10.70599/rvim/2026/v18.i1/43-55 Vol 18(1), 2026 | pp. 43-55

RVIM Journal of Management Research

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bridging Efficiency and Participation: A Management-Theoretical Approach to Strengthening Democratic Governance in the Nigerian Public Sector

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Keywords: Accountability, Contingency Theory, Democratic Governance, Nigeria, Public Management, Qualitative Analysis, Service Delivery, Systems Theory

Article Received: XX-XX-20XX
Article Revised: XX-XX-20XX
Article Accepted: XX-XX-20XX

Abstract

This study explores the intersection between the practical demands of public management and the guiding principles of democratic governance in Nigeria, examining how efficiency-driven administrative practices can coexist with participatory democratic ideals. At its core, the research evaluates the role of public institutions in promoting accountability and delivering services, while balancing managerial performance with citizen engagement. Using a qualitative research design, the study draws exclusively on secondary data, including policy reports, scholarly articles, and official publications, framed within Systems Theory and Contingency Theory. Data were analysed thematically to generate nuanced insights. The findings reveal a persistent tension between centralised, bureaucratic management approaches and the participatory ethos of democratic governance, often resulting in inefficiency, limited accountability, and widespread public dissatisfaction. However, the evidence also suggests that adopting flexible, context-sensitive management practices grounded in democratic principles can enhance institutional responsiveness and legitimacy. The study argues that Nigerian public institutions frequently struggle to adapt best practices to local realities, thereby limiting their ability to address governance challenges effectively. In conclusion, the research advocates for a hybrid governance model that integrates the strengths of both public administration and business management. Such a model would prioritise institutional reforms aimed at embedding performance-based systems, strengthening managerial capacity, and institutionalising citizen engagement in service delivery. By focusing

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not only on institutional functionality but also on inclusiveness and accountability, these reforms hold the potential to revitalise democratic governance in Nigeria.

Major Findings: This study makes an original contribution to the growing discourse on democratic governance by demonstrating that effective public sector governance cannot be achieved through managerial efficiency alone. By bringing together Systems Theory and Contingency Theory, the study develops an integrated framework that explains how institutional coordination, administrative flexibility, accountability, and citizen participation can work together to strengthen democratic governance in Nigeria. Unlike previous studies that examine management reforms or governance challenges separately, this research bridges both perspectives and proposes a practical hybrid governance model that is responsive to Nigeria's institutional realities. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, public administrators, and governance scholars seeking to promote more accountable, inclusive, and effective public institutions in Nigeria and similar developing democracies.

INTRODUCTION

Democratic governance in Nigeria continues to dominate the larger discussion on development, especially at a time when the nation faces issues related to institutional inefficiencies, lack of civic trust, and general mistrust of service delivery by the government (Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2019; World Bank, 2025). Democratic governance is a form of governance system that is based on the grounds of transparency, participation, accountability, responsiveness, and rule of law (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022a). Nonetheless, in most developing democracies, which also include Nigeria, the ideals of democracy are usually compromised by administrative bottlenecks, misuse of resources, and politicisation of the state public service (Lawal *et al.*, 2012; Mumuni, 2024; Aiyede & Muganda, 2023). When focusing on management theory as it is implemented in the private sector, it is possible to note that it is highly centred around efficiency, strategic leadership, goal orientation, and performance, whereas the application of these concepts to the government has made people question how it can be compatible with democratic values (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

Other foundational theories like the bureaucratic model propagated by Weber and the scientific management by Taylor advanced the use of hierarchical positions of power and specialisation of tasks that remains the main feature of most Nigerian Government centers (Okuru *et al.*, 2024). Subsequent evolutions, which include human relations theory, contingency theory, and system theory, instilled flexibility, adaptability, and focus on human behaviour, which is more in line with the ideals of participatory governance (Bryson *et al.*, 2021). In a Nigerian consideration, New Public Management (NPM) reform implementation has brought about a new emphasis on performance indicators, decentralisation, and customer (citizen) orientation in Nigeria. Yet, critics claim that such reforms tend to down-tune the voice of citizens and minimise responsibility through technocratic performance optimisation instead of democratic debate (Agboola & Lamidi, 2017; Ayodele & Adebusuyi, 2024). Institutional legitimacy and trust in the system are weakened because there is a lack of mechanisms to combine participatory governance and strategic management concepts.

The current paper brings a management-theoretical perspective into the issues of democratic governance in Nigeria. It examines the interaction of leadership processes, institutional capacity, stakeholder engagement, and policy processes contributing to solidify democratic accountability or neutralise it. Based on qualitative and documentary sources of information, the study seeks to provide a hybrid governance framework that will have the balance of

technical performance and democratic responsiveness, especially in the system of local governments and federal ministries.

Finally, the study also enriches the body of literature by suggesting the change toward flexibility and bottom-top bureaucratic systems to more accommodating and citizen-responsive ones, in which efficiency and involvement may work simultaneously to create a more inclusive development (UNECA, 2023).

Statement Problem

Nevertheless, even after implementing various public sector reforms in Nigeria, such as performance-based approaches and reshaping governance, the public institutions in the country are still very ineffective and unresponsive to the needs of citizens (Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2019; World Bank, 2023). These obstacles hint at an even bigger issue: the ongoing incongruence between managerial ideas based on efficiency and participatory values of democratic governance (Okuru *et al.*, 2024). Reinventing governments according to NPM principles has aimed at achieving improved efficiencies through imitating corporate management techniques of decentralisation, performance measurement, and result-based accountability (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Such approaches have, however, been mostly implemented in Nigeria without necessary adjustments to the political, social, and institutional environment.

Consequently, reforms ensure there is a greater focus on outputs at the cost of citizen participation, inclusion and deliberative processes and in this way, it has increased the governance gap (Ayodele & Adebusuyi, 2024; Osumanyi *et al.*, 2020; Onodugo *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, the structural division amongst the different institutions, political intrusion as well as the absence of strategic management plagues the Nigerian public sector and makes it more difficult to ensure reforms generate sustainable democratic returns (Okuru *et al.*, 2024). In reality, efficiency-based frameworks tend to strengthen elite capture and marginalise citizens towards the decision structures (Lawal *et al.*, 2012; UNDP, 2021). The other thing that is lacking is a more integrative model that not only incorporates the systematic rigour of management theory but also the normative focus of democratic governance. This would make a model that not only ensures public institutions work well but also would have meaning with the citizens they are expected to serve (Bryson *et al.*, 2021; UNDP, 2022b). This study aims to address this gap by examining the management theories and the systems theory, contingency theory, and the management of public value; to improve efficiency and participatory accountability in the Nigerian public-sector institutions.

Research Objectives

The overarching goal of this study is to examine how management theories can be adapted to strengthen democratic governance within the Nigerian public sector. Specifically, the study seeks to:

i. Analyse the compatibility between key management theories and democratic governance principles in the context of public administration in Nigeria.
ii. Assess the extent to which current public sector reforms in Nigeria promote both managerial efficiency and citizen participation.
iii. Identify institutional, political, and cultural factors that constrain the integration of managerial principles into democratic governance practices.
iv. Propose a hybrid framework that incorporates both managerial effectiveness and participatory governance for improved public service delivery in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Systems Theory and Contingency Theory

This particular study is based on a theoretical framework that rests on the foundations of Systems Theory and Contingency Theory, as both of those approaches provide dynamic and adaptive perspectives through which a researcher may comprehend the complexities of democratic governance and challenges associated with managing a public sector. Besides being widely applicable in organisational and administration research, the theories also offer a strategic model of analysis of how institutions, leadership, environment, and performance are tied together in governance systems.

Systems Theory

Institutions, such as public institutions, can be described as systems, according to the Systems Theory, initially proposed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968), and a system is characterised by the fact that it is made of distinct and interconnected and interdependent components that have to relate themselves to the exterior environment in order to survive and develop. The theory considers the public sector as a complex system that should be adaptive and needs coherence internally, feedback loops, and responses to external requests, including citizen engagement, policy changes, and social change (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972; Bryson *et al.*, 2021). In the context of democratic governance in Nigeria, Systems Theory presents the importance of alignment among different forms of administrative structure, political leadership, civil society, and the citizens. The functioning of public institutions requires not only the alignment of the components of the given institution (*e.g.*, the ministries, departments and agencies) to perform within the given institution, but also to be responsive to the external expectations of the backers of the said public institution, such as transparency and inclusivity (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2021). Nevertheless, in Nigeria, the lack of connection between the systems of the government and civic participation, in most cases, results in the failure of governance, ineffective feedback, and institutional learning (Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2019). The proposed study explores the input-to-output conversion activities that Nigerian public sector institutions undertake of citizen demands/policies, and their responsiveness to feedback protests/elections/audit through the systems lens. The theory is useful in evaluating how dysfunction in any of the sub-systems, like those that involve politicised bureaucracy or underfunded local governments, derails the wider particular objectives of participation, responsiveness and accountability in governance.

Contingency Theory

Contingency Theory is an extension of the systems perspective in that it states that management in organisations cannot be a single model; rather, it should fit the internal and external environment of the organisation (Fiedler, 1964; Donaldson, 2001). The Contingency Theory in governance terms insists on situational fittingness, implying that reforms and administration models should fit political, cultural, institutional, and economic objective situations. Nigeria is one country that has experienced numerous cases of transplanted reforms in the public sector that had little or no adaptation to the local contingencies, and hence their effectiveness was significantly reduced (Ayodele & Adebusuyi, 2024; Onodugo *et al.*, 2020). To illustrate, where decentralisation is employed and appears to succeed in more institutionalised democracies in Nigeria more often than not, little oversight structures and weak civic involvement would tend to result in local elites dominating the use of resources because it is the most available and accessible (Emordi *et al.*, 2024). Contingency Theory can therefore enable this study to first of all critically evaluate the situational compatibility of diverse management principles, particularly those formulated based on New Public Management (NPM), with the realities of the Nigerian country politically and sociologically. It enables the construction of a flexible, situation-sensitive, and adaptive model of governance that adapts to the various needs of the Nigerian communities, institutional weaknesses, and democratic pressures model of governance.

Synthesis and Application

The combination of Systems Theory and Contingency Theory allows a robust frame of analysis and enhancement of democratic governance applied to the Nigerian public sector. Whereas Systems Theory places much importance on the necessity of interdependence, feedback and adaptive capacity among institutional actors, Contingency Theory focuses on the significance of context-sensitive treatments to reform, management and participation. It is based on these theories that the main premise of this study is formulated, namely that democratic governance in Nigeria can be reinforced not merely on abstract theories and imported manner of reforms, but through systematically implemented and flexible forms of management that are systematically

incorporated into institutional frameworks as well as democracies within the country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Management Theory and Democratic Governance: Management theory and democratic governance have been viewed as two distinct fields, with one concentrated on control and efficiency and the other on participation and deliberation (Frederickson, 2005). Nevertheless, new paradigms like Public Value Management (Moore, 1995) and Collaborative Governance draw attention to the fact that the two can be synergistic. These approaches suggest that public managers must simultaneously pursue efficiency and legitimacy by engaging citizens in decision-making processes while maintaining effective service delivery (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2021).

This emerging perspective challenges the traditional assumption that managerial efficiency and democratic participation are mutually exclusive objectives. While conventional management approaches emphasise performance, coordination, and resource optimisation, democratic governance prioritises accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, and citizen engagement. However, contemporary governance scholarship increasingly recognises that neither efficiency nor participation alone is sufficient to achieve sustainable public sector outcomes. Effective governance requires a balance between administrative competence and democratic legitimacy.

The intersection between management theory and democratic governance therefore lies in the ability of public institutions to create value through efficient service delivery while remaining responsive to the needs and expectations of citizens. In practice, governance systems that focus solely on efficiency may achieve short-term administrative gains but risk losing public trust and legitimacy. Conversely, governance structures that prioritise participation without effective management may struggle to translate citizen demands into tangible policy outcomes. This suggests that a complementary relationship exists between management principles and democratic values, particularly within developing democracies where governments face increasing pressure to improve both service delivery and citizen satisfaction.

Public Sector Management in Nigeria: Challenges and Gaps: Problems that Nigerians face in the public service include bureaucracy, poor accountability, corruption and lack of citizen trust. Although various reforms have brought into play performance-based management, they have often failed to institutionalise citizen voice, transparency, and responsiveness. Moreover, the gap between reform policies and local realities persists due to political interference and weak institutional capacity in implementation (World Bank, 2022).

These challenges highlight the limitations of reform efforts that focus predominantly on administrative efficiency while paying insufficient attention to governance quality and citizen participation. Although several public sector reforms have sought to modernise service delivery and improve organisational performance, the expected improvements in accountability, responsiveness, and public trust have remained limited. This suggests that managerial reforms alone may not be sufficient to address the broader governance challenges facing Nigeria's public sector.

Furthermore, many reform initiatives have been influenced by imported administrative models that do not always adequately reflect Nigeria's socio-political and institutional realities. As a result, implementation outcomes often differ significantly from policy intentions. The persistence of these governance challenges indicates the need for approaches that are both context-sensitive and adaptive, capable of integrating management efficiency with democratic governance principles. Such an approach would provide a more holistic framework for addressing the complex realities of public administration in Nigeria.

Empirical Review: A number of empirical investigations provide clues to the relationship between governance and management in Nigeria. A number of empirical studies have questioned the status of democratic governance in Nigeria; a qualitative content analysis revealed that democratic consolidation is still low because of institutional

ineffectiveness, corruption, and political dominance in the affairs of the civil services (Emordi *et al.*, 2024). On the same note, Salawu & Sackflame (2023) noted that public institutions are usually non-autonomous and hungry, an aspect that interferes with their capacity to produce democratic dividends. The qualitative study carried out by Arum *et al.* (2024) on the issue of public service reforms in Nigeria shows that although efficiency-oriented reforms have enhanced internal processes, citizens have not been very responsive to their participation or trust in government. Salawu & Sackflame (2023) focused on the failings of governance in Nigeria and indicated that managerial reformation tends to lack political accountability and therefore makes it unsustainable. Nwekeaku & Obiorah (2019) studied the issue of strategic management in public institutions and discovered that management practices should be location-specific and adjusted to the norms of democracy to work.

Ukwu *et al.* (2025) applied the case study method in evaluating the application of the SERVICOM. They discovered it enhanced service delivery within a few of the agencies; however, weak monitoring and awareness of citizens affected its success. In their role, Bello and Ahmed (2023) investigated participatory budgeting in several Nigerian states and concluded that entangling citizens in the process of making fiscal decisions resulted in more accountable and responsive outcomes in the realm of governance.

Empirical Applications of Management Theory: There have also been empirical studies on the transfer of management to public administration. As an example, Anayochukwu and Ani (2022) analysed the applicability of the systems theory to local government administration and suggested that the lack of strong feedback mechanisms and coordination between structures has denied the local councils the ability to meet the development agenda. Anam (2014) used the theory of contingency when considering the relationship between rigid models of bureaucracy and the inability to cope with environmental and political differences at the Nigerian state government levels. This conformed to the postulation of Burns and Stalker (1994) on the management principle of contingency theory of management.

Public Sector Reform Outcomes: Hope (2012) tested the impacts of NPM-based reforms in Nigeria and in other Sub-Saharan African economies. The analysis pointed out the infinitesimal cost-efficiencies but stressed the degradation of participatory procedures. Likewise, Nwekeaku and Obiorah (2019) have discovered that those healthcare reforms pertaining to NPM frameworks tend to focus on managerialism rather than democratic accountability, which causes disillusion of citizens. These studies indicate that even though management-oriented reforms are needed, these should be democratised and localised in order to be sustainable.

Gaps in the Literature: The reviewed literature provides important insights into democratic governance, public sector reforms, and management practices in Nigeria. However, several gaps remain evident. First, although numerous studies have examined democratic governance challenges such as corruption, weak institutions, poor accountability, and limited citizen participation (Emordi *et al.*, 2024; Salawu & Sackflame, 2023), most of these studies focus primarily on governance outcomes without adequately incorporating management theories as explanatory frameworks. Second, studies on public sector reforms have largely concentrated on administrative efficiency, performance management, and service delivery improvements (Arum *et al.*, 2024; Hope, 2012; Nwekeaku & Obiorah, 2019). While these studies provide valuable insights into managerial reforms, they pay limited attention to how such reforms interact with democratic principles such as participation, transparency, responsiveness, and legitimacy. Consequently, the relationship between management effectiveness and democratic governance remains insufficiently explored. Third, although systems theory and contingency theory have individually been applied within public administration studies (Anayochukwu & Ani, 2022), very few studies have explicitly combined these theoretical perspectives in the analysis of democratic governance within Nigeria's public sector. This has created a theoretical gap in understanding how organisational interdependence, environmental uncertainty, institutional adaptation, and governance outcomes interact within the Nigerian context.

In addition, there is a paucity of empirical research that simultaneously incorporates managerial and democratic indicators when evaluating governance effectiveness. Existing studies tend to assess either administrative performance or democratic outcomes in isolation, thereby limiting a comprehensive understanding of governance effectiveness. As a result, the literature lacks a theoretical synthesis capable of linking administrative efficiency with participatory legitimacy.

This study addresses these gaps by integrating Systems Theory and Contingency Theory within the broader framework of democratic governance. By synthesising these perspectives, the study develops a hybrid analytical approach that explains how efficiency, adaptability, accountability, and citizen participation can be jointly pursued in Nigeria's public sector. In doing so, the study contributes to both theoretical and practical discussions on strengthening democratic governance through context-sensitive and inclusive management approaches.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine how management theories can contribute to strengthening democratic governance within Nigeria's public sector. The choice of a qualitative approach was informed by the nature of the research problem, which involves exploring complex governance processes, institutional dynamics, and administrative practices that cannot be adequately captured through numerical measurement alone. Democratic governance encompasses issues such as accountability, participation, transparency, institutional effectiveness, and citizen engagement, all of which require contextual interpretation and in-depth analysis.

A qualitative design was therefore considered appropriate because it enables the researcher to explore meanings, relationships, and patterns embedded within existing scholarly and policy literature. It also provides an opportunity to examine how management theories such as Systems Theory and Contingency Theory have been applied to public administration and governance reforms within the Nigerian context. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research is particularly useful for investigating social phenomena in their natural settings and for developing a deeper understanding of complex institutional realities. Given that this study seeks to provide a theoretical and conceptual understanding of the relationship between management principles and democratic governance, the qualitative approach offered the most suitable framework for achieving the study's objectives.

Data Source and Collection

The study relied exclusively on secondary data obtained from a wide range of documentary sources. The use of secondary data was considered appropriate because the research is conceptual and analytical in nature, focusing on existing knowledge, policy experiences, and scholarly debates relating to democratic governance and public sector management in Nigeria. Documentary sources provide rich and credible evidence for examining governance trends, institutional reforms, and theoretical developments over time.

Data were collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, government policy documents, conference papers, and reports published by international organisations. Sources were accessed through recognised academic databases and repositories, including JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar, and institutional databases. To enhance the quality and relevance of the data, documents were selected based on clearly defined inclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria required that documents: (i) address issues relating to democratic governance, public administration, management theory, or public sector reform; (ii) contain theoretical, empirical, or policy-relevant discussions; (iii) focus on Nigeria or provide insights applicable to developing public-sector contexts; and (iv) be published within the last ten years, except for seminal theoretical works considered foundational to the study. Documents that lacked relevance to the study objectives, contained insufficient scholarly evidence, or focused exclusively on private-sector management were excluded from the review.

The selection process was guided by the need to ensure that the evidence reviewed was current, credible, and directly related to the objectives of the study. The use of multiple sources also enabled the researcher to compare perspectives across different authors and institutions, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness of the analysis (Bowen, 2009).

Method of Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. This method was selected because it provides a systematic and flexible approach for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for governance and policy studies because it enables the researcher to synthesise information from diverse documentary sources and identify recurring issues relevant to the research objectives.

The analysis followed the six stages proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first stage involved familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of the selected documents to gain a thorough understanding of the content. The second stage involved generating initial codes by identifying recurring concepts and ideas relating to management theories, governance practices, public sector reforms, accountability, participation, and institutional performance.

The third stage focused on searching for themes by grouping related codes into broader analytical categories. Emerging themes include institutional capacity, managerial efficiency, citizen participation, governance challenges, accountability mechanisms, and adaptive public-sector reforms. In the fourth stage, the identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal consistency and relevance to the study objectives. The fifth stage involved defining and naming themes by clearly specifying their meanings and analytical significance within the broader context of democratic governance and public administration.

The final stage involved interpreting and reporting the findings by linking the identified themes to the theoretical framework and existing literature. This process enabled the researcher to develop a coherent explanation of how management theories can contribute to improving democratic governance in Nigeria's public sector.

To enhance analytical rigour, the coding and theme-development process was conducted systematically and repeatedly reviewed to ensure consistency between the themes identified and the evidence obtained from the selected documents. The findings were also interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical framework to strengthen the credibility and coherence of the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Since this study relied solely on publicly available secondary sources and did not involve direct interaction with human participants, formal ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the research process. All sources consulted were properly acknowledged through appropriate citation and referencing procedures to ensure academic integrity and avoid plagiarism.

In addition, care was taken to present findings objectively and accurately without misrepresenting the views of the original authors. The study adhered to established principles of honesty, transparency, and responsible scholarship in the collection, analysis, and reporting of information.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Here, a thematic analysis using the existing secondary data found in official reports, peer-reviewed research, policy reports, and subsequent literature is presented. Pertinent situations associated with research aims and theories (Systems Theory and Contingency Theory) are discussed in the findings.

Weak Institutional Capacity and Managerial Inefficiencies

It has been shown in the literature that one of the challenges faced on the path of democratically

ruling Nigeria is the institutional fragility that is characterised by managerial weaknesses (Ukwu *et al.*, 2025). It can also be found that there are many public agencies that do not have coherent performance management systems, robust human resources and effective coordination systems, a fact that compromises service delivery and accountability. This inefficiency, in terms of the System Theory, is a manifestation of failed subsystems related to one another, like planning, budgeting, and performance assessment, that are required in operating a public sector in the best way possible. The breakdown of these subsystems creates dysfunctional systems and democratic shortage.

The reviewed studies collectively suggest that institutional weakness is not merely an administrative challenge but a democratic governance problem. Inefficient coordination among planning, budgeting, and monitoring units often results in delayed policy implementation, wastage of public resources, and reduced public confidence in government institutions (Ilegar & Wilson-Uade, 2026). This finding aligns with System Theory, which emphasises the interdependence of organisational subsystems. When one subsystem fails, the effectiveness of the entire governance structure is compromised, thereby weakening democratic responsiveness and accountability.

Centralisation and Limited Citizen Participation

Most studies have pointed out that the Nigerian government is too centralised, and this has locked out citizens in participatory governance (Amin *et al.*, 2024; Ogundare, 2025). No proper consultations with civil society, communities and other grassroots stakeholders have been conducted to make policies. Given a Contingency Theory approach, we can say that this is a top-down approach of management that does not fit in the complex and diverse governance system of Nigeria. Public managers are inclined to implement standardised schemes determined by the administrative and socio-political background rather than adjusting the strategies to the local context.

The literature indicates that excessive centralisation reduces opportunities for citizens to influence decisions affecting their communities. This weakens democratic legitimacy and limits government responsiveness to local needs. Several studies argue that decentralised and participatory governance arrangements improve policy relevance and public trust (Syakir & Elbina, 2025). From a Contingency Theory perspective, governance approaches should be adapted to Nigeria's diverse socio-cultural and regional contexts rather than relying on uniform administrative solutions.

Reform Fatigue and Policy Inconsistency: The unending reforms in the Nigerian public sector are mostly donor-led and have led to fatigue from implementing the same policies, low level of institutional memory, and inconsistency in implementation (Akindele *et al.*, 2002; Nwekeaku & Obiorah, 2019; Arum *et al.*, 2024). Such reforms rarely meet with the political culture or with the state of things in administration. Through this, the Contingency Theory holds theoretically in that it focuses on the fact that external conditions versus internal strategies are a match in determining the effectiveness of the various managerial models. The reforms that disregard the peculiarities of a certain setting are most likely to be inefficient and problematic according to democracy.

A recurring pattern in the literature is that many public sector reforms are externally driven and implemented without sufficient consideration of local institutional realities. As a result, reform initiatives often fail to achieve sustainability and become abandoned before their objectives are realised. This creates reform fatigue among public servants and weakens institutional learning. The findings reinforce the central sproposition of Contingency Theory that managerial approaches are most effective when tailored to specific environmental and organisational conditions.

Accountability Mechanisms and Governance Gaps: Having legal and procedural frameworks of accountability in place, but due to corruption, politics and no transparency in place, their application is weak (Amin *et al.*, 2024). This has diluted democracy and destroyed people's trust in the government.

Under System Theory, weak feedback loops (audits, citizen feedback mechanisms) interfere with the system undergoing self-correcting processes, innovative processes or being in a state of equilibrium. This leads to failures in accountability that amount to governance gaps and policy failures.

The evidence reveals a significant gap between the existence of accountability frameworks and their practical enforcement. While anti-corruption agencies, audit systems, and oversight institutions are formally established, political interference and weak enforcement mechanisms frequently undermine their effectiveness. Consequently, governance outcomes often fall short of democratic expectations. In System Theory terms, ineffective feedback mechanisms prevent institutional self-correction, thereby perpetuating governance failures and reducing public confidence in democratic institutions. This assertion was in line with Syakir *et al.* (2025) on the impact of decentralisation on local governance.

Synthesis of Findings: The findings reveal that the challenges confronting democratic governance in Nigeria are interconnected rather than isolated. Weak institutional capacity reduces administrative efficiency, while excessive centralisation limits citizen participation in governance processes. Similarly, policy inconsistency and reform fatigue undermine the sustainability of governance reforms, whereas weak accountability mechanisms reduce public trust in government institutions. Collectively, these issues create a cycle of governance inefficiency and democratic underperformance. This finding is in line with Sukare & Usman (2026) on Governance, accountability, and public sector reforms in Nigeria.

The findings support the assumptions of System Theory by demonstrating that governance outcomes depend on the effective interaction of multiple institutional subsystems, including planning, budgeting, monitoring, accountability, and citizen engagement. Failures within one component often produce negative consequences across the broader governance system. Likewise, the findings validate the relevance of Contingency Theory by highlighting the importance of context-sensitive managerial approaches that reflect Nigeria's political, administrative, and socio-cultural realities. The analysis agreed with Hadiyanti *et al.* (2024) on the development of contingency theory in the public sector.

Overall, the evidence suggests that strengthening democratic governance in Nigeria requires a balanced approach that combines managerial efficiency with meaningful citizen participation. Sustainable reforms should prioritise institutional capacity development, decentralised decision-making, consistent policy implementation, and stronger accountability mechanisms. Such measures would enhance both governance effectiveness and democratic legitimacy within the Nigerian public sector.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the literature on public sector management and democratic governance by integrating Systems Theory and Contingency Theory as complementary analytical frameworks for understanding governance challenges in Nigeria. While previous studies have often applied these theories independently, this study demonstrates that the interaction between institutional coordination, managerial adaptability, citizen participation, and accountability is critical to democratic governance outcomes. The findings extend the application of both theories beyond organisational performance by illustrating their relevance to democratic governance in developing public sector contexts. Specifically, the study shows that effective democratic governance depends not only on the efficiency of interconnected institutional subsystems but also on the ability of public institutions to adapt management practices to contextual realities.

Practical Contribution

The study provides policymakers, public administrators, and governance reform practitioners with a management-oriented framework for strengthening democratic governance in Nigeria. By highlighting the interconnected challenges of institutional inefficiency, limited citizen participation, policy inconsistency, and weak accountability mechanisms, the study offers practical insights for designing governance reforms

that balance administrative efficiency with democratic responsiveness. Furthermore, the proposed hybrid governance approach provides a basis for developing public sector policies that promote effective service delivery, transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement. The study therefore serves as a useful guide for improving governance outcomes and advancing democratic consolidation within the Nigerian public sector.

CONCLUSION

This paper has carried out a critical examination of the application of the management theories, namely Systems Theory and Contingency Theory, in the improvement of democratic governance within the Nigerian public sector. Using secondary sources of data and thematic findings, it was observed that inefficiency in the administration of the government is usually caused by the bureaucratic and entrenched nature of outcomes that fail to appreciate citizens, responsiveness and flexibility.

Meanwhile, the lack of transparency, accountability, and mismanagement of performance in institutions are weak opponents of democratic consolidation. It was also found that the inconsistency of managerial practices, the poor oversight mechanisms, and poor adaptation to the dynamics of a particular situation beset the democratic form of governance in Nigeria. In many cases, public institutions tend to operate in a non-people-centred manner and thus establish alienation, distrust, and inefficiency.

The undermined significance of using management framing to restore the lost trust by the masses, improve performance, and reinforce participatory governance institutions is also highlighted in this paper. In a nutshell, good governance should combine efficiency (spurred by strategic management) and inclusivity (which is based on the principles of democracy). To spearhead effective reforms in the democratic project in Nigeria, a model that is a combination of both goal-oriented administration practices and citizen participation comes out as essential.

Recommendations

- Public institutions in Nigeria should institutionalise a hybrid model that blends managerial efficiency (as promoted by classical and systems theories) with participatory mechanisms central to democratic governance. This would ensure performance and responsiveness are mutually reinforced. There is also a need for regular training and re-training programs to be developed to equip public administrators with both technical management skills and democratic leadership competencies.
- Nigeria's public sector should embed contingency-based management tools that allow flexible responses to context-specific governance challenges. Independent oversight bodies should be empowered to monitor performance and enforce democratic accountability.
- Insights from contingency theory and systems theory should inform civil service reform. Policy frameworks should be contextually grounded, avoiding "one-size-fits-all" solutions while ensuring alignment with democratic values.
- Encourage citizen feedback systems through digital platforms, town hall meetings, and public satisfaction indices. This will bridge the gap between managerial decisions and citizens' real needs. Effective collaboration among federal, state, and local institutions is essential. A decentralised but well-coordinated management structure allows adaptation to local governance challenges without compromising national development goals.
- Investments should be made in policy research units within ministries and agencies to generate empirical data that inform reform processes. Evidence-based management enhances both efficiency and democratic responsiveness. Introduce public sector performance scorecards linked to democratic service indicators such as equity, participation, and transparency. This would reinforce meritocratic management while maintaining democratic integrity.

FUNDING

This research received no external fundings.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The author solely conceived the study, identified the research problem, and developed the conceptual and theoretical framework. He conducted the literature review, designed the research methodology, collected and analysed the documentary data, interpreted the findings, and prepared the original manuscript. The author also revised and edited the manuscript, approved the final version for publication, and accepts full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work.