

**POLITICS, STATE CAPACITY AND THE CRISIS OF PUBLIC POLICY
IMPLEMENTATION IN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, Nigeria has introduced numerous well-designed public policy initiatives across key sectors, yet implementation outcomes have remained persistently inconsistent with policy objectives. Existing scholarship has largely attributed this gap to administrative inefficiency and resource constraints, while paying insufficient attention to the political dimension that shapes state capacity and policy implementation. This study examines the relationship among political interference, state capacity and public policy implementation in Nigeria. Adopting a qualitative documentary approach, the study draws on scholarly literature, government reports and policy documents to analyse how politics influences implementation outcomes. The findings reveal that persistent political interference weakens state capacity to implement public policies across sectors. The study concludes that the crisis of public policy implementation in Nigeria is fundamentally rooted in weakened state capacity arising from sustained political intrusion into public policy implementation processes. It recommends, inter alia, the strengthening of institutional autonomy and the insulation of implementation agencies from partisan political control as necessary conditions for improving policy outcomes.

Keywords: Nigeria, Policy Implementation, Politics, Political Interference, State Capacity.

INTRODUCTION

The inauguration of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in May 1999 marked a decisive transition from prolonged military rule to constitutional democracy (Elechi & Ohazuruike, 2024). This transition generated expectations that governance would become more transparent, accountable and development-oriented. It was widely assumed that democratic institutions would improve policy responsiveness, strengthen coordination and enhance public service delivery (Hoffmann & Wallace, 2022; Itodo, 2026; Onuoha, 2023). More than two decades later, however, these expectations remain largely unmet (Itodo, 2026; Onuoha, 2023). Nigeria's governance experience is characterised by a persistent paradox: the continuous proliferation of seemingly well-intentioned public policy initiatives with weak and inconsistent implementation outcomes (Itodo, 2026; Onuoha, 2023). Successive governments have introduced wide-ranging reforms in economic management, anti-corruption, infrastructure development, welfare and security. Yet many of these policies fail to achieve their intended objectives. Implementation is frequently affected by either policy discontinuity or policy somersault, reinforced by political interference (Arowolo, 2025).

Existing studies have explained this problem in different ways, ranging from weak state capacity (Manu, 2026; Ohemeng, 2026; World Bank, 2026), administrative inefficiency (Anyin & Anam, 2026; Fakorede, 2025) and limited coordination (Kaddu, 2023; Uwizeyimana, 2024), to resource constraints (Sukare & Usman, 2026) and informal practices (Obamwonyi & Aibieyi, 2014; Signé, 2025). While these explanations are valuable, they are often treated in isolation, making it difficult to fully explain how politics and state capacity interact in shaping policy implementation outcomes. What remains insufficiently explained is the interaction between politics and state capacity and how they, altogether, define and redefine policy implementation outcomes. In particular, there is limited clarity on how political incentives influence bureaucratic behaviour and how state capacity conditions the implementation of clearly formulated policies.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the relationship between politics and state capacity in public policy implementation in Nigeria. It argues that the crisis of public policy implementation is best understood as an outcome of the interaction between political incentives and state capacity limitations. While policy formulation often reflects formal rational planning,

implementation is shaped by political pressures that constrain administrative capacity to implement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of policy is generally understood as a purposive course of action that includes both action and inaction by state and non-state actors, producing intended and unintended outcomes (Zittoun et al., 2021; Young et al., 2023). Rather than a single decision, policy, particularly public policy, unfolds over time through a process involving multiple actors and institutions, including ministries, departments and agencies, where coordination and interdependence are central (Rashidian, 2021). In this sense, policy is not merely a static decision but an evolving institutional process. Building on this processual understanding, Anyin and Anam (2026) define public policy as a set of actions that combine goals and the means of achieving them, regardless of outcomes. According to Atakpa (2025), this set of actions further includes rules, regulatory measures and administrative decisions that guide collective action, sometimes shaped by judicial interpretation and institutional practice. From a problem-solving perspective, Young et al. (2023) perceive public policy as a response to societal challenges shaped by competing interests, actors and constraints.

Public policy, as conceived by Fakorede (2025), refers more specifically to government-directed action aimed at addressing collective problems through institutional authority and legal frameworks. While distinguishing it from private initiative, Kaddu et al. (2023) emphasise the binding and coercive nature as well as its orientation toward public welfare as elements that diverge public policy from private action. In practice, public policy operates across sectors such as agriculture, education, health, security, environment and administration, and is commonly categorised into distributive, redistributive and regulatory forms. In this study, public policy is understood as a governance instrument whose meaning is shaped not only by formal design but also by institutional interpretation and implementation dynamics. Public policy is best conceptualised as a cyclical process involving formulation, adoption, and implementation. Uwizeyimana (2024) refers to formulation as the stage where policy options are identified, assessed and selected within political and technical constraints. This stage, according to him, is

shaped not only by feasibility and resource considerations but also by power relations, institutional interests and political negotiation.

In contrast, Sukare and Usman (2026) conceptualise implementation as the translation of policy decisions into administrative action. The existing literature consistently shows that implementation is a linear trajectory, from formulation to implementation (Anyin & Anam, 2026; Fakorede, 2025; Sukare & Usman; Uwizeyimana, 2024). However, this study departs from this linear characterisation of policy process. Instead, the current study contends that there is often a persistent gap between policy intent and actual outcomes. This gap is central to policy analysis because it highlights that effectiveness depends not only on formulation quality but also on the institutional and political conditions of implementation. In many cases, well-formulated policies fail due to administrative constraints, institutional weaknesses and political pressures.

Understanding this gap requires attention to the relationship between politics and administration. Classical public administration theory, associated with Wilson and Weber, assumes a clear separation between political decision-making (formulation) and administrative execution (implementation), where politics formulates policy and administration implements it neutrally. However, empirical evidence challenges this dichotomy, showing that policy formulation and implementation are deeply interconnected and function as a continuous process rather than discrete stages. In practice, policy directives are often broad and open-ended, leaving significant room for interpretation during implementation. Political actors therefore become active participants in implementation, a situation that influences policy outcomes. Political intrusion into a domain exclusively reserved for bureaucrats not only makes implementation susceptible to political partisanship, it ultimately exposes implementation to political influence that derails the process. This reality clearly blurs the boundary between politics and administration.

In Nigeria's Fourth Republic, policy formulation has become increasingly structured through development plans, fiscal frameworks and sectoral strategies, reflecting formal planning procedures and alignment with global governance norms. However, implementation outcomes remain inconsistent, with frequent delays, partial implementation and substantial deviation from original policy objectives. This study identifies political incentives as a key determinant of this implementation gap. Policy decisions are often shaped by electoral considerations, elite bargaining

and resource distribution pressures, which influence prioritisation and implementation. At the same time, bureaucratic capacity, institutional coordination and resource availability remain critical determinants of implementation effectiveness. Where institutions are weak or fragmented, the divergence between policy design and implementation becomes more pronounced.

Overall, policy implementation is not a purely technical exercise but the outcome of continuous interaction between political incentives and institutional capacity. While formulation may follow rational planning procedures, implementation reflects how political dynamics intersect with bureaucratic structures. However, what remains insufficiently explained in the literature is how political interference and state capacity interact in a sustained manner to produce persistent implementation failures in Nigeria. This study addresses this gap by examining their combined effect on policy implementation outcomes in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

Theoretical foundations of political dimension of policy implementation

This study is anchored on two complementary theoretical frameworks: implementation theory and state capacity theory. Taken together, they provide an integrated explanation of how policies move from formulation to implementation, and why this process is often uneven in practice. While implementation theory explains the environment of policy implementation and how this affects policy outcomes, state capacity theory explains the institutional conditions that enable or constrain that process. Their combination therefore offers a more complete understanding of the interaction between politics, state capacity and implementation failure. Implementation theory, as pioneered by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), focuses on the context of policies and how such context shapes their success or failure. As subsequently developed by scholars such as Davies et al. (2003), Eccles et al. (2005), Greenhalgh et al. (2005), Nutley et al. (2007), and Rycroft-Malone and Bucknall (2010), the theory examines how policies are operationalised within organisational settings. It conceptualises implementation as a complex and iterative process involving the mobilisation, allocation and coordination of resources in pursuit of policy objectives (Nilsen, 2020).

A key strength of implementation theory lies in its focus on the determinants of implementation outcomes. Implementation theory is particularly relevant to this study for three reasons: it explains the processes by which policy is translated into practice; it highlights the

factors that influence implementation outcomes; and it provides tools to assess implementation in its contextual setting. Context is a critical element in implementation studies. It refers to the conditions within which implementation occurs and is often conceptualised as an environment or setting broader than the immediate phenomenon under study. Context here is taken broadly, encompassing political, social, economic, cultural and religious dimensions, but with particular attention to the political environment and its implications for policy outcomes.

Context is therefore not passive, but actively shapes how policies are formulated and implemented (Corchón, 2020; Damschroder, 2020; Nilsen, 2020). The theory also emphasises that implementation is not linear, as reflected in the diffusion–dissemination–implementation continuum, where policies evolve from ideas to communication and ultimately to practice (Damschroder, 2020; Nilsen, 2020). This perspective is especially significant for the present study, which examines how the political context, emblematised in state capacity crisis, affects policy implementation. It is now increasingly seen as dynamic, shaping and reshaping the implementation process and its outcomes (Okoro, 2020; Young et al., 2023). Despite these strengths, implementation theory has important limitations. It does not sufficiently explain the structural conditions that shape implementation environments, under-theorises the capacity of the state itself and provides limited insight into how political authority interacts with bureaucratic structures in shaping implementation outcomes.

State Capacity Theory, with its intellectual foundation in Max Weber's (1978) analysis of the modern state, addresses these limitations by focusing on the ability of the state to govern effectively, enforce laws and mobilise resources. Weber's conception of the state as possessing a monopoly over the legitimate use of force, alongside his emphasis on a professional and merit-based bureaucracy, provides a core basis for understanding state capacity (Weber, 1978). Building on this foundation, Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol (1985) advanced a state-centred perspective that emphasised state autonomy, institutional capacity and the role of state structures in shaping political and socioeconomic outcomes. Tilly (1990) subsequently developed the historical and bellicist dimension of state capacity, explaining how the pressures of warfare compelled states to develop effective systems of taxation and administration in order to survive. Related insights are

found in historical institutional analyses, which link state formation to broader patterns of social and structural transformation (Skocpol, 1979; Snowberg & Ting, 2022)

In contemporary scholarship, the concept has been further developed within political economy. Besley and Persson (2009) distinguish between fiscal and legal dimensions of state capacity and show the conditions under which states invest in these capacities. Similarly, studies of developmental states highlight how strong administrative systems enable governments to coordinate and sustain economic growth (Johnson, 1982; Mastrorocco & Teso, 2023). Together, these perspectives establish state capacity as the institutional foundation for effective policy formulation and implementation. State capacity is commonly understood through three interrelated dimensions: coercive capacity, referring to the ability to maintain order and enforce authority; administrative capacity, referring to the ability to design and implement policies through a competent bureaucracy; and extractive capacity, referring to the ability to mobilise resources, particularly through taxation (Andersen et al., 2023; Mkandawire & Mistree, 2017). These dimensions collectively capture the strength of the state.

A central insight of state capacity theory is that formal institutions alone do not guarantee effective governance. Bureaucratic systems are shaped by political incentives and pressures that constrain institutional capacity to implement policies (Acemoglu, 2005; Andersen et al., 2023). As a result, even where formal administrative structures exist, their effectiveness depends on how they operate within a broader political environment. State capacity is also historically conditioned, shaped by colonial legacies, patterns of political development and institutional evolution over time. However, state capacity theory also has limitations. While it provides a strong account of structural conditions, it pays less attention to the processes through which policies are implemented in practice. It also does not fully explain how political actors influence or reshape bureaucratic action during implementation. Consequently, it is more effective in explaining institutional potential than actual policy outcomes.

The integration of implementation theory and state capacity theory provides a more comprehensive analytical framework. State capacity theory explains the structural foundations of governance, particularly the strength or weakness of administrative systems, while implementation theory explains how policies are translated into practice within those structures. In combination,

both perspectives show that policy implementation outcomes are shaped by the interaction between institutional capacity and implementation processes. More specifically, this study conceptualises policy implementation as a function of the interaction between political dimensions and state capacity. Political dimensions, expressed through entrenched leadership priorities, political incentives, competing elite interests and patterns of political interference, shape both the formulation of policies and the environment within which they are implemented. These dimensions influence the allocation of resources, the degree of bureaucratic autonomy and the level of coordination across institutions. In turn, state capacity conditions how effectively policies can be translated into action. Where state capacity is weak, resources are limited and coordination is fragmented, implementation is more likely to be inconsistent or distorted.

Conversely, where state capacity is strong, policies are more likely to be implemented in line with their original objectives. Thus, political dimensions and state capacity do not operate independently. Political pressures can weaken or strengthen state capacity, while existing capacity conditions shape how political directives are implemented. The outcome of this interaction is reflected in policy implementation performance. Implementation failure, therefore, is not treated as a purely administrative problem, but as the result of a dynamic relationship between politics and state capacity. In this study, policy implementation is therefore understood as the outcome of a continuous interaction between politics and state capacity within a broader governance context. This integrated framework provides the analytical basis for examining how politics and state capacity jointly shape policy implementation outcomes in Nigeria's post-authoritarian setting.

POLITICS, STATE CAPACITY AND THE CRISIS OF PUBLIC POLICY IMPLEMENTATION: AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED CASES

Using selected policy cases, this study analyses how political interference systematically erodes the implementation effectiveness of the Nigerian state in fulfilling its developmental responsibilities. The selected cases include: the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), privatisation of power sector and Social Investment Programmes (SIP).

Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), 1986

Implemented in 1986 under the Babangida administration, Nigeria's Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) was an IMF/World Bank-influenced reform package designed to stabilise a declining oil-dependent economy. It sought to liberalise the economy, reduce fiscal imbalance and promote market efficiency through deregulation and privatisation, with core objectives including diversification, reduced public sector inefficiency, and private sector-led growth (Ubah, 2025). Key instruments included currency devaluation, trade liberalisation, and privatisation of state-owned enterprises. While SAP initially produced modest gains in non-oil exports and foreign exchange availability, it also triggered severe socioeconomic dislocation, including inflation, unemployment and rising poverty, which generated widespread resistance (Ubah, 2025).

Although technically coherent within orthodox economic logic, SAP's implementation was undermined by political mediation and weak accountability structures. Reform implementation was shaped by regime survival considerations, leading to selective enforcement, policy inconsistency and negotiated implementation outcomes. In effect, implementation became a political process rather than a technocratic one. From a state capacity perspective, SAP reveals the limits of coercive reform in the absence of institutional legitimacy and bureaucratic insulation. While the state possessed coercive authority, it lacked administrative coherence and social embeddedness necessary for sustained structural adjustment. This reinforces Weber's argument that legitimacy is central to effective bureaucratic governance (Weber, 1978).

Privatisation of the Power Sector in Nigeria (2013)

The 2013 privatisation of Nigeria's power sector under the Goodluck Jonathan administration aimed to improve efficiency, attract investment and enhance electricity supply through restructuring of the electricity value chain. The reform unbundled the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) into six generation companies (GenCos) and eleven distribution companies (DisCos), while transmission remained under state control via the Transmission Company of Nigeria (TCN) (Audu et al., 2017; Manjo, 2024). Despite its scale, implementation outcomes remain weak, with electricity generation stagnating at approximately 5,000 MW, far

below national demand (Onwuamaeze, 2025; Roy et al., 2025). Although the reform aimed to resolve inefficiencies inherited from NEPA and PHCN, its implementation has been constrained by persistent political economy distortions. Historically, NEPA and PHCN functioned as instruments of political patronage, with employment, procurement and contracting shaped by political considerations rather than technical competence.

The 2005 Electric Power Sector Reform Act and the 2013 privatisation were intended to correct these weaknesses, but implementation was undermined by elite capture and weak institutional safeguards (Manjo, 2024). Asset allocation and concessionaire selection processes were widely criticised for lack of transparency and dominance by politically connected actors. Rather than resolving governance failures, privatisation reproduced them within a new institutional framework. Regulatory agencies also remain vulnerable to political pressure, limiting enforcement of performance standards on private operators. As a result, inefficiencies in generation and distribution persist despite formal liberalisation. This case demonstrates a key paradox: privatisation without regulatory independence and institutional autonomy does not strengthen state capacity; it merely reconfigures political interference within market structures.

Social Investment Programmes (2015-2024)

A key set of cases of politically mediated policy implementation in Nigeria is found within the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development, particularly under its Social Investment Programmes (SIPs) between 2015 and 2024. These include TraderMoni, the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP), the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP) and related cash transfers, all designed to reduce poverty, stimulate micro-enterprise development, and strengthen social protection (Anikeze et al., 2024). However, implementation has generated sustained debate around politicisation, political corruption and accountability deficits (Nwagwu & Nnaeto, 2026; Ogwola & Olofu, 2024), making SIPs a key lens for understanding how political interference reshapes welfare outcomes. From inception, many SIPs were closely tied to executive political branding under the Muhammadu Buhari administration. Although presented as technocratic interventions,

their visibility and distribution patterns reflected political communication strategies in which welfare delivery also served as political signalling.

For example, TraderMoni, a petty-trader microcredit scheme, was criticised for its rollout, timing and beneficiary selection (Onuoha & Macalex-Achinulo, 2023). Its rapid, highly visible cash disbursement enhanced electoral gains but weakened targeting accuracy, sustainability and developmental impact. Similarly, the NHGSFP recorded uneven state-level implementation, alongside contract inflation, payment irregularities and politicised contractor selection (Onuoha & Macalex-Achinulo, 2023).

Across SIPs, a major weakness was the absence of reliable beneficiary identification systems, enabling elite capture and administrative discretion. Disbursement frequently relied on informal associations, market unions, and politically connected intermediaries, reducing transparency and targeting integrity. From a state capacity perspective, this reflects a breakdown of Weberian rational–legal authority, where rule-based allocation is replaced by discretionary distribution. The absence of a unified social registry, as Anikeze et al. (2024) and Atakpa (2025) have observed, also limited tracking, evaluation and duplication control. Oversight bodies, including audit institutions and legislative committees, were constrained by political sensitivities, weakening accountability enforcement. Between 2020 and 2024, the ministry faced scrutiny over alleged mismanagement of COVID-19 palliatives and related funds, highlighting broader governance risks in centralised welfare delivery (Anikeze et al., 2024; Atakpa, 2025).

These patterns are better understood not as isolated corruption cases but as structural outcomes of weak accountability systems and politicised social policy. The SIP experience thus illustrates how welfare programmes become instruments of political legitimacy rather than developmental transformation, exposing persistent weaknesses in targeting, autonomy, and monitoring. In Weberian terms, effective implementation requires separation of political authority from administrative execution. In Nigeria, however, welfare programming is embedded in political strategy, producing politically embedded implementation structures. From Tilly’s perspective, SIPs reflect constrained infrastructural power, particularly the state’s limited capacity to implement policy through impersonal, rule-based systems.

CONCLUSION

Across the selected cases, a consistent pattern emerges: political interference systematically reshapes public policy implementation in Nigeria, often converting it into an extension of partisan competition and elite bargaining rather than a technocratic developmental process. Bureaucratic institutions frequently lack the autonomy required to resist such pressures, resulting in distorted implementation, weak coordination and implementation gaps. In addition, policy continuity remains fragile, as regime change and shifting political priorities repeatedly disrupt institutional learning and long-term programme consolidation. Collectively, these cases demonstrate that political interference is not an incidental challenge but a structural constraint on state capacity in Nigeria. Whether in state-owned enterprises such as NEPA and Ajaokuta, or in privatised and restructured sectors, political actors continue to shape outcomes through patronage-based appointments, contract allocation processes, regulatory manipulation and institutional capture. These dynamics persist across administrations, reinforcing a cycle of weak governance performance.

In Weberian terms, this reflects the enduring weakness of rational-legal authority and the limited insulation of bureaucratic institutions from political control. From Tilly's perspective, it signals constrained infrastructural power, where the state struggles to implement policy consistently through impersonal and rule-based systems in the face of competing elite networks. Importantly, the evidence suggests that privatisation and institutional restructuring alone are insufficient to improve state capacity where political interference remains embedded within regulatory and governance structures. The analysis therefore demonstrates that Nigeria's crisis of public policy implementation cannot be adequately explained by administrative inefficiency alone. Rather, it is rooted in the political configuration of the state itself, where policy processes are continuously shaped by partisan interests and elite competition. Political interference operates not as an occasional disruption but as a systemic condition embedded in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of public policy. Strengthening state capacity therefore requires more than technical reform; it demands the insulation of bureaucratic institutions from partisan control and the consolidation of credible, rules-based accountability systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Furthermore, improving public policy implementation in Nigeria requires a deliberate restructuring of the relationship between political authority and bureaucratic administration. A first step involves strengthening the institutional autonomy of the civil service through merit-based recruitment, promotion and deployment systems that reduce political patronage in administrative appointments. Without insulating key implementation agencies from partisan influence, technical competence will continue to be subordinated to political loyalty.

In addition, strengthening integrated national data systems, particularly in social intervention and welfare programmes, is essential to reduce discretion in beneficiary selection and limit elite capture. A unified and transparent social registry would enhance targeting efficiency, reduce duplication and improve accountability in programme delivery.

Also, institutional accountability mechanisms, including audit institutions and legislative oversight bodies, should be reinforced to operate with greater independence and enforcement capacity. This includes ensuring timely publication of audit findings and protecting oversight institutions from political intimidation or interference.

Finally, sustainable improvement in state capacity requires a broader political commitment to depoliticising development policy. This entails a shift from short-term, visibility-driven interventions toward long-term institutional planning anchored in policy continuity, transparency and performance-based evaluation. Without such a shift, reform efforts are likely to reproduce the existing cycle of weak implementation under persistent political interference.

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