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POLITICAL PARTY DEFECTION AND CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Political parties play a crucial role in the democratization process and the functioning of democracy, as they serve as intermediaries between the government and the people. In the Nigerian context, however, political parties have often deviated from their ideal roles, undermining democratic consolidation and national development. One of the most concerning phenomena in Nigerian politics is the high incidence of party defections, which has become a recurrent and disturbing issue among the political ruling class. Consequently, this paper aims to investigate the causes and patterns of political party defections among the Nigerian ruling class, while showcasing the negative impact on democratic sustainability. Adopting a survey design and utilizing a mix-methods approach to data collection, this study combines both qualitative and quantitative techniques in order to gain an understanding of issues. This paper ***employs Rational Choice Theory as the theoretical framework for the analysis.*** *The theory suggests that political gladiators make decisions based on calculated self-benefit, as they weigh the benefits of defection over loyalty to a party. The findings indicate that political defections are* ***primarily driven*** *by personal ambitions and shifting political alliances, rather than by ideological consistency or commitment to public service. This finding demonstrates that political party defection weakens party ideologies and undermines public trust in political institutions. Conclusively, party defection creates instability and erodes citizens' confidence in the political process. Finally, the paper concludes by recommending ways to curb defections, strengthen party cohesion, and build a strong party ideology. The paper aims to achieve a more stable and sustainable democratic system in Nigeria.*

Keywords: Political parties, Defection, Democracy, Democratic sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

The principle and practice of democracy worldwide are anchored on stable political institutions and political parties grounded in coherent, well-articulated ideologies. Such ideological clarity is essential for political accountability, programmatic competition, and democratic consolidation. However, in Nigeria, the persistence of political party defection has emerged as a critical challenge to democratic sustainability. Rather than serving as vehicles for collective ideology and policy orientation, political parties increasingly function as platforms for elite bargaining and personal advancement. Since the advent of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999, party defection has occurred at an unprecedented scale. Scholars consistently observe that these defections are rarely motivated by principled ideological disagreement; instead, they are largely driven by personal ambition, access to state resources, patronage networks, and electoral calculations (Ibrahim, 2023; Aleyomi, 2013). This pattern

underscores the weak institutionalization of political parties and the absence of clear ideological distinctions within Nigeria's multiparty system.

Recent developments further reinforce this concern. The defection of Governor **Umo Eno** of **Akwa Ibom State**, alongside members of his cabinet, from the **Peoples Democratic Party** to the **All Progressives Congress**, exemplifies the fluid and opportunistic nature of party allegiance in Nigeria. Similarly, the large-scale defection involving the state executive and members of the House of Assembly in **Delta State** reflects a broader national trend in which political actors migrate en masse to ruling or electorally advantageous parties, often without reference to policy or ideology. These defections have far-reaching implications. They weaken party cohesion, erode ideological identity, undermine political accountability, and diminish public trust in democratic institutions. Ultimately, the burden of these practices is borne by the masses, manifesting in governance instability, policy inconsistency, and democratic disillusionment. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the trends of political party defection in Nigeria, interrogates its political and democratic implications, and assesses how it challenges the sustainability of democracy. It further explores the structural and institutional gaps within Nigeria's political system that enable such defections and proposes viable reforms aimed at curbing the practice and strengthening democratic consolidation.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Political party defection has become a persistent and troubling feature of Nigeria's democratic landscape, posing significant challenges to the consolidation of democratic governance. Rather than reflecting genuine ideological realignments, party switching in Nigeria is largely driven by personal ambition, the pursuit of political relevance, weak internal party democracy, and opportunistic calculations by the political elite. Since the country's return to democratic rule in 1999, the frequency and scale of defections among elected officials and party leaders have increased markedly, raising concerns about the credibility and stability of the party system. This trend undermines core democratic principles, particularly political accountability, party loyalty, and ideological coherence. When politicians defect with ease and minimal consequences, political parties become weak institutional platforms rather than vehicles for policy articulation and citizen representation. Consequently, public trust in political parties and the democratic process is eroded, as voters are left uncertain about the commitments and policy orientations of those they elect. Over time, this contributes to voter apathy, cynicism, and declining confidence in democratic institutions. Moreover, the prevalence of party defection weakens democratic norms and threatens institutional stability. The absence of a robust constitutional and legal framework to effectively regulate defections, combined with fragile political institutions, has allowed this practice to flourish with limited sanctions. As a result, Nigeria's democracy remains vulnerable to elite manipulation, undermining efforts toward democratic deepening and sustainable governance. These challenges highlight the need for systematic academic inquiry and informed policy interventions aimed at strengthening party institutionalization, enforcing internal party democracy, and safeguarding the integrity of Nigeria's democratic system.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

This study is anchored in **Rational Choice Theory (RCT),** a framework popularized in political science by **Anthony Downs** in *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Bergson, 1958). RCT posits that political actors behave as rational agents who make strategic decisions aimed at

maximizing utility, whether defined in terms of electoral success, political power, career advancement, or access to material resources. Within this framework, political behavior is understood as the outcome of cost benefit calculations conducted under conditions of uncertainty and competition. Applied to the Nigerian context, RCT provides a compelling analytical lens for understanding political party defection. Defection is conceptualized not as an ideologically motivated act but as a rational and strategic response to shifting political incentives. Politicians are more likely to defect when remaining within their original party is perceived to impose higher costs such as electoral marginalization, denial of party tickets, leadership exclusion, or loss of patronage than switching allegiance to an alternative party that offers greater prospects for political survival and advancement. This logic helps to explain why defections in Nigeria tend to cluster around election periods, party primaries, and leadership contests, when the distribution of political opportunities and resources becomes most uncertain (Aleyomi, 2013; Namadi, & Yerima 2025). Recent empirical studies reinforce the explanatory power of RCT in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Megbele et al (2025), demonstrates that defections are strongly correlated with incumbency advantages and expectations of electoral success, while Agboga (2023) show that politicians strategically realign with dominant parties ahead of elections to reduce uncertainty and enhance access to state resources. These findings are consistent with broader comparative scholarship linking weak party institutionalization to rational elite opportunism in emerging democracies (Prince, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive and robust analysis of political party defection and its implications for sustainable democracy in Nigeria. The mixed-methods approach is appropriate for capturing both the measurable patterns of political party defection and the deeper, contextual explanations underlying elite political behavior and institutional dynamics. Data for the study were generated from primary and secondary sources. Primary data consisted of direct observation and semi-structured key informant interviews, while secondary data included documentary and empirical materials drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, conference and seminar papers, press releases, and reputable internet-based sources.

The qualitative component of the study relied on direct observation and key informant interviews with purposively selected respondents, including political party officials, political analysts, civil society actors, and informed observers of Nigeria's democratic process. This purposive sampling strategy ensured that participants possessed the requisite expertise to provide informed perspectives on the causes, patterns, and democratic consequences of political party defection. Interview questions were designed to elicit detailed narratives on elite motivations, intra-party dynamics, and institutional weaknesses. The qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic content analysis, involving systematic coding and interpretation of recurrent themes relevant to party defection, party institutionalization, and democratic sustainability.

The quantitative component of the study was derived primarily from secondary data sources, including documented records of party defections, electoral outcomes, and legislative realignments reported in official documents, academic studies, and credible media reports.

These data were used descriptively to identify observable trends, frequencies, and temporal patterns of party defection across election cycles in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The quantitative analysis provided empirical grounding for the qualitative findings and facilitated the identification of broad patterns that informed deeper qualitative interpretation.

To ensure validity and reliability, data from qualitative and quantitative sources were systematically triangulated. Findings from interviews and observations were cross-checked against documentary and empirical evidence, thereby reducing bias and enhancing the credibility of the results. The integration of qualitative insights with quantitative trends allowed for a more nuanced understanding of political party defection as both an empirically observable phenomenon and a strategically motivated behavior shaped by institutional incentives. The mixed-methods approach adopted in this study strengthens analytical depth by combining empirical pattern identification with contextual explanation. This integrative methodology provides a rigorous foundation for examining the structural, institutional, and incentive-driven factors undermining democratic sustainability in Nigeria.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Concept of Political Party

Political party defection commonly described as *cross-carpeting*, *decamping*, or *party switching* has become a defining feature of Nigeria's Fourth Republic. While party switching is not unique to Nigeria, its scale, frequency, and timing often concentrated around election cycles distinguish it from similar practices in more institutionalized democracies. Scholarly interest in the phenomenon has therefore intensified, particularly due to its implications for party institutionalization and democratic sustainability. Ekekwe, cited in Amos (2024), observes that Nigerian politics, like that of many African states, is driven largely by parochial elite interests that are often framed as collective or national goals. In this context, Amos (2024) conceptualizes political parties as the institutional backbone of democracy, responsible for elite recruitment and governance coordination across the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Normatively, political parties are expected to articulate ideology, structure political competition, and ensure accountability.

Similarly, the Independent National Electoral Commission (2025) defines a political party as an organized platform for presenting candidates and policy programmes to the electorate, thereby facilitating informed political choice and periodic alternation of power. In established democracies, this role is reinforced by ideological consistency and party discipline. In Nigeria, however, empirical evidence suggests that parties function more as electoral vehicles than as enduring ideological institutions. Ulu, & Okogbuo (2024) further defines political parties as voluntary, organized, and legally registered associations aimed at acquiring and exercising state power, while Boafo-Arthur, cited in Ulu and Okogbuo (2024), emphasizes their permanence and interest-aggregation functions. Yet, these defining attributes have been significantly weakened in Nigeria, where party allegiance is often fluid and instrumental.

POLITICAL PARTY DEFECTION

At a conceptual level, political party defection emanates from the broader idea of defection as the withdrawal from an established allegiance, loyalty, or obligation. In the context of party politics, it refers to the voluntary decision of an elected official or party member to exit one political organization and realign with another, often without relinquishing the electoral

mandate secured under the former party's platform. As Masemola (2007) observes, the phenomenon is described in the literature using a range of terms party switching, carpet crossing, floor crossing, decamping, or cross-carpeting reflecting both its prevalence and its normative contestation across political systems. Early normative accounts largely interpret political party defection as evidence of weak ideological commitment and fragile party institutionalization, particularly in new or transitional democracies. Defectors are frequently portrayed as opportunistic actors whose actions undermine party cohesion, distort voter preferences, and weaken democratic accountability. Such interpretations are prominent in contexts where parties lack stable ideological identities and where electoral mandates are personalized rather than programmatic. However, contemporary scholarship has increasingly moved beyond moralistic explanations to situate defection within rational choice and political economy frameworks. From this perspective, defection is conceptualized as a strategic response by political elites to shifting incentives, constraints, and opportunity structures within competitive and uncertainty-laden political environments (Mainwaring & Zoco, 2007). This analytical shift allows for a more nuanced understanding of defection as calculated political behavior rather than merely a symptom of ethical failure.

In Nigeria, political party defection has become a defining feature of the Fourth Republic, reflecting deeper structural and institutional weaknesses within the party system. Aleyomi (2013) identifies several interrelated drivers, including intra-party factionalism, leadership crises, and the absence of internal democracy, violations of zoning and power-sharing arrangements, and the predominance of personal ambition over collective ideology. These conditions weaken party cohesion and significantly lower the costs of exit, thereby incentivizing politicians to seek alternative platforms perceived as offering greater electoral viability or material advantage. Empirical evidence supports this interpretation. Atuonwu, & Omeje, (2025) demonstrates that defections frequently follow electoral defeat, exclusion from party nomination processes, or marginalization within party hierarchies, suggesting that defection in Nigeria is closely tied to elite competition and political survival rather than ideological disagreement. More recent empirical studies (2021–2024) reinforce the incentive-driven and institutional explanation of party defection in Nigeria. Edibo et al. (2025) show that the persistence of defections is strongly associated with weak party discipline and the personalization of party leadership, which undermine ideological coherence. Similarly, Debus et al. (2024), drawing on post-2019 electoral data, find that defections intensify in pre-election periods as politicians strategically reposition themselves to maximize nomination and electoral prospects. Atuonwu, & Omeje, (2025) further argues that movements toward ruling parties are motivated by expectations of electoral success, access to state patronage, and political protection, particularly in a context where incumbency confers disproportionate material and coercive advantages. Recent evidence from the run-up to the 2023 general elections also indicates that defections were concentrated among political elites seeking alignment with dominant coalitions rather than expressing policy or ideological realignment (Prince, 2025; Azubike et al., 2025).

These Nigerian patterns resonate with broader African scholarship, which emphasizes that weak party institutionalization and the personalization of political power foster fluid and unstable party affiliations (Yusuf, 2025). In such contexts, political parties function less as programmatic or ideological institutions and more as vehicles for elite bargaining, coalition building, and access to state resources. As a result, party labels carry limited ideological

meaning, and defection becomes a rational strategy for navigating volatile political landscapes. Comparative perspectives further illuminate the Nigerian experience. Studies of floor crossing in other developing democracies suggest that high rates of defection are associated with fragile ideological cleavages, weak enforcement of party discipline, and limited or inconsistently applied sanctions for disloyalty (Heller & Mershon, 2009). In Nigeria, although constitutional and judicial provisions such as those relating to legislative seat forfeiture exist, their uneven interpretation and enforcement have failed to deter defections effectively (Olatunji et al., 2024). Recent analyses argue that this institutional ambivalence has contributed to the normalization and routinization of defection as an accepted strategy of political survival (Amadi, & Nwafor, 2025). Taken together, the literature suggests that political party defection in Nigeria is best understood not as ideological realignment but as a rational, incentive-driven behavior shaped by institutional fragility, patron client relations, and the high stakes of political competition. This conceptualization underscores the imperative of strengthening party ideology, internal democracy, and institutional enforcement mechanisms as critical steps toward curbing opportunistic defections and advancing democratic consolidation.

SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY

Sustainable democracy refers to the capacity of democratic institutions, norms, and practices to endure, adapt, and reproduce themselves over time without undermining their foundational principles. Egwu (2019) conceptualizes sustainable democracy as a system of governance anchored in broad participation, accountability, transparency, and adherence to the rule of law, with sufficient resilience to withstand political and socio-economic shocks. Central to this sustainability is the presence of institutionalized political parties that are ideologically coherent, organizationally stable, and capable of structuring political competition, aggregating interests, and mediating relations between the state and society. Theoretical perspectives on democracy further emphasize adaptability alongside normative stability. Dahl, as cited in Amos and Ubani (2023), argues that sustainable democracy must continually respond to social, political, and economic pressures while preserving core democratic values such as political equality, individual liberties, and pluralism. Political parties play a pivotal role in this process by providing predictable channels for political participation and accountability. Where parties are weakly institutionalized, democracy becomes vulnerable to personalization of power, elite opportunism, and declining public trust (Mainwaring & Zoco, 2007).

POLITICAL PARTY DEFECTION AND THE CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

In Nigeria, the sustainability of democracy is closely linked to the strength and institutionalization of political parties. However, persistent and recurrent party defections have significantly undermined this relationship. Recent empirical studies since 2021 reveal that frequent defections weaken party cohesion, blur ideological distinctions, and distort electoral competition. Ajayi, & Ibrahim (2025) argue that weak internal party discipline and elite dominance encourage fluid party affiliations, reducing political parties to temporary vehicles for electoral access rather than enduring democratic institutions. In a similar vein, Olatunji et al. (2024) observe that pre-election defections intensify political uncertainty and erode voter confidence, as citizens increasingly struggle to hold parties and candidates accountable for their promises and performance.

Building on this perspective, analyses of the 2023 electoral cycle further illuminate the democratic costs associated with weak party institutionalization in Nigeria. Specifically, Megbele et al. (2024) show that most defections during this period were motivated by strategic alignment with dominant political coalitions and access to state patronage, rather than by policy orientation or ideological commitment. As a result, such patterns undermine opposition politics, entrench incumbency advantages, and erode the level of electoral competitiveness necessary for democratic sustainability.

In a complementary vein, qualitative evidence from a focused group discussion comprising five participants reinforces these empirical observations while adding important contextual depth. Participants shared broadly convergent narratives, albeit with nuanced individual perspectives, on the drivers of political party defection in Nigeria. Notably, one discussant, Hon. **Eliot A. Osomu,** a former member of the **Bayelsa State House of Assembly**, identified *pre-election strategic calculations* as a particularly salient factor. He contended that, in the run-up to general elections, politicians frequently realign with ruling or electorally competitive parties as a means of enhancing their chances of success at the polls. **To illustrate this dynamic**, he referenced the high-profile defections of **Alex Otti** of Abia State and **Peter Obi,** both of whom transitioned from their previous political platforms to the **Labour Party** ahead of the 2023 general elections. **Taken together,** these cases underscore a broader pattern in which party defection in Nigeria is driven less by ideological realignment and more by electoral pragmatism and the pursuit of strategic political advantage, thereby reinforcing the empirical findings in the extant literature.

Taken together, the Nigerian experience suggests that sustainable democracy cannot be achieved without strengthening party institutionalization. Enhancing internal party democracy, enforcing discipline, and reducing incentives for opportunistic defections are therefore critical to restoring voter trust, stabilizing electoral competition, and consolidating democracy over the long term. Against this broader backdrop, political party defection in Nigeria has been particularly pronounced in the rivalry between the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) since 2013. Defections between these two dominant parties have followed a recurring pattern closely tied to election cycles. During the 2015 general elections, mass defections from the PDP to the APC significantly altered Nigeria's political landscape. High-profile defections by sitting governors, legislators, and party leaders contributed to the APC's electoral victory and the PDP's first loss of presidential power since 1999. Notably, this wave of defections was motivated less by ideological convergence and more by the perception that the APC possessed stronger electoral momentum and greater access to federal power.

Subsequently, a reverse trend emerged ahead of the 2019 general elections. Several APC lawmakers defected back to the PDP following internal party disputes, contentious primaries, and intense struggles over leadership positions within the ruling party. These defections disrupted legislative cohesion and underscored the fragility of party loyalty once electoral incentives shifted. Similarly, in the run-up to the 2023 general elections, defections intensified across both parties. Politicians who lost party primaries in the APC defected to the PDP and smaller parties, while PDP members crossed over to the APC in anticipation of electoral advantage and access to state resources. These movements were particularly pronounced at the gubernatorial and legislative levels, reinforcing the perception that party affiliation in

Nigeria is largely contingent on personal electoral calculations rather than ideological alignment.

Beyond electoral politics, the institutional consequences of frequent defections are evident in legislative governance and policy stability. According to Diepreye, & Oputa (2025), persistent defections undermine legislative stability and policy continuity, as shifts in party composition within the National Assembly often affect leadership selection, committee chairmanships, and the passage of executive bills. As a result, democratic accountability is weakened, and policy distinctions become blurred, limiting voters' ability to make informed electoral choices. These broader democratic consequences of elite political instability were further illustrated by the declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State by Bola Ahmed Tinubu on 18 March 2025. Although the action was constitutionally justified on governance and security grounds, the suspension of democratic institutions and the appointment of a sole administrator underscore how prolonged elite conflict often intensified by party defections and factionalism—can culminate in severe democratic interruptions. This development reinforces the argument that unchecked party defection not only weakens party systems but also poses a direct threat to the continuity and resilience of democratic governance in Nigeria.

FINDINGS

This study identifies several interrelated factors that explain the persistence of political party defection in Nigeria and its implications for democratic sustainability.

First, the findings reveal that recurrent internal party crises significantly drive political party defection in Nigeria. These crises are manifested through factionalism, the imposition of candidates by party elites, disputed party primaries, and the emergence of splinter groups. Such practices undermine internal party democracy and marginalize party members, thereby incentivizing affected politicians to defect to alternative parties where they perceive greater opportunities for political advancement. Consequently, party defection emerges as a rational response to exclusionary intra-party processes rather than as an ideologically motivated decision. Second, the study finds that the absence of clearly defined and consistently articulated party ideology constitutes a critical structural factor underpinning political party defection in Nigeria. Most political parties exhibit minimal ideological differentiation, making party affiliation largely interchangeable. This ideological fluidity lowers the psychological and political costs of defection, enabling politicians to switch parties with limited reputational consequences. The findings therefore suggest that party defection in Nigeria is symptomatic of weak party institutionalization and the dominance of personality-based and patronage-driven politics. Thirdly, the study establishes that political party defection poses a substantial threat to the sustainability of democracy in Nigeria, with broader implications for democratic consolidation across Africa. Frequent defections weaken party systems, disrupt legislative stability, and erode political accountability by blurring responsibility between parties and elected officials. Over time, this pattern undermines voter confidence in political institutions, reduces meaningful electoral choice, and contributes to democratic fragility, particularly in emerging democracies with weak institutional constraints.

Finally, the findings indicate that Nigerian politicians strategically exploit ambiguities and loopholes within the constitutional framework particularly Section 109(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution to justify frequent party switching. Rather than serving as a deterrent, this

provision has been interpreted in ways that legitimize defections under the guise of party division or factional disputes. The absence of effective enforcement mechanisms and judicial clarity further enables political actors to circumvent constitutional intent, thereby institutionalizing defection as a normalized feature of Nigeria's democratic practice. These findings demonstrate that political party defection in Nigeria is not an isolated behavioral anomaly but a structurally embedded phenomenon rooted in weak party institutionalization, flawed constitutional safeguards, and incentive-driven political behavior. Addressing this challenge is therefore central to strengthening democratic governance and achieving sustainable democracy in Nigeria and comparable African states.

CONCLUSION

Twenty-six years after the return to civil rule, Nigeria continues to confront persistent challenges associated with party politics, including weak ideological orientation, internal factionalism, elite domination, and recurrent political party defection. This study demonstrates that party defection has become a strategic tool for political survival among elites at local, state, and federal levels, particularly following electoral defeat or exclusion from intra-party power structures. Such behavior reflects a political environment in which party affiliation is instrumentalized for the acquisition and retention of power rather than grounded in ideological commitment or constitutional accountability. The findings reinforce the central argument of this paper that dysfunctional party politics constitute a major obstacle to sustainable democracy in Nigeria. The prevalence of ideologically indistinct parties has lowered the cost of defection, normalized opportunistic political behavior, and weakened democratic accountability. Consequently, political party defection has emerged not merely as an individual choice but as a systemic manifestation of weak party institutionalization and fragile democratic norms. Addressing this challenge is therefore critical to strengthening democratic consolidation and enhancing the long-term viability of Nigeria's democratic experiment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the study's findings, strengthening sustainable democracy requires a multifaceted reform approach. Political parties should articulate and consistently uphold clear ideological orientations to enhance programmatic competition and increase the political costs of opportunistic defections. At the institutional level, constitutional and electoral provisions governing party defection need to be clarified and strengthened, with enforceable and proportionate sanctions to deter unconstitutional party switching. Equally important is the promotion of internal party democracy through transparent leadership selection, credible candidate nomination processes, and effective conflict-resolution mechanisms, which would reduce factionalism and elite dominance. Finally, sustained civic and political education should be prioritized to instill democratic values, constitutional awareness, and ideological commitment among political elites and the electorate. Collectively, these reforms provide a realistic pathway for strengthening party institutionalization, curbing political defection, and advancing sustainable democracy in Nigeria and comparable emerging democracies.

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