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POVERTY AND SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT: Democracy flourishes where citizens are secure economically and civic freedoms are upheld; however, entrenched poverty and shrinking civic space continue to undermine democratic consolidation. This study examines the relationship between poverty, shrinking civic space, and democratic governance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999-2026). While Nigeria has sustained a democratic system for over two decades, persistent socioeconomic deprivation and institutional weaknesses have constrained citizen participation and curtailed civic freedoms, posing significant challenges to democratic consolidation. Structural Functionalist theory, which conceptualises poverty as a dysfunction within the socioeconomic subsystem that undermines the effective functioning of political and civic subsystems, was adopted as a framework. The study relied on secondary data sourced from government reports, books, newspapers and peer-reviewed journal articles published between 1999 and 2026. Data were analysed using the qualitative content analysis method. Findings indicate that poverty constrains political participation, increases citizens' vulnerability to patronage and clientelism, and interacts with insecurity to restrict civic engagement. The study further finds that unequal access to information, education and digital resources limits citizens' ability to exercise civic freedoms and hold public authorities accountable. These conditions collectively weaken institutional accountability and democratic responsiveness. The study concludes that poverty and shrinking civic space are mutually reinforcing constraints on democratic governance. It recommends strengthening socioeconomic inclusion and social protection, protecting civic freedoms, improving security, expanding access to information and digital resources, and enhancing institutional transparency and accountability to promote inclusive and sustainable democratic governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Democratic Governance; Human Rights; Poverty; and Shrinking Civic Space

INTRODUCTION

Civic space constitutes a fundamental pillar of democratic governance, as it provides the enabling environment through which citizens exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. An open and inclusive civic space allows individuals and groups to engage meaningfully in public discourse, influence policy processes, and hold government accountable. According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR, 2014), a vibrant civic space is indispensable for sustaining development, peace, and democratic

consolidation because it ensures transparency, participation, and responsiveness in governance. Where civic space thrives, democracy is strengthened through active citizen engagement and the protection of fundamental human rights.

In Nigeria's Fourth Republic, which began in 1999, democratic governance has been sustained for over two decades. However, the country continues to face significant structural and institutional challenges that undermine democratic consolidation. Despite regular elections and constitutional guarantees of civil liberties, Nigeria's democratic experience has been characterised by weak institutions, declining public trust, and increasing restrictions on civic participation. Recent electoral cycles, particularly the 2023 general elections, revealed growing political apathy, low voter turnout, and heightened public disillusionment with democratic processes. These trends point to a gradual shrinking of civic space and raise concerns about the quality and sustainability of democracy in the country.

Pervasive poverty aggravates civic space constraints. Poverty is generally characterised not just by income deficiency but by inadequate access to quality education, health care, employment, and informational resources that enable people to fully engage in civic life (Alexander & Ibrahim, 2025). Individual citizens whose capacities are consumed by survival requirements often have no capacity, time or incentives to become involved in civic groups, political campaigns, or the organisation of collective action. The dependency relations fostered by endemic poverty may, in fact, increase reliance on political patrons who support dependent participation, thereby strengthening their domination of the state.

Studies such as Falode (2016), Olaniyan (2018), Agwuegbo (2021), Charles, Amobi & Uchechukwu (2022), and Anyim-Ben et al. (2023) examined restrictions on civic freedoms and their implications for democratic participation. Although these studies provide important insights into the political and institutional dimensions of civic-space contraction, they do not sufficiently explain how poverty operates as a structural determinant of citizens' capacity to access, exercise and defend civic space.

This article therefore examines the relationship between poverty and shrinking civic space in Nigeria's Fourth Republic and explores how this relationship affects democratic governance. The paper provides actionable recommendations to safeguard and broaden civic space, promoting inclusive governance and citizen engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Poverty

Poverty is a multidimensional concept that has been defined in various ways by scholars, but it generally refers to the inability to meet basic human needs due to insufficient financial resources. It is often understood as a condition where individuals lack adequate income to sustain essential requirements such as food, shelter, and clothing (Gilbert & Barigbon, 2015). In this sense, poverty reflects economic deprivation and limited capacity to support daily living.

Beyond income, poverty also encompasses broader dimensions of human deprivation, including limited access to education, healthcare, and overall well-being, commonly described as human poverty. It is closely linked to social exclusion, where individuals or groups are unable to fully participate in economic, social, political, and cultural life (Birchall, 2019). This exclusion may result from systemic inequalities that restrict access to opportunities and resources.

In Nigeria, poverty is driven by multiple interrelated factors such as corruption, unemployment, weak governance, inadequate infrastructure, and social marginalisation. Its effects are far-reaching, contributing to hunger, poor health outcomes, low educational attainment, and diminished quality of life. Vulnerable groups, including children, women, the elderly, and rural populations, are disproportionately affected.

Shrinking Civic Space

Civic space broadly denotes the enabling environment that allows individuals and groups within a society to exercise fundamental freedoms such as association, peaceful assembly, and expression (CIVICUS, 2020a). It represents a vital platform where citizens can exchange ideas, collaborate with others, articulate shared concerns, and work collectively toward improving their social, economic, and political conditions (Oxfam, 2020; UNOHCHR, 2014). Through this space, individuals and organisations are empowered to participate meaningfully in governance processes, shape public policy, and contribute to democratic development (CIVICUS, 2020b).

In essence, civic space constitutes the political, legal, economic, and social environment that facilitates citizen engagement in public affairs. It provides opportunities for people to organise, express diverse viewpoints, and influence decision-making processes. A vibrant and pluralistic civic space ensures that governments remain responsive and attentive to the needs and aspirations of the broader population (Agwuegbo, 2021). It also guarantees the enjoyment of constitutionally protected rights, enabling citizens to pursue both individual and collective interests without undue interference.

Furthermore, civic space plays a crucial role in promoting accountability and transparency. By allowing civil society organisations to operate freely, it strengthens mechanisms for monitoring government actions and preventing the misuse of state power. In such an environment, citizens can demand good governance, advocate for their rights, and hold public officials accountable. This openness fosters democratic consolidation and supports the functioning of institutions that safeguard human rights.

However, civic space becomes constrained or “shrinks” when governments and their institutions limit these freedoms and reduce their responsiveness to citizens’ demands. Under such conditions, democratic guarantees weaken, and institutions designed to protect rights become ineffective (Charles, Amobi & Uchechukwu, 2022). In Nigeria, despite the existence of democratic structures, there has been a growing trend of restrictions on civil society, freedom of expression, and public participation (Olaniyan, 2018).

Shrinking civic space is therefore characterised by increasing limitations on the ability of individuals and non-state actors to engage in civic activities and influence governance. This may manifest through legal constraints, censorship, harassment, surveillance, intimidation, or even violence against activists and organisations. Such restrictions undermine democratic engagement, weaken accountability mechanisms, and hinder citizens' capacity to contribute to social and political transformation.

Democratic Governance

Democratic governance is rooted in the principle that political authority ultimately resides with the people. As noted by Appadorai (2004), democracy refers to a system in which citizens exercise power either directly or through representatives elected at regular intervals. In a similar vein, Lipset describes democracy as a political arrangement that provides constitutional avenues for changing leaders while allowing a broad segment of the population to influence public decisions through competitive elections (Mahajan, 2013). This underscores the role of political competition, participation, and representation in shaping governance outcomes (Gauba, 2007).

Popular sovereignty affirms that the electorate holds ultimate authority, while popular representation ensures elected officials act in the people's interest. Popular participation emphasises active citizen engagement in political processes. The rule of law guarantees that laws are supreme and apply equally to all, and civil liberties protect fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, association, and property (Alexander & Ibrahim, 2021).

Governance, more broadly, refers to the exercise of authority in managing a country's affairs. Hirst and Thompson (1996) conceptualise governance as the control of an activity by some means such that a range of desired outcomes is attained. The World Bank (1993, 1994) defines it as the manner in which power is used to manage a nation's economic, political, and social resources for development. Similarly, Mann (1984), as cited in Fukuyama (2013), highlights governance as the capacity of government to formulate and implement rules and deliver services effectively.

In a democratic context, governance is expected to uphold accountability, transparency, justice, and respect for human rights. The United Nations Development Programme (1997) emphasises that democratic governance promotes inclusive decision-making, ensuring that societal priorities reflect broad consensus and that marginalised groups are represented. Ultimately, democratic governance extends beyond elections to encompass institutional integrity, human security, and the promotion of social and economic well-being.

Poverty, civic space and democratic governance: A critical synthesis

Poverty, insecurity, and civic space affect democratic governance in interconnected ways. Beyond mere absence of income, poverty implies lack of opportunity in terms of education, employment, service delivery, infrastructure, access to information, and political participation. According to Alexander and Ibrahim (2025), entrenched deprivation, enduring inequality and governance deficit have generated insecurity that manifests in acts of terror, inter-communal violence, political violence, armed banditry and kidnapping. Such negative implications hinder economic activity,

compromise socio-political stability, and distort processes of democratisation, preventing effective citizen participation in governance.

However, poverty is not synonymous with political apathy; the absence of acceptable living conditions can generate grievances that make citizens push for political reforms and change institutions of governance. When government is unresponsive to socio-political and material interests of the citizens, civic societies and other collective agencies may become key instruments through which they register their grievances and hold governments accountable. Here, civic space provides a platform through which citizens articulate grievances, organise themselves, and lobby public decision-makers.

Nigeria's civil society has been critical to the country's democratisation by enhancing transparency, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and inclusion in the governance process (Odeh, 2012; Uadiale, 2011; Falode, 2016). Nonetheless, Civic society has been weakened by challenges relating to resource deficits, disorganisation, loss of public trust and external interference (OvieEjumudo, 2019), limitations on protest, access to information and freedom of speech that have complicated interactions between citizens and the state (Oke & Atufe-Musa, 2021). These restrictions have become particularly problematic when and where poverty is widespread, and insecurity is prevalent. Restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of association and peaceful assembly have created a variety of challenges to the sustainable development of democracy in Nigeria, because of the difficulty they pose to vulnerable segments of the population trying to transform their grievances into prolonged political activism (Anyim-Ben et al., 2023).

Accordingly, poverty generates grievances, insecurity increases vulnerability, and limitations on civic space limit mechanisms for redress. Ultimately, achieving democratic consolidation in Nigeria goes beyond holding regular elections; it means enhancing the living conditions of citizens, ensuring their security, safeguarding civic freedoms and strengthening civil society institutions. An inclusive democratic system thus requires vulnerable populations to have opportunities not only to participate in voting, but also to organise, air grievances, challenge authority, hold people to account, and participate in public decisions.

Poverty in Nigeria

Poverty in Nigeria has shown a persistent and worsening trajectory since the return to democratic governance in 1999. Both the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and the World Bank confirm that economic growth has not translated into significant poverty reduction, as poverty has expanded both in depth and breadth across rural and urban populations.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the proportion of the population that was below the poverty line in 1980 was 27.2 percent; it jumped to 46.3 percent in 1985, fell back to 42.7 percent in 1992, and rose to 65 percent in 1996 (NBS, 2012). By 2004, the level of poverty continued to worsen due to poor economic diversification and legacy effects from structural adjustment; it was estimated that over 54 percent of Nigerians were below the poverty line (National Bureau of Statistics, 2005). As a result, poverty became even more acute between 2005 and 2010 as a result of increasing oil prices and revenue. In the National Bureau of Statistics (2009/2010)

poverty survey report, it showed that Nigeria's poverty rate rose to nearly 60.9 percent, indicating that more than one half of the population of Nigeria does not have access to basic things that people need, such as food, water, healthcare, housing, and so on (NBS, 2012).

According to Oxfam (2017), poverty and inequality in Nigeria are not uniformly distributed across geographical space. Variations exist at the national, regional, and state levels. Northern Nigeria shows a considerably high prevalence of poverty; the highest is in the North West (71.4%), followed by the North-East (69.1%) and the North-Central (60.7%). In contrast, South-West has the lowest poverty prevalence at 49.8%. South-South and South-East have a prevalence of 55.5% and 59.5%, respectively. The report also indicated that, on a State basis, Sokoto State emerged as the most impoverished with 81.2%, while Niger State had 33.8%. According to the report, in 2016, youth unemployment in Nigeria lay between 12.1% and 21.5%, with the youth underemployment rate being higher. By 2018/2019, the Nigeria Living Standards Survey (NLSS) conducted by the NBS in collaboration with the World Bank revealed that 40.1% of Nigerians (about 82.9 million people) lived below the national poverty line; poverty line was defined at ₦137,430 per person per year; rural poverty stood at 52.1% compared to 18% in urban areas (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

62.9 percent of Nigerians, or almost 133 million people, were multidimensionally poor. Deprivation is much more prevalent in rural areas, where up to 72 percent of people are multidimensionally poor, compared to 42 percent in cities (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). Substantial deprivation is noted across the indicators in living standards, education, health, employment, food security, sanitation and access to basic services (Tuki & Kwari, 2025).

Human Development Index (HDI) value for 2019 is 0.539, which puts the country in the low human development category, positioning it at 161 out of 189 countries and territories. Between 2005 and 2019, Nigeria's HDI value increased from 0.465 to 0.539, an increase of 15.9%. Between 1990 and 2019, Nigeria's life expectancy at birth increased by 8.8 years, mean years of schooling increased by 1.4 years, and expected years of schooling increased by 3.3 years. Nigeria's Gross National Income (GNI) per capita increased by about 58.0% between 1990 and 2019 (UNDP, 2020). In 2023, Nigeria recorded poverty rates of 56%, 61% in 2024, and 63% in 2025, respectively (The Punch, 2026). Rural poverty remains especially severe, with 75.5% of poor rural Nigerians; urban poverty was about 41.3% (The Guardian, 2025). This indicates a widening rural-urban inequality gap and deepening spatial inequality. 10 million Nigerians are estimated to have fallen into extreme poverty in 2025, raising the share of the population living below the international poverty line (US$3.00, 2021 PPPs) to 50.9 percent from 47.7 percent in 2024 (World Bank, 2026).

The aforementioned reveals a persistent rise in poverty despite economic growth, highlighting structural inequalities and weak redistribution mechanisms. Rural populations remain disproportionately affected, while recent increases indicate worsening living conditions, deepening inequality, and limited impact of policy interventions on improving citizens' welfare and human development outcomes.

Civic Space in Nigeria

Civic space in Nigeria is a complex, dynamic narrative spanning the colonial era to the present day. This history is marked by periods of repression, resistance, and resilience, reflecting the country's struggle for democracy, human rights, and good governance. During the colonial period, the British authorities imposed strict controls on political participation, freedom of expression, and assembly. Laws such as the Native Authority Ordinance of 1914 and the Sedition Ordinance of 1917 limited civic engagement and maintained British control. Despite these restrictions, Nigerians resisted colonial rule through riots, boycotts, strikes, and civil disobedience. Key actors in this resistance included nationalist leaders like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, and Margaret Ekpo, who played pivotal roles in the fight for independence (Falode, 2016).

Limited civic space during the colonial era helped foster unity and a collective political agenda among Nigerians. This period laid the foundation for popular struggles for political emancipation and economic empowerment, ultimately leading to Nigeria's independence in 1960. Furthermore, after independence, Nigeria experienced a tumultuous period marked by military coups, civil war, and political instability. The First Republic (1960-1966) was characterised by intense regional and ethnic politics, electoral malfeasance, and violence. The subsequent military regimes further restricted civic space, with decrees that normalised arbitrary use of force against civic engagement and dissent.

Despite these challenges, professional associations and trade unions like the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), and the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) played crucial roles in resisting military rule and advocating for democracy. Civil society organisations (CSOs) and pro-democracy groups emerged, fighting against military authoritarianism and promoting democratic governance (Odeh, 2012; Uadiale, 2011). Ihonvbere (1996) opined that these demands became necessary in the context of an unprecedented deterioration in the general conditions of living, increasing state repression and elite corruption, and a pro-democratic wind blowing across the globe.

Nigeria's transition to civil rule in 1999 marked a new era for civic space. CSOs experienced a resurgence, advocating for human rights, good governance, and accountability. Throughout the Fourth Republic, CSOs have played prominent roles in promoting credible elections, civic awareness, and advocacy for socioeconomic rights and pro-people policy changes. Groups like the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) and the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room have carried out extensive voter education, deployed election observers, and engaged with election stakeholders to improve the electoral environment. However, newer threats to civic space have emerged, often framed around national security and interest. Successive governments have been criticised for repressing dissenting voices, including arrests and detention of activists and journalists.

The development of civic space in Nigeria faces several challenges, including government repression, economic hardship, and security concerns. Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for growth and development (See Figure 1 below). The resilience and determination of Nigerian civil society, the increasing use of technology for civic engagement, and the growing awareness of human rights and democratic principles are all positive trends.

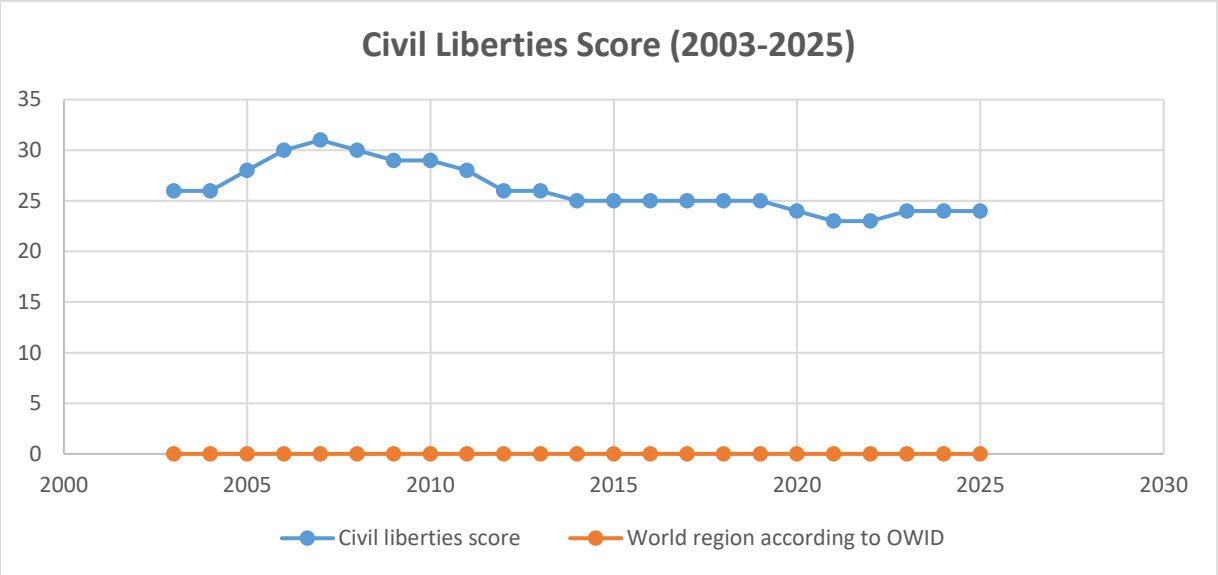

Figure 1: Civil Liberties Score in Nigeria (2003-2025)

Source: Freedom House (2026): https://ourworldindata.org/democracy

Civic space in Nigeria is a testament to the country's struggle for democracy, human rights, and good governance. From the colonial era to the present day, Nigerians have continuously fought for their rights and freedoms, often in the face of significant challenges. The future of civic space in Nigeria depends on the ability of civil society, government, and citizens to work together to promote democratic values, protect human rights, and ensure accountability.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Structural Functionalist Theory is adopted as a framework for analysis. The theory is a major sociological and political theory associated with scholars such as Émile Durkheim (1893; 1897), Talcott Parsons (1937; 1951), Gabriel Almond (1960, 1966), Robert K. Merton (1949), and John Meyer (2009). These scholars collectively argue that society operates as an interconnected system in which different institutions work together to maintain stability, order, and continuity. Each contributor expanded the theory by showing how social structures perform essential roles that sustain societal equilibrium.

In political science, Gabriel Almond further developed this perspective in his seminal works on "The Politics of the Developing Areas" (1960) and "Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach." Almond applied structural functionalism specifically to political systems, particularly in developing countries, emphasising that political development depends on how well different system functions are performed and coordinated. He argued that political systems, like social systems, are composed of interdependent structures that carry out specific functions necessary for system survival and adaptation.

From a structural functionalist perspective, society is understood as a complex and interrelated system composed of various parts such as the economy, political institutions, family structures, and civil society organisations. Each component performs specific functions that contribute to the system's overall stability and maintenance. When all parts function properly, society maintains equilibrium and social order. However, when one part becomes dysfunctional, it creates imbalance and affects the performance of the entire system.

Within this framework, the economy provides material resources, the legal system ensures order and regulation, the value system provides norms and shared beliefs, while civil society facilitates communication and participation. The political system is a subsystem responsible for achieving goals through legitimate policymaking and governance. It ensures coordination among different societal components and translates collective needs into binding decisions for the society as a whole (Beer & Ulam, 1968).

Structural functionalism is built on several key assumptions as outlined by Almond and Powell (1966). First, society is a complex structure made up of interdependent parts that work together to maintain stability. Second, every institution, role, or social practice serves a function that contributes to the survival and continuity of the system. Third, changes in one part of the system inevitably affect other parts due to their interdependence. Fourth, social systems tend toward equilibrium or homeostasis, with mechanisms in place to restore balance when disruptions occur. Fifth, social order is primarily sustained through consensus and shared values rather than coercion or conflict. Sixth, certain institutions such as the family, education system, and government are universal necessities for societal survival. Finally, social change is typically gradual and adaptive rather than abrupt or revolutionary.

With this theoretical lens, widespread poverty is understood as a major dysfunction within the economic subsystem. When a large proportion of the population lacks sufficient income and resources, they are unable to perform essential economic roles such as consumption, production, and taxation. This weakens aggregate demand, reduces government revenue, and limits the state's capacity to provide essential public goods such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. As a result, the system experiences imbalance or "social disequilibrium," which may lead individuals to seek alternative survival strategies, including informal or illicit activities. This further undermines trust in formal institutions and weakens systemic legitimacy.

Civil society, including non-governmental organisations, the media, and trade unions, plays a crucial role in maintaining integration and regulation within the system. It provides channels for expressing grievances, aggregating interests, and holding government accountable (Falode, 2016; Oke & Atufe-Musa, 2021). However, when civic space is restricted through censorship, legal constraints, harassment, or repression, this essential feedback mechanism is weakened. As a result, societal problems such as poverty and inequality may be ignored or poorly addressed, leading to what can be described as a "functional lag" in the political system. Without an active and free civic sphere, the government becomes less responsive to emerging social needs.

The theoretical implication is that poverty and shrinking civic space jointly undermine democratic stability. When citizens are economically deprived and unable to participate freely in civic

activities, civic engagement declines, trust in government erodes, and social instability increases. Conversely, when economic conditions improve and civic freedoms are protected, citizens are more likely to participate actively in governance and contribute to democratic consolidation.

In Nigeria, the interaction between poverty and restricted civic space creates a reinforcing cycle. Economic marginalisation reduces citizen voice, while suppression of civic expression prevents reforms that could address poverty. This weakens social cohesion, which is essential for sustaining democracy. In response to these pressures, the system often adapts through informal coping mechanisms such as patronage networks, religious organisations, and local vigilante groups. While these mechanisms may temporarily restore order, they do not strengthen formal democratic institutions or promote long-term governance stability.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study uses a documentary design and qualitative content analysis because it examines relationships between poverty and the contraction of civic space and democratic governance using secondary documented sources. The data were gathered from academic journals, books, and research reports produced by government and international organisations.

Purposive sampling criteria were chosen as the materials needed to relate to the relationship between poverty and civic space and democratic governance and civic participation in Nigeria. An intensive literature search of published data between 1999 and 2026 was carried out using key search engines, Google Scholar, SpringerLink, ResearchGate, and Academia, by using a combination of search terms like “poverty in Nigeria”, “shrinking civic space in Nigeria”, “political participation in Nigeria”, “civil society in Nigeria” and “democratic governance in Nigeria”, etc. The qualitative content analysis method was used to analyse the data obtained. Data collected across the different sources were triangulated in order to establish connections, differences, and convergence of similar information in order to reach common conclusions.

IMPLICATIONS OF POVERTY AND SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE FOR DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

Poverty and Political Participation

Poverty also hampers participation, not just because of the limited income that a poor citizen has, but also because deprivation limits freedom (time, resources, information, security) to exercise that participation in ways which extend over time. Citizens struggling with basic survival such as adequate food, adequate work to secure employment, food to live on and a safe abode etc., would have fewer resources at their disposal to attend a political rally or civic organisation meeting, to closely monitor election officials, to write their representatives or to engage in lengthy forms of sustained political action and advocacy.

This decreasing participation has also appeared in the electoral experience of Nigeria (see Table 1 below). Presidential election turnout has shown an observable dip compared with the elections held in 2003. It can be inferred from the data provided to show that turnout rates for presidential elections

are 52.3% (1999), 69.1% (2003), 57.5% (2007), 53.7% (2011), 43.7% (2015), 34.8% (2019), 27.1% (2023) and that turnout for presidential election, 2023 recorded 25,286,616 voting from 93,469,008 registered voters, making a turnout percentage of 27.0% (Independent National Electoral Commission, 2023).

Table 1: Presidential Electoral Participation in Nigeria (1999-2023)

Year	Estimated Population (Millions)	Registered Voters (Millions)	Votes Cast (Millions)	Turnout (% of Registered Voters)	Participation (% of Total Population)
1999	122	57.9	30.3	52.3%	24.8%
2003	133	60.8	42.0	69.1%	31.6%
2007	146	61.6	35.3	57.5%	24.2%
2011	162	73.5	39.5	53.7%	24.4%
2015	181	68.8	30.1	43.7%	16.6%
2019	201	84.0	29.4	34.8%	14.6%
2023	223	93.5	25.3	27.1%	11.3%

Note: Figures are approximate but widely cited from INEC reports, election databases, and demographic estimates.

Between 2003 and 2023, the number of registered voters rose by more than 50%, while the number of voters participating in elections dropped significantly, from around 42 million voters in 2003 to just over 25.3 million in 2023. Consequently, the turnout rate dropped drastically, by about 42 percentage points from 69.1% in 2003 to around 27% in 2023, clearly a massive decline in electoral participation despite an ever-increasing registered electorate.

The decline does not imply that poverty leads to disenchantment with the electorate. Turnout depends on the interplay between several factors, including credibility of elections, security, mobilisation of voters, confidence in institutions, a sense of empowerment, efficiency of electoral management, competition, and so on. To be sure, serious flaws, low confidence, violence, reported voter suppression, and a historic low turnout of approximately 27 percent in 2023 characterised the elections held (Freedom House, 2025).

This could point to a state of poverty that constrains its citizens' ability to develop robust civic engagement, even though constitutionally protected legal citizenship may exist, with a gap between what Freedom House (2025) calls "formal" (not necessarily "actual") political inclusion. Citizens have the right to register, vote, associate and communicate political preferences; however, they do not have the tools, security or information to enforce that right continually.

Poverty, Patronage and Clientelism

Persistent poverty provides the environment under which material inducements become a politically meaningful tool, particularly in societies where citizens have limited opportunities to secure formal employment, enjoy social protection, or rely on public services. But poor people are

not necessarily predisposed to sell their votes or enter into clientelism. Instead, poverty seems to intersect with political institutions, social ties, party organisation and the strategies of elites.

Confirming this assertion, Awoyemi (2025), using data from Afrobarometer's Round 8, showed that poverty alone did not significantly explain targeting for vote buying. Other social and political traits also influenced how electoral inducements were distributed. However, socioeconomic hardship boosts the political attraction of immediate material gains where formal social protection is scarce. Political parties exploit this vulnerability through cash transfers, food, gifts, job offers, and promises of electoral inducements. Clientelistic links can also depend on the deployment of state resources and the utilisation of social protection programmes during elections.

Likewise, Demarest (2022) demonstrates how Nigerian representatives are induced to funnel resources to members of their party and political elites instead of the wider constituency, thereby reinforcing narrow clientelism. This means that patronage modifies the accountability relationship between constituents and representatives-instead of being sensitive mostly to broader policy concerns, elected officials become more responsive to well-organised networks, party cadres and powerful patrons. It should be noted that poverty is not the sole cause of clientelism. Rather, socioeconomic deprivation leads citizens to be more susceptible to clientelistic approaches when the political institutions allow the trade of material resources for political support.

This kind of relationship weakens programmatic competition by giving more political weight to immediate material gains over long-term policy goals. Therefore, vote buying, along with other solidarity inducements, contributes to weak accountability and transactional forms of political participation (Nwagwu et al., 2022; Shehu et al., 2025).

Poverty, Insecurity and Shrinking Civic Space

People do not practise political and civic rights in a vacuum. In societies where terrorism, banditry, kidnappings, communal conflicts and other symptoms of insecurity are pervasive, the physical and psychological circumstances of collective action become even harder to sustain. This is supported by the findings of the European Union Agency for Asylum (2026), which placed Nigeria 148th out of 163 countries in the 2025 Global Peace Index and sixth in the 2024 Global Terrorism Index among the most affected countries by terrorism.

While this doesn't directly measure civic space, it provided empirical data for the context within which civilians, their community groups and their organised associations operate. Moreover, in relation to displacement and mobility, indications from Freedom House (2025) demonstrated that in excess of 2 million people in northeastern Nigeria were displaced from home due to factors such as insecurity and environmental degradation. Similarly, from January to July 2024, more than 2,000 kidnappings had been reported and insecurity, in general, could limit the ability to attend public meetings, participate in protest actions, community group meetings and engage in election processes.

Anyim-Ben et al. (2023) contend that suppression of human rights, limited civil society engagement, and erosion of social cohesion affect freedom of expression, association and peaceful

assembly. Freedom House (2025a, 2025b, 2026) similarly documents intimidation, arrests of protesters and journalists, restrictions on expression and the use of legal and administrative mechanisms as constraints on civic activity.

Accordingly, poverty enhances exposure to the factors of insecurity, which in turn restricts the willingness and ability of people to engage in civil and political participation and such restricted space in return hinders people's collective ability to agitate for a resolution of security challenges and poverty.

Access to Information, Civic Freedoms and Citizen Engagement

Democratic participation is not simply about having the formal freedoms of expression and association; citizens also need effective access to information, communications technologies, education and institutional channels for demanding, holding government to account. Nigeria's present-day civic environment exemplifies this gulf between formal rights and effective practice. According to Freedom House (2026a) country rating (44/100 and "Partly Free") and its 2025b internet freedom ratings (59/100, "Partly Free"), journalists, protesters and online activists, in particular, face continuing restrictions, and the physical infrastructure required for internet access is still inadequate.

Unequal capacity to participate is also likely to have a socio-economic dimension. Poor households, for instance, are less likely than more affluent citizens to have the necessary material assets to access information or information. Indeed, Nigeria's NBS (2022) finds that multidimensional poverty affects education, housing, health, employment and access to the basics: indicators all relevant to unequal civic capabilities.

The above suggest an economic cycle of inequality, feeding itself: if citizens lack access to, for example, a decent education, to electricity or to digital technology, or if they can't easily access accurate and impartial information, then the constitutional promise of the right to speak up and to participate in public life, remains largely in the hands of better resourced citizens and more organised groups whose ability to hold government to account and, in general, participate effectively in political processes are enhanced by their economic position. In other words, civic space should not simply be conceptualised in terms of formal rules and institutions; its real quality is partly dependent on the socioeconomic capacity to give effect to constitutionally guaranteed rights.

Poverty, Institutional Accountability and Democratic Governance

Key accountability rests on citizens' access to information, ability to assemble, hold public officials accountable and seek explanations for government policies. Such systems fail where citizens are either materially impoverished, physically insecure or isolated from social and political networks. Considering Nigeria's corruption context, Transparency International (2025) ranked Nigeria 142nd in terms of corruption out of a possible 182 countries with a score of 26 out of a hundred.

This score remained unchanged from 2024, but Nigeria's ranking worsened from 140th to 142nd. This provides insight into the broader institutional environment beyond poverty and its direct association with corruption, where poverty, accountability, and democracy come into intersection. Wealthy political actors and their political patrons influence politics to a disproportionately greater extent in Nigeria. According to Freedom House (2026), citizens' political decision-making in Nigeria is still heavily shaped by vote-buying, intimidation, and the role of wealthy political sponsors. Demarest (2022) contends that a narrow clientelist relationship between political actors and their political party may lack any accountability framework. Strong patronage or transactional relations between two parties make accountability weak, and so they can measure their politicians by short-term benefits.

With political patronage, it reduces the incentives of political actors to deliver public goods on a mass scale programmatically rather than giving services through narrow patron networks. Accordingly, the weakening of institutions also reproduces socioeconomic deprivation. In a country where public institutions fail to produce adequate jobs, or services such as infrastructure, health and education as well as social security, residents will be dependent on informal or political patrons for support. As a result of dependency, power or political clientage will increase, thus leaving residents with weak power to demand the reform of the institutions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the intricate interplay between poverty and civic space in shaping democratic governance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. From the perspective of Structural Functionalism, society is composed of interdependent subsystems, including economic, political, and civic, that must function harmoniously to maintain stability and social order (Almond & Powell, 1966). Poverty represents a dysfunction in the economic subsystem, creating imbalances that reverberate through the political and civic subsystems and lead to shrinking civic space and weakened democratic accountability.

Pervasive poverty limits citizens' capacity to participate fully in political and civic activities by reducing access to education, information, and resources necessary for informed participation, contributing to political apathy and low voter turnout. The study aligns with previous research indicating that economic deprivation correlates with limited civic engagement and reduced political voice (World Bank, 2022). In Structural Functionalist terms, the economic subsystem's dysfunction directly disrupts the political subsystem's effectiveness, as citizens are unable to fulfil their roles as active participants in governance.

Civic space in Nigeria has increasingly contracted due to both structural and institutional factors, as governmental restrictions on protests, civil society regulation, and selective enforcement of laws constrain freedom of association and expression. The study highlights how poverty exacerbates these restrictions, as economically marginalised groups lack the capacity to organise, advocate, or resist. Structural Functionalism interprets this as a failure of societal integration: when one subsystem falters, it generates feedback problems that weaken overall system stability, reflected in compromised democratic governance.

There is a cyclical relationship between poverty, patronage politics, and corruption. Economic deprivation incentivises clientelism, as citizens rely on political elites for access to resources. This undermines democratic principles, fosters elite capture of institutions, and restricts the civic space available for independent organisations. Within the Structural Functionalist framework, these dynamics reflect the interdependence of subsystems: dysfunction in the economic subsystem promotes maladaptive behaviours in the political subsystem, further limiting civic freedoms.

Structural Functionalism illuminates the mechanisms through which socioeconomic dysfunction translates into civic and political vulnerabilities, offering a holistic lens to assess democratic governance. Accordingly, democracy is not solely a function of political institutions but is deeply conditioned by the socioeconomic realities and civic capacities of the populace.

Conclusion

The study concludes that poverty and the contraction of civic space constitute deeply intertwined constraints that compromise democratic governance in Nigeria. Poverty is not merely about a lack of means but about limiting individuals' capacity and access to education, information, employment, security and digital resources that foster authentic democratic engagement. Consequently, constitutional rights of citizens may be in place on paper (to vote, associate, communicate views and engage the government), but their effective realisation may be uneven across the populace. Limited participation in the electoral process reflects some of these barriers to substantive democratic engagement, although official membership in political organisations remains high.

The paper also reveals how socioeconomic exclusion can render a section of the citizenry highly susceptible to patronage and clientelist politics. This is particularly true in the context of a dearth of access to adequate public services and social protection, and in conditions where security challenges are pervasive, as in the instance of terrorism, kidnapping, banditry and displacement. Unequal access to ICTs further limits the chances for citizen-initiated collective action and the demand for accountability, particularly in the context of insecurity which hinders citizens' movement, aggregation and communication. The intertwining of poverty, insecurity, contraction of civic space, and weakened accountability is thus a crucial constraint to democratic consolidation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen democratic governance in Nigeria.

i. Government should create more opportunities for employment and expand social protection, access to quality education, health care and basic infrastructure so that citizens will become less vulnerable and more engaged.
ii. Governments should ensure citizens' freedom of expression, association, assembly and to information, and desist from arbitrary detention, harassment and intimidation, in any form, as it undermines legitimate citizen action.

iii. Governments (at federal, state and local levels) should fortify community-centred security approaches aimed at fighting the menace of terrorism, banditry, kidnapping and communal disturbances, and take steps to ensure the security of persons in precarious communities where insecurities hinder meaningful participation.
iv. Democratic and governing structures, at all tiers of government, should be made more transparent, responsive, and inclusive. A rigorous commitment to fighting corruption, vote buying, and political patronage is necessary.
v. Governments and other stakeholders must bridge the digital and informational divide by ensuring widespread and affordable access to the internet, electricity, basic social education and digital skills. This will make disadvantaged citizens equal stakeholders in Nigeria's democratisation.

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