

ELEMENTS OF POLITICAL SCIENCE



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CHAPTER

9

PUBLIC OPINION AND PRESSURE GROUP

BY

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INTRODUCTION

Public opinion and pressure groups are concepts in government as well as Political Science that captures the actions and programmes of government in their different interpretations. It is against this background these two concepts would be clearly evaluated.

Public Opinion

This is another concept in political science which implies a wide and highly acceptable view of the people i.e. members of the public about certain events. This wide, held belief is usually centred on political matters. It is the collective belief of the aggregate number and members of the public over an existing political event. In the words of Olawale (1982), public opinion may be defined as important political views held by relatively large sections of the people. A good example is the agitation or request that has to do with the creation of more local governments and state after independence. This no doubt led to the creation of more states and local government in Nigeria.

It is imperative that opinions should be expressed for the primary purpose of influencing other people before we can now effectively and reliably refer to it as public opinion. If a group of individuals hold views that bothers on a number of issues but for one particular reason or the other fail to express them, such feelings or considered views remain private and very personal to the individuals concern. It is worthy of note that interaction and communication for the purpose of exerting influence are very important indicators in public opinion. The attempt can be directed at influence at the existing members of a community. For instance, the students at a recognized

school may be very receptive to the opinion of their school principal that his view begin to affect their attitudes. On a similar note, the public involved may be a monarch who tries to influence the attitude of his people on specific and very important issues or matters that bothers on government projects. The public might be the entire citizenry of a particular country, who are at the receiving end of attempts by those in government to influence their attitudes. Thus, Oyeleye (ed) (1990) opined that, the sum total of the various individuals who have feelings in either direction on an issue or development, constitute the public for that specific issue or development. Such issues, he reiterated may range from the mode of dressing for school children to whether or not education should be free and how we are being governed.

Formation of Public Opinion

Since public opinion constitutes the aggregate expressed views or feelings of existing individuals, the concern here therefore is to evaluate and examine how opinions are formed. It is pertinent therefore to identify some of the agents responsible for the formation of public opinion. Below are some of them, that may require some explanation;

- a. The family
- b. Peer groups
- c. The school
- d. Pressure and reference groups
- e. The mass media
- f. Opinion leaders

The family: The family is the first and primary stage of human development and consciousness. The self awareness and person views and feelings start from the family. In most cases individual opinion and belief is usually shaped by parental ideas and ways of doing things. Thus it is not surprise to see children exhibiting the same parental traits that bothers on ethnic belief, religion belief or preferences that are similar to that of their parents. It is equally correct to say that if a child is left at the mercy of a nanny or house help, such a child may acquire the attitudes of such surrogate parents.

Peer groups: This is another agent of public opinion that help to form it. The thrust of this group is that as a child development process evolves he interacts with different number of playmates who are within the same age bracket. These playmates who interact among themselves are referred to as peer group. They bring the varying views and feelings of their own families into the school and during interaction, may influence the opinions and attitudes that the other children in that same group would or may have acquired from their respective homes.

The school: The school is another place where public opinion is formed. This is because as the child grow, he does not only grows up in his home. He grows up in schools with special opinion about his teachers and classmates. Often time this personal view or opinion of his class teachers or class mates influence him/her.

Mass media: Mass media provide a large audience for the passing on of the views of other people. The mass media such as the newspapers, radio, television and magazines help to provide avenues to express their views to influence other citizens and decision makers, particularly these who are within the corridor of power adopt subtle means of shaping public opinion.

Measurement of Public Opinion

The popularity of any existing government often time is determined by what people feel and say about such government. Anyaule (1991), asserted that any sensitive government may from time to time like to know what opinion members of the public held about its policies and actions. Other independent bodies may also like to ascertain what the public opinion is on certain issues. Nevertheless, public opinion can be measured or determine through the following methods;

Election: The emergence of a candidate of a political party test his popularity during and after elections. The case of President Ebele Goodluck Jonathan is a living example. His failure after the election of 2015 is an evidence that he is not popular in the eyes of the public.

Opinion poll: This is another method of seeking the mind and opinion of the members of the public concerning the popularity of existing candidates in elections. Usually, questions from a selected sample of people and their collective views are reliable basis to articulate the views of the entire population.

Referendum: This is an empirical method of referring a political question or programme, policy etc, to the entire electorate for approval or disapproval.

Public demonstration: In societies where fundamental human right is encouraged regarding peoples right to candidly and very genuinely express their feelings over what they do not like can equally help to measure or determine the popularity of an existing government. Some are large turnout of public demonstrators over a specific issues could be a hypothesis to assessing the popularity or lack of support by members of the public.

Importance of Public Opinion

One of the many usefulness of the public opinion in every existing society is that it enables the government to know the peoples yearnings and aspirations. No existing government that worth its sort plays with the perception and feeling of the people about it governance. In an ideal situation such collective views and feelings could either mar or make the government during election period.

Another importance is that for governments that do not want to govern or oversees the affairs of the public by force, public opinion is a reliable means to provide an avenue for finding out the desires of the ruled.

Public opinion help to provide an avenue for opposing a tyrannical government or a government that is dictatorial. For example, public demonstrations, the use of placards etc are existing expressions of repressed public opinion which may undermine the popularity and legitimacy of a repressive government. This collective actions born out of genuine will have led to drastic change of government in some countries.

Disadvantages of Public Opinion

A major problem about public opinion is that in a highly and heavily politicized government it can be manipulated very easily and quickly by disgruntled politicians who might want to get popular by bribing the people to help them sing songs of praises about their policies and programmes when they do not merit it. Such is the case among some of the members of the public in Nigeria who are suffering from the poverty of the mind and stomach.

Pressure Group

This is a group of people with similar objectives and interests whose primary aims and objectives is to influencing government policies. Pressure groups are conglomeration of people who have similar objectives primarily to influence government policies and programmes to promote their common interests. In the words of Oyeneye (1998) pressure group may be defined as any group of people bound together by some common interests or profession who engage in some activities to influence government policies to their own advantage. Sometime, pressure group is synonymously used as interest group because of their objectives which are similar in the pursuit of their interests, bearing in mind too that in politics, people hardly act alone. The idea behind it is for people to work in tadem to produce collective results. Humprey Nwosu (1991) opined that pressure groups are organized associations which seek to influence government decisions and policies, without attempting to contest election to take control of the government.

Types of Pressure Group

Institutional pressure groups; These are pressure groups that exist to protect the interest of certain viable and important institutions within a given society. A good example is the military (army) that lobbies for a big slice of the national budget. Consequently, the army is invariably promoting the group interest just like the air force as well as the police can also promote their group interests through lobbying for a sizeable and reliable share of the national budget.

Characteristics of Pressure Group

The following are some of the characteristics of pressure group:

Pressure group exist to protect the interests of their members. For instance, Nigeria Bar Association (NBA) exist to protect and promote the interest of its members in form of lobbying government regarding policies that will affect the interest of its members.

Most association depend on contributions from their members and support from other sources.

They are usually very organize. This sense of organization enable them to achieve their collective interests or goals.

Advantages of Pressure Group

1. One good thing about existing pressure groups of different magnitude is that they defend the interests of their members.
2. They make government very attentive to the demand of its members.
3. The awareness and political education of the people are enhanced through the activities of pressure group.

Disadvantages of Pressure Group

The most unfortunate thing about them is that they encourage bribery and corruption through lobbying strategy in order to influence government policies and programmes. Pressure group is sometime tagged selfish as they only fight for the interest of their members without considering the general interest of their members.

The economy of an existing country is disturbed or destabilized by the strikes or industrial action embarked upon by its members.

Activities of pressure group sometime cause the downfall of government through riots and protest.

Their romance with political parties may lead to rigging of elections of a particular political party whose manifestoes is in line with their yearnings and aspirations.

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