United States Foreign Aid and Political Development in Nigeria: Strengthening Democracy and Capacity Building for Civil Societies

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Abstract

This study examined United States foreign aid and political development in Nigeria with emphasis on strengthening democracy and capacity building for civil societies. The objective of the study is to analyze how the US foreign aid has impacted democratic institutions and political development in Nigeria. The qualitative descriptive analysis method was adopted and secondary and primary data were used. Experts on US Foreign Aids were interviewed to complement data obtained from secondary sources including books, journals, articles, magazines, national dailies, the internet and other official documents containing the relevant information required for success of this research work. The study finds that U.S. assistance to Nigerians has contributed to the strengthening of democratic institutions, promotion of good governance and empowering of Civil Society Organizations to play a substantial role in preserving democracy and good governance. However, there are still challenges of democratic development in the country, which need to be addressed. The study recommends that Nigeria needs to strengthen its partnership with the United States government, and intensify effort towards improving institutional capacity building for the overall political development, good governance and development

Keywords: Capacity Building, Civil Society, Democratic Development, Foreign Aid, Political Development

Introduction

Foreign aid, or foreign assistance, is a key tool used by developed countries to support the socio-political and economic advancement of developing nations, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (Aluko & Arowolo, 2020). This aid can take various forms—development loans, political and military support, technical assistance, grants, and commodity programs—intended to support growth while also serving donor interests (Abdul, Adamu, & Ogwuche, 2022; Girma, 2021). As an instrument of influence, foreign aid promotes free and fair elections, institutional development, and civil society strengthening through both ideological and technical means (Anjorin, 2023; Sani & Dukawa, 2024). In Nigeria, despite returning to democracy in 1999, electoral fraud, corruption, weak institutions, and low accountability persist (Garba & Shaapera, 2018; Freedom House, 2023). These challenges reveal that democratic transition has not necessarily produced deep democratic

governance, making U.S. foreign assistance especially vital in addressing institutional and governance deficits. This is worrisome because, the problem of democratic development and good governance have regarded as some of the major reasons for conflict and security challenges in Nigeria, including the menace of Boko Haram (Garba, 2018).

The United States provides both material and strategic support to advance democracy, security, and development globally (Fagge, 2022; Agunbiade & Mohammed, 2018). Nigeria—due to its size, population, and regional influence—is one of the top African recipients of U.S. democratic assistance (Jega, 2020; Olatujoye, Fajobi, & Adeniran, 2022). Historically, U.S.–Nigeria relations evolved from Cold War diplomacy to post-1999 support for democratic consolidation, underscoring shared geopolitical priorities (Garba, Izah & Akuva, 2021). U.S. democracy assistance reaches Nigeria through initiatives like the Africa Regional Democracy Fund and programs that strengthen electoral systems and civil society. In practice, these efforts aim to improve governance, enhance institutional accountability, and promote civic engagement through funding mechanisms such as the Democracy Special Account, Economic Support Fund (ESF), and Overseas Contingency Operations (Acosta & Carothers, 2020; Adamu, 2020; Murshed & Khanaum, 2015).

Given Nigeria's internal governance weaknesses and widespread public distrust, U.S. aid plays a crucial role in sustaining democratic development. Nigerian institutions often lack autonomy and enforcement capacity, while civil society struggles with resources and reach. U.S.-funded initiatives like the Strengthening Civic Advocacy and Local Engagement (SCALE) project have helped civil society actors demand transparency and influence reform (USAID, 2022). According to Garba & Shaapera (2018), the success of Nigeria's democratic deepening depends heavily on leveraging such international partnerships to reinforce local reform efforts.

Despite notable progress, several challenges continue to hinder the effectiveness of foreign aid. One critical concern is that donor-driven models are often designed with limited consideration of local contexts, priorities, and institutional dynamics. As a result, such interventions may fail to gain local ownership, leading to reduced effectiveness, implementation gaps, and difficulties in achieving sustainable outcomes (Aluko & Arowolo, 2020; Fagge, 2022). These limitations highlight the need for more adaptive and context-specific approaches that are informed by grassroots realities and foster genuine collaboration between donors and local stakeholders.

Nigeria's importance to U.S. foreign policy, as Africa's most populous country and a regional power strengthens the case for sustained democracy assistance. Its active role in ECOWAS and the African Union makes Nigeria a critical player in regional stability and security (Adebajo, 2016; Pham, 2020; Garba, 2023a; Garba, 2023b). As Garba, Izah & Akuva (2021) have noted, this strategic relevance has positioned Nigeria at the center of U.S. efforts to promote governance, counterterrorism, and regional cooperation. Nonetheless, recurring election flaws and institutional weaknesses raise questions about the long-term impact of external support (Lowenthal, 2015; Whitehead, 2019; Carothers, 2020; Hyde-Price, 2021). These challenges are compounded by internal factors such as elite dominance, weak political accountability, and public disillusionment with democratic processes (Garba & Shaapera, 2018; Garba, Izah & Akuva, 2021).

This paper explores U.S. foreign aid and political development in Nigeria, focusing on democracy promotion and civil society capacity building. It analyzes the effectiveness of U.S. support on democratic institutions, transition strategies, and key actors such as YIAGA, INEC, and USAID.

Conceptualization

Democracy

Democracy, frequently lauded as the epitome of political structures, occupies a crucial role in modern worldwide discussions due to its significant impact on human rights, governance, and societal advancement. To Hyde-Price (2021) democracy from the purview of political science, the term has often been used in three fairly distinct senses, even though they refer to aspects of the same phenomenon. In a general sense according to Greg (2018) "democracy" is used to describe a system of government in which ultimate power (or sovereignty) rests with the people against other forms of government in which the final decision-making power rests with an individual (monarchy) or with a small number (aristocracy). The term democracy is used in political science. This is the institutional sense. In this sense, Ogbe and Ojie (2020) viewed democracy as a system of government in which the powers of government are divided amongst different institutions such that some institutions are responsible for making laws, while others are responsible for executing the laws and yet a third institution may be responsible for mediating or adjudicating in disputes between different individual or groups who violate the laws of the land.

Political Development

Political development is basically a process that is concerned with the improvement of institutions, attitudes and values that form the political system of a society or nation. Political expert Lauren and Thomas (2019) provides the dimensions / elements of political development as follows: "Political development as: increasing equality between individuals in relation to the political system, increasing the capacity of the political system in relation to the environment, and increasing the differentiation and specialization of institutions and structures in the political system. These three dimensions are always at the "bottom and heart of the development process".

Igwe (2024) posit that political development enhances the state's capacity to mobilize and allocate resources, to process policy inputs into implementable outputs. This assists with problem-solving and adaptation to environmental changes and goal realization. The contemporary notion of good governance also dwells on efficient, effective, and non-corrupt public administration. John (2022) define political development in advanced industrial societies in terms of the growth of the class consciousness and political organization of the proletariat, leading, ultimately, to the overthrow of capitalism and the approach of communism.

Civil Society:

Civil society refers to the collection of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups, faith-based organizations, professional associations, labor unions, student groups, and other entities that operate independently from the government and represent various interests and values within society. These groups play a crucial role in advocating for citizens' rights, monitoring government activities, and fostering public participation in democratic processes. Civil society organizations (CSOs) act as intermediaries between the state and citizens, contributing to transparency, accountability, and inclusive governance (Carothers, 1999).

Capacity Building:

Capacity building involves the process of developing and strengthening the skills, abilities, processes, and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a rapidly changing world. In the context of civil society, capacity building includes improving internal governance, leadership, financial management, strategic planning, and advocacy skills. It also entails enhancing the ability of CSOs to engage in constructive dialogue with the government, influence policy, and mobilize citizens for democratic participation (UNDP, 2010).

Foreign Aid

Foreign aid refers to the international transfer of capital, goods, or services from one country or international organization to another, primarily aimed at promoting economic development and welfare. It often takes the form of grants or concessional loans and is typically extended by developed countries to assist developing nations (Abdul, Adamu, & Ogwuche, 2022). According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), foreign aid is the voluntary transfer of resources from one country to another, intended to promote development and welfare in the recipient country. The most common type of foreign aid is official development assistance (ODA), which is assistance given to promote development and to combat poverty. The transactions are mostly from developed countries to developing countries. A developing nation typically lacks a strong manufacturing base and is distinguished by a low value of the Human Development Index (HDI). Foreign aid may be offered as a contribution or a loan, which can either be a hard or soft loan. If the loan is in a foreign currency, it is termed as a hard loan.

Summary of Literature Review

A study conducted by Ikelegbe (2021) on The Perverse Manifestation of Civil Society: Evidence From Nigeria acknowledges the potential for external actors and forces to shape internal political dynamics within a nation and thereby influence democratic transitions. However, many scholars stress the inherent limitations of such influence and caution against overestimation. It is underscored, for instance, that democracy cannot be externally imposed; rather, it emerges and flourishes from conditions intrinsic to a nation. The contention posits that regardless of the sincerity and determination of a nation or international body in endeavoring to establish democratic governance elsewhere, their effectiveness and influence "largely hinge on opportunities presented by domestic circumstances," and in many instances, their endeavors may only marginally affect transition outcomes. In cases where domestic conditions are not conducive to democracy, the endeavors of an external actor could feasibly fail to produce any discernible impact.

Ogbe and Ojie (2020) studied The Impact of U.S. Foreign Policy on Nigerian Political Environment. They posit that maintaining democracy is achieved by defending and advancing people's right to vote, as well as promoting democratic values and culture. They emphasized that full protection of human rights requires a vibrant civil society, which is a necessary component of functioning democracies. However, unreasonable limitations on the space available to civil society organizations harm the implementation of international human rights norms and weaken democratic sustainability.

Fiallo (2019) conducted a study on U.S. Policy on Democratization in Latin America, concluding that the U.S. often failed to instill democracy abroad because it was difficult to impose that political

system through external meddling. Democracy, he argues, normally needs to grow out of internal conditions. In the context of Africa, Marina Ottaway (2003) warned that no amount of external 'engineering' will bring about democratic results unless favorable domestic conditions exist. She distinguishes between 'political liberalization' — the initial opening up of political spaces — and 'democratization', which requires deeper consolidation of democratic institutions and behavior.

Ryan (2017) studied Democracy Promotion and U.S. Foreign Policy, exploring the democracy-security dilemma. His work highlights the complexity of balancing U.S. security interests and democracy promotion. Using Egypt, India, and Turkey as case studies, Ryan shows that while security considerations often dominate foreign policy decisions, democratic values are inconsistently promoted, which has implications for the credibility of U.S. democratization efforts.

Building on these perspectives, Mohammed (2013) examined the role of civil society in Nigeria's democratic experiment in his study Democracy, Civil Society and Good Governance in Nigeria. Mohammed emphasized that while external support can strengthen civil society organizations (CSOs), the depth and resilience of democracy depend largely on internal struggles for accountability, inclusiveness, and the institutionalization of democratic norms. He argues that despite substantial foreign support, Nigeria's democratization has remained shallow due to elite dominance, weak institutionalization, and a fragile political culture (Mohammed, 2013).

Similarly, Mohammed and Buba (2021) in Democratic Consolidation and Civil Society in Nigeria analyzed how foreign aid initiatives targeted at strengthening Nigerian civil society have sometimes resulted in the formation of donor-driven NGOs with limited grassroots legitimacy. They assert that for democracy to take root, civil society must be organically connected to local realities rather than donor priorities.

Garba, Iza and Akuva (2021) contributes to this discourse by highlighting the historical trajectory of Nigeria–U.S. bilateral relations, emphasizing that while strategic cooperation has existed since independence, democracy promotion became more prominent following Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999. He argues that U.S. support, though well-intentioned, must be tailored to Nigeria's internal political dynamics and institutional realities in order to be effective. This reinforces the broader scholarly consensus that democracy cannot be successfully exported through standardized approaches.

Further, Carothers (2015) discusses the paradox of democracy promotion, noting that while external actors such as the U.S. can support reforms, genuine democratic consolidation is a long-term process driven more by internal political will than external pressure. Hyde-Price (2021) also contends that democracy promotion efforts must be context-specific, emphasizing institution-building and societal engagement rather than top-down imposition.

Thus, the gap in the literature on the United States' democratic policy and political development in Nigeria lies in the lack of comprehensive studies that analyze the specific impact and effectiveness of U.S. interventions in promoting democracy in Nigeria. While there is considerable research on the broader topic of democracy promotion in Africa, including Nigeria, there remains a pressing need for more focused investigations that delve into the specific strategies, initiatives, and measurable outcomes of U.S. involvement in Nigerian political development.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach based on a review of primary and secondary data obtained from sources such as official U.S. government documents, NGO reports, academic literature, and semi-structured interviews with experts in international relations and Nigerian politics. Primary data, particularly the interviews, play a central role by providing first-hand insights from individuals with relevant professional experience and subject-matter expertise.

The interviewees include a diverse range of stakeholders, such as academic scholars specializing in international relations and political development, civil society advocates actively engaged in governance and accountability, officials from Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, representatives from key organizations like YIAGA Africa and the MacArthur Foundation, electoral experts affiliated with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and other elections specialists with practical experience in democratic reform initiatives. This wide range of perspectives ensures a holistic understanding of U.S. democracy promotion efforts and their impact on Nigeria's political landscape.

In qualitative research, the emphasis is placed on understanding the nature, experiences, contexts, and complexities of the phenomenon under study, rather than quantifying it (Osikoya & Ali, 2016). Accordingly, this study explores the nuances of U.S.–Nigerian foreign aid relations and democracy assistance by combining documentary evidence with the lived experiences and insights of practitioners and analysts.

Moreover, the qualitative method allows for in-depth probing and flexible questioning, which is particularly important for unpacking the intricate dynamics of democracy promotion. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns, strategies, and key themes in the data, offering a rich, layered interpretation of how U.S. support influences democratic development and civil society strengthening in Nigeria. The integration of interview data enhances the depth of the analysis, providing grounded and context-specific insights that complement the secondary sources.

Theoretical Framework

Liberal Democracy Theory

This study adopts the Liberal Democracy theory, which emphasizes individual rights, representative institutions, and the rule of law. Rooted in John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), the theory holds that governments exist to secure fundamental rights such as liberty, health, and property, and that democratic governance benefits society as a whole. Liberal Democracy is built on four key principles: individual rights and liberties, seen as inherent and universal; the rule of law, requiring equal treatment and an independent judiciary; political pluralism, allowing multiple parties and viewpoints to compete in open debate; and free and fair elections, ensuring legitimacy through transparency and public consent (Dixon & Landau, 2021; Habermas, 2023; Diamond, 2008; Garba & Shaapera, 2028). Critics argue that liberal democracy enables economic inequality or weakens communal values. Some religious ideologies reject it altogether (Zakaria, 1997). Still, it promotes safeguards against majority tyranny through

mechanisms like federalism, coalition governments, and minority protections (Dahl, 1989; Carothers, 2009).

This theory is relevant for understanding how U.S. foreign aid promotes democracy in Nigeria—by supporting electoral reforms, civil liberties, and inclusive political systems. It explains U.S. backing for electoral institutions and democratic norms, including proportional representation and broad coalition-building (Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, & Seligson, 2007).

US Foreign Aids and Democratic Development in Nigeria
The United States has a long-standing commitment to promoting democracy worldwide, including in Nigeria. Its foreign aid strategy in Nigeria has evolved over time, with a significant portion directed toward strengthening democratic governance, the rule of law, civil society engagement, and credible electoral processes. The U.S. views democratic stability in Nigeria as crucial to regional and international security, economic development, and global peace (Carothers, 2009; USAID, 2020).

Through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. government funds a variety of programs and initiatives designed to support democratic institutions, enhance electoral integrity, improve governance, and strengthen civil society organizations (CSOs). One of the major focus areas is building the capacity of Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to conduct free, fair, and credible elections. Support has included technical assistance, training for election officials, and provision of equipment to improve voter registration and election monitoring systems (National Democratic Institute, 2019; USAID, 2020).

Nigeria has witnessed several democratic successes in recent years, including some of the most credible and peaceful presidential elections in the nation's history from 2015 to 2023. Newly enacted legislation has enhanced transparency and access to government information. However, challenges persist in improving democratic governance, addressing corruption, and reducing conflict. Persistent threats such as ethnic, religious, resource-driven, and communal conflicts continue to undermine democratic gains (Diamond, 2008; Zakaria, 1997).

The United States, through USAID and other agencies, has invested in targeted programs to address these challenges and deepen democratic governance in Nigeria. According to data from ForeignAssistance.gov (2024), the U.S. has made significant financial commitments to Nigeria's democratic development in recent years. The table below shows US Foreign Aids and Democratic Development in Nigeria over a given period of time:

Table 1: Selected U.S.-Funded Democracy and Governance Programs in Nigeria (2020–2024)

Period	Top Activities	Funds	Sectors
2020-2024	Strengthening institutions and Civil Society	$1.942M	Government and civil society
2020-2024	Political process strengthening activity	$3.6M	Government and civil society
2023	Election integrity activity	$1.6M	Government and civil society
2022-2024	Civil Society Resilience Strengthening (CSRS)	$2.75M	Government and civil society
2023-2024	Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening	$3.6M	Government and civil society

Source: ForeignAssistance.gov (2024).

In addition to these investments, the U.S. works closely with Nigerian civil society groups such as YIAGA Africa, CLEEN Foundation, and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD). These organizations receive funding and support to conduct civic education, election observation, voter mobilization, and advocacy for electoral reforms. For instance, during the 2019 and 2023 general elections, USAID and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) supported YIAGA's "Watching The Vote" initiative, which deployed thousands of trained observers across the country to enhance electoral transparency and credibility (YIAGA Africa, 2020; USAID, 2022; NDI, 2019).

Furthermore, the U.S.-Nigeria Civil Society Engagement Strategy aims to empower local organizations by improving their advocacy, governance, and institutional capacities. Civil society is seen as a vital actor in democratic development because it amplifies citizens' voices, promotes accountability, and engages in policy dialogue with the government (USAID, 2020; Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014). However, many CSOs still struggle with capacity and resources to influence governance and policy effectively (Freedom House, 2021). To support democratic consolidation more holistically, U.S. assistance emphasizes four core areas, as follows:

(i) Strengthening Civil Society: Democracy in Nigeria has advanced through the active engagement of civil society in constitutional and electoral reforms, anti-corruption efforts, and the promotion of rights for women and marginalized groups. USAID supports over 200 civil society organizations to enhance their networking, policy advocacy, and collaboration with government and private stakeholders. Through citizen oversight and advocacy campaigns, civil society partners have achieved tangible results, such as the release of long-overdue government audits and the completion of previously abandoned capital projects (USAID, 2022; DRL, 2021).

(ii) Political Competition and Consensus Building: Since Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999, the country has made progress in political competition and democratic consolidation. U.S. support extends to the development of political parties, strengthening of independent electoral

commissions, and encouraging civil society input in electoral and constitutional reform. Initiatives like parallel vote tabulations conducted by civil society have reinforced the legitimacy of election results and exposed electoral malpractice when necessary (NDI, 2019; LeVan, 2015).

(iii) Improved Good Governance: The U.S. works with key state and local government institutions to enhance their capacity in planning, budgeting, management, and evaluation. These interventions aim to build a more accountable and responsive government capable of delivering essential public services. U.S.-backed policies and systems promote transparency, empower civil society, and mobilize the private sector to participate in monitoring and assessing service delivery. Notably, sustained advocacy has led to increased state allocations to education and health, and improved strategic planning at subnational levels (USAID, 2020; Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, & Seligson, 2007).

(iv) Political Conflict Mitigation and Reconciliation: Given Nigeria's complex and persistent conflicts, the U.S. promotes collaborative approaches between government and civil society to reduce violence and foster reconciliation. This includes the development of early warning systems and grassroots peacebuilding mechanisms. Activities involve religious and traditional leaders, women's groups, youth networks, and civil society actors who collectively design protocols and materials to prevent and respond to outbreaks of violence. In the conflict-prone northern states, public information campaigns have been deployed to encourage peaceful resolution of disputes (USAID, 2020; U.S. Department of State, 2021).

Additionally, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) supports legal reforms and human rights initiatives in Nigeria. These efforts focus on improving access to justice, strengthening judicial independence, safeguarding human rights defenders, and addressing issues such as gender-based violence and systemic discrimination (DRL, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

While the U.S. has achieved notable success in promoting democratic norms and practices in Nigeria, enduring challenges such as electoral violence, political corruption, weak institutional frameworks, and the limited reach of civil society in rural areas continue to pose obstacles to full democratic consolidation (Freedom House, 2021; Omotola, 2010). Nevertheless, U.S. foreign aid remains an essential driver of Nigeria's democratic development—providing technical expertise, financial resources, and diplomatic support to foster a resilient and inclusive democratic system (USAID, 2022; Carothers, 2009).

U.S. Foreign Aid and Civil Society Capacity Building in Nigeria
Civil society is widely recognized as a cornerstone of democratic governance, functioning as a vital link between the state and its citizens, while championing transparency, accountability, and civic engagement (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014; Freedom House, 2021). In line with this understanding, the United States has maintained a long-standing commitment to strengthening civil society organizations (CSOs) in Nigeria as a central component of its broader democracy promotion strategy (USAID, 2020; U.S. Department of State, 2021). These efforts are grounded in the belief that a strong, independent, and capable civil society is essential for democratic resilience and inclusive development.

U.S. foreign aid in this area has primarily focused on enhancing the institutional and operational capacity of CSOs by providing them with financial support, technical assistance, and training. These resources are intended to strengthen organizational governance, leadership development, accountability mechanisms, and advocacy strategies (Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, & Seligson, 2007). Through agencies like USAID, American assistance supports Nigerian NGOs working on a broad range of critical issues, including human rights, anti-corruption initiatives, gender equality, youth political inclusion, and electoral integrity (USAID, 2022). Programs like the Strengthening Civic Advocacy and Local Engagement (SCALE) project exemplify this approach. Funded by USAID, SCALE is designed not only to enhance the advocacy capabilities of CSOs but also to build durable coalitions, promote dialogue with public institutions, and foster an enabling civic space that allows these organizations to thrive and engage citizens meaningfully (USAID Nigeria, 2022).

Complementing such initiatives is the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, a U.S.-supported platform that plays a pivotal role in strengthening electoral oversight and fostering dialogue between civil society actors and electoral stakeholders. This coalition brings together more than 70 CSOs to monitor elections, prevent conflict, and hold institutions accountable. By issuing real-time assessments, organizing press briefings, and interfacing with INEC and security agencies, the Situation Room has become a critical actor in Nigeria's electoral landscape (Situation Room, 2023; NDI, 2019). Its activities underscore the value of collective civil society action in upholding electoral transparency and democratic legitimacy.

In addition to support for advocacy and electoral monitoring, U.S. assistance has significantly contributed to the professionalization and expansion of local organizations. Training in areas such as financial management, monitoring and evaluation, proposal development, strategic communications, and policy engagement has enabled many CSOs to become more effective and credible participants in governance processes. These capacity-building efforts have not only strengthened internal organizational practices but have also enhanced the influence of civil society actors in shaping national development priorities and holding public institutions accountable (USAID, 2020).

Despite these notable contributions, several structural and operational challenges continue to constrain civil society effectiveness in Nigeria. Many CSOs still operate under conditions of financial precarity, limited staffing, and organizational fragmentation. Moreover, overreliance on external donor funding raises concerns about sustainability and autonomy, particularly when funding priorities are externally driven or misaligned with grassroots needs (Freedom House, 2021). There is also a tendency for aid to disproportionately benefit urban-based organizations, thereby excluding rural voices and reinforcing geographic disparities in civic participation (Ibrahim & Hulme, 2010).

Furthermore, some scholars caution that while foreign aid can be transformative, it may inadvertently weaken local ownership if programming does not sufficiently account for context or engage communities in a participatory manner. To address these risks, U.S. agencies like USAID are increasingly emphasizing local partnerships, adaptive programming, and long-term sustainability as guiding principles in their support for civil society development (Banks, Hulme, & Edwards, 2015; USAID, 2022).

Overall, U.S. foreign aid has played an influential role in enhancing the capacity, reach, and resilience of Nigerian civil society. By equipping CSOs with the tools to advocate for policy reforms, monitor governance processes, and amplify citizen voices, American support continues to strengthen Nigeria's democratic infrastructure. While challenges remain, particularly regarding sustainability and inclusiveness, the cumulative impact of these efforts has been to foster a more vibrant, responsive, and accountable civic environment, which is essential for democratic consolidation in the country (USAID, 2020; Carothers, 2009).

Discussion of Findings

The Impact of U.S. Foreign Aid on Democratic Institutions in Nigeria
The United States, as an advanced democracy, has consistently supported Nigeria's efforts to consolidate its democratic governance. Through agencies such as USAID, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the International Republican Institute (IRI), the U.S. government has provided substantial assistance to facilitate critical reforms and democratic development. Interviews with key officials confirmed the pivotal role of the U.S. in Nigeria's democratization since the country's return to civilian rule in 1999. This involvement spans several areas:

(i) The U.S. supported Nigeria's transition from military to civilian rule on May 29, 1999, marked by the election of President Olusegun Obasanjo. According to Dr. Kole Shettima, Director at the MacArthur Foundation, "The U.S. was instrumental in facilitating Nigeria's transition from military rule to civilian governance in 1999, playing a significant role in building the necessary infrastructure for the nascent democratic process."

(ii) According to an informant at YIAGA Africa, the financial support provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has played a pivotal role in sustaining and expanding Nigeria's democratic space. The informant emphasized that USAID's allocation of $36 million in 2020 toward democratic development initiatives in Nigeria was not only a demonstration of the United States' strategic interest in promoting governance and accountability but also a practical investment in grassroots engagement, civic education, and electoral reform. Through this funding, local organizations such as YIAGA Africa have been able to implement programs aimed at strengthening electoral transparency, enhancing voter education, and increasing youth and women participation in governance processes. The informant further noted that such support has contributed to fostering greater public trust in democratic institutions and has helped civil society organizations hold government actors more accountable (USAID, 2020).

(iii) Beginning in 2015, the U.S. committed approximately $51 million over five years to ensure credible and peaceful elections.

(iv) Leading up to the 2015 elections, the U.S. collaborated with other international donors to enhance Nigeria's electoral management bodies and civil society engagement (U.S. Department of State, 2017).

Overall, the United States remains the most generous bilateral donor to Nigeria and several other developing countries. This support has not only strengthened Nigeria's democratic institutions but has also facilitated broader bilateral trade relations. A 2024 USAID report affirmed that "the U.S.

was the single largest donor country providing substantial foreign aid and foreign direct investment to support the development of needy African nations" (USAID, 2024).
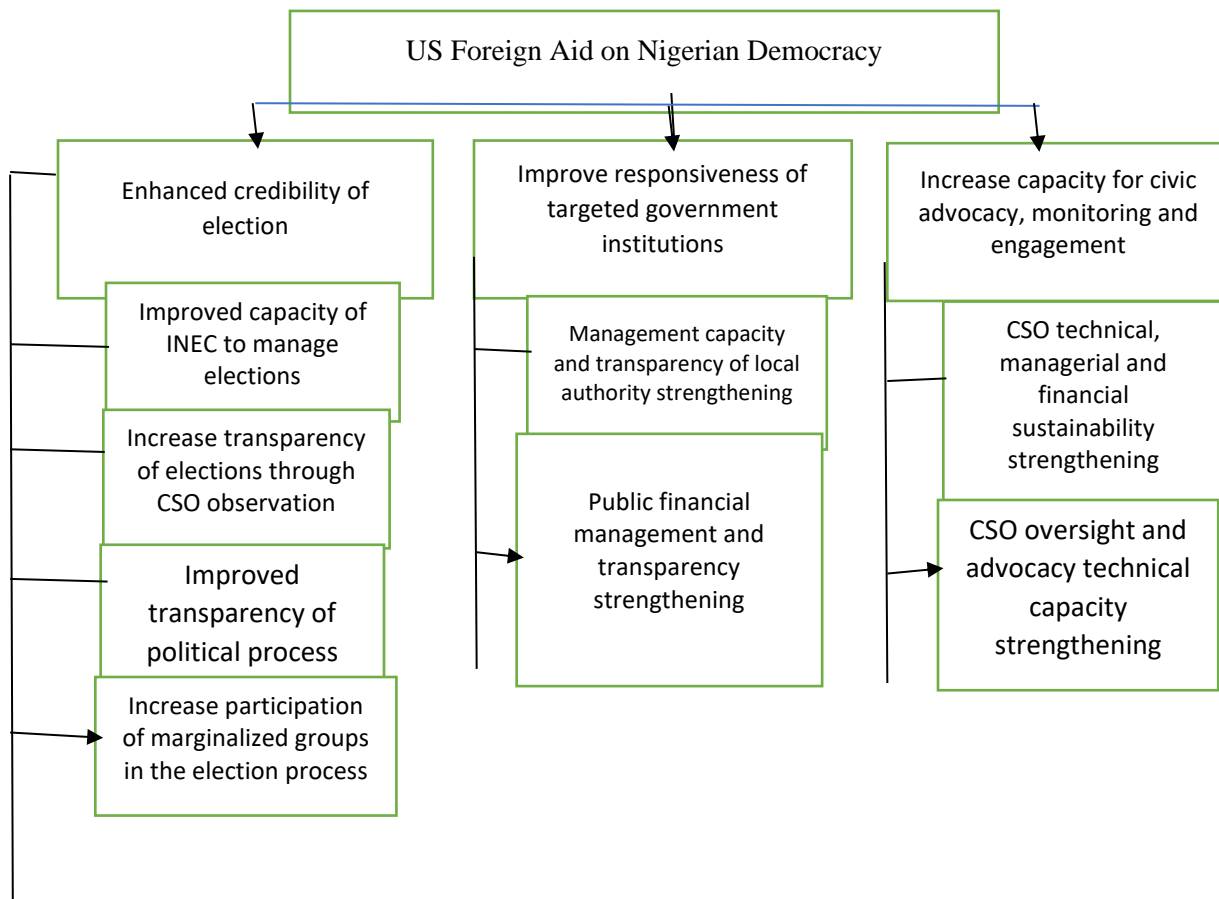

Figure 1. Impact Pathways of U.S Foreign Aid on Strengthening Nigerian Democracy.

Source: USAID Report, 2024

Political Institutional Development

Nigeria's 2015 elections marked a historic milestone, widely seen as the most credible and transparent since independence. The U.S. capitalized on this momentum to deepen its support for Nigeria's democratic development by enhancing political party systems, fortifying the independence of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and supporting civil society engagement in electoral reforms. In collaboration with CSOs, INEC facilitated parallel vote tabulations and oversaw Nigeria's first peaceful transfer of power between rival political parties.

U.S. engagement remained consistent in the years that followed, contributing to the 2022 amendment of the electoral law, greater youth participation in the 2023 elections, and expanded access for marginalized groups. This has been part of a broader effort to continually improve electoral processes, strengthening the foundations of Nigeria's democracy.

Mohammed Haidara of the Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade & Investment highlighted the impact of U.S. support, saying:

> U.S. support has significantly improved Nigeria's electoral processes through capacity building, technology deployment, and civic engagement. Through U.S.-backed initiatives, Nigeria has seen considerable progress in its electoral integrity, with technological solutions that were once considered ambitious becoming central components of the voting process (Interview, 2025).

These reforms led to key technological advancements in elections:
(i) biometric voter registration in 2011,
(ii) introduction of Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and Smart Card Readers in 2015, and
(iii) adoption of the Biometric Voter Authentication System (BVAS) and INEC Result Viewing (IReV) portal in 2023.

Prof. Seray Jah, Country Director of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), pointed out how U.S.-funded observer missions, such as those led by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), played an essential role in the process: "U.S.-funded observer missions were critical, not just for monitoring elections but for sharing best practices and providing technical support. This ensured that elections were more transparent and that Nigerians could trust the results."

In addition to election-related work, U.S. assistance also extended to supporting Nigeria's judicial and legislative frameworks, helping to solidify democratic processes across the system. Prof. Jibrin Ibrahim noted:

> *Between 2011 and 2015, electoral credibility improved significantly, largely due to reforms introduced with U.S. support. The biometric voter registration introduced in 2011 was a game changer. It laid the foundation for more secure and transparent elections, preventing fraud and ensuring that eligible voters were accurately registered* (Interview, 2025).

Technological reforms, in particular, stood out as key milestones. Prof. Adele Jinadu highlighted their importance:

> *The U.S. has supported INEC, especially with the introduction of biometric voter authentication technologies, which aim to reduce electoral malpractice. These technologies are not just about improving efficiency; they symbolize a deep commitment to ensuring that elections are both free and fair, minimizing the opportunities for fraud and ensuring that the will of the people is truly reflected in the outcomes* (Interview, 2025).

Echoing this perspective, Shettima remarked:

> *The U.S. has focused heavily on helping INEC build its internal capacity and implement reforms that align Nigeria's electoral practices with international standards. This long-term support has made a significant impact on both the credibility and transparency of*

Nigeria's elections, setting a benchmark for other African nations to follow (Interview, 2025).

These sustained efforts culminated in a series of electoral improvements that transformed Nigeria's democratic process, reinforcing its reputation as a key player in African politics.

Capacity Building for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)
Although Nigeria's political space remains dominated by entrenched elites, civil society organizations (CSOs) have emerged as important agents of democratic reform and accountability. Recognizing this potential, the U.S., primarily through USAID, has worked to build the institutional and advocacy capacity of these organizations. This includes strengthening internal governance systems and supporting work in budget monitoring, fiscal accountability, and transparency. U.S. support has been instrumental in helping CSOs navigate the complex political environment, ensuring they have the tools needed to engage with government bodies effectively.

In addition to policy advocacy, U.S. support has fostered conflict mitigation programs involving traditional leaders, youth groups, and women's organizations. These grassroots efforts have helped create early warning systems and violence prevention mechanisms that are crucial in a country like Nigeria, where political and ethnic tensions often erupt into violence. At the international level, the U.S. committed $55 million (2020–2024) to the Making All Voices Count initiative, which awarded $2.5 million in its first round to Nigerian CSOs. This initiative aims to amplify the voices of Nigerians who are often excluded from political processes, particularly youth, women, and marginalized communities.

According to USAID evaluations, strengthening CSOs has led to better service delivery across health, education, and water sectors, as well as improved labor conditions and more inclusive governance. The growing engagement of CSOs in policy debates has also spurred better financial management practices and greater inclusion of marginalized groups in governance. These initiatives highlight how empowered CSOs are transforming Nigerian democracy by holding government accountable and pushing for more equitable public policies.

A prominent civil society advocate emphasized the importance of U.S. support, stating:

> *U.S. assistance has been crucial in building the monitoring capacity of CSOs to track elections and hold the government accountable. Without this support, many CSOs wouldn't have been able to perform these vital functions. The training and resources provided have been instrumental in enabling CSOs to take on more responsibility and effectively monitor elections, a role that has become essential for Nigeria's democratic process* (Interview, 2025).

This statement reinforces the notion that international assistance is not merely supplementary, it is foundational to many CSOs' ability to fulfill watchdog roles in Nigeria's evolving democratic landscape.

Dr. Husseini Abdu of PLAN International Nigeria also shared his thoughts, saying:

Training and funding from the U.S. have significantly enhanced the ability of CSOs to advocate, monitor elections, and push for transparency, which has been crucial for the democratic process. These organizations have become key players in monitoring elections, pushing for reform, and ensuring that the government remains accountable to the people (Interview, 2025).

His insights emphasize that U.S. democracy assistance does more than support institutions—it equips civic actors with the skills and tools to demand systemic reform and transparency.

Prof. Habu Mohammed from Bayero University Kano added:

The U.S. has consistently recognized the vital role of civil society in promoting democracy in Nigeria. Without strengthening these organizations, efforts to push for transparency and accountability would be much weaker. Civil society has become the backbone of democratic change in Nigeria, helping ensure that the government remains responsive to the needs of its people (Interview, 2025).

This reflection underscores how civil society has emerged as a key pillar of Nigeria's democratic architecture, with external support accelerating its institutional and advocacy capacity.

Collectively, these insights highlight how U.S. support has empowered Nigerian CSOs to become central players in democratic governance, strengthening Nigeria's institutions at the grassroots level and contributing to broader societal reforms.

U.S. Strategic Interests and Soft Power

The U.S. approach to democracy promotion in Nigeria is not solely altruistic; it also aligns with broader strategic interests in Africa. Guided by the Democracy Promotion Act of 2007 and linked to economic initiatives such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), U.S. support reflects both ideological commitment and pragmatic geopolitical priorities. The U.S. views Nigeria, as Africa's largest democracy and economy, as a vital partner in its broader strategy for political stability and economic growth across the region.

Ambassador Nasiru Waje of the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs discussed this relationship, noting:

U.S. assistance has been directed at strengthening democratic principles, not only within the federal government but also across state institutions and civil society organizations. The U.S. recognizes the importance of democratic stability in Nigeria as it serves as a pillar for the entire West African region. Their support is not just about fostering democracy, but about ensuring that the region remains stable, secure, and economically viable (Interview, 2025).

This statement reflects the dual nature of U.S. assistance—emphasizing both internal democratic development and regional security, underscoring Nigeria's role as an anchor state in West Africa.

Prof. Warsu Ali from the University of Jos also highlighted the strategic value of U.S. support, pointing out:

> *The U.S. is not just a partner in Nigeria's democratic development; it is also a strategic ally. Nigeria's political stability and economic growth are crucial to broader U.S. interests in the region. The stability of Nigeria has implications far beyond its borders—affecting trade, security, and regional cooperation across Africa. The U.S. understands that a stable Nigeria is essential to achieving broader strategic goals in Africa, including counterterrorism efforts and regional economic development* (Interview, 2025).

Ali's remarks echo this strategic framing, suggesting that democracy promotion in Nigeria functions as a means to reinforce the U.S.'s broader security and economic goals across the African continent.

This perspective is further corroborated by Mohammad J. Kuna, who noted: "Nigeria's regional, continental, and global leadership roles and influence are key attractions to the U.S. A stable, democratic Nigeria is critical for regional peace and for the fight against terrorism in sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel."

Kuna's view reinforces the idea that Nigeria's geopolitical stature makes it an indispensable partner in U.S. foreign policy, especially concerning security and anti-terrorism measures in the Sahel region.

Prof. Adele Jinadu added:

> *The US is deeply interested in Nigeria's political development, not just because of Nigeria's strategic importance in Africa, but also due to its significant role in global geopolitics. A stable and democratic Nigeria is crucial for regional stability and the global fight against terrorism* (Interview, 2025).

Jinadu emphasizes the global dimensions of this relationship, situating Nigeria as a pivotal player not only within Africa but in the wider context of global governance and U.S. international priorities.

Taken together, these expert perspectives illustrate that U.S. involvement in Nigeria's democratic development is driven by a mix of normative ideals and realpolitik. The goal is not only to support democracy for its own sake, but also to ensure regional stability, secure economic interests, and advance broader American foreign policy objectives.

Public Perception and Electoral Credibility

Despite significant progress, skepticism about electoral credibility remains widespread due to Nigeria's history of electoral irregularities. The 2023 elections, with a voter turnout of just 27%, were marred by delays in result uploads, vote-buying, and sporadic violence (NDI/IRI, 2023). These challenges highlight ongoing weaknesses in Nigeria's democratic systems, including

political competition, corruption, and impunity, all of which continue to undermine trust in electoral processes.

Nevertheless, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that U.S. support has been crucial in fostering democratic resilience and in enhancing electoral credibility. The U.S. commitment to Nigeria's electoral reforms has provided critical tools and resources to strengthen its democratic institutions, even in the face of recurring challenges.

Prof. Mohammed Kuna of INEC reflected on the significance of U.S. support, stating that "The era of widespread election rigging, such as that seen in 2003 and 2007, is over. While challenges remain, INEC has made significant strides in improving electoral credibility." He also added:

> *The promotion of democracy and the democratic state form across the world was a major element of US security architecture, in that democratic countries under US influence would be more stable and less likely to pose security threats to the US* (Interview, 2025).

These testimonies reveal a clear consensus: while challenges persist, U.S. involvement has played a foundational role in Nigeria's democratic development, helping the country make significant strides despite ongoing obstacles. This role is further evidenced by the following key facts:

1. The U.S. remains actively engaged in Nigeria's political landscape, consistently advocating for free and fair elections.
2. It has voiced concerns about political interference by security forces and reaffirmed its commitment to monitoring Nigeria's electoral processes.
3. The U.S. regularly urges all stakeholders—INEC, political parties, and security agencies—to enhance the credibility of elections.
4. As a fellow democracy, the U.S. continues to affirm its dedication to supporting Nigeria's peace, democratic governance, and long-term prosperity.

Conclusion

U.S. democracy assistance has played a meaningful and multi-faceted role in shaping Nigeria's political development. By promoting electoral credibility, empowering civil society actors, and supporting governance reforms, the United States has contributed to steady—albeit gradual—democratic progress in Nigeria. These efforts have helped to build institutional resilience and public awareness, even as the country continues to grapple with deeply entrenched issues such as political patronage, insecurity, and corruption. Programs funded by U.S. agencies and implemented in partnership with Nigerian stakeholders have fostered improvements in election management, legal reforms, civic participation, and transparency. Though the road has not been without setbacks, these interventions have laid a critical foundation for long-term democratic consolidation.

However, the sustainability of these democratic gains cannot be ensured by external actors alone. The success of democracy promotion efforts hinges not merely on donor funding or technical expertise, but more importantly on local ownership, genuine political will, and the ability to adapt

foreign support to Nigeria's specific socio-political realities. Democracy, at its core, is not a one-size-fits-all export; it must take root in the culture, institutions, and values of a nation. Therefore, a sustained, flexible, and context-sensitive approach is essential, not only to build on the progress already achieved but to address the deeper structural issues that continue to hinder democratic development. These include the need for stronger rule of law, equitable political representation, and inclusive policy-making. Only by combining strategic international support with homegrown initiatives and reforms can Nigeria fully realize the promise of a stable, participatory democracy.

Recommendations

1. Nigeria needs to engage in discussions with the U.S. on institutional capacity building and the implications of the rule of law in the fight against corruption.
2. The U.S. should support and promote an inclusive future where Nigerian citizens' votes count, leading to responsive governance and a peaceful society.
3. Nigeria and the U.S. should maintain a steadfast partnership in strengthening electoral processes that enhance accountability, meet citizens' expectations, and support innovative projects that help communities resolve conflicts without violence.
4. There is a need for collaboration with civil society to protect democratic principles such as the right to vote and freedom of expression, ensure the fair administration of justice, reduce electoral illiteracy, and increase transparency in democratic activities.

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