

# Teaching Democracy amid Political Distrust: Civic Education and Political Socialization in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Democratic consolidation in Nigeria seems to be undermined by a deepening crisis of institutional trust and civic disengagement. Turnout of voters in the 2023 presidential election fell to 26.72 per cent, the lowest recorded since the return to civil rule in 1999, reflecting a widening gap between the formal apparatus of democracy and the dispositions of ordinary citizens. This theoretical paper argues that civic education and political socialization are foundational to reversing this trend, and that the current failure of both is a structural problem rooted in curriculum inadequacy, pedagogical weakness, and institutional neglect. Drawing on Almond and Verba's Civic Culture Theory, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, and Freire's Critical Pedagogy, this paper examines how Nigeria's formal civic education curriculum has failed to cultivate the democratic values, critical awareness, and participatory habits that a functioning democracy requires. It analyses how the hidden curriculum of the Nigerian school system decays and the dominance of passive instructional methods reproduces civic passivity rather than democratic agency, and how digital spaces have emerged as alternative sites of political socialization with both emancipatory and destabilizing dimensions. The paper recommends curriculum reform centered on critical civics, active-learning pedagogies, the integration of digital media literacy, and mandatory reforms to pre-service teacher education as the primary pathways for civic renewal.

**Keywords:** civic education, democratic culture, institutional distrust, Nigeria, political socialization

## **Introduction**

Civic Education, as a formal school subject, is the primary institutional mechanism through which democratic values are transmitted across generations. It was institutionalized as a compulsory core subject in Nigeria's basic and senior secondary schools by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) following the return to civil rule in 1999, to cultivate citizens capable of meaningful democratic participation (NERDC, 2007). Political socialization, on the other hand, is the process through which citizens acquire political values, beliefs, and orientations, beginning from childhood and shaped by formal schooling (Greenstein, 1965; Ugobueze, 2024). Together, these two processes constitute the foundation upon which democratic culture must rest. When both fail, the consequences are visible in the political behavior of the citizenry.

Democracy is not simply a system of government. It is a culture, sustained by citizens who understand their rights, trust the institutions through which those rights are exercised, and believed that participation is meaningful. Where that culture is absent or fragile, the formal apparatus of democracy, that is, elections, legislatures, and constitutions, tends to become a shell, procedurally intact but substantively hollow. Nigeria presents precisely this paradox. The country has maintained an unbroken civilian government since 1999, now exceeding a quarter of a century, yet the health of its democratic culture has deteriorated steadily across this same period.

The most visible symptom of this deterioration is a declining civic participation. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), voters' turnout in Nigeria's presidential elections fell from 57.54 per cent in 2007 to 53.68 per cent in 2011, 43.65 per cent in 2015, 34.75 per cent in 2019, and 26.72 per cent in 2023, the lowest figure since the return to democracy (Punch, 23 March 2025). The 2023 elections, in which only 24.9 million of the 93.47 million registered voters cast a ballot, confirmed what many observers had suspected: that a growing majority of Nigerians have withdrawn from formal democratic engagement (Chatham House, 2023). This withdrawal is not primarily a logistical problem. It is a crisis of political trust and civic identity.

Afrobarometer data places Nigeria among the most distrustful societies on the continent, with average institutional trust at only 30.00 per cent across key state institutions (Afrobarometer, 2024). Trust in parliament, specifically, stood at only 19.00 per cent in 2022, one of the lowest levels recorded among African countries surveyed (London School of

Economics, 2025). These are not passing fluctuations. They reflect a structural condition in which the legitimacy of democratic institutions has eroded to the point where disengagement has become a rational and increasingly normalized response among citizens.

This paper contends that the teaching of civic education and political socialization appear not to have yielded the desired results and that any serious effort to renew democratic culture in Nigeria must begin in the classroom. When civic education is weak, rote, and disconnected from lived political reality, it fails to produce citizens who feel capable of, or responsible for, democratic participation. Worse, as Freire (1970) argued, it may actively reinforce the civic passivity that characterizes disengaged political cultures.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is anchored on three complementary theoretical frameworks: Almond and Verba's Civic Culture Theory, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, and Freire's Critical Pedagogy. Together, they explain how democratic culture is formed, how it breaks down, and how education can either reinforce or interrupt that breakdown.

#### **Civic Culture Theory (Almond and Verba, 1963)**

The civic culture theory was propounded by Almond and Verba in 1963. The theory focuses on the comparative study of political attitudes of citizens and identifies three types of political culture: parochial, subject, and participant. In a parochial culture, citizens have little awareness of or interest in the political system. In a subject culture, citizens are aware of the political system but relate to it only as passive recipients of its decisions. In a participatory culture, citizens see themselves as active agents capable of influencing political outcomes. Almond and Verba (1963) argued that stable democracy requires a civic culture, a balanced mix of participant orientations with sufficient subject and parochial elements to ensure political stability and effective governance.

Applied to Nigeria, this framework reveals a society in which subject culture increasingly predominates. Citizens are aware of the state and experience its failures directly, yet they lack sufficient confidence in their own civic efficacy to engage constructively with its institutions. Civic education, if properly designed and delivered, it would move citizens from subject orientations toward participant ones. Where civic education fails, as the evidence in this paper demonstrates, has been the case in Nigeria, the subject culture deepens, and the conditions for disengagement are structurally reproduced (Enu and Eba, 2014).

### **Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986)**

Bandura propounded the Social Cognitive Theory in 1986. The social cognitive theory holds that human behavior is learned observationally through modelling. Individuals do not simply receive information; they observe the behavior of people in their environment, process the outcomes of those behaviors, and adjust their own expectations and actions accordingly. In the context of political socialization, this means that a student does not simply absorb the definitions of democracy or the rights of citizens written in a civic textbook. The student also observes, daily, how political leaders behave, how public institutions perform, and what the actual consequences of civic engagement are in their community (Akinlabi, 2022).

When the observable models in a student's political environment consistently feature corruption, electoral manipulation, security failures, and impunity, these real-world models compete directly with classroom instruction. Bandura's framework predicts that, where observed political behavior consistently contradicts what is taught in the civic classroom, the classroom lesson will lose credibility. Students learn not only from what they are told but from what they see. This has direct and serious implications for civic education in Nigeria, where the gap between the formal curriculum and observable political reality is as wide.

### **Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970)**

Critical Pedagogy Theory was put forward by Freire in 1970. Freire's critique of what he termed the banking model of education. In the banking model, the teacher deposits knowledge into students who are expected to store and reproduce it. Students are passive, and the measure of educational success is faithful reproduction of received content. Freire argued that this model is inherently depoliticizing: it produces citizens accustomed to receiving authority rather than questioning it, and who associate learning with compliance rather than agency.

Critical pedagogy proposes instead an education centered on dialogue, problem-posing, and the critical analysis of lived social and political reality. Applied to civic education, this means that students should not merely memorize the functions of the three arms of government. They should be equipped to evaluate how those arms function in practice, to identify when they fail, and to understand the constitutional and civic mechanisms available for demanding accountability. Willeck and Mendelberg (2022) provide empirical support for this position: the quantity of civic education matters little for democratic participation outcomes, but how civic education is taught matters substantially. Active learning strategies consistently show evidence of increasing political knowledge, civic efficacy, and political engagement.

## **Literature Review**

### **Political Socialization and the Role of Schools**

Political socialization theory, developed systematically by Greenstein (1965) and extended by subsequent scholars including Ugobueze (2024) and Akinlabi (2022), holds that citizens acquire their fundamental political orientations, including attitudes toward authority, beliefs about political efficacy, and dispositions toward participation, primarily during childhood and adolescence. Schools are one of the most important agents of political socialisation, alongside the family, peer groups, religious institutions, and the media (social and mainstream media). What distinguishes formal schooling from other agents is its systematic character; it is the only institution with the mandate, the curriculum, and the trained personnel to deliberately shape civic knowledge and values across an entire population (Ugobueze, 2024).

The relevance of this for Nigeria is grave. The informal agents of political socialization, including family narratives about government, community experiences of corruption, and peer discourse shaped by social media, consistently transmit negative orientations toward the state. If schools do not deliberately counter these orientations with substantive, credible civic education grounded in democratic values, they effectively cede the field to forces that reproduce distrust. Akinyetun (2021), in a study of 1,208 Nigerian youth drawn from the Nairaland online platform, found a significant positive relationship between youth political participation and both good governance perceptions and social inclusion. This confirms that where young people experience responsive institutions, they are more likely to engage and vice versa. That is, where institutions are experienced as unresponsive, young people tend to withdraw.

### **The State of Civic Education in Nigeria**

Civic Education was institutionalized as a compulsory core subject across basic and senior secondary schools in Nigeria by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) following the transition to civil rule. The curriculum covers democratic rights and responsibilities, governmental structures, constitutional frameworks, electoral processes, national values, and citizenship obligations (NERDC, 2007). The goal is to produce citizens with a strong sense of internal political efficacy, that is, the belief that they have the competence to understand and meaningfully influence the political system (Akinlabi, 2022).

Akinlabi (2022), in a study of secondary school students in Oluyole Local Government Area of Oyo State, examined whether formal civic education delivers on this objective. While students who studied Civic Education demonstrated some improvement in political knowledge, the relationship between civic education and genuine internal political efficacy was weak. The study attributed this weakness to the dominance of passive instructional methods and the absence of opportunities for students to practice democratic participation within their school environments. Aibangbe (2025), in a subsequent study of senior secondary school students, confirmed that the dominant instructional method in Nigerian civic education classrooms remains the lecture method, producing students who can define democracy but cannot practice it.

Enu and Eba (2014), in a qualitative study of the Nigerian Social Studies teaching context at the University of Calabar, identified the pervasive reliance on lecture-based pedagogy centered on rote learning and memorization as a structural obstacle to democratic citizenship formation. They argued that Nigerian educators must guide a transition from rote learning to critical thinking, and that achieving this requires restructuring both the curriculum and the instructional approach. More than a decade later, the structural problems they identified remain largely unaddressed (Aibangbe, 2025; Ugbede & Demesugh, 2025).

### **Political Distrust and Its Consequences for Democratic Participation**

The relationship between political trust and democratic participation is well established. Low institutional trust is associated with declining voter turnout, disengagement from civic organizations, and what Norris and Inglehart (2019) describe as a democratic deficit, in which citizens support democratic ideals but reject the specific institutions and processes through which democracy is practiced. In Nigeria, this pattern is fully and measurably developed.

Nigeria was rated among the African countries with the weakest institutional trust, with an average trust score of 30 per cent across key institutions (Afrobarometer, 2024). Since 2011, trust in parliaments across Africa has declined by 19 percentage points, with Nigeria registering particularly acute parliamentary distrust at 19 per cent in 2022 (London School of Economics, 2025). The consequences are direct and measurable. Nigeria's 2023 presidential election produced a turnout of only 26.72 per cent. Chatham House (2023) concluded that the winner's mandate derived from less than 10 per cent of the total electorate, a legitimacy deficit with serious implications for democratic governance.

### **The Agents of Socialization in Conflict**

Political socialization theory identifies several primary agents through which citizens acquire political values and orientations: the family, the school, peer groups, religious and traditional institutions, and the media (Greenstein, 1965; Ugobueze, 2024). In Nigeria, these agents do not operate in harmony. Each one transmits a message that conflicts with the normative democratic values that the formal civic curriculum is designed to instill. The result is a structural contradiction that the school, as the only agent formally mandated to teach democracy, is left to confront alone.

### **The Family**

The family is the earliest and most enduring agent of political socialization. In Nigeria, where generational experiences of government failure, corruption, and elite impunity are widespread, family narratives about the state are predominantly negative. Children grow up hearing that government cannot be trusted, that votes do not count, and that civic engagement carries risk without reward. This foundational orientation, formed before a child ever enters a civic education classroom, creates a deep resistance to the democratic values the curriculum seeks to transmit.

### **The School**

The school is the only agent with a formal mandate to teach democratic values. However, as the evidence reviewed in this paper demonstrates, the dominant instructional model in Nigerian civic education classrooms, lecture-based, rote, and disconnected from lived political reality, reproduces civic passivity rather than democratic agency (Aibangbe, 2025; Enu and Eba, 2014). The school, therefore, fails to counter the negative orientations transmitted by other agents and, in many cases, reinforces them through its own authoritarian administrative culture.

### **Peer Groups**

Peer groups reinforce the political orientations that young people bring from their family and community environments. In a context where civic disengagement is the norm among adults, peer discourse tends to normalize withdrawal from formal democratic participation. Young people who might otherwise be motivated to vote or engage with political institutions are often discouraged by the collective cynicism of their social networks.

### **Religious and Traditional Institutions**

Religious and traditional institutions command significantly higher public trust than formal state institutions in Nigeria (Afrobarometer, 2024). While this reflects the deep social authority of these institutions, it also signals to young citizens that legitimate authority and moral guidance are located outside the democratic state. This undermines the civic curriculum's effort to build confidence in formal democratic structures and institutions as the proper arena for collective decision-making.

### The Media

The media, particularly social media, has become one of the most powerful agents of political socialization for Nigerian youth. As Oyewumi and Akintolure (2022) and Akinyetun (2021) demonstrate, digital platforms circulate real-time evidence of electoral manipulation, corruption, and institutional failure that directly contradicts what civic textbooks teach. Without foundational media literacy, young people absorb these narratives uncritically, and the result is the hardening of distrust into a permanent orientation of disengagement. The school is therefore left as the sole agent mandated to defend democratic ideals that every other socializing force actively discredits. Table 1 illustrates this conflict across four key dimensions.

**Table 1: The Conflict Between Civic Curriculum Messages and Lived Societal Reality in Nigeria**

Agent of Socialization	Normative Curriculum Message	Lived Societal Reality
The State and Judiciary	Law enforcement protects citizens; the judiciary provides impartial justice.	Perceived institutional corruption, selective justice, and reported security force abuses.
The Electoral Process	Voting is a sacred civic duty; elections are transparent and produce accountable leaders.	Documented patterns of electoral violence, vote-buying, and a voter turnout of 26.72 per cent in 2023 (INEC, 2023).
Public Service	Public positions are held in trust for community development and citizen welfare.	Observable patterns of self-enrichment, weak public service delivery, and high youth unemployment.
The School	Education equips citizens for democratic participation and civic responsibility.	Lecture-dominated classrooms, rote assessment, and no authentic practice of democratic deliberation (Enu and Eba, 2014; Aibangbe, 2025).

*Note. Compiled from Enu and Eba (2014), Aibangbe (2025), Ugobueze (2024), and INEC (2023).*

Table 1 illustrates the structural conflict between the normative messages delivered through the civic curriculum and the lived political realities that Nigerian students encounter outside the classroom. This conflict, which Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory predicts

will undermine the credibility of classroom instruction, is a central mechanism through which civic education fails in Nigeria.

### **Digital Spaces as Alternative Sites of Political Socialisation**

Political socialization of young Nigerians has increasingly migrated towards digital platforms because structural deficits and rigid pedagogies constrain traditional school environments. Oyewumi and Akintolure (2022) argued that social media has evolved into a functional compass for civic education in Nigeria, enabling young adults to organize anti-corruption campaigns, track elections, and develop ideological democratic awareness beyond the boundaries of state-sponsored curricula. For a youth demographic that feels systematically excluded by state institutions, digital platforms offer immediate entry into political deliberations that the formal classroom does not provide.

Akinyetun (2021), in a study of 1,208 Nigerian youths on the Nairaland platform, found a significant positive relationship between online civic engagement and both good governance perceptions and social inclusion. This finding confirms that digital civic participation is not merely expressive but is associated with more positive democratic orientations. However, digital socialization in a context of deep institutional distrust also carries significant risks. Without foundational media literacy, online political engagement frequently occurs within polarised echo chambers, and algorithmic platforms can accelerate systemic cynicism. Table 2 summarises the dual nature of digital civic socialization for Nigerian youth.

**Table 2: Opportunities and Risks of Digital Civic Socialisation for Nigerian Youth**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Risks</b>
Civic Mobilisation	Rapid organisation of youth movements; real-time accountability tracking of public officials (Oyewumi and Akintolure, 2022).	Mobilisation can be manipulated by political actors using coordinated disinformation.
Information Access	Bypasses state-controlled media; enables access to diverse political perspectives.	Algorithmic echo chambers reinforce existing beliefs rather than enabling critical evaluation.
Democratic Orientation	Peer-to-peer civic discourse can build political awareness and democratic interest among youth (Akinyetun, 2021).	Without media literacy, online engagement can deepen alienation and harden distrust into rejection of democratic institutions.

*Note. Compiled from Oyewumi and Akintolure (2022) and Akinyetun (2021).*

### **How Schooling Reproduces the Distrust it Should Overcome**

The most important dimension of Nigeria's civic education crisis is not simply that schools fail to transmit democratic values, but that the structure and practice of schooling may actively reproduce the dispositions that democratic culture requires them to disrupt. This argument follows directly from Freire's (1970) critique of banking education and from Bandura's (1986) account of observational learning.

When civic education is delivered through lectures, when correct answers are defined by authority rather than arrived at through dialogue, and when students have no meaningful voice in their educational environment, the implicit lesson is that power belongs to the authority at the front of the classroom. Students absorb this lesson and carry it into their relationship with political institutions. A student taught to receive rather than to deliberate is unlikely to become a citizen who participates, demands accountability, or resists manipulation. Aibangbe (2025) and Enu and Eba (2014) confirm that this is precisely the dominant mode of civic education in Nigerian secondary schools, and the outcome is civic passivity rather than democratic agency.

The physical and administrative environment of Nigerian public secondary schools compounds this effect through the hidden curriculum, that is, the unwritten lessons communicated through the structure and conditions of schooling itself. When students learn about human dignity and state responsibility while sitting in overcrowded, under-resourced classrooms, the school environment becomes a lesson in state neglect. When student government elections are stage-managed by school authorities, students learn that democratic participation is performative rather than real. As Table 1 shows, the school itself has become one of the agents in which the conflict between normative messages and lived reality is most acutely experienced.

### **The Legitimacy Gap: A Bandura Problem**

Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory predicts that where observed behavior consistently contradicts what is taught, the lesson will lose credibility. In Nigeria, this is the lived daily experience of every secondary school student who studies the constitutional rights of citizens and returns home to a community where those rights are routinely violated. The result is exactly what Table 1 illustrates: a systematic conflict between what the curriculum teaches and what observable political reality confirms.

The framework of Almond and Verba (1963) explains what happens to these students over time. Citizens who accumulate sufficient evidence that the political system does not respond to their needs, that their votes do not produce accountable leaders, and that civic

participation carries risk without reward, will shift from participant orientations toward subject orientations. A curriculum that presents an idealized account of Nigerian democracy without honestly engaging with its deficits does not build a democratic culture. It builds cynicism.

### **Digital Socialization as Both Opportunity and Risk**

Oyewumi and Akintolure (2022) argued that the combination of social media and civic education is essential for navigating a peaceful path toward democratic renewal in Nigeria, and that curriculum developers should urgently integrate social media into civic education as a tool for building ideological democratic commitment among young adults. Their argument is supported by the empirical findings of Akinyetun (2021), which established a significant positive relationship between online youth civic engagement and democratic orientation.

However, as Table 2 makes clear, digital socialization is a double-edged instrument. Without the analytical foundations that only structured civic education can provide, online political spaces amplify the distrust and cynicism they should help to overcome. The implication is that Oyewumi and Akintolure's (2022) call for the integration of social media into civic education must be understood as part of a broader argument for media literacy: it is not enough to use digital tools in classrooms; students must be equipped to navigate digital political spaces critically and responsibly.

### **From Banking to Deliberation: What Better Civic Education Requires**

Willeck and Mendelberg (2022) synthesize the international evidence consistently: the quantity of civic education has little predictive value for democratic participation outcomes. How civic education is taught is the decisive variable. Active learning strategies, including deliberative discussion, simulated democratic exercises, student governance, and community civic projects, consistently show evidence of increasing political knowledge, civic self-efficacy, and political participation. Table 3 summarizes the key contrasts between current civic education practice in Nigeria and the recommended approach.

**Table 3: Current Civic Education Practice Versus Recommended Practice in Nigerian Secondary Schools**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Current Practice</b>	<b>Recommended Practice</b>
Instructional Method	Lecture-based; teacher transmits content to passive students (Aibangbe, 2025; Enu and Eba, 2014).	Deliberative discussion; problem-posing; simulated democratic exercises (Freire, 1970; Willeck and Mendelberg, 2022).
Curriculum Content	Constitutional structures; definitions of rights; government functions.	Critical analysis of how institutions actually function; accountability

		mechanisms; Nigeria's political history.
Assessment Design	Factual recall; multiple choice and short-answer examinations.	Analytical essays; civic project portfolios; reasoned argument assessment.
Teacher Preparation	No mandatory civic pedagogy training in most pre-service programmes.	Mandatory active learning pedagogy course for all Social Science pre-service teachers (NCCE mandate).
Digital Literacy	Absent from the civic education curriculum.	Integrated as a civic competency: source evaluation, misinformation detection, responsible online participation (Oyewumi and Akintolure, 2022).

*Note. Compiled from Enu and Eba (2014), Aibangbe (2025), Freire (1970), Willeck and Mendelberg (2022), and Oyewumi and Akintolure (2022).*

The reforms summarized in Table 3 are not beyond Nigeria's institutional capacity. The NERDC curriculum already identifies active citizenship and inquiry as learning objectives. The gap is between stated objectives and actual classroom practice. Closing that gap requires simultaneous action on curriculum content, pedagogical method, assessment design, teacher education, and digital literacy, all five components of a single interconnected system.

### **Policy Way Forward**

Based on the foregoing analysis, this paper offers the following policy way forward directed at the Federal Ministry of Education, NERDC, the NCCE, and the TRCN.

1. NERDC should revise the Civic Education curriculum at the secondary level to shift from rote-learning objectives toward competency-based outcomes focused on democratic deliberation, critical thinking about political institutions, and civic action.

2. The NCCE should make active learning pedagogy for civic and social studies education a compulsory component of all pre-service teacher education programmes, including deliberative discussion facilitation, student-centered inquiry methods, and the design of community-based civic projects.

3. NERDC should integrate digital media literacy into the Civic Education curriculum as a civic competency, equipping students to evaluate political information, identify misinformation, and participate in online civic spaces critically and responsibly.

4. The Federal Ministry of Education should ensure that student representative bodies are elected through genuine, transparent, student-led processes free from administrative interference.

5. WAEC and NECO should revise civic education assessment to include analytical and argumentative questions that reward critical thinking.

6. Nigerian higher education institutions and research funding bodies should commission longitudinal empirical studies tracking the relationship between civic education quality and political participation outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

Teaching democracy in a distrustful society is one of the most demanding challenges facing Nigerian educators. The crisis is real, measurable, and deepening. The trajectory of declining voter turnout, falling institutional trust, and civic disengagement documented from 1999 to 2025 reflects not only the failures of governance but also the failure of civic education to perform its foundational social function: the formation of democratic citizens.

The students in secondary schools today are Nigeria's citizens for the next half-century. What they are taught about democracy, and above all how they are taught to practice it, will shape the character of Nigerian democratic culture long beyond any single election cycle. The 2027 general elections are approaching. The deeper and more consequential deadline is the moment at which a generation decides, based on everything it has learned, whether democratic participation is worth the effort. Civic education is not the only influence on that decision, but it is the one most directly within the reach of policy. Nigeria must use that reach.

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