevance of Rousseau's framework for understanding governance in Nigeria.

2. Rousseau's Social Contract Theory

The political philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau emerges from a critical engagement with the problem of political authority in early modern Europe, particularly in response to the inequalities and hierarchical structures that characterized *ancien régime* societies. As Alexis de Tocqueville (1856/2000) observes in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Europe was still, as it had long been, a society of monarchies, in which all power seemed to flow from the sovereign, a condition that underscored the concentration of authority and the marginalization of popular participation that Rousseau sought to challenge. In this context, Rousseau was deeply concerned with the question of how political authority could be made legitimate without undermining the natural freedom and equality of individuals. His intervention is best understood as a radical departure from both absolutist theories of sovereignty and earlier social contract theorists who grounded political obligation in consent but retained significant inequalities within the political order.

At the heart of Rousseau's theory is the concept of the social contract, which provides a normative foundation for legitimate political authority. Unlike earlier social contract theorists, Rousseau does not conceive of the contract as a mere agreement to establish government; rather, it is an act through which individuals collectively constitute themselves as a moral and political community. In this sense, the social contract is not simply a historical event but a regulative ideal that defines the conditions under which political authority can be justified. As Rousseau argues, the transition from the state of nature to civil society involves a transformation in the nature of freedom itself—from natural liberty, characterized by unrestrained individual action, to civil liberty, grounded in obedience to laws one has prescribed for oneself (Rousseau, 1762/1997). This transformation is captured in Rousseau's (1762/1997, p. 49) well-known formulation:

The social contract establishes a form of association that defends and protects the person and goods of each associate with the full common force, and by means of which each, uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before.

This passage encapsulates Rousseau's central paradox: the reconciliation of individual freedom with collective authority. Political obligation is legitimate only when individuals, as members of the sovereign body, participate in the formation of the laws to which they are subject. Thus, freedom is not diminished but reconstituted within the framework of collective self-rule.

Closely related to the idea of the social contract is Rousseau's concept of the general will, which represents the collective will of the people oriented toward the common good. The general will is not simply the aggregation of individual preferences; rather, it reflects what citizens would will if they set aside private interests and deliberated as members of a political community. In this regard, Rousseau draws a crucial distinction between the "will of all," which is the sum of private interests, and the general will, which expresses the common interest (Rousseau, 1762/1997). The legitimacy of laws, therefore, depends on their alignment with the general will, not merely on procedural approval or majority rule.

The concept of the general will also underpins Rousseau's doctrine of popular sovereignty. For Rousseau, sovereignty resides in the people collectively and is inalienable, indivisible, and infallible in its proper expression. It cannot be transferred to representatives without undermining its essential character, since the act of willing cannot be delegated. As a result, Rousseau is deeply skeptical of representative forms of government that distance citizens from direct participation in lawmaking. Sovereignty, in this framework, is not merely a legal attribute of the state but a continuous expression of the collective agency of citizens.

Taken together, the social contract, the general will, and popular sovereignty form an integrated framework for evaluating political legitimacy. Rousseau's theory establishes a demanding standard: a political system is legitimate only to the extent that it reflects the collective will of its citizens and enables their active participation in the processes of governance. This has significant implications for modern democratic theory. While contemporary democracies often rely on representative institutions and periodic elections, Rousseau's framework challenges the adequacy of such arrangements if they fail to secure substantive participation and alignment with the common good. In this sense, Rousseau's thought is highly relevant to modern democratic discourse. It provides a critical lens for assessing the gap between democratic form and democratic substance, particularly in contexts where formal institutions coexist with limited citizen influence and weak accountability. By foregrounding the normative principles of collective self-rule and civic participation, Rousseau offers a robust standard against which the legitimacy of contemporary political systems can be evaluated.

3. Citizen Participation and the Limits of Popular Sovereignty in Nigeria

In Rousseau's framework, the legitimacy of political authority depends fundamentally on the active participation of citizens in shaping the laws and policies that govern them. The general will is realized not merely through formal mechanisms, such as elections, but through substantive engagement that aligns individual and collective interests. In Nigeria, however, the practical realization of popular sovereignty has been limited by multiple structural, institutional, and socio-political factors. Some of these factors are discussed below.

Electoral Participation

Elections are widely regarded as the primary mechanism through which citizens express political agency. Yet, electoral participation in Nigeria has historically been constrained by systemic deficiencies. According to Chiamogu and Chiamogu (2026), voters turnout in national elections often falls below 50%, reflecting both logistical challenges and widespread distrust in the electoral process. Low participation rates undermine the capacity of the electorate to express a coherent general will, resulting in a disconnection between democratic procedures and substantive sovereignty. As Rousseau (1762/1997) emphasizes, legitimacy arises only when citizens are genuinely engaged in lawmaking, not when elections merely produce procedural outcomes.

Civic Engagement

Beyond formal elections, civic engagement encompasses activities through which citizens influence public affairs, such as advocacy, protest, and participation in civil society organizations. In Nigeria, civic engagement has grown, particularly among youth-led movements, yet it remains unevenly distributed and often constrained by political repression and weak institutional support (Gumbi & Baba, 2024). Rousseau's insistence on continuous participation underscores that such engagement is not an optional supplement but a necessary condition for the legitimacy of governance. When civic spaces are limited, the collective capacity to articulate and enact the general will is compromised.

Case Study: #EndSARS

The #EndSARS movement of 2020 provides a vivid illustration of Nigerian citizens exercising agency outside formal institutions. Sparked by widespread dissatisfaction with police brutality, particularly by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), the protests demonstrated mass mobilization, deliberation, and advocacy for the public good. As Gumbi and Baba (2024) note, the movement reflected both frustration with state inaction and a normative claim to civic sovereignty. Yet the limited responsiveness of the state, coupled with violent repression in some areas, highlights the tension between citizen initiatives and the structures of formal authority. In Rousseauian terms, #EndSARS represents a partial enactment of the general will, constrained by the failure of the state to recognize or institutionalize citizen input.

Voters Apathy

Voters' apathy compounds these challenges, reflecting a broader disillusionment with formal political processes. Citizens' perception that elections neither alter governance outcomes nor hold leaders accountable contributes to declining participation. Studies by Madueke (2025) indicate that cynicism and distrust in political elites are major determinants of electoral disengagement in Nigeria. From a Rousseauian perspective, widespread apathy signals a structural failure of popular sovereignty, as the body politic is unable to articulate its collective will effectively.

Structural Barriers

Finally, structural barriers—including corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, unequal access to political resources, and socio-economic inequalities—further limit the realization of popular sovereignty (Ayoola et al., 2024; Suleiman, 2025). These conditions distort citizen participation and weaken the alignment between governance and the general will. Rousseau's framework underscores that legitimacy cannot be sustained where systemic inequities prevent citizens from participating fully in shaping laws and policies, highlighting the ethical and normative deficiencies of such a political system.

In sum, while formal democratic institutions exist in Nigeria, citizen participation remains constrained both quantitatively and qualitatively. Electoral processes, civic engagement, and protest movements like #EndSARS reveal pockets of normative legitimacy, yet persistent voters apathy and structural barriers demonstrate a significant gap between the ideal of popular sovereignty and the lived reality. This tension underscores the need for a critical reassessment of Nigerian governance through the lens of Rousseau's social contract, highlighting the ethical imperative of aligning institutions with the collective will of the people.

4 State Legitimacy in Nigeria and the Crisis of the General Will

Rousseau's conception of political legitimacy is demanding: a government is legitimate only to the extent that it reflects the general will of the citizenry, enabling individuals to participate meaningfully in the creation and application of laws (Rousseau, 1762/1997). In Nigeria, however, formal democratic structures coexist with practices that undermine this normative standard, producing a crisis of legitimacy that reflects a fundamental misalignment between political authority and the collective will of the people.

Rousseauian Legitimacy versus Nigerian Reality

In the Rousseauian framework, legitimacy is not conferred merely by the existence of elections or constitutional arrangements; it emerges from substantive civic participation and the alignment of governance with the common good. By contrast, Nigerian governance is characterized by weak institutional accountability, patronage politics, and elite dominance, which constrain the expression of the general will (Ojo & Kugbayi, 2024; Madueke, 2025). While citizens technically possess the right to vote and to participate in civic life, the structures within which these rights are exercised often prevent them from exerting meaningful influence. Rousseau's insistence on inalienable, participatory sovereignty thus casts these systemic shortcomings as ethical and normative failings, not merely technical or administrative problems. Some of the key causes of the misalignment are interrogated below.

Misalignment with the General Will

The gap between formal democratic procedures and substantive governance produces a clear misalignment with the general will. Laws and policies frequently reflect elite interests rather than the collective welfare, undermining the ethical foundation of political authority. Citizens may participate in elections or civic discourse, but when outcomes consistently fail to represent shared interests, the social contract envisioned by Rousseau is effectively breached. This misalignment erodes the moral legitimacy of the state, producing what Suleiman (2025) describes as a "structural hollowing" of democratic institutions in many postcolonial contexts, including Nigeria.

Consequences of Legitimacy Deficits

The divergence between state practices and the general will has profound political and social consequences:

- **Distrust in government:** Persistent corruption, policy inefficacy, and unresponsiveness generate widespread skepticism about the state's intentions, undermining citizens' confidence in political institutions (Oluyemi, 2024). In Rousseauian terms, distrust reflects the breakdown of the relational foundation necessary for voluntary adherence to authority.
- **Protests and civic unrest:** Episodes such as the #EndSARS movement demonstrate citizens' attempts to assert their agency when formal mechanisms fail to channel their voices effectively. These protests exemplify the partial enactment of the general will outside institutional structures, highlighting both the normative demand for accountability and the structural failure to integrate citizen participation meaningfully (Gumbi & Baba, 2024).
- **Weak consent and passive compliance:** When citizens perceive their engagement as ineffectual, consent becomes minimal and largely coerced by the structural dominance of elites rather than freely given. Rousseau emphasizes that the legitimacy of governance depends on active, informed consent; passive acquiescence, even under procedural democracy, cannot sustain genuine sovereignty.

Together, these consequences demonstrate that legitimacy in Nigeria is fragile, conditional, and repeatedly challenged by systemic misalignment with the general will. Rousseau's framework provides both a diagnostic and

normative lens, revealing that formal institutions alone cannot secure legitimacy: ethical governance requires continuous citizen participation, equitable representation, and alignment with the common good.

5. Structural Constraints on the Realization of the Social Contract in Nigeria

While Rousseau's theory of the social contract establishes the normative conditions for legitimate political authority, the practical realization of these principles is often hindered by structural and institutional barriers. In Nigeria, persistent corruption, the complexities of federalism and pluralism, and the enduring influence of traditional authority collectively limit the alignment of governance with the general will, thereby weakening legitimacy.

Corruption and Institutional Weakness

Corruption represents perhaps the most pervasive barrier to the effective realization of popular sovereignty in Nigeria. Public officials frequently divert state resources for personal gain, subverting the ethical foundations of governance and distorting the mechanisms through which citizens participate in decision-making (Suleiman, 2025; Oluyemi, 2024). Bureaucratic inefficiency further compounds this problem, as slow or opaque administrative processes prevent meaningful civic engagement. From a Rousseauian perspective, such practices violate the social contract by converting citizen participation into a nominal formality. When government officials prioritize private over collective interests, the general will is systematically obstructed, and civil freedom—central to Rousseau's conception of legitimate governance—is compromised.

Federalism and Pluralism

Nigeria's federal structure, designed to accommodate ethnic, religious, and regional diversity, presents another significant challenge. While federalism theoretically decentralizes power and facilitates local participation, it can also produce fragmented authority, competition among subnational units, and policy incoherence (Ayoola et al., 2024). Pluralist pressures, including competing ethnic and religious loyalties, often lead political elites to prioritize narrow group interests over the common good. Rousseau's normative framework emphasizes the indivisibility and unity of the sovereign will; when political authority is dispersed or captured by sectional interests, the alignment between laws and the collective welfare is weakened, undermining legitimacy.

Role of Traditional Authority

Traditional authorities, including chieftaincies and religious leadership, remain influential in many regions of Nigeria. These authorities can serve as mediators of governance and channels for civic engagement, but they may also constrain the exercise of individual and collective political agency. In some cases, allegiance to traditional structures supersedes participation in formal democratic processes, producing parallel systems of authority that compete with the state (Ojo & Kugbayi, 2024). Rousseau's vision of civil freedom presupposes that citizens' political agency is exercised collectively and equally within the sovereign body. Where traditional hierarchies impose obligations or influence outcomes outside formal civic deliberation, the general will is diluted, and the social contract is incompletely realized.

Collectively, corruption, federalism, and traditional authority create structural conditions that impede the substantive realization of the social contract in Nigeria. Even when citizens attempt to participate meaningfully, these constraints distort the mechanisms through which the general will can be expressed. Rousseau's framework thus provides a critical lens for diagnosing these structural failures, highlighting that legitimacy is not merely a function of formal institutions but requires alignment between political authority, citizen participation, and the common good.

6. Reconstructing the Social Contract in Nigeria

The preceding analysis has shown that Nigeria's democratic institutions fall short of Rousseauian standards of legitimacy, primarily due to weak citizen participation, structural barriers, and misalignment with the general will. Reconstructing the social contract requires reforms that restore substantive engagement, enhance accountability, and realign governance with the collective good.

Participatory Reforms

A core avenue for restoring legitimacy lies in expanding meaningful participatory mechanisms. Rousseau emphasizes that citizens must be active participants in the formulation of laws to exercise civil freedom fully (Rousseau, 1762/1997). In the Nigerian context, participatory reforms could include mechanisms for citizen-initiated legislation, public deliberation forums, and enhanced inclusion of marginalized groups in decision-making processes (Ojo & Kugbayi, 2024). Such reforms aim to bridge the gap between formal procedural democracy and the substantive enactment of the general will, ensuring that political authority reflects the ethical foundation of the social contract.

Civic Education

Sustainable participation requires a citizenry capable of informed deliberation. Civic education programs can cultivate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for citizens to engage critically with political processes (Madueke, 2025). Rousseau himself underscores the role of education in fostering civic virtue and moral judgment, as individuals must be equipped to subordinate private interests to the common good (Rousseau,

1762/1997). In Nigeria, targeted civic education—particularly among youth and first-time voters—can strengthen the normative basis for collective decision-making, mitigating voters apathy and enhancing the legitimacy of governance.

Institutional Accountability

Legitimacy in governance requires that institutions operate transparently and are held accountable for their actions. Corruption, elite capture, and administrative opacity undermine both the effectiveness of citizen participation and the ethical foundations of the social contract (Suleiman, 2025). Measures such as strengthened anti-corruption agencies, transparent public budgeting, independent oversight bodies, and judicial reforms are essential for ensuring that governance aligns with the general will. From a Rousseauian perspective, accountability mechanisms are not merely administrative tools; they are ethical imperatives that protect civil freedom and validate citizens' participation. Rousseau emphasizes that the legitimacy of authority depends on its adherence to the collective will: institutions must reflect citizens' interests and preserve freedom by ensuring that public power remains responsive to the general will. Without such alignment, governance risks becoming an instrument of domination rather than public service.

Montesquieu provides a complementary structural framework to safeguard liberty and enforce accountability. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, he argues that the separation of powers—dividing political authority among legislative, executive, and judicial branches—creates a system of mutual checks that guards against tyranny. Central to this framework is the independent judiciary, which Montesquieu (1748/1989, Book XI, Ch. 6), describes as essential for liberty:

Again, there is no liberty, if the judiciary power be not separated from the legislative and executive. Were it joined with the legislative, the life and liberty of the subject would be exposed to arbitrary control; for the judge would be then the legislator. Were it joined to the executive power, the judge might behave with violence and oppression. There would be an end of everything, were the same man or the same body, whether of the nobles or of the people, to exercise those three powers, that of enacting laws, that of executing the public resolutions, and that of trying the causes of individuals.

An impartial judiciary is not simply another branch of government but a bulwark of freedom, enforcing the rule of law, protecting individual rights, and ensuring that public officials and citizens alike are subject to legal constraints. Judicial independence ensures that formal accountability mechanisms—such as oversight bodies, public audits, and anti-corruption agencies—are enforceable, translating ethical principles into tangible protections against abuse.

Tocqueville complements both perspectives by highlighting the historical and social dimensions of institutional legitimacy. He notes that in pre-revolutionary Europe, “Europe was still, as it had long been, a society of monarchies, in which all power seemed to flow from the sovereign” (Tocqueville, 1856/2000, Book I, Chap. 2), illustrating how concentrated power undermines citizen participation and accountability. Tocqueville's analysis underscores that institutions alone, without a culture of accountability and civic engagement, cannot secure liberty. Structural safeguards, ethical governance, and active citizen oversight must operate in tandem.

In the context of Nigeria, these theoretical insights are particularly relevant. Although the Nigerian Constitution formally adopts the doctrine of separation of powers, judicial independence has often been compromised by executive influence, political interference, and corruption in judicial appointments and tenure. Consequently, oversight institutions, anti-corruption agencies, and transparency measures frequently fail to enforce accountability, undermining public trust. In such an environment, Rousseau's call for governance aligned with the general will cannot be fully realized, Montesquieu's bulwark of liberty is weakened, and Tocqueville's warnings about concentrated power resonate strongly. Thus, institutional accountability requires both ethical and structural dimensions: ethical alignment with the general will ensures that governance reflects citizen interests and moral responsibility, while structural safeguards—especially an independent judiciary—ensure that this alignment is enforceable. Together, these dimensions highlight that effective governance depends not merely on laws or procedures, but on the interplay of moral legitimacy, institutional integrity, and citizen participation, which collectively protect liberty and uphold democratic legitimacy.

Federal Restructuring Debates

Finally, debates surrounding federal restructuring highlight the importance of institutional design in realizing the social contract. Nigeria's federal system, while intended to accommodate pluralism, often produces fragmentation and sectionalism that dilute the general will (Ayoola et al., 2024). Deliberations on restructuring—ranging from fiscal federalism to decentralization of authority—must be guided by normative criteria, ensuring that reforms strengthen, rather than weaken, the collective capacity of citizens to shape governance. Rousseauian principles suggest that institutional configurations should facilitate equitable participation and the realization of collective sovereignty, rather than entrench divisions or elite dominance.

Reconstructing the social contract in Nigeria requires an integrated approach: participatory reforms, civic education, institutional accountability, and thoughtful federal restructuring. These measures collectively aim to realign political authority with the general will, ensuring that civil freedom is substantive rather than merely formal. Rousseau's framework provides both the normative justification and the critical lens for these reforms, emphasizing that democracy is meaningful only when citizens actively shape the laws and institutions to which they are bound.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to interrogate the alignment between Rousseau's social contract theory and Nigeria's liberal democracy. The paper is divided into seven sections. After the introduction, which lays out the problem and methodology of the study, the second section charts Rousseau's social contract doctrine underscoring the role of civic participation as the pivot of political legitimacy. Placing Rousseau's framework alongside most recent political development in the country, sections three and four established that there is a disconnection between practice and principle in Nigeria's democracy. Section five identifies "Corruption and Institutional Weakness, Federalism and Pluralism and Role of Traditional Authority" as some of the factors militating against bridging the gap between theory and experience in Nigerian political system. Participatory Reforms, Civic Education, Institutional Accountability, encouraging Federal Restructuring Debates, among other are proposed as ways of moving Nigeria from its current state of crisis of legitimacy to active policy participations by its citizens. Consequently, Rousseau's theoretical framework provides both a diagnostic, analytical and normative lens for understanding Nigeria's current political challenges and its remedies. Particularly, Rousseau's adamancy that political authority is legitimate only when it reflects the collective will and ensures civil freedom highlights the moral and deficiency current Nigerian system that undermines the aspirations of citizens. Movements such as End SARS illustrate the collective aspirations of the people, also underscore the state's failure to institutionalize citizen agency. The study thereby bridges theory and practice, showing that Rousseau's principles remain deeply relevant for diagnosing and responding to the question of legitimacy of contemporary political systems, particularly in contexts marked by elite capture like Nigeria.

References

- Achebe, C. (1983). *The trouble with Nigeria*. Heinemann.
- Ayoola, T., Ibrahim, H., & Adeyemi, F. (2024). Federalism, pluralism, and governance challenges in Nigeria. *Journal of African Political Studies*, 12(3), 45–67.
- Chiamogu, E., & Chiamogu, P. (2026). Electoral participation and democratic legitimacy in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Political Research*, 15(1), 23–42.
- Gumbi, L., & Baba, R. (2024). Civic engagement and youth movements in Nigeria: Lessons from #EndSARS. *African Journal of Civic Studies*, 8(2), 89–112.
- Madueke, K. (2025). Voter apathy, distrust, and civic disengagement in contemporary Nigeria. *Journal of Nigerian Social and Political Studies*, 10(1), 55–73.
- Montesquieu, C.-L. de S. de. (1748/1989). *The Spirit of the Laws* (A. M. Cohler, B. C. Miller, & H. S. Stone, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.
- Oluyemi, J. (2024). Corruption, institutional weakness, and the crisis of legitimacy in postcolonial Nigeria. *African Governance Review*, 9(4), 101–122.
- Ojo, S., & Kugbayi, T. (2024). Democratic forms and the erosion of popular sovereignty in Nigeria. *Journal of Political Philosophy in Africa*, 7(1), 33–57.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1997). *The social contract* (G. D. H. Cole, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work published 1762)
- Suleiman, A. (2025). State legitimacy, popular sovereignty, and governance deficits in Nigeria. *Nigerian Political Science Review*, 11(2), 77–98.
- Tocqueville, A. de. (2000). *The old regime and the revolution* (S. Gilbert, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1856)