

Inclusive Democracy or Political Exclusion? Examining the Participation of Persons with Physical Disabilities in Anambra State's Democratic Process

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Abstract

Democracy is expected to ensure inclusion, equal participation, and fair representation for all citizens. However, the experience of persons with physical disabilities in Anambra State shows that these ideals are not fully achieved in practice. This study examined the extent of their participation in the democratic process, with specific focus on their involvement in elections and governance, as well as the barriers that limit their engagement. A qualitative approach was adopted, using in-depth interviews and secondary data from policy documents, electoral guidelines, and relevant literature. The data were analysed thematically to identify key patterns and issues. The findings reveal that while many persons with physical disabilities are politically aware and participate in voting, their overall level of engagement remains limited. Participation beyond voting, such as involvement in decision-making and leadership, is very low. The study identified several interconnected barriers, including inaccessible infrastructure, transportation challenges, especially during election-day movement restrictions, negative societal attitudes, weak implementation of inclusive policies, economic constraints, and lack of political representation. These challenges reflect structural and social limitations rather than individual incapacity. The study concludes that although Nigeria has made some progress in promoting inclusive democratic frameworks, meaningful inclusion of persons with physical disabilities is still limited. For democracy to be truly consolidated, there is a need for stronger implementation of policies, improved accessibility, and deliberate efforts to promote active participation and representation of persons with disabilities in all aspects of political life.

Keywords: Inclusive Democracy, Physical Disability, Political Participation, Barriers, Anambra State.

Introduction

Democracy is often described as a system that gives every citizen a voice, but in practice, that voice is not always equally heard. In Nigeria, since the return to civilian rule in 1999, there have been clear efforts to strengthen democratic institutions and expand participation. Elections are held regularly, and there is increasing public awareness of civic rights. However, the deeper question remains: who truly participates in this democracy, and who is left out? Scholars such as Diamond (2008) and Dahl (1989) emphasize that democracy is not just about elections but about inclusive participation and equal access to power. In the Nigerian context, researchers like Ibrahim (2007) and Jega (2015) have also noted that while electoral processes have improved, structural inequalities still limit the participation of marginalized groups. Among these groups are persons with physical disabilities, whose political experiences raise important concerns about whether Nigeria's democracy is truly inclusive or only partially so.

The idea of inclusive democracy is built on the belief that everyone, regardless of physical condition or social status, should have equal opportunity to take part in political life. This aligns with global frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which stresses full participation in governance. However, the reality in many developing democracies shows a gap between policy and practice. As Sen (1999) argues, development must be seen as the expansion of freedoms, including political freedoms for vulnerable populations. In Nigeria, scholars such as Adebayo (2016) and Odinkalu (2018) have pointed out that persons with disabilities often face systemic exclusion due to weak implementation of inclusive policies. This tension between the ideal of inclusion and the reality of exclusion is at the heart of debates about democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Empirical studies further highlight the nature and extent of this problem. For example, Akinyemi and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014) found that limited access to education and socioeconomic disadvantages reduce political awareness among persons with disabilities in Nigeria. Ezeani (2012) also observed that electoral systems often fail to accommodate physically challenged individuals, especially in terms of polling unit accessibility. Similarly, Obi and Ozor (2020) argued that social stigma and negative societal attitudes discourage active political engagement among persons with disabilities. Beyond Nigeria, Schur, Kruse, and Blanck (2013) demonstrated that persons with disabilities are generally less likely to vote due to structural and institutional barriers,

while Mitra (2017) showed that legal frameworks alone are insufficient without practical enforcement mechanisms. In the African context, Kuper et al. (2014) emphasized that challenges such as inaccessible infrastructure, lack of assistive devices, and transportation difficulties significantly limit participation in elections.

While these studies are instructive in this discussion, they also reveal an important gap. Much of the existing research focuses on national-level analysis or treats persons with disabilities as a homogeneous group, without paying close attention to specific categories such as those with physical disabilities. In addition, there is limited focus on subnational contexts like Anambra State, where local political dynamics, cultural factors, and institutional practices may shape participation in unique ways. There is also a lack of detailed understanding of how persons with physical disabilities engage not just in voting, but in broader democratic activities such as advocacy, representation, and governance processes. This gap makes it difficult to fully assess the depth of democratic inclusion in specific settings.

It is against this background that this study examines whether democracy in Anambra State can truly be described as inclusive. Specifically, the study seeks to assess the level of political participation of physically challenged persons in elections and governance, and to identify the major barriers that hinder their full involvement in democratic activities. By doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on democratic consolidation in Nigeria and provides a clearer picture of whether progress so far has translated into meaningful inclusion or whether significant forms of political exclusion still persist.

1. Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in the Social Model of Disability, a theory primarily developed by Michael Oliver in the 1980s, building on earlier ideas from disability rights activists such as Vic Finkelstein (1970s). The Social Model of Disability shifts attention away from the individual's physical impairment and instead focuses on how society creates barriers that limit participation. According to Oliver (1990), disability is not simply a medical condition but a social construct produced by inaccessible environments, discriminatory attitudes, and exclusionary institutional practices.

The major tenet of this theory is that people are “disabled” not by their physical conditions but by societal structures that fail to accommodate diversity. In the context of democracy, this means that

limited political participation among persons with physical disabilities is not due to inability, but rather due to barriers such as inaccessible polling units, lack of assistive technologies, and social stigma. The theory strongly advocates for structural change, including inclusive policies and the removal of environmental and institutional barriers.

Over time, the Social Model has been refined to address some of its early limitations. Scholars like Shakespeare (2006) have argued for a more balanced approach that integrates both social and biological dimensions of disability, leading to what is sometimes referred to as the “interactional” or “biopsychosocial” perspective. One major strength of the Social Model is that it empowers persons with disabilities by emphasizing rights, equality, and inclusion. It is highly relevant for analyzing political exclusion and advocating policy reforms. However, its weakness lies in its tendency to underplay the role of individual impairments and personal experiences. Despite this limitation, the theory remains a powerful framework for examining barriers to inclusive democratic participation.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring experiences, perceptions, and underlying barriers affecting the political participation of persons with physical disabilities. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the social and institutional factors that shape inclusion or exclusion within the democratic process. It is particularly suitable for this study because it captures rich, detailed insights that cannot be easily quantified.

The area of study is Anambra State, Nigeria. The state provides a relevant context due to its active political environment and growing attention to democratic participation at the grassroots level. However, like many parts of Nigeria, questions remain regarding how inclusive these democratic processes are, especially for marginalized groups such as persons with physical disabilities.

The population of the study consists of persons with physical disabilities, electoral officials, and civil society actors involved in disability advocacy within Anambra State. A purposive sampling technique is employed to select participants who have direct experience or knowledge relevant to the study. A small but information-rich sample of 15 participants is considered sufficient to achieve data saturation in this qualitative research.

The primary instrument for data collection is a semi-structured interview guide. This instrument allowed flexibility for participants to express their views while ensuring that key themes related to political participation and barriers are covered. To ensure validity, the interview guide was reviewed by experts in political science and education, and a pilot test was conducted with a small group similar to the study population to refine the questions.

Data are collected through in-depth interviews and supported with secondary data from policy documents, electoral guidelines, government reports, and relevant academic literature. This triangulation enhanced the credibility of the findings.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study. Participants were adequately informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. For the in-depth interviews, verbal and/or written consent was obtained from each participant before data collection commenced.

For data analysis, the study employed thematic analysis, where interview data are transcribed, coded into NVivo, and organized into themes that reflect patterns of participation and barriers. This method allowed for a systematic interpretation of qualitative data and helped to draw meaningful conclusions about inclusive democracy in Anambra State.

3. Data Presentation/Discussion of Findings

This section presents and analyses the data collected from the field using a qualitative approach. The data were gathered through in-depth interviews with persons with physical disabilities, electoral stakeholders, and civil society actors in Anambra State. All interviews were carefully transcribed and imported into NVivo software for systematic coding and analysis. Through this process, recurring ideas, patterns, and meanings were identified and grouped into themes. The thematic analysis helped to clearly organise the findings in line with the objectives of the study, which are to assess the level of political participation and to identify the barriers to participation. The analysis is presented under two broad themes: (1) level of political participation and (2) barriers to political participation. Each theme is further broken down into sub-themes based on the responses from participants.

Theme 1: Level of Political Participation

Awareness and Interest in Politics

The findings show that most participants are aware of political activities in their communities. Many respondents expressed interest in politics and indicated that they follow political discussions through radio, television, and social media. Some participants noted that political awareness has improved over time due to increased access to information.

However, despite this awareness, the level of deep political engagement remains low. While participants could identify major political actors and events, fewer participants demonstrated strong involvement beyond basic awareness. This suggests that awareness alone does not necessarily translate into active participation.

One respondent explained that although they follow political news regularly, they do not feel fully included in the political process. This indicates a gap between knowledge and meaningful engagement.

"I tune in to the radio every morning to hear what our lawmakers are doing in Awka, and I follow the election news on my phone all the time. But knowing what is happening is where it ends for me. When it comes to the real party structures or having a say in who represents us, we are completely in the dark. It feels like watching a football match from the gallery; you see everything, but you are not part of the game."

Participation in Voting

Voting emerged as the most common form of political participation among respondents. Many participants reported that they are registered voters and have taken part in elections at least once. Voting was seen as an important civic duty and a way to express their opinions. However, participation in voting was not consistent. Some respondents admitted that they had missed elections due to challenges such as transportation difficulties, inaccessible polling units, or health-related issues. A few participants also mentioned that they felt discouraged from voting because they believed their votes would not make a difference.

There were also mixed experiences regarding the voting process. While some participants reported smooth experiences, others described significant challenges, especially in accessing polling units. This shows that although voting is the most common form of participation, it is still not fully accessible to all persons with physical disabilities.

"During the last governorship election, the road leading to my ward's polling unit was deeply eroded and filled with gutters. My wheelchair couldn't pass through, and there was no provision made by INEC to help me cross. I had to literally sit by the roadside, begging young men passing by to help lift me and my chair over the ditches just so I could go and cast my vote."

Involvement Beyond Voting

The study found that participation beyond voting is very limited. Only 2 participants reported attending political meetings, engaging in campaigns, or participating in community decision-making processes. Most respondents stated that they are rarely invited to political meetings or consultations. Even when such opportunities exist, physical barriers and social attitudes often discourage participation. For example, some participants mentioned that meeting venues are not accessible, making it difficult for them to attend.

In terms of leadership and representation, none of the participants reported holding political office. Some participants expressed interest in leadership roles but stated that they lacked the support, resources, and encouragement needed to pursue such positions. This finding suggests that while some level of participation exists, it is mostly limited to voting, with very little involvement in broader democratic activities.

"The political parties hold their stakeholder meetings and rallies in upstairs town halls without any working elevators or ramps, or in crowded party offices that are impossible for someone like me to navigate. No one invites us to the table during ward consultations. They only look for us when they need numbers on election day, but when it is time to plan campaigns or discuss leadership slots, we are completely forgotten."

Perception of Inclusion

Participants were asked whether they feel included in the democratic process. The majority expressed feelings of exclusion. Many respondents stated that the political system does not adequately consider their needs. Some noted that although there are policies that support inclusion, these policies are not effectively implemented. Others mentioned that they rarely see persons with disabilities in leadership positions, which reinforces their sense of exclusion. The general perception among participants therefore is that democracy in Anambra State is not fully inclusive, especially for persons with physical disabilities.

"They tell us on the news that Nigeria's democracy belongs to everybody, but the reality on the ground tells a completely different story. Our laws are beautiful on paper, but in practice, nobody enforces them. When you look at the entire government structure in this state, from the local

government councils to the state assembly, you will rarely find a single person with a physical disability holding a key position. It makes you feel like a second-class citizen in your own state."

Theme 2: Barriers to Political Participation

Physical and Environmental Barriers

One of the most significant barriers identified in this study is physical inaccessibility. Many participants reported that polling units, registration centres, and meeting venues are not designed to accommodate persons with physical disabilities. Common issues include: 1. Lack of ramps for wheelchair users, 2. Poor road conditions, 3. Long distances to polling units, 4. Inaccessible buildings.

These challenges make it difficult for participants to move freely and participate in political activities. Some respondents explained that they had to rely on others for assistance, which affects their independence and confidence. This finding strongly supports the idea that environmental factors play a major role in limiting participation.

"Most of the voting booths are set up inside public primary school classrooms with very high steps and narrow doorways, or right in the middle of open sandy fields. I am a grown man, but I had to depend on strangers to lift me up like a child to get close to the ballot box. It robs you of your dignity and independence as a human being."

Transportation Challenges

Transportation emerged as a major barrier to political participation among persons with physical disabilities. Many participants explained that accessing reliable and affordable transportation is already difficult on normal days, and this challenge becomes even worse during elections. A key issue raised was the restriction of vehicle movement on election days, which is often enforced to ensure security. While this policy may serve a general purpose, it creates unintended difficulties for persons with physical disabilities who depend heavily on transportation to reach polling units.

Participants noted that public transport options are limited and not designed to accommodate their needs, making them rely on private arrangements. However, with movement restrictions in place, even these private options become unavailable or highly risky. In addition, some polling units are located far from residential areas, requiring long-distance travel that is not feasible without proper transport support.

As a result, many respondents reported frustration and, in some cases, complete withdrawal from the voting process. The combination of distance to polling units and restricted movement significantly reduces their ability to participate, highlighting a gap between electoral policies and the practical realities faced by persons with physical disabilities.

"The movement restriction on election day is a major setback for us. Since commercial buses and Keke (tricycles) are completely off the roads, and my polling unit is over two kilometers away, I am stuck. I cannot trek that distance on my crutches over rough roads. The security agents stop even private cars that try to assist us. Because of this, I had no choice but to stay at home during the last election, even though my voter card was ready."

Social Attitudes and Stigma

Social attitudes were identified as a significant barrier to political participation. Many participants reported experiencing discrimination, negative stereotypes, and lack of respect from others. Some respondents stated that people often underestimate their abilities or assume that they are not capable of contributing to political discussions. This creates a sense of exclusion and reduces their motivation to participate.

In addition, a few participants mentioned that they feel uncomfortable attending political gatherings because of how they are treated by others. This shows that social factors play an important role in shaping participation.

"When you show up at a political gathering, people look at you with pity rather than respect. I once tried to voice my opinion during a community town hall meeting about local governance, and I overheard someone whispering behind me, 'Look at this one, instead of him to be looking for his daily bread or begging for help, he is here talking about politics.' That kind of stigma crushes your spirit and makes you want to crawl back into your shell."

Institutional and Policy Barriers

Although there are policies aimed at promoting inclusion, participants noted that implementation remains weak. Many respondents were not aware of specific government programs that support their political participation.

Some participants also pointed out that electoral officials are not always trained to assist persons with disabilities. This can lead to confusion and difficulties during the voting process.

Furthermore, there is limited provision of assistive technologies, such as accessible voting materials. This makes it harder for persons with physical disabilities to vote independently. The findings therefore suggest that institutional efforts are not yet sufficient to ensure full inclusion.

"The INEC officials at my voting point didn't seem to have any clue on how to handle voters with special physical needs. There were no separate queues for disabled persons, and when I asked for assistance or information about assistive voting tools, they just looked at me confused and told me to wait or find someone to help me. The guidelines they advertise on TV are non-existent when you get to the village booths."

Economic Constraints

Economic challenges were also mentioned by participants as a barrier to participation. Many persons with physical disabilities face financial difficulties, which affect their ability to engage in political activities.

For example, the cost of transportation, communication, and participation in political events can be high. Some participants stated that they prioritize basic needs over political involvement. This highlights the link between economic status and political participation.

"Nigerian politics requires financial muscle, even at the grassroots level. To rent a special vehicle that can transport me comfortably to political events costs double the standard price. When you are struggling to feed your family and afford basic healthcare because of your condition, spending your little money on transport to go and sit at a party rally becomes an expensive luxury you cannot afford."

Lack of Representation

Another important finding is the lack of representation of persons with physical disabilities in political positions. Participants expressed concern that their interests are not adequately represented in decision-making processes. Many respondents believe that having more representatives with disabilities in government would improve inclusion. However, they also noted that there are significant barriers to entering politics, including lack of support and funding. This lack of representation reinforces feelings of exclusion and limits opportunities for meaningful participation.

"Because none of our leaders understand what it truly means to live with a physical handicap in this country, our issues are always pushed to the bottom of the list. We need people who look like us and live our reality to be in those executive chambers and legislative houses. Until we have actual persons with disabilities making the laws and approving budgets, policies concerning us will continue to be treated as an afterthought or a charity project."

4. Discussion of Findings

Level of Political Participation

This study set out to examine whether democracy in Anambra State is truly inclusive by focusing on the participation of persons with physical disabilities. The findings from the data reveal that although some level of participation exists, especially in voting, the overall experience of persons with physical disabilities reflects a pattern of limited inclusion. This section discusses these findings in relation to existing literature, policy frameworks, and the Social Model of Disability, which guides this study.

One of the key findings of this study is that political awareness among persons with physical disabilities is relatively high, but this does not translate into active participation. Many participants reported that they follow political events and understand their civic rights, yet their actual involvement remains limited. This finding aligns with earlier studies which show that awareness alone is not enough to guarantee participation. For instance, Schur, Kruse, and Blanck (2013) found that persons with disabilities in many contexts are politically aware but still participate less due to structural barriers. Similarly, Akinyemi and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014) argue that social and economic disadvantages often limit the ability of marginalized groups to move from awareness to action.

This gap between awareness and participation can be better understood through the Social Model of Disability. According to Oliver (1990), individuals are not disabled by their impairments but by the barriers created by society. In this case, participants are aware of their rights but are prevented from acting on them due to environmental and institutional barriers. This supports the idea that improving knowledge alone is not enough; there must also be changes in the structure of the political system to allow meaningful participation.

Another important finding is that voting is the most common form of political participation among persons with physical disabilities. This is not surprising, as voting is often seen as the simplest and most direct way to participate in democracy. However, even this basic form of participation is not fully accessible. Some participants reported that they missed elections due to challenges such as distance to polling units, lack of transportation due to restriction vehicle movement on election days, and physical inaccessibility. This finding is consistent with reports from the Independent

National Electoral Commission (INEC), which acknowledge that accessibility remains a challenge despite reforms (INEC, 2019). The Electoral Act (2022) in Nigeria includes provisions for assisting persons with disabilities, such as priority voting and the use of assistive devices. However, evidence from this study suggests that these provisions are not always effectively implemented at the local level. This is supported by Kuper et al. (2014), who argue that policy commitments often fail to translate into practice due to weak institutional capacity.

The issue of inaccessible polling units, highlighted by participants, is also widely documented in the literature. Ezeani (2012) notes that many polling stations in Nigeria are located in places that are difficult to access, such as schools without ramps or open fields with uneven terrain. This creates a physical barrier that limits participation. From the perspective of the Social Model of Disability, this is a clear example of how the environment disables individuals, rather than their physical condition.

Furthermore, the study found that participation beyond voting is very limited. Very few participants reported attending political meetings, engaging in campaigns, or taking part in decision-making processes. This finding is important because democracy is not only about voting; it also involves active engagement in governance. According to Dahl (1989), a truly democratic system requires continuous participation, not just periodic voting. The low level of broader engagement observed in this study is supported by other research. Nzeadibe (2013) found that marginalized groups in Nigeria are often excluded from informal political networks where important decisions are made. Similarly, Mitra (2017) argues that persons with disabilities are less likely to engage in political activities beyond voting due to a combination of social and institutional barriers.

One of the most striking findings of this study is the strong perception of exclusion among participants. Many respondents stated that they do not feel included in the democratic process and believe that their needs are not adequately considered. This perception is important because it affects motivation and willingness to participate. If individuals feel that their participation will not make a difference, they are less likely to engage. This finding is in line with the work of Sen (1999), who emphasizes that true development involves expanding people's capabilities, including their ability to participate in political life. When persons with disabilities feel excluded, it indicates a failure to expand these capabilities. Odinkalu (2018) also notes that in Nigeria, formal democratic

structures often exist without meaningful inclusion of marginalized groups, leading to what he describes as “partial citizenship.”

At the same time, some findings from this study contrast with more optimistic perspectives in the literature. For example, Jega (2015) argues that electoral reforms in Nigeria have significantly improved inclusiveness, particularly through voter education and administrative changes. While this may be true at a general level, the experiences of participants in this study suggest that these improvements have not fully reached persons with physical disabilities at the grassroots level. This highlights the importance of examining local contexts rather than relying only on national-level assessments.

Barriers to Political Participation

Another key issue discussed in the findings is the role of physical and environmental barriers. Participants consistently pointed to inaccessible infrastructure, such as lack of ramps and poor road conditions, as major obstacles to participation. This finding strongly supports the Social Model of Disability, which identifies environmental barriers as the main cause of exclusion. Research by Shakespeare (2006) acknowledges that while the Social Model may not fully capture the personal experience of disability, it remains very useful for understanding structural barriers. In this study, the emphasis on environmental challenges clearly shows that the problem lies not in the individuals but in the design of the political system.

In addition to physical barriers, transportation challenges were also highlighted. Participants explained that vehicle movement restrictions during elections, combined with long distances to polling units, make it very difficult for them to vote. This finding adds an important dimension to existing research, as it shows how general electoral policies can have unintended negative effects on persons with disabilities.

The Electoral Act (2022) does not adequately address the specific impact of movement restrictions on persons with disabilities. This suggests a gap in policy design. Studies such as those by Schur et al. (2013) emphasize the need for targeted interventions to ensure accessibility, rather than one-size-fits-all policies.

From the perspective of the Social Model of Disability, these challenges are not due to individual limitations but are the result of social, institutional, and environmental barriers. Addressing these

barriers requires more than policy statements; it requires practical changes in infrastructure, institutional practices, and societal attitudes.

Another major issue that emerged from the findings is the role of social attitudes and stigma in shaping the political participation of persons with physical disabilities. Many participants reported that negative perceptions from society discourage them from engaging in political activities. They are often seen as incapable, dependent, or irrelevant in political discussions. This finding reflects a deeper cultural problem that goes beyond physical barriers. This result is consistent with the work of Goffman (1963), who explains stigma as a social process that reduces individuals to stereotypes and limits their social participation. In the Nigerian context, studies such as Eleweke and Ebenso (2016) show that disability is still widely misunderstood, often leading to exclusion in public life. Similarly, Lang and Upah (2008) found that cultural beliefs and negative attitudes towards disability in many African societies create barriers that prevent full participation in governance.

From the perspective of the Social Model of Disability, these attitudes are part of the social environment that disables individuals. It is not the physical condition of the individual that limits participation, but the way society responds to it. This study confirms that even when physical access is possible, negative social attitudes can still discourage participation. For example, some participants stated that they feel unwelcome at political gatherings, which reduces their confidence and willingness to engage. However, some scholars present a slightly different view. For instance, Amartya Sen (1999) argues that participation is influenced not only by social attitudes but also by individual capabilities and access to resources. While this perspective adds depth, the findings of this study suggest that social barriers remain a dominant factor in limiting participation, especially in local contexts like Anambra State.

Closely related to social attitudes is the issue of institutional and policy barriers. The study found that although there are policies designed to support inclusion, their implementation is weak. Many participants were not aware of any specific government programmes that promote their political participation. This indicates a gap between policy design and actual practice.

Nigeria is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (United Nations, 2006), which clearly states that persons with disabilities have the right

to participate fully in political and public life. In addition, the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act (2018) provides a legal framework for protecting these rights at the national level. Despite these legal provisions, the findings of this study show that enforcement remains limited.

This situation is not unique to Nigeria. Groce et al. (2011) note that many developing countries have strong disability policies on paper but struggle with implementation due to limited resources and weak institutional structures. In Nigeria, Okafor (2019) argues that policy implementation is often hindered by lack of funding, poor coordination, and low political will.

The findings also revealed that electoral officials are not always adequately trained to support persons with physical disabilities. This is important because frontline officials play a key role in ensuring inclusive elections. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2022), guidelines have been developed to assist persons with disabilities, including priority voting and assistance at polling units. However, participants' experiences suggest that these guidelines are not consistently applied.

This gap between policy and practice supports the argument made by Lipsky (1980) in his theory of "street-level bureaucracy," which explains how frontline workers influence the implementation of policies. In this case, even if inclusive policies exist, their effectiveness depends on how electoral officials apply them during elections.

Another important finding from the study is the role of economic constraints in limiting political participation. Many participants reported that financial difficulties affect their ability to engage in political activities. Costs related to transportation, communication, and participation in meetings can be high, especially for individuals who already face economic disadvantages. This finding is supported by empirical studies. For example, Banks and Polack (2014) show that persons with disabilities are more likely to experience poverty due to limited access to education and employment opportunities. In Nigeria, Mitra, Posarac, and Vick (2013) also found a strong link between disability and economic vulnerability. These economic challenges reduce the ability of individuals to participate actively in political life.

From the Social Model perspective, economic exclusion is another form of structural barrier. It shows that participation is not only about physical access but also about having the resources

needed to engage. Without financial support, even the most motivated individuals may be unable to participate. Interestingly, some scholars argue that economic empowerment can significantly improve political participation. For example, Yeo and Moore (2003) suggest that improving access to livelihoods for persons with disabilities can increase their confidence and ability to engage in governance. This suggests that addressing economic barriers could have a positive impact on political inclusion.

The study also highlighted the issue of lack of representation of persons with physical disabilities in political offices. None of the participants reported holding political positions, and many expressed concern that their interests are not represented in decision-making processes. This lack of representation creates a cycle of exclusion, where policies are made without considering the needs of persons with disabilities. This finding aligns with the work of Young (2000), who argues that inclusion in decision-making is essential for achieving social justice. When certain groups are excluded from leadership, their perspectives are often ignored. In Nigeria, Emejulu (2015) also emphasizes that political representation is key to ensuring that marginalized voices are heard.

However, some studies suggest that there have been gradual improvements. For example, the European Union Election Observation Mission (2019) reported some progress in Nigeria's efforts to include persons with disabilities in the electoral process. Despite this, the findings of this study show that such improvements have not yet translated into meaningful representation at the local level.

Another important point raised by participants is the lack of targeted support and inclusion strategies. While general policies exist, there are few specific interventions designed to address the unique needs of persons with physical disabilities. This reflects what Shakespeare and Watson (2002) describe as the limitation of generic policies that fail to consider diversity within disability groups. For instance, persons with mobility challenges may require different forms of support compared to those with visual or hearing impairments. The absence of tailored solutions limits the effectiveness of inclusion efforts. This finding suggests the need for more context-specific and targeted interventions.

In contrast, countries such as South Africa have made more progress in this area. Howell et al. (2006) note that targeted disability policies and active civil society engagement have improved

participation in some sectors. This comparison highlights the possibility of improvement if appropriate strategies are adopted.

5. Summary and Implications of findings

One major issue that clearly emerges from this study is the gap between formal democratic provisions and actual lived experiences. On paper, Nigeria operates a democratic system that guarantees equal political rights for all citizens, including persons with physical disabilities. Legal frameworks such as the Electoral Act (2022) and the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act (2018) suggest that inclusion is a priority. However, the findings show that these rights are not fully realized in practice, especially at the grassroots level.

This gap between theory and reality has been widely discussed in Nigerian political studies. Aiyede (2015) argues that democratic institutions in Nigeria often exist in form but lack full functionality in practice. Similarly, Omotola (2010) describes Nigeria's democracy as "procedural," meaning that while elections are conducted regularly, deeper elements such as inclusion, equality, and participation are still weak. The findings of this study strongly support these views, especially as they relate to persons with physical disabilities in Anambra State.

From the lens of the Social Model of Disability, this gap reflects a failure of the system to remove structural barriers. The issue is not whether rights exist, but whether the environment allows individuals to exercise those rights. In this study, participants clearly expressed that although they are legally recognized as equal citizens, the conditions around them prevent them from participating fully. This reinforces the argument that democracy cannot be considered inclusive if certain groups are systematically excluded in practice.

Another important issue highlighted by the findings is the intersection of multiple barriers. The study shows that physical, social, economic, and institutional barriers do not operate independently. Instead, they combine to create a more complex form of exclusion. For example, a participant who faces mobility challenges may also struggle with transportation costs, negative social attitudes, and lack of institutional support at the same time.

This finding aligns with the concept of intersectionality as discussed by Crenshaw (1989), who explains that different forms of disadvantage can overlap and reinforce each other. In the context

of disability and political participation, this means that addressing only one barrier is not enough. A more comprehensive approach is needed to ensure full inclusion.

Supporting this view, Meekosha and Soldatic (2011) argue that disability in developing countries must be understood within a broader social and economic context. In Nigeria, where poverty, weak infrastructure, and governance challenges already exist, persons with disabilities are likely to face even greater difficulties. The findings of this study clearly reflect this reality, as participants repeatedly described how different challenges combine to limit their participation.

At the same time, it is important to note that some progress has been made in recent years. For example, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has introduced measures such as the inclusion of disability symbols on voter registers and priority voting for persons with disabilities (INEC, 2022). These efforts show a growing recognition of the need for inclusion.

However, the findings of this study suggest that these efforts are still not enough. Many participants were either unaware of these measures or reported that they were not properly implemented during elections. This supports the argument made by Sabatier (1986) that policy success depends not only on design but also on effective implementation and monitoring.

Another key implication of the findings is the need to rethink the concept of participation itself. The study shows that participation is often narrowly defined as voting, while other forms of engagement are largely ignored. This limited understanding of participation can hide deeper forms of exclusion. Scholars such as Arnstein (1969) have long argued that participation exists on a spectrum, ranging from tokenism to full citizen control. In this study, the participation of persons with physical disabilities appears to be closer to the lower end of this spectrum. While they may be allowed to vote, they are rarely involved in decision-making processes or leadership roles.

This raises important questions about the quality of democracy in Nigeria. If participation is limited to voting without meaningful engagement, then democracy remains incomplete. This finding is in line with the argument of Diamond (2008), who emphasizes that true democratic consolidation requires not just elections, but active and inclusive participation from all segments of society.

The issue of representation also has significant implications. The lack of persons with physical disabilities in political offices means that their interests are often overlooked in policy decisions.

This creates a cycle where exclusion continues because those affected are not involved in shaping solutions. Phillips (1995) argues that political representation is essential for ensuring that diverse perspectives are included in governance. In Nigeria, where politics is often influenced by elite interests, marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities face additional challenges in gaining representation. The findings of this study confirm that this remains a major issue in Anambra State.

In contrast, some countries have adopted measures such as quotas or reserved seats to improve representation of marginalized groups. While such measures are not yet widely implemented in Nigeria for persons with disabilities, they provide an example of possible strategies for improving inclusion.

Another important implication of the study is the role of civil society and advocacy groups. Although not deeply explored in the findings, some participants mentioned the importance of support from disability organizations. This suggests that non-state actors can play a key role in promoting inclusion. Research by Lewis (2003) shows that civil society organizations are often more effective in reaching marginalized groups and advocating for their rights. In Nigeria, disability advocacy groups have contributed to the passage of the Disability Act (2018), showing their potential impact. Strengthening these groups could help bridge the gap between policy and practice.

Finally, the findings of this study highlight the need for a shift from symbolic inclusion to practical inclusion. It is not enough to have policies that mention persons with disabilities; there must be clear, actionable steps to remove barriers and support participation. This includes improving infrastructure, providing accessible transportation, training electoral officials, and creating opportunities for leadership and representation. From the Social Model perspective, these changes require a transformation of the system rather than the individual. Society must adapt to meet the needs of all citizens, rather than expecting individuals to overcome barriers on their own. This is the central message of the theory and is strongly supported by the findings of this study.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the extent to which democracy in Anambra State is inclusive by focusing on the political participation of persons with physical disabilities. The findings show that while some

level of participation exists, especially in voting, it remains limited and uneven. Participation beyond voting, such as involvement in political meetings, decision-making, and leadership, is very low. This suggests that inclusion is more symbolic than practical.

The study identified several key barriers, including physical inaccessibility, transportation challenges, negative social attitudes, weak policy implementation, economic constraints, and lack of representation. These barriers often overlap and reinforce one another, making participation more difficult. Despite the presence of legal frameworks and electoral guidelines that promote inclusion, their implementation remains weak, especially at the grassroots level. Grounded in the Social Model of Disability, the study shows that exclusion is largely caused by societal and structural barriers rather than individual limitations. For democracy to be truly inclusive, these barriers must be addressed through practical and targeted interventions.

So, while Nigeria's democracy has made some progress, it has not fully achieved inclusiveness for persons with physical disabilities. Greater commitment to implementation, accessibility, and representation is necessary to ensure meaningful democratic participation for all.

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