

NIGERIA IN THE MINDS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN PUBLIC TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS: AN EMPIRICAL SURVEY ON THE TRUST DEFICIT IN POLITICAL GOVERNANCE

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of political office holders' performance, economic inequality, and the gap between campaign promises and their fulfilment on the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions, as well as the extent of this trust deficit. The study employed a descriptive survey research design. A multi-stage sampling procedure was utilised to select a sample of 776 undergraduate students from colleges of education, polytechnics and universities in Osun State, Nigeria. Data collection was conducted using an 18-item research instrument titled "Empirical Trust Deficit Survey in Political Governance". The items were polytomously scored using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (SD, scored as 1), "Disagree" (D, scored as 2), "Neither Agree nor Disagree" (NAD, scored as 3), "Agree" (A, scored as 4), and "Strongly Agree" (SA, scored as 5). The instrument was validated by three experts in the field of psychology and educational tests and measurements, administered to a group of 90 tertiary undergraduate students in Osun State, Nigeria, outside the study area, and yielded an internal reliability index of 0.78. The collected data was analysed using descriptive statistics, specifically simple percentages. The results showed that undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions displayed a level of distrust in political governance due to the perceived low level of performance by political office holders. Additionally, the students neither agreed nor disagreed that economic inequality contributes to their distrust in political governance. Finally, the findings revealed a substantial gap between the campaign promises made by Nigerian politicians and their fulfilment, leading to the erosion of trust among the students. This study recommends, among other suggestions, the implementation of a robust monitoring mechanism in Nigeria to ensure the fulfilment of at least 60% of election campaign promises.

Keywords: Trust deficit, political governance, poor performance, economic inequality, gap between campaign promises and fulfilment, and tertiary institution undergraduate students of Nigeria.

Introduction

The trust deficit in political governance among Nigerians has been the subject of increasing attention, particularly due to its rise since the late 1980s. Numerous studies indicate that public trust in government is influenced by economic factors (for example, rising economic inequality), political factors, including scandals and job performance evaluations of elected officials and government institutions (Cohen, 2015), and social conditions such as crime and poverty (Mansbridge *et al.*, 2022). One study found that trust in government explains political attitudes and behaviours. For instance, declining levels of trust affect public evaluations of the government, voting intentions (Kim & Han,

2021), and preferences on a wide variety of issues, including policies on race and healthcare.

There have been ongoing debates on trust in public administration in political science literature. While some studies argue that citizen distrust is destructive, others argue that citizen distrust in political governance is rational (Kumar *et al.*, 2020). The loss of trust among citizens in political governance can have potentially catastrophic consequences as it can lead to loss of confidence in political leaders. The authors of this study align with the viewpoint of Kumar *et al.* (2020) that citizens' distrust in government is both catastrophic and rational. Regardless of factors such as socioeconomic status, religion, political affiliation, or ethnicity, citizens' loss of

trust in government tends to be reasonable. It is, therefore, important to understand the dynamics of political trust and distrust, encompassing the various reasons behind the erosion of trust in governance.

In general, trust can be defined as the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behaviour based on shared norms on the part of other members of that community. Therefore, trust is an instrument with which citizens evaluate government policies, programmes, promises, honesty, and justice, as well as politicians. Political trust is based on an individual's evaluation of the political sphere (Godefroidt *et al.*, 2015). Tyler and Jackson (2014), and Jackson and Gau (2016) suggest that trust is fundamental to governmental legitimacy. It affects citizens' attitude towards government information, including their policies and projects (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). According to Tyler (2006), legitimacy involves the belief that the authorities are trustworthy, honest, and care about citizens' welfare. As a result, citizens should not only accept their authority, but also voluntarily defer to their decisions and directives. However, when governmental legitimacy is challenged due to a trust deficit, citizens do not automatically defer to government policy directions. Instead, they doubt and question them, and in some cases, blatantly disbelieve them (Uslaner, 2013). The distrust among citizens has a direct impact on the effectiveness of political office holders.

During election periods in Nigeria, politicians, including those vying for political offices, make various campaign promises to citizens, including undergraduate students in tertiary institutions. These undergraduate students are enrolled in colleges of education, polytechnics, and universities throughout the country. They are often used as campaign instruments by politicians to win the trust of citizens. In response to the political trust arising from the campaign promises, undergraduate students form a significant portion of the citizenry who are influenced to vote for these politicians. They are promised quality education, domestic and foreign scholarships, reductions

in tuition fees, credit facilities for business start-ups, and immediate employment after service with the National Youth Service Corps, among other commitments. However, some of these promises remain unfulfilled during and after the politicians' tenure in public offices. Considering this context, this study aims to investigate the reasons behind the loss of trust in political among tertiary undergraduate students in Nigeria. Existing research has predominantly focused on the public's distrust and trust in federal, state, and local government institutions across the country. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to examine the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Specifically, this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To investigate the impact of political office holders' performance on the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions;
2. To determine the effect of economic inequality on the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions; and
3. To investigate the gap between campaign promises and their fulfilment, and its effect on the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. Does the level of performance of political office holders affect the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions?
2. What is the effect of economic inequality on the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions?
3. What is the impact of the gap between campaign promises and their fulfilment on the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

Literature Review

A comprehensive review of related empirical studies was conducted for this paper. One of the studies examined was conducted by Kumagai and Iorio (2021), who investigated the process of building trust in the government through citizen engagement as part of the governance global practice's programmatic analytics and advisory service.

In a related study, Godefroidt *et al.* (2015) developed a model of institutional trust based on insights from both cultural and institutional performance theories. The study's findings strongly supported the superiority of institutional performance theories in explaining institutional trust, while providing limited support for cultural expectations. The study concluded that national pride substantially encourages institutional trust.

Adelopo and Rufai (2020) explored the ways in which trust deficit undermines anti-corruption initiatives in the context of systemic corruption. The study analysed commentaries from Nigerian netizens on two critical corruption incidents that are significant to corporations. The study revealed poignant narratives highlighting perceptions of incompetence, dishonesty and confusion that undermine anti-corruption measures in that particular context. The study recommended that donors, international organisations and businesses play a role in encouraging and supporting beneficiary governments to secure and sustain trust in anti-corruption initiatives, which is seen as crucial for achieving improved outcomes.

Kim (2015) conducted a study on an effective government-public relationship building based on a synthetic approach to public segmentation. The study used a national survey dataset to examine variations in trust among different segments of the population towards federal, state, and local governments. The study found that there are different predictors for trust in each level of government.

Akinola *et al.* (2021) conducted a review study that employed a microlevel analysis of public opinion survey data (question by

question) to explore the empirical linkages of political trust within Nigeria. The study utilised data from the Afrobarometer Survey Round 4 carried out in 2008. The findings revealed that political trust, or trust in government in Nigeria is influenced by a number of factors, including economic performance, the media, interest in public affairs, religious membership, political participation, interpersonal trust, lack of basic needs, and management of corruption. Notably, interpersonal trust and the government's management of corruption were identified as the most influential factors shaping trust in government. Participants who reported high levels of interpersonal trust and those who perceived that the government was effective in addressing corruption tended to trust the government. The study did not claim to provide all the answers on political trust or trust in government in Nigeria, but it attempted to bridge the gap in the literature on the topic and offer insights for future research.

Materials and Methods

The study employed a descriptive survey research design. This approach is considered appropriate for this study as it aims to investigate the level of performance, economic inequality, and the gap between campaign promises by political leaders and their fulfillment, and their effects on the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. This research design can also provide a comprehensive understanding of the subjects' loss of trust in their political leaders.

The population of this study comprised all first-year, second-year, and final-year undergraduate students enrolled in colleges of education, polytechnics, and universities in Nigeria during the 2021/2022 academic session. These students were selected as they were deemed to be well-suited to assess the trust deficit among Nigerian undergraduate students in their political leaders.

This study had a sample size of 776 undergraduate students from Nigerian colleges

of education, polytechnics, and universities. In each category of tertiary institutions, 260 undergraduate students were selected, resulting in a total of 780 initially chosen for this study (Table 1). The study adopted a multi-stage sampling procedure. At the first stage, Osun State was selected through convenience sampling out of the 36 states of Nigeria to facilitate easy accessibility to study participants. The second stage involved purposive selection of two senatorial districts (Osun Central and Osun East). At the third stage, three local government areas, one from the Osun East senatorial district (Ilesa) and two from the Osun Central senatorial district (Boripe and Osogbo) were selected using the simple random sampling technique. At the fourth stage, three tertiary institutions (Osun

State College of Education, Ilesa; Osun State Polytechnic, Iree; and Osun State University, Osogbo) were randomly selected from each of the three local government areas. At the fifth stage, two departments (History, Fine and Applied Arts, Computer Science, Physics, Agricultural Science, Biology, Economics, and Political Science) were randomly selected from four faculties or schools of (Arts, Physical Sciences, Sciences, and Social Sciences). This results in a total of eight departments being included in the study. Lastly, at the sixth stage, 97 first-year, second-year, and final-year undergraduate students were randomly selected from each of the eight departments, amounting to a final sample size of 776 undergraduate students for this study.

Table 1: Sample selection format from the first stage to fifth stage

S/N	Senatorial District	LGA	Institution	Faculty/School	Department	Students
1	Osun Central	(i) Boripe	Osun State Polytechnic, Iree	(i) Arts	(a) History	97
2	Osun East	(ii) Osogbo	Osun State University, Osogbo	(ii) Sciences	(b) Fine and applied arts	97
		(iii) Ilesa	Osun State College of Education, Ilesa	(iii) Physical Sciences	(c) Agricultural science	97
				(iv) Social Sciences	(d) Biology	97
					(e) Computer science	97
					(f) Physics	97
					(g) Economics	97
					(h) Political science	97
Total	2	3	3	4	8	776

Source: Author's sample selection format

A research instrument titled "Empirical Trust Deficit Survey in Political Governance" was used in the data collection. The instrument consisted of three sections: Section A focused on poor performance by those in power; Section B explored increasing economic inequality; and Section C examined the gap between campaign promises and fulfilment. The instrument consisted of 18 items, with six items in each of the mentioned sections. A five-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (SD, rated 1), Disagree (D, rated 2), Neither Agree

nor Disagree (NAD, rated 3), Agree (A, rated 4), and Strongly Agree (SA, rated 5) to score the items.

The instrument underwent a validation process conducted by three experts, comprising one from the Psychology Department and two from the field of educational tests and measurements. To ensure its reliability, the questionnaire was administered to 90 undergraduate students in three private tertiary institutions outside the study area: Assanusiya College of Education in Odeomu, Osun State;

the Polytechnic, Ile-Ife, in Osun State; and Oduduwa University in Ipetumodu, Osun State).The completed questionnaires were collected on the spot, and the responses were compiled, scored, and coded using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. The internal consistency reliability for the instrument was determined using the Cronbach’s Alpha method, yielding a coefficient of 0.78 for “Empirical Trust Survey in Political Governance” . This coefficient indicated a satisfactory level of internal consistency for the study.

Subsequently, the instrument was administered to participating undergraduate students in their respective institutions, with the help of four research assistants who had received two weeks of training on research conduct and ethics prior to the fieldwork. Before administering the instrument, the researchers obtained the informed consent from the heads of departments of the participating students. Throughout the administration process, the research assistants were supervised to ensure the maintenance of an adequate testing environment. Descriptive statistics, specifically

simple percentages were used to address all the three research questions.

Results and Discussion

Research Question One: Does the level of performance of political office holders affect the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

To answer this research question, responses to items regarding trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions were coded and scored using SPSS version 26. The scoring system assigned a value of 1 for “Strongly Disagree (SD)”, 2 for “Disagree (D)”, 3 for “Neither Agree nor Disagree (NAD)”, 4 for “Agree (A)”, and 5 for “Strongly Agree (SA)”. The scores were then analysed using simple percentages as a descriptive statistical measure. The findings regarding the effect of the level of performance of political office holders on the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: The effect of the level of performance of political office holders on the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions

S/N	Item	SD	%	D	%	NAD	%	A	%	SA	%	Total Respondents	Total (%)
1	Poor performance	216	27.8	86	11.1	315	40.6	98	12.6	61	7.9	776	100
2	Insecurity challenges	59	7.6	14	1.8	64	8.3	219	28.2	420	54.1	776	100
3	Political challenges	213	27.4	107	13.8	0	0	256	33.0	200	25.8	776	100
4	Religious challenges	23	3.0	68	8.8	113	14.5	184	23.7	388	50.0	776	100
5	Different corrupt practices	0	0	86	11.1	0	0	246	31.7	444	57.2	776	100
6	Self-aggrandisement	90	11.6	180	23.2	59	7.6	409	52.7	38	4.9	776	100

Source: Author’s computation, 2022

Table 2 presents the percentages of the trust deficit responses from undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions regarding the level of performance of political office holders. Items that received a percentage response of 25.8% (representing 200 respondents) were deemed responsible for the trust deficit among Nigerian undergraduate students in their political leaders. The results indicate that out of the total 776 respondents, 27.8% (216 participants) strongly disagreed, while 40.6% (315 participants) neither agreed nor disagreed that political office holders in Nigeria are performing poorly. Furthermore, the responses from the undergraduate students regarding the poor performance of Nigerian political leaders in addressing insecurity, political, and religious challenges; involvement in corrupt practices and self-aggrandisement are as follows: 54.1% (420 participants) strongly agreed and 28.2% (219) agreed; 27.4% (213 participants) strongly disagreed, 33.0% (256 participants) agreed

and 25.8% (200 participants) strongly agreed; 50% (388 participants) strongly agreed; 31.7% (246 participants) agreed and 57.2% (444 participants) strongly agreed; and 52.7% (409) agreed, respectively. Hence, it can be concluded that undergraduate students in Nigeria exhibit a sense of distrust in political governance due to the perceived low level of performance by their political office holders.

Research Question Two: What is the effect of economic inequality on the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

To address this research question, the same scoring format, SPSS version, and analytical method used for the first research question were applied. The responses of undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions regarding the effect of economic inequality on their trust deficit in political governance are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: The effect of economic inequality on the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions

S/N	Item	SD	%	D	%	NAD	%	A	%	SA	%	Total	Total (%)
1	Economic inequality in Nigeria	129	16.6	150	19.3	331	42.7	106	13.7	60	7.7	776	100
2	Powerlessness of the poor	76	9.8	124	16.0	211	27.2	218	28.1	147	18.9	776	100
3	Views that the poor is not represented	231	29.8	319	41.1	153	19.7	43	5.5	30	3.9	776	
4	The poor in Nigeria feels reluctant	43	5.5	43	5.5	69	8.9	309	39.9	312	40.2	776	100
5	Unequal access to healthcare	185	23.8	102	13.1	321	41.4	111	14.3	57	7.4	776	100
6	Unequal access to quality education	8	1.0	16	2.1	5	0.6	211	27.2	536	69.1	776	100

Source: Author’s computation, 2022

The results as presented in Table 3 show that 42.7% (331 participants) neither agreed nor disagreed; 27.2% (211 participants) neither agreed nor disagreed and 28.1% (218 participants) agreed; 29.8% (231 participants) strongly disagreed and 41.1% (319 participants) disagreed; 39.9% (309 participants) agreed and 40.2% (312 participants) strongly agreed; 41.4% (321 participants) neither agreed nor disagreed; and 27.2% (211 participants) agreed and 69.1% (536 participants) in response to items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, respectively. Items with a response percentage below 25.8% (200 participants) were rejected as not significantly contributing to the loss of trust in political governance among the undergraduates. Hence, it can be concluded that undergraduate students

in Nigeria neither agreed nor disagreed that economic inequality contributes to their distrust in political governance.

Research Question Three: What is the impact of the gap between campaign promises and their fulfilment on the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

To answer this research question, the same scoring method, SPSS version, and analytical approach used for the first and second research questions were employed. The responses of undergraduate students in Nigeria on the gap between campaign promises and fulfilment on their trust deficit in political governance are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: The impact of the gap between campaign promises and their fulfilment on the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions

S/N	Item	SD	%	D	%	NAD	%	A	%	SA	%	Total Respondents	Total (%)
1	Little or no clue of fulfilling campaign promises	243	31.3	194	25.0	289	37.2	17	2.2	33	4.3	776	100
2	Ban on going abroad for medical treatment	21	2.7	55	7.1	0	0	599	77.2	101	13.0	776	100
3	Stability of naira at the international market	21	2.7	33	4.3	36	4.6	85	11.0	601	77.4	776	100
4	Upgrading all federal government-owned hospitals	99	12.8	101	13.0	338	43.5	127	16.4	111	14.3	776	100
5	The defeat of Boko Haram has failed	27	3.5	47	6.1	0	0	219	28.2	483	62.2	776	100
6	Over 60% of the campaign promises have failed	78	10.0	40	5.1	139	18.0	344	44.3	175	22.6	776	100

Source: Author’s computation, 2022

The results presented in Table 4 indicate that undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions responded to items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 as follows: 31.3% (243 participants) strongly disagreed and 37.2% (289 participants) neither agreed nor disagreed; 77.2% (599) agreed; 77.4% (601) strongly agreed; 43.5% (338) neither agreed nor disagreed; 28.2% (219) agreed and 62.2% (483) strongly agreed; and 44.3% (344) agreed, respectively. Some items in Table 3 had response percentages lower than 25.8% (200 participants) and were not considered significant factors contributing to the declining trust among undergraduate students in Nigeria in their political leaders. Thus, it can be concluded that there is a substantial negative gap between campaign promises made by Nigerian politicians and their fulfilment, leading to a loss of trust among undergraduate students.

Discussion and Conclusion

It has been observed that undergraduate students in Nigeria have experienced a decline in trust in their political leaders, which served as the motivation for this study. The analysis of the first research question reveals that undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions exhibit a lack of trust in political governance due to the low level of performance demonstrated by political office holders. This finding agrees with Adelopo and Rufai (2020), who identified incompetence, dishonesty, and confusion as factors contributing to citizens' distrust in political governance. The high rate of unemployment (lack of part-time jobs) and extreme poverty among undergraduates are among factors influencing this issue. During election campaigns, politicians make promises to these undergraduate students such as offering job opportunities while they are still in school, or employment after graduation. Additionally, politicians may also take undue advantage of their vulnerable situation by providing them with monetary gifts and food items. According to them, these practices are adopted to secure the support and votes of undergraduate students. In return, the students develop loyalty and optimism, actively supporting and praising

their political leaders. Consequently, they may overlook the poor performance of these leaders until the end of their tenure. The research findings also highlight the prevalence of dishonest leaders in Nigeria, who constantly provide misleading information about their performance. Moreover, the results indicate that addressing issues such as insecurity, political and religious challenges, corruption, and self-aggrandisement significantly impacts the perception of how political leaders are performing. These factors greatly contribute to the erosion of trust among Nigerian undergraduate students in political governance. This agrees with Iroghama (2012), who identified religious membership, political participation, and corruption management as key factors influencing political trust in Nigeria. The country experiences a high rate of insecurity, including banditry, kidnapping, political conflicts between different affiliations, and religious conflicts between different groups such as Christians, Muslims, and Traditionalists. Corruption, involving bribery, money laundering, misappropriation of funds, along with the accumulation of wealth by Nigerian leaders have also been found to exacerbate this trust deficit. This finding is consistent with Akinola *et al.* (2021), who also emphasized the influence of religious membership, political participation, and corruption management on political trust in Nigeria.

The findings from the second research question indicate that economic inequality is not perceived as the primary determinant of distrust in political governance among undergraduate students in Nigeria. The state of healthcare is a clear reflection of economic inequality in the country. A significant number of public and private hospitals in Nigeria are in a poor state, and most politicians opt to seek medical treatment overseas. A similar pattern can be seen in education, as politicians often send their children abroad to receive quality education while schools in Nigeria suffer from inadequate resources and precarious conditions. Furthermore, the findings highlight the power imbalance between the underprivileged in Nigeria, and influential politicians and wealthy

individuals in the country, in which the voices and views of the poor are not adequately represented in the political system. As a result, they feel reluctant to participate in politics, whether through voting or seeking office. These findings differ from previous studies by Tyler and Jackson (2014), and Jackson and Gau (2016) who found that trust is paramount to governmental legitimacy. According to Tyler (2006), legitimacy hinges upon the belief that those in power are trustworthy, honest and care about citizens' welfare.

The findings from the third research question three reveal a significant negative gap between the campaign promises made by Nigerian politicians and their subsequent fulfilment. This discrepancy has led to a trust deficit among undergraduate students in tertiary institutions. It was found that that more than 60% of the campaign promises made by the current administration, covering the period from 2015 to 2023, remained fulfilled even as late as 2022, seven years into its tenure. Furthermore, the findings indicate that Nigerian political often make campaign promises without sufficient knowledge on how to fulfil them. These findings confirm the study by Uslander (2013), who posited that when the government's authority is challenged due to a loss of trust, citizens respond by doubting and questioning the government's credibility, and in some cases, outright disbelieve them.

In summary, it can be concluded that low level of performance by political office holders, and the disparity between campaign promises and their fulfilment are determinants of the trust deficit in political governance among undergraduate students of Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The government should prioritise addressing issues related to security,

political and religious challenges, corruption, and economic matters, including unemployment, per capita income, and provision of welfare to the most vulnerable citizens. These issues should be tackled from the grassroots level.

2. There should be equal access to healthcare services, quality education, and the right to vote and be voted should be ensured for all citizens, including political leaders, in Nigeria. This means that schools, hospitals, and other humanitarian institutions in the country should not be neglected while politicians seek better services abroad for themselves or their families.
3. Within the context of Nigerian political governance, there should be a robust monitoring mechanism in place to ensure that at least 60% of campaign promises are fulfilled. Assessment of the fulfilments should be carried out during, before or at the end of a particular administration.

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