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Leila Rodriguez Ph.D.

Department of Anthropology, University of Cincinnati, leila.rodriguez@uc.edu

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The Transnational Political Involvement of Nigerian Immigrants in New York City:  
Motivations, Means and Constraints<sup>1</sup>

Leila Rodriguez, PhD  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Cincinnati  
leila.rodriguez@uc.edu

**Abstract**

Africans represent a small but rapidly growing immigrant population in the United States. Nigerians, who constitute the largest group, form a well-organized community with numerous ethnic, hometown and social associations. Through some of these organizations, many Nigerians have successfully intervened in the economic and social development and the political processes of their hometowns. Their political involvement in the U.S. is less. In this article I use quantitative and qualitative data to analyze the motivations that Nigerian immigrants have for political involvement in Nigeria or the U.S., the means that enable this participation, and the constraints to participating. Findings suggest the importance of gender, class and acculturation for shaping political participation.

## Introduction

There is a growing recognition among migration scholars that immigrants increasingly maintain links to their homelands, and that these multiple ties have important consequences for both their sending and receiving countries. Transnational migration is the process by which “immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relationships that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Glick Schiller et al., 1995: 48). More broadly, the concept of transnationalism refers to processes that transcend the boundaries of individual nation-states, and are bound to the constraints and opportunities of their specific contexts (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998). Transnationalism can occur in economic, political or sociocultural spheres (Portes, 2001) and also differs in its level of institutionalization (Portes, Guarnizo & Landolt, 1999). Two perspectives dominate the discussion of political transnationalism as it pertains to immigrants. One perspective views it as a grassroots movement, an expression of “bottom-up” resistance (Guarnizo, 2001; Portes, 2003). In this view, marginalized people use transnational activities to resist state and other forms of domination. An alternative perspective interprets transnational political practices as enabling states to exert power outside their traditional jurisdiction (Glick Schiller, 1999). Specifically, countries of origin seek to incorporate immigrants, who are beyond their territory, into their national projects.

Immigrants can be involved in the politics of their country of reception and/or in the politics of their country of origin in multiple ways. When naturalized, immigrants vote in their receiving country’s elections on many issues, including but not limited to immigration policy (Guarnizo, 2001; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Richman, 2008). Naturalized immigrants also participate in local politics and are even voted into office (Richman, 2008). Immigrant hometown associations can organize national mobilization and protests (Richman, 2008), and provide aid to immigrants’ hometowns. Finally, immigrants can become directly involved in political activities in their home countries, either by voting in elections, campaigning for political parties, or by being courted abroad by home candidates. Among some immigrant groups like Dominicans in New York City, home country political parties have established offices in immigrants’ new neighborhoods (Guarnizo, 2001).

Some scholars have questioned early studies of immigrant transnational political participation on the grounds that the scope of immigrant transnationalism has been overestimated and that it does not represent a new phenomenon (Portes, 2001). However, despite evidence that only a small percentage of immigrants become involved in transnational activities, their impact in both their sending and receiving countries is significant and has macrosocial consequences (Portes, 2001; Portes, 2003). Similarly, while recent immigrants to the United States are not the first to undertake transnational activities, some aspects of their use, reach and impact are different than anything previous because both the global and local contexts, as well as the composition of the immigrant groups, have changed substantially (Guarnizo, 2001). Compared to older waves of immigrants, contemporary ones are more informed about the U.S., the local and global contexts in which their transnational activities are embedded are very different and more interconnected, and their home country seeks to institutionalize these activities in unprecedented ways (Guarnizo, 2001).

Finally, research shows that transnational activities oriented towards the country of origin can occur simultaneously with those oriented towards the host society (Bermudez, 2010). This is because the process of incorporation does not necessarily weaken transnational participation

(Itzigsohn and Saucedo, 2002). Rather, context of reception and mode of incorporation lead to different causal paths to transnational practices (Itzigsohn and Saucedo, 2002).

This article expands current research on immigrant political transnationalism in two ways. First, while debates until now have centered on the validity of “transnationalism” as a concept, the pervasiveness of the phenomenon among immigrants, and forms of political transnationalism, I examine the conditions under which immigrant political transnationalism can occur. Specifically, I explore the motivations that Nigerian immigrants have for political involvement in Nigeria or the U.S., the means that enable this participation, and the constraints to participating. In addition, Latin American populations have dominated the literature on immigrant political transnationalism (Escobar, 2004; Grassmuck & Pessar, 1991; Fox, 2006; Guarnizo & Diaz, 1999; Guarnizo, et al., 2003; Itzigsohn et al., 1999; Kyle, 2000; Levitt, 2001; Mahler, 1999; Margolis, 1994; Massey et al., 1994) although some work has been conducted with other populations as well, primarily Asians (Lessinger, 1992; Smart & Smart, 1998). This article broadens the regional scope by examining transnational political participation among Nigerian immigrants.

### **Nigerian Immigration to the United States**

Contemporary African immigration to the United States stems from a combination of factors that includes shifts in African economies and in U.S. immigration legislation. In Africa, post-independence economic problems peaked in the 1970s, with food insecurity, high inflation, and rising unemployment affecting many countries (Takyi & Konadu-Agyemang, 2006). The introduction of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the 1980s further reorganized economic systems from state to private control, devalued the local currencies and caused governments to cut back on multiple social services (Takyi & Konadu-Agyemang, 2006). These deteriorating socioeconomic conditions created incentives for migration.

In the U.S., the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act changed the criteria for admission to the country by removing quotas that favored the immigration of Europeans and by making family reunification the primary condition for admitting new immigrants (Arthur, 2000; Konadu-Agyemang & Takyi, 2006). Second, the 1990 introduction of the Diversity Visa Lottery (DV) program increased the migration of Africans to the U.S. This program was designed to increase the number of immigrants from underrepresented countries<sup>2</sup>, which greatly favored African nations. Of all eligible countries, Nigerians have consistently obtained the largest number of DV visas since 2002, an average of 6,750 annually, or almost 14%<sup>3</sup> of the allotted 50,000 (U.S. Department of State).

The 2000 U.S. Census registered about 880,000 African-born foreigners living in the U.S., about 3% of the total foreign-born population (Wilson, 2003). By 2009, this number had grown to almost 1.5 million (McCabe, 2011). The highest concentration of Africans is found in the Northeast, particularly New York City (Wilson, 2003; McCabe, 2011). The African foreign-born are highly educated and over 90% have at least a high school degree (Dixon, 2006). They have higher rates of labor force participation than the rest of the foreign-born, and are less likely to be unemployed (Dixon, 2006). They are, however, less likely than the rest of the foreign-born to be naturalized citizens (Dixon, 2006). Nigerians constitute the largest group of African immigrants in the U.S., about 14.1% (McCabe, 2011). Between 2000 and 2009, the number of Nigerians doubled, to almost 210,000.

There are an estimated 250 different ethnic groups in Nigeria, the three largest ones being the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani (Gordon, 2003). Although there are no estimates of what percent of immigrants in the U.S. belong to any of these groups, project participants reiterated that the Hausa rarely migrate internationally, and large concentrations of Igbo, Yoruba and some minority groups are present in the U.S.

Nigerian immigrants form a well-organized community with multiple ethnic, hometown and social organizations. The tradition of belonging to associations is historical and began within Nigerian communities. Trager (2001) documented association membership among the Ijesa Yoruba and found that there are multiple types of organizations that local people belong to, based on occupational groups, religious groups, age groups, and social clubs. Of particular importance are the hometown associations, found within and outside Nigeria, wherever there is a sizable population of individuals originating in the same town. These organizations are a significant source of local-level development (Trager, 2001). Abbott (2006) distinguishes between the smaller scale hometown associations and the larger “ethnic unions.” Amongst their functions he lists petitioning governments regarding grievances and even organizing the first mass political parties (p.141).

As a group, Nigerian immigrants exhibit particular characteristics (some of which are shared by other African migrant populations): they are a recent and growing population, for nearly a decade they have been the primary beneficiaries of the diversity visa program, they are on average highly educated and speak English, and they participate extensively in hometown associations. These traits seem conducive to transnational political participation among a group of African, specifically, southern Nigerian, immigrants.

### **Data and Methods**

I collected the data for this project during yearlong fieldwork in New York City that included a dozen qualitative interviews with community and association leaders, as well as participant observation in association meetings and activities; a quantitative survey with 83 respondents, collected using institutional sampling in churches; approximately 30 semi-structured interviews with Nigerian immigrants; and a collection of articles from numerous Nigerian-American newspapers, Internet forums, and other works written by some of the project’s participants. A total of 40 Nigerian associations were found, including three profession-based (lawyers, social workers and nurses), six interest-based (youth, soccer, etc.), and 31 hometown or ethnicity-based associations. The 12 association-leader interviews were conducted with two organizations that aid newly arrived immigrants to settle, and 10 hometown or ethnicity-based associations, including Yoruba, Igbo, and some smaller ethnic groups.

The association interviews probed the goals of different associations and their membership composition, their establishment and funding, and obstacles encountered in their operation. The survey collected information on demographic characteristics, socioeconomic indicators, labor and migration history, and participation in Nigerian and American activities. Sampling took place in one or more branches of 10 different churches, including Catholic, Adventist, Apostolic, and various Christian denominations that originated in Nigeria. For this article the variables used are: sex, age, marital status, ethnicity, educational level, annual income, type of employment, number of years in the U.S., visa of entry, U.S. and Nigerian citizenship status, participation in Nigerian and American associations, voting in Nigerian and American elections, and whether respondent routinely follows political news from Nigeria and the United

States. Table 1 describes the survey sample. Finally, the immigrant interviews included a set of questions regarding membership and roles in diverse Nigerian or American associations.

**Table 1: Survey Sample Description**

		Variables (N=83)			
Sex	Male	69.51%	Years in the U.S.		
	Female	30.49%	Mean	14.15	
Age			Range	<1 – 36	
	Mean	44.96	U.S. Citizen		
	Range	19 – 75	Yes	87.65%	
Ethnicity			No	12.35%	
	Yoruba	77.11%	Nigerian Citizen		
	Igbo	8.43%	Yes	84.93%	
	Bini	6.02%	No	15.07%	
Marital Status			Nigerian Association Member		
	Edo	4.82%	Yes	52.00%	
	Other	3.61%	No	48.00%	
			U.S. Association Member		
Education	Single	14.63%	Yes	29.58%	
	Married	79.27%	No	70.42%	
	Other	6.1%	Votes in Nigerian Elections		
	High School/2yr College	12.20%	Yes	11.59%	
	College	46.34%	No	88.41%	
	Post-College	37.80%	Votes in U.S. Elections		
	Other	3.66%	Yes	50.00%	
Type of Job			No	50.00%	
	Self-Employed	13.16%	Follows Nigerian News		
	Wage Laborer	75.00%	Yes	84.00%	
	Non-Wage Work/Other	11.84%	No	16.00%	
Income (\$)			Follows U.S. News		
	<30,000	31.88%	Yes	94.59	
	30,000 – 60,000	43.48%	No	5.41%	
Entry Visa	>60,000	24.64%			
	Tourist	51.90%			
	Student	11.39%			
	Green Card	25.32%			
	Refugee	2.53%			
	Religious	2.53%			
	Other	6.33%			

## Results

Nigerians participate in multiple transnational activities. Some of these behaviors including transnational entrepreneurship and remittances (which virtually every Nigerian sends home) are primarily economic and will not be discussed here. Other activities, while often entailing an economic aspect, are more politically oriented and they include voting behavior and membership in different associations.

Six survey variables are used as indicators of political transnationalism: regularly keeping up with Nigerian or American political news, voting in Nigerian or American elections and membership in Nigerian or U.S. associations. Following American or Nigerian political news is a measure of how invested people are in the events of the two countries; in the case of the U.S., it serves as a loose measure of acculturation, and for Nigeria, as a measure of the retention of ties to the home country. Table 2 depicts the cross-tabulations of sex, age, ethnicity, marital status, education, job type, income, entry visa, years in the U.S., and citizenship status with the interest in political news. Because some cell counts are low, not all results are considered. Despite this data limitation, some patterns do emerge.

**Table 2: Percent that Regularly Follow Nigerian or U.S. Political News  
(N in parenthesis)**

		<b>Nigerian News (Total: 84.00%)</b>	<b>U.S. News (Total: 94.50%)</b>
Sex			
	Male	92.45 (49)	100.00 (49)
	Female	63.64 (14)	84.00 (21)
Age			
	Mean	46.69 (49)	44.30 (54)
Ethnicity			
	Bini	100.00 (4)	100.00 (2)
	Edo	100.00 (4)	100.00 (4)
	Igbo	100.00 (6)	100.00 (6)
	Yoruba	81.03 (58)	93.22 (59)
	Other	66.67 (3)	100.00 (3)
Marital Status			
	Single	55.56 (5)	100.00 (11)
	Married	88.52 (54)	93.22 (55)
	Other	75.00 (3)	100.00 (3)
Education			
	High School/2yr College	87.50 (7)	100.00 (7)
	College	74.29 (26)	96.15 (32)
	Post-College	93.43 (27)	100.00 (28)
Type of Job			
	Self-Employed	100.00 (6)	100.00 (7)
	Wage Laborer	87.04 (47)	96.15 (52)
	Non-Wage Work/Other	77.78 (7)	100.00 (9)

**Table 2 (cont'd): Percent that Regularly Follow Nigerian or U.S. Political News  
(N in parenthesis)**

Income (\$)			
	<30,000	85.71 (18)	100.00 (19)
	30,000 – 60,000	81.48 (22)	93.10 (27)
	>60,000	93.33 (14)	93.33 (14)
Entry Visa			
	Tourist	77.78 (28)	91.67 (33)
	Student	77.78 (7)	87.50 (7)
	Green Card	89.47 (17)	100.00 (18)
	Refugee	100.00 (1)	100.00 (1)
	Religious	100.00 (2)	100.00 (2)
	Other	100.00 (4)	100.00 (5)
Years in the U.S.			
	Mean	13.97 (61)	13.39 (68)
U.S. Citizen			
	Yes	84.38 (54)	93.75 (60)
	No	80.00 (8)	100.00 (9)
Nigerian Citizen			
	Yes	85.96 (49)	92.73 (51)
	No	80.00 (8)	100.00 (11)

Overall, across categories respondents were more likely to regularly follow U.S. versus Nigerian political news. This is not surprising considering they live primarily in the U.S. To follow Nigerian news requires some additional effort, although Nigerian-American newspapers are readily found in Nigerian churches and businesses throughout the city. Men were more likely than women to follow the news in either country. Those married were the most likely to follow Nigerian news, as were those with the highest education, those with the highest incomes, and the self-employed. Finally, those who entered the U.S. on a tourist or student visa are the least likely to follow any news at all. For students, this may reflect their younger age. Those with tourist visas overstayed their permitted time, and may currently remain on undocumented status.

A second indicator of political transnationalism is voting behavior. The Nigerian constitution recognizes dual citizenship and immigrants do not have to renounce their Nigerian citizenship even after becoming naturalized U.S. citizens. For this reason, they can be eligible to vote in both countries. Table 3 depicts the cross-tabulations of sex, age, ethnicity, marital status, education, job type, income, entry visa, years in the U.S., and citizenship status with voting behavior.

**Table 3: Percent that Vote in Nigerian or U.S. Elections  
(N in parenthesis)**

		<b>Vote in Nigeria (Total: 11.59%)</b>	<b>Vote in U.S. (Total: 50.00%)</b>
Sex			
	Male	12.77% (6)	47.83% (22)
	Female	9.09% (2)	54.55% (12)
Age			
	Mean	44.50 (4)	49.10 (29)
Ethnicity			
	Bini	0.00% (0)	50.00% (1)
	Edo	0.00% (0)	75.00% (2)
	Igbo	0.00% (0)	50.00% (3)
	Yoruba	14.55% (8)	50.00% (27)
	Other	0.00% (0)	33.33% (1)
Marital Status			
	Single	25.00% (2)	12.50% (1)
	Married	10.17% (6)	53.45% (31)
	Other	0.00% (0)	100.00% (1)
Education			
	High School/2yr College	0.00% (0)	50.00% (3)
	College	12.50% (4)	34.38% (11)
	Post-College	14.81% (4)	65.38% (17)
Type of Job			
	Self-Employed	33.33% (2)	16.67% (1)
	Wage Laborer	10.20% (5)	54.17% (26)
	Non-Wage Work/Other	11.11% (1)	66.67% (6)
Income (\$)			
	<30,000	17.65% (3)	31.25% (5)
	30,000 – 60,000	0.00% (0)	73.08% (19)
	>60,000	18.75% (3)	56.25% (9)
Entry Visa			
	Tourist	9.38% (3)	51.61% (16)
	Student	12.5% (1)	75.00% (6)
	Green Card	11.11% (2)	44.45% (8)
	Refugee	0.00% (0)	0.00% (0)
	Religious	0.00% (0)	50.00% (1)
	Other	0.00% (0)	40.00% (2)
Years in the U.S.			
	Mean	10.67 (6)	19.59 (34)
U.S. Citizen			
	Yes	11.67% (7)	56.67% (34)
	No	0.00% (0)	0.00% (0)
Nigerian Citizen			
	Yes	11.32% (6)	50.00% (26)
	No	0.00% (0)	70.00% (7)

Overall, across all categories respondents were more likely to vote in U.S. versus Nigerian elections. A high proportion (almost 88%) of the Nigerians surveyed are naturalized U.S. citizens. While this is not representative of broader naturalization trends, it serves to explain the U.S. voting behavior of the sample. More importantly, Nigerians cannot vote in Nigerian elections from abroad through the embassies, so voting in Nigerian elections requires time and money to travel. Men are more likely than women to vote in both the U.S. and Nigeria, as are those with the highest educational level. The self-employed are the most likely to vote in

Nigerian elections, but the least likely to vote in U.S. elections. Many self-employed Nigerians engage in transnational trade and travel frequently to Nigeria. At the same time, self-employment is a viable economic opportunity for many immigrants who are not legally in the U.S., which may explain why they cannot and do not vote in American elections. Unsurprisingly, those with the lowest earnings are the least likely to vote in either country's elections. Those who do vote in American elections have on average been in the U.S. longer, which reflects their eligibility to do so, as immigrants cannot become naturalized until many years after their arrival. Interestingly, only about 57% of naturalized Nigerian immigrants claim to vote in U.S. elections.

Finally, the survey contained a third indicator of political transnationalism: membership in Nigerian or U.S. associations. Overall, respondents were more likely to be involved in Nigerian versus U.S. associations. Of 40 Nigerian associations I encountered during fieldwork, three are profession-based associations (lawyers, nurses and social workers), six represent particular interests (women, youth, soccer, elite clubs), and the remaining 31 are hometown or ethnicity-based. In their study, Orozco and Rouse (2007) found that 16% of Nigerian immigrants belong to hometown associations. In my survey 52% of respondents claimed membership in some Nigerian association, hometown or otherwise. Table 4 depicts the cross-tabulations of sex, age, ethnicity, marital status, education, job type, income, entry visa, years in the U.S., and citizenship status with association membership.

**Table 4: Percent that Participate in Nigerian or U.S. Associations  
(N in parenthesis)**

		<b>Nigerian Association (Total: 52.00%)</b>	<b>U.S. Association (Total: 29.58%)</b>
Sex			
	Male	54.72% (29)	35.29% (18)
	Female	45.45% (10)	15.00% (3)
Age			
	Mean	47.61 (31)	47.56 (18)
Ethnicity			
	Bini	40.00% (2)	33.33% (3)
	Edo	0.00% (0)	0.00% (3)
	Igbo	40.00% (2)	16.67% (6)
	Yoruba	59.32% (35)	32.14% (56)
	Other	0.00% (0)	33.33% (3)
Marital Status			
	Single	33.33% (3)	33.33% (3)
	Married	54.84% (34)	27.59% (16)
	Other	33.33% (1)	33.33% (1)
Education			
	High School/2yr College	37.50% (3)	33.33% (2)
	College	57.14% (20)	15.63% (5)
	Post-College	51.72% (15)	44.83% (13)
Type of Job			
	Self-Employed	75.00% (6)	16.67% (1)
	Wage Laborer	50.00% (26)	29.41% (15)
	Non-Wage Work/Other	66.66% (6)	62.50% (5)
Income (\$)			
	<30,000	35.00% (7)	27.78% (5)
	30,000 – 60,000	50.00% (13)	25.93% (7)
	>60,000	85.71% (12)	43.75% (7)

**Table 4 (cont'd): Percent that Participate in Nigerian or U.S. Associations  
(N in parenthesis)**

		<b>Nigerian Association (Total: 52.00%)</b>	<b>U.S. Association (Total: 29.58%)</b>
Entry Visa			
	Tourist	61.11% (22)	32.35% (11)
	Student	44.44% (4)	44.44% (4)
	Green Card	38.89% (7)	22.22% (4)
	Refugee	100.00% (1)	0.00% (0)
	Religious	0.00% (0)	0.00% (0)
	Other	40.00% (2)	20.00% (1)
Years in the U.S.	Mean	16.53 (38)	20.14 (21)
U.S. Citizen	Yes	56.25% (36)	32.79% (20)
	No	30.00% (3)	11.11% (7)
Nigerian Citizen	Yes	56.90% (33)	30.91% (17)
	No	40.00% (4)	40.00% (4)

Men are more likely than women to be involved in both Nigerian and U.S. associations, as are those in the highest income bracket. Those who are married are more likely to be in a Nigerian association, but they are the least likely to be in an U.S. association. Those with the highest education are most likely to be in an U.S. association, and the least educated are least likely to be in a Nigerian association. The self-employed are the most likely to be in a Nigerian association but the least likely to be in a U.S. association. Those in U.S. associations have on average resided in the U.S. longer, which suggests that participation in American associations increases with acculturation. Finally, naturalized U.S. citizens are the most likely to be involved in both Nigerian and U.S. associations, but those who retain their Nigerian citizenship are the least likely to be in a U.S. association.

It is important to highlight here the limitations of the survey data. First, because of sampling limitations these data apply only to various Christian groups, and some bias is introduced in this way. Second, the sample is skewed towards those of Yoruba ethnicity, men, the married, and naturalized citizens. These findings should therefore not be taken as representative of all Nigerian immigrants in the city or the U.S. Nonetheless, these descriptive survey results reveal some general patterns that are worth noting. First, in general, respondents are more involved in American elections and follow American political news more than Nigerian ones, but they are more likely to be in a Nigerian association than an American one. This suggests that participation in a Nigerian association is a good indicator of transnational political participation. Second, men and those with higher education and incomes are most likely to participate in both American and Nigerian political arenas, indicating the importance of gender and class for transnationalism. Third, the self-employed are the most likely to participate in Nigerian associations, vote in Nigerian elections and follow Nigerian political news, yet they are the least likely to exhibit U.S.-oriented political behavior. The importance of associations, men, those with higher education and income, and the self-employed also becomes evident in the

qualitative interview responses. These interviews also provide further evidence of the motivations, means and constraints of political engagement in Nigeria and the U.S.

### **Nigerian Associations**

Nigerian associations in New York City vary in size and scope. Some associations, particularly those representing the more numerous and powerful ethnic groups in Nigeria, have hundreds of members and are able to accomplish multiple and larger projects. Others, specifically the hometown associations of some minority ethnic groups, are much smaller and carry out projects of smaller scope. The larger associations have several chapters in the U.S., and convene at an annual convention. As a male respondent, who was a member of one of the largest ethnic associations, described:

I come from the Yoruba tribe so we have an association [of Yoruba people], the New York chapter. So it is an association that provides a platform for Yorubas to come together and be able to see what we can do to encourage our children to the African, Nigerian and Yoruba culture, and also see how we can preserve, you know, all the ideals of our tradition. So it has a number of events like coronation ceremonies you know, for high school and graduate students. We try to encourage them and give them awards so we can encourage them. We also have scholarship programs to send back to Nigeria so we can help schools and students. We also have what we call the Yoruba day, it's a day where we showcase all our culture to people, all the things we do back home, the food, the dress, you know, it's for Yoruba and outsiders.

Many respondents echoed the sentiments in the statement. Associations are often categorized as being involved in “cultural” activities, but their scope is much broader. Nigerian associations conduct activities both in the U.S. and in Nigeria. The main activities in Nigeria involve philanthropic projects, including scholarships for students to attend a Nigerian university, donating hospital equipment, conducting vaccination campaigns and repairing main roads. More importantly, these activities often involve coordination with state or local Nigerian governments, linking association members to the political structure in multiple ways. A male respondent from a large hometown association explained:

We work hand in hand with the government, the state government at home. And every year we introduce a couple of programs. We had one medical mission. One medical mission every year, a team of doctors and nurses and medical personnel. We treat [the patients] for free and we give them medication free. We also have an educational mission. We try to give them, the people, scholarships and so on. We are also very strong on the issue of good governance. We are very mindful of the way the government is run. And we send people there to see how the government is, how it is governing. And when we see anything wrong we are very critical. We make a report. And so now, the state government is very conscious of us. And they work hand in hand with us.

The previous statement suggests at least two ways in which U.S.-based Nigerian associations are politically involved in Nigeria. First, projects aimed at developing local regions—scholarships, medical missions, road construction, etc.—are coordinated with local authorities. In fact, some of the projects fulfill the work that should be carried out by the local authorities. Second, some associations further act as overseers of local and state governments, a role that is often conflictive.

## Motivations

While most Nigerian associations help out their communities of origin, a few were created specifically to help out Nigerian immigrants in the U.S. One of these associations is run by a single person who has a network of lawyers, doctors and priests ready to provide free services, counseling and temporary housing to Nigerians who cannot locate their contact person when they move to New York City, or simply become lost in its bureaucracy. Part of their motivation was that many newcomers requested aid to the Nigerian consulate but were unable to obtain it. The director recounted:

I have three calls that came in today. One of them was some Nigerian visiting. They had this little child who had sickle cell anemia, you see what I'm saying? How can this organization help? Well, this organization cannot help because we don't have the means to help. How about the Nigerian consulate? No, the Nigerian consulate will not be able to help because they are not funded for that. Now, what else can we do? Well, I can do one thing and that is find them a place to stay.

Both the associations aimed at immigrants and those whose activities focus on Nigerian hometowns work to fill what their leadership perceive as a gap left by Nigerian authorities, both at home and in their diplomatic representations abroad. This role has developed over time, for the associations were first established to help immigrants acclimate to their new society. One respondent explained:

Back then [when he migrated] we do not have any constituted body as a mentor.

Whatever kind of mentoring you get is on a one-to-one basis, maybe friends or you know, acquaintances. But we formed this association so that we would be seen as an African society authentic group, a group of professional people dedicated to the cause of Africans. Back then in the '80s it was just . . . we couldn't identify one. So that was what motivated us to set things up.

Another form of political participation in the U.S. is voting. While the survey shows that only 57% of Nigerians eligible to vote in the U.S. do so, respondents credited the transparency in the electoral process in the U.S. with encouraging them to vote. Nigerian immigrant newspapers further motivate involvement in American political processes and voting. One editorial urged naturalized immigrants to vote because "immigrants have been devolved to the state of a third-class citizen of America, and to reverse this immigrants must speak with a loud voice in the next presidential election" (Editorial, 2008a). Another newspaper reminded Nigerians that while their experiences with Nigerian elections have likely been negative, given the extent to which elections are rigged, this should not keep them from voting in American elections (Editorial, 2008b).

Associations geared towards their hometowns cited a widespread perceived need for help in Nigeria as their primary motivation. One respondent recounted how the first governor of his state after the end of military rule in Nigeria was corrupt and inefficient:

The schools were closed for a year. The infrastructure was bad, the roads were not good, the hospitals had doctors and nurses who were not accredited. Everything was just really going terribly wrong. Nothing was working. And so that was the thing that made us form the organization. Because if you go at home people were crying for help, our families were asking us [those who live abroad] to help.

Although few individuals spoke directly about it, some association leaders have also used their work to increase their political clout in their hometowns, and some plan to return to govern themselves. One informant did admit “[ . . . ] we are trying to expand and seek public office.”

Motivations for participating in activities in Nigeria or geared towards the Nigerian community are numerous. They range from individual benefit (such as those who plan on running for governor in Nigeria), group benefit (reproduction of Nigerian culture in the U.S.) and altruistic (alleviating the problems faced by families and communities in Nigeria). The motivations for participating in the U.S., however, are fewer and are encouraged by a few community leaders and through media like the local Nigerian immigrant newspapers.

### Means

For Nigerian immigrants, living abroad is the single most important means to participate politically in their home country. Those who reside in the U.S., even with modest incomes, are usually better off financially than they were in their communities of origin and they use that advantageous position to leverage political influence. As a male respondent explained:

I go to the [local Nigerian] government and say look, I make so much money. I can make some contributions to your campaign, so you take care of me, take care of the things I care about. Now I can do that because I am right here in the United States. If I make a lot of money or win the lottery I can go to my government and say I'm going to give you half. Do not forget that the whole thing is in the social status of everybody. Your social status is determined by power. Now what is power? You can have lots of money and buy up everything.

The previous statement helps to explain why in the survey, those with greater education and incomes had greater rates of participation in Nigerian associations. While many respondents discussed the power of money, it is clear that not every Nigerian immigrant is wealthy enough to have such influence over local Nigerian politics. Nonetheless, the importance of being relatively wealthy by working abroad was echoed in multiple interviews. One respondent further links money and remittances to increased political power for family members who remain back home:

The people over here have more money than people back home. So, the people over here have an advantage, what can you do? Things are changing, now when people come over here, their lifestyle change. Don't forget also, you left to improve your life. So once you're here, you really improve your life, you're not going to go back. And one of the things even the governor [in Nigeria] is now finding out, there are now people here asking, why is this governor doing this. They are looking for the guys who send [remittances], because the relatives back home depend on the people over here to send money. You might say, why is this important to the governor? Because the people over here would tell you, when I send money home, I tell [the relatives] who to go to. So the governor can get some of the people here to back him, and the people over here now have to decide who to back and to tell their relatives who to back. Oh yes, people over here are really involved.

The Nigerian immigrant community's importance is evident in their relationship with their hometown and state leaders. Not only are immigrants courted during electoral campaigns, but governors travel to the U.S. to meet with the larger associations and participate in their annual conventions. Those who are politically involved take the opportunity of those visits to influence Nigerian policies. One respondent commented:

Even the present governor, of the state, he has not been able to govern well. So now, he knows what the problems are, so he was here [in New York City] about a month ago, so we pointed out to him that education and other areas needed work.

In addition to the status granted by wealth, living abroad also gives immigrants the freedom to confront the local Nigerian governments without fear of repercussions. As one informant explained:

There was nobody who could criticize the government, nobody who could take a neutral stance. Everybody wanted to get in the good graces of the government and so we needed this outside independent voice. In that we are [in the U.S.] we are not beholden to the government of Nigeria, they are not paying us, we are not under their payroll, we don't need their money, we are professionals here so it's easier for us to take independent positions. That's what we've been doing.

One association of people from a southeastern Igbo state stands out as playing the most direct political role, one that doesn't involve support for specific political parties, but instead entails a commitment to fighting corruption. A key goal of this association is ensuring good governance of their home state. They strive to be independent and objective and in the process of confronting their state government they foresaw conflict. Association leaders claim that is part of their job, and credit their status as Nigerians living in the U.S. as enabling them to fulfill their goals. One former association president recounted a specific incident where association leaders confronted a former governor and prevented him from running for re-election:

There was a lot of conflict [...] and so I went to Nigeria to visit his [the governor's] office, and at the end of the day after discussing with him he stormed out of his office and wouldn't say . . . he said that he was going somewhere, he wouldn't talk to us again. And we then went to the press and denounced him and after we did that, that gave the people the courage. And then people started criticizing him and that eventually led to his downfall, so, when they had another election, he wasn't, he couldn't run because people now had condemned him.

After a conflictive period with the government they accused of corruption, association members are now called to act as international observers of local elections, and they host local leaders at their national convention in the U.S. The work of this association stands out in comparison to that of smaller associations: it holds the government responsible for carrying out its duties, and it does not create long-term dependency on immigrants abroad to supplement the work of the local government.

Finally, newspapers and other means of communications are crucial to the successful operation of the multiple Nigerian immigrant associations. Newspapers serve to recruit members to different associations and to announce scheduled meetings. Larger events are publicized in the "African High Society" pages. Newspapers also encourage transnationalism by providing articles on everything from how to make money in the Nigerian stock market (Nwankpa, 2007), to announcing local visits by Nollywood stars and publishing the results of local elections in Nigeria.

The Internet has been used by other immigrant groups as an important space for political activity (Bretell, 2008). Nigerians do not rely on this resource much. Association websites are often outdated and provide little information regarding their work. Some Nigerian-Americans do use Internet forums to write political columns, and some discussion is held in Internet forums. One of these is [www.nairaland.com](http://www.nairaland.com), where Nigerians at home and abroad sometimes engage in

heated debate. Some of larger associations do make use of communications technology in other ways. As one respondent explains:

We don't even have to meet by committee, we do what is also called teleconferencing. We call into a place, we talk, and then we have the meeting. With this system, the whole group participates, Austria, Germany, England, France, China, they are in it. So once I type something, all of them get it. The good is that everybody can get it. We are still trying to make it strong and we are still looking for people. And one of the problems we are having, it's a universal problem, is timing and scheduling.

### **Constraints**

Some constraints also exist to deter transnational political activity. For immigrants wanting to participate in Nigeria, even when they can afford the trip back to Nigeria, corruption and lack of faith in the electoral system impede participation. As one respondent stated:

There are some leaders [in Nigeria] who misbehave during the elections and betray the trust of the people.

Some associations, particularly those wanting to be seen as objective and neutral, are discouraged from collecting too many public funds or carrying out certain projects for fear of being deemed too partisan:

We are careful not to do too much so we are still seen as independent, and be able to remain a constructive political voice. In other words, there are certain things that we don't do so it doesn't become too political. We tend to have to find a balance.

Other associations further deal with internal problems, particularly members who do not pay their dues, and poor leadership. Even in associations with large membership, participation for the majority is reduced to paying dues and attending meetings and events. For two associations that provided me their accounting documents, dues are the single most important source of financing. As one respondent explained:

Certain chapters don't have good leadership, and so are not being able to meet their obligations. Each chapter is supposed to pay a due. If we want to do something like, in a year we want to go on a medical mission then we will levy the chapters. We'll say the chapters pay a few thousand, so a problem that has come out of these chapters is not being able to meet up with these payments, with their obligations. Under our constitution, if you don't pay, then for instance you can't vote and you cannot be voted for, and you cannot be an officer, and some other things. To the extent that there's been problems, we have come to these chapters, you know, they want something out of nothing. And they are not able to meet their obligations.

Participation in the U.S. is hindered first and foremost by lack of residency or citizenship. This situation might change as Nigerians continue to receive large numbers of the diversity visas and migrate as permanent residents. A few informants felt like being black was an additional obstacle in the U.S. that did they not face in Nigeria. As one individual explained:

Our motivation, in some ways, cannot adapt itself to a complicated society like America, especially New York. You see, it's hard whether you are Dominican, Spanish, African or black American. If you are black it makes no difference. Everyone sees you as "black."

Finally, one informant who has been in the U.S. for several decades, and has been consistently in the leadership of his association, believes that newer generations of Nigerian immigrants will become less politically involved in either the U.S. or Nigeria because they are only focused on acquiring wealth and not on effecting social change. According to him,

People who come now, are mostly not educated. And they are not educationally inclined. They are not coming here to get an education, they are probably coming here to look for a job, no matter what to get employment. I mean, to maybe drive a cab, whatever. Now that's totally different from when we came. When we came here, you were coming specifically to go to school. Most of us finished high school, some had gone to university. Whoever came here, for the most part, were coming to go to school. And they already had arranged where they wanted to go and how long it was going to take them. You know, program and so on. And the plan was to graduate and go back. But people who come now, most of them, quite frankly are just hustlers. You know they are just hustling for existence. It's a totally different outlook, consequently the Nigerians today, a lot of them come and they don't even bother to go to school, you know.

He continues to explain that many of the immigrants who returned to Nigeria in the 1960s and '70s after studying in the U.S. eventually migrated again to the U.S. after being disappointed by the political turmoil in Nigeria. According to him, for those immigrants the original desire to build the Nigerian state motivates their political involvement in Nigeria and the U.S. The newer generations, however, are only focused on making a living for themselves.

### **Conclusions**

This article outlines some of the motivations, means and constraints to transnational political behavior among Nigerian immigrants in New York City. While the scholarly debate surrounding immigrant transnationalism revolves around the scope and pervasiveness of such activities, I sought to explore the context under which such behavior occurs. The survey findings and the qualitative interviews suggest the importance of gender, class and acculturation for understanding political transnationalism among Nigerian immigrants (see Table 5 for a summary of findings).

**Table 5: Summary of Motivations, Means and Constraints for Political Participation in Nigeria and the United States**

	U.S.	Nigeria
Motivations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interview responses indicate that transparency in the political process facilitates voting. They also suggest a need to intervene in the settlement process of new immigrants in the U.S.</li> <li>- Nigerian immigrant newspapers encourage involvement in American politics and voting.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interview responses signal the importance of perceived needs of home communities and family requests for intervention. They also depict how associations supplement the work of the Nigerian government.</li> <li>- Social status (and possibly political clout) gained by participating.</li> </ul>
Means	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Naturalization a prerequisite to voting.</li> <li>- Survey data suggest the importance of gender and class.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interview responses indicate that residing in the U.S. gives independence from local Nigerian governments. Also, money and status of living abroad gives power to influence. Communications technology facilitates coordination of associations' work.</li> <li>- Survey data suggest the importance of gender and class. Being self-employed also facilitates participation.</li> <li>- Newspapers serve to recruit members to associations, inform of political situation in Nigeria, advertise candidates' platforms, etc.</li> </ul>
Constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interviews suggest the importance for some of perceived racism in the U.S. Also, being an immigrant reduces social status enjoyed in Nigeria. Respondents employed in the local (NYC) government fear participating in overt political activity.</li> <li>- Survey data indicate lower participation rates among the self-employed. This may be associated with their legal status or the nature of their work. Women, those with lower incomes and education participate less, too.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interviews indicate lack of trust in the political system and fears that accusations of partisanship will hinder association programs and activities. Internal problems within associations (leadership, unpaid dues, etc.) also impede their work.</li> <li>- Survey indicates that women, those with lower incomes and education participate less.</li> </ul>

News readership, voting behavior and membership in associations were used as indicators of transnationalism in the survey. According to the survey, men were more likely than women to regularly follow both Nigerian and U.S. news, to vote in Nigeria or the U.S., and to be members of either Nigerian or American associations. In addition, the leadership of the associations I encountered consisted almost exclusively of men, and all the association members who granted me interviews were men. The individuals I met or was told about who sought election in Nigeria were all men as well. Given that the political involvement of Nigerian

immigrants is greatly facilitated by their leadership roles in associations, most of this activity is the domain of men.

The importance of social class is also highlighted by the survey and interview data. In the survey, respondents in the highest education category were the most likely to follow Nigerian news, to vote in Nigerian or U.S. elections and to be members of an American association (when membership rates in American associations are low to begin with). Those in the lowest education category (two-year college or below) were the least likely to belong to a Nigerian association, despite the high overall rate of Nigerian association membership. Similarly, those in the highest earnings category (\$60,000 or higher) were most likely to follow Nigerian news and most likely to vote in either country's elections. Those in the lowest earnings category were the least likely to vote at all.

The importance of class is also evident from the qualitative interviews. One factor that enables Nigerian immigrants to become politically involved in their communities of origin is their condition as immigrants. Residing in the U.S. gives them access to earnings that are greater than what they received in Nigeria, granting them social status there. In addition, because they do not reside in Nigeria, they have the power to criticize local governments or carry out different projects and campaigns with no fear of retribution. The amount of status and power conferred to them, however, is likely to increase as their wealth increases, too. In addition, not all associations are created equal, and those with a larger membership and wealthier members are able to carry out more ambitious projects. Technology and advertisement in media further facilitates the work of associations; individuals with higher education and wealth are most able to access these means. While residing in the U.S. comparatively increases immigrants' social class to the one they held in Nigeria, respondents also perceived that it simultaneously undermined their ability to participate civically in the U.S. Lack of citizenship, racism and immigrant status were mentioned as constraints to political engagement in the U.S.

Finally, the data also imply the importance of acculturation as a predictor of political transnationalism. In the survey, self-employed immigrants (as opposed to wage workers) were the most likely to follow Nigerian news, to vote in Nigerian elections and to belong to a Nigerian association. They were also the least likely to vote in U.S. elections or belong to American associations. Because nearly all self-employed Nigerians in New York City are involved in trading, it is possible that their frequent trips to Nigeria inhibit their acculturation into American society. The survey also shows that Nigerians involved in American associations had on average been longer in the U.S. than their counterparts who did not belong to an American association.

The importance of acculturation is also indicated by the interview data. More precisely, the lack of acculturation seems related to the political involvement of Nigerian immigrants in Nigeria. Associations were frequently created to preserve Nigerian culture among immigrants, and more associations work in Nigeria than in the U.S. One respondent related acculturation to immigrant cohort, complaining that more recent immigrant waves are less interested with staying involved in their Nigerian hometowns and more preoccupied with "hustling," or "making it" in the U.S.

To better understand immigrant political transnationalism, studies must address the conditions under which such behavior occurs. In this article, I have outlined some of the motivating factors for political transnationalism, as well as the means that enable it and the constraints to it. Future research can examine this more formally, and also address the actual effects of immigrant political transnationalism for individuals and their communities of origin and reception.

### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Only citizens of countries that sent less than 50,000 immigrants to the U.S. the previous year are eligible to participate in the DV program.

<sup>3</sup> The actual number of visas obtained by Nigerians per year are: 2002 (6,049); 2003 (5,989); 2004 (7,145); 2005 (6,725); 2006 (6,191); 2007 (9,849); 2008 (8,773); 2009 (6,041); 2010 (6,006); 2011 (6,000); 2012 (6,024); 2013 (6,218). Because of the actual cost of the visa and other expenses, this number does not represent the actual number of Nigerian immigrants per year. On the other hand, those who do obtain permanent residency are subsequently eligible to sponsor family members.

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