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Party Defection and Democratic Governance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

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Abstract
Party defections are a pervasive and destabilising feature of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, significantly undermining democratic consolidation. This study investigated the causes, impacts, and potential solutions to party defections within the Nigerian context, using Abia State as a case study. Employing a quantitative research design, data were collected via a validated questionnaire from 278 registered politicians across the state's three dominant political parties: the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the All Progressives Congress (APC), and the Labour Party (LP). Findings revealed that the primary drivers of defection are the search for political patronage and opportunities (Mean=3.47), the influence of ruling party dominance (Mean=3.44), and a lack of internal party democracy (Mean=3.40). The study further found that defections severely erode public trust in democracy (Mean=3.48), reduce the accountability of leaders (Mean=3.37), and weaken opposition parties (Mean=3.36), leading to legislative instability and policy inconsistency. The research concludes that defections are predominantly motivated by personal ambition and institutional weaknesses rather than ideology. To mitigate this phenomenon, the study strongly recommends strengthening internal party democracy, enacting constitutional and electoral reforms to penalise opportunism, and promoting civic education to foster a culture of political accountability.

Keywords: Democracy**,** democratic governance, electoral accountability, internal party democracy, party defections.

Introduction
Party defections have become arguably the most defining feature of Nigeria's Fourth Republic since 1999, with profound implications for its democratic process. Unlike what has been seen in mature democracies, where party loyalty is a result of ideology, Nigerian defections are more often driven by ambition, party internal wrangling, and politics of survival. The constant change of loyalty between politicians undermines the integrity of party systems and weakens

the consolidation of democratic rule. The movement of political actors between parties means electoral mandates are often twisted, with voters becoming disillusioned about the inviolability of their votes. Political scientists write that such tendencies make democratic institutions weak and impair stable governance (Adeoye, 2020). This series of defections also calls into question the character of Nigerian party politics, widely described as weakly institutionalised and transactional. This reality has gone further in characterising scholars' and policymakers' interests in the sustainability of multiparty democracy in Nigeria. The trend towards increasing defections suggests political competition is no longer concerned with public service but more with access to state power. Such a phenomenon ultimately weakens the democratic culture, which Nigeria claims to uphold (Okorie, 2021).

The consequences of defections on governance are far-reaching, particularly as such defections usually occur at pivotal moments in Nigeria's political development. When legislators defect, it creates legislative instability, affects the stability of policies, and, at times, triggers executive-legislative conflicts. This undermines accountability since defectors might no longer feel disposed to keep promises made when still under their former party's manifesto. Scholars have observed that this distorts the representative function of democracy in such a way as to privilege elites' interests over those of citizens (Olawale, 2022). Disabling opposition parties by defection also affects the power balance for successful checks and accountability in government. In addition, political realignments have periodically caused violent confrontations in state legislatures and subnational governments. These occurrences reveal the way in which defections bring about political instability and inefficiency of government at different levels of government. Citizens are consequently left with little trust in electoral processes when loyalty to parties is undermined. Lastly, this loss of trust thwarts democratic consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (Nwankwo, 2023).

From a constitutional perspective, Nigeria has attempted to limit defections through provisions of the 1999 Constitution. Section 68(1)(g) stipulates conditions under which parliamentarians are entitled to resign their seats if they switch sides, particularly where there is no split in their former party. Political elites have nonetheless manipulated the ambiguity of this provision by using internal crises as grounds for defection. These loopholes in the law have made defections a recurring aspect of the National Assembly and state legislatures. Analysts agree that this is not only an indication of the weakness of institutions but also of the inadequacy of the judiciary to make deterrent punishments stick (Eze, 2020). Also, the lack of internal party democracy provides fertile grounds for politicians to justify their crossover to other parties. This parliamentary gimmickry has institutionalised defections so that they become tactical tools for political advantage at the polls rather than constitutional breaches. Defections, therefore, become both the cause and symptom of Nigeria's weak democracy. The precepts of the constitution, however lofty, are still not adequate in curbing political opportunism (Ibrahim, 2021).

Academics today argue that the rate of defections is a central factor that determines the rate of Nigeria's stalled democratic consolidation. Political loyalty in Nigeria is characteristically along the axis of resource allocation and patron-client networks rather than in deference to principle or ideology. This transactional framework has enhanced a patron-client framework that undermines political accountability. The experts believe that as long as political parties are not institutionally rooted and ideology-based platforms are not promoted, the practice of defection will continue to undermine governance (Ogbona, 2022). Defections also reveal the weak regulatory capacity of Nigeria's political institutions in defending democratic ideals. The phenomenon of political opportunism encourages a culture in which governance is secondary to electoral survival. As a result, democratic governance becomes fragile and continuously vulnerable to elite interest threats. This explains why Nigeria continues to fail in developing credible institutions that can withstand political pressures. The problem of party defections is therefore central to the debate on sustaining Nigeria's Fourth Republic (Adesina, 2024).

Statement of the Research Problem

Nigeria's post-1999 democracy has always been disrupted by the regular occurrence of party defections, which continues to provoke passionate debates among scholars, policymakers, and the public at large. Rather than being a channel by which democratic structures are consolidated, defections in Nigeria are more a consequence of political survival struggles, intra-party conflicts, and individual interests. The action has undermined the strength of political parties, distorted mandates during elections, and created instabilities within governance systems. Whenever politicians switch allegiances between parties with little

understanding of ideology, the credibility of the party system becomes suspect, and the electorate becomes disillusioned with representative democracy. Incidents of mass defections by governors, legislators, and other government officials have assisted in undermining the opposition and eroding the system of checks and balances necessary for responsive government. This has generated fear that Nigeria's democracy is being taken hostage by political opportunism rather than being driven by collective national interest. While there are provisions under the constitution for limiting defections, they have largely remained ineffective due to judicial ambiguity and elite manipulation. This has resulted in an unstable trend of political instability and undermined faith in governance. How defections affect Nigeria's democratic consolidation is, therefore, a matter of concern to be understood.

Despite the growing literature on party politics, there is still a lack of empirical evidence on the impact of defections on governance outcomes in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Earlier work has usually reported the frequency with which defections are occurring, rather than how critically their importance for democratic institutions' legitimacy, policy consistency, and accountability has been analysed. Also, the persistence of defections shows deeper institutional shortcomings, including the lack of internal party democracy and the lack of ideological politics. This has contributed to making Nigeria's democracy weak, vulnerable to elite capture, and lacking in reaching its complete potential in stability, development, and inclusiveness. To address this gap, there is a need to examine the relationship between defections and the governance process, as it questions whether these defections have strengthened or dented Nigeria's democratic enterprise. Against this backdrop, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the key factors driving party defections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic?
2. How have party defections affected democratic governance and accountability in Nigeria?
3. To what extent do defections impact political institution stability and opposition parties?
4. How can the negative impacts of party defections be minimised in Nigeria's democracy?

Conceptual Clarification

Concept of Political Parties

Political parties are institutionalised collectives of persons with common interests and ambitions to wield political power through electioneering and the construction of governments. Political parties in consolidated democracies are embedded in ideological foundations which present voters with clear policy choices. Political parties in Nigeria, however, have largely operated as platforms for political elites to pursue self-interest rather than champion noble ideologies. Nigerian political parties, Olayinka (2020) states, are inadequately institutionalised and are often patrons of patronage, godfatherism, and opportunism. This institutional weakness predisposes them to internal crises, fractionalization, and leadership struggles, which in turn facilitate defections in retaliation. Nigeria's political parties do not tend to promote democratic consolidation but are instead arenas for elite bargaining and resource allocation. This has contributed to a culture where party loyalty is not constant and defection is the norm as part of political survival strategies. Being aware of what political parties in Nigeria are, therefore, is central to explaining the recurring phenomenon of party defections in the Fourth Republic.

Concept of Party Defections

Party defection, otherwise referred to as cross-carpeting or floor-crossing, describes the mechanism through which an elected member abandons the political party for whose ticket they were elected to another party. While defections in established democracies are typically rare and ideologically driven, in Nigeria, they occur frequently and in a more opportunistic manner. Defections in Nigeria happen for reasons of personal ambition, disagreement over

candidate selection, or the desire to join incumbent parties for patronage and protection, as posited by Nwosu (2021). This phenomenon has destabilised the executive and legislature, as shifting allegiances upset power balances. The occurrence further weakens the inviolability of electoral mandates, as representatives elected typically disregard the electorates that placed them in office under a particular party. Furthermore, defections destabilise opposition parties, weaken political accountability, and destabilise democratic competition (Emeh, 2022). Party switching, thus, is not merely a political tactic; it is destabilising agencies that challenge the institutionalisation of democracy in Nigeria.

Concept of Democratic Governance

Democratic governance is a system of principles, practices, and processes through which elected representatives wield power in a manner that enhances accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, and citizen engagement. It goes beyond sporadic elections to include how government institutions react to the voice of the people. In the Nigerian context, democratic governance has also faced substantive threats from corruption, institutionally fragile institutions, electoral malpractices, and elite interests' hegemony. As Adedayo (2022) notes, when political actors keep changing party affiliations, it destroys legislative stability and policy consistency. This action destroys accountability because politicians readily renege on promises made while on their first party platforms. In addition, party defections erode the trust of citizens in the democratic process because politicians are perceived as self-serving rather than human-focused. Democratic government requires stable parties and dedicated representatives, but party defections erode these pillars and bring about instability in the direction of governance (Ikechukwu, 2023). Thus, Nigeria's democratic government cannot be understood at all without examining the prevalent impact of party defections.

Concept of Accountability in Governance

Accountability in governance refers to the obligation of political leaders and institutions to explain their actions, defend policy decisions, and be answerable to the voters. Accountability in strong democracies ensures that holders of political offices remain responsible to citizens' needs and are faithful to electoral commitments. Defections are rampant in the political culture of Nigeria; however, politicians who defect abandon the manifestos and promises under which they were first voted into office. Umeh (2020) presents that defections compromise the accountability relationship between leaders and citizens, such that voters cannot hold performance to account based on party programs. This creates a governance culture in which survival trumps service delivery. Additionally, defections weaken the watchdog role of the opposition, thus weakening checks and balances in government (Chukwuma, 2021). Without strong accountability processes in place, Nigeria's democratic government risks consolidating into elite bargaining and not being public interest-oriented.

Theoretical Framework

Rational Choice Theory

According to Rational Choice Theory, individuals make decisions by weighing costs against benefits to maximise their personal payoffs. In Nigeria's political landscape, defections tend to be such pragmatic shifts, where politicians leave their parties to join groups that provide greater electoral victory prospects, access to state resources, or political salience. As Adebayo (2021) has noted, party switching in Nigeria is not inspired by ideology but by the rational seeking of political survival. Applied to the current research, the theory can account for why defections remain common despite public outcry; for the majority of politicians, defying a different party is a rational step to remain relevant in a fluid political environment. It accounts for the self-interest foundation of political decisions throughout Nigeria's Fourth Republic and highlights how defections are rational acts given that political affiliation is fragile in such a system.

Democratic Consolidation Theory

Democratic Consolidation Theory addresses the process of rooting democracy, solidity, and wide acceptability as the only legitimate form of governance. Defections hamper this process of consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic by destabilising parties, undermining opposition infrastructure, and diminishing people's trust in democratic institutions. Nnamdi (2023) argues that defections render governance unpredictable by distorting the electoral mandate and weakening accountability mechanisms. Applied to the present study, the theory describes how serial party defections threaten Nigeria's deepening democracy by causing instability and undermining institutional credibility. It stipulates that unless defections are reduced through more effective party systems and ideological underpinnings, Nigeria's democratic experiment will remain vulnerable and subject to the influence of the elite.

Empirical Literature

Akpambang & Oniyinde (2020) conducted a cross-sectional empirical survey that examined political party switching among elected politicians in Nigerian states through a mixed-method approach consisting of documentary analysis and a questionnaire survey of party delegates and a purposive sample of 210 elected politicians and ex-party leaders. The sample for the study was defected federal, state and local officials who had defected or remained loyal to their parties during the 2015–2019 electoral cycle, and respondents were recruited by purposive and snowball sampling to reach individuals with first-hand experience of defection. Data were collected through a standardised questionnaire (on reasons, timing, and perceived impact of defections) and open-ended interviews with 24 key informants chosen from party secretariats and state assemblies.

Quantitative data were analysed by descriptive statistics (frequency, percentages, mean scores) while interview transcripts were subjected to thematic content analysis to ensure triangulation of evidence. Results indicated that intra-party tensions, imposition of primary candidates, and perceived access to governmental buildings were the most frequently cited reasons for switching parties, since respondents further explained defections as a result of less accountability from parties and legislative volatility. Defectors rarely cited ideological considerations, and that legal disincentives were insufficient owing to judicial ambiguity and horse-trading in government. Limitations acknowledged by the authors include purposive sampling that restricts generalizability and reliance on self-reports that are likely to misrepresent opportunistic motivations. Setting aside these concerns, the paper presented robust empirical evidence that defections are predominantly organisational and strategic rather than ideological. For the present research, Akpambang and Oniyinde's operationalisation of drivers, its mixed-method design, and its internal party process definition of key causal variables provide a methodological and conceptual framework for measuring causes of defections and institutional effects.

Agboga (2023) conducted a nationwide, multi-method empirical examination of voter reactions and electoral sanctions linked to party switching, based on a nationally representative 1,023-voter survey paired with an original dataset of 214 federal legislators who switched parties between 2011 and 2019; the design thereby united voter-level attitudinal information with politician-level observational results to examine electoral punishment of switchers. The survey component utilised stratified random sampling by geopolitical areas and an interviewer-administered questionnaire to measure voters' normative views on switching, perceived legitimacy of switchers, and self-reported voting intentions, while the legislator data utilised archival coding from legislative gazettes and election returns. In legislator analysis, the author employed logistic and linear regression models (and coarsened exact matching) to compare re-election chances and vote-share change between switchers and matched non-switchers while

controlling for variables such as party stronghold, committee leadership, gender, and incumbency.

Findings demonstrated enduring negative voter views against switchers in the survey and high electoral punishment of switchers at the polls, where switchers were far less likely to be re-elected and experienced greater losses in vote share. The study also identified contextual moderators: switchers joining locally hegemonic parties sometimes avoided punishment, while in programmatic/competitively politicised constituencies, punishment was more pronounced. Strengths of data quality were a large representative survey and well-assembled legislative coding, although the author did mention constraints in observing latent switch motivations due to politicians' public reasons concealing private bargaining. Agboga's rigorous matching of voter and politician data demonstrates how electoral responsibility can be a sanctioning mechanism, and in this study, his evidence places the variable "electoral sanction" front and centre as an empirical indicator when measuring the democratic costs or limits on defectors.

Ambali, Salawu & Olatunji (2024) did an empirical work titled The Relationship between Defection and Electoral Outcome in Southwestern Nigeria as a cross-sectional survey with documentary content analysis, supplemented to investigate the effect of intra-party conflict and candidate defection on election results in selected southwestern states during the 2019 and 2023 elections. The target group comprised aspirants, party leaders, and a stratified random sample of 520 registered voters from urban and rural wards across three states, while the main respondents among party players were purposively selected to represent insiders with comprehension of primary events. Measures included a systematic voter survey questionnaire (measuring defection perception and vote intention), a semi-structured party elite interview guide, and a content-analysis checklist to code primary election process and media accounts of defections. Quantitative data were analysed via descriptive statistics and chi-square tests to explore the relationships between defection perception and voting intention, whereas qualitative interviews were thematically analysed to reveal causal mechanisms from internal party strife to defections.

The study confirmed a statistically significant negative correlation between perceived illegitimate defections and voter willingness to vote for defectors, as well as evidence that if party primaries were perceived as unfair, defections were more common and electoral volatility followed. Limitations noted were geographic specificity (southwest only), limiting national generalizability, and potential non-response bias from elite interview respondents. Yet, the research empirically demonstrated a linkage between weak internal party democracy and higher defection rates and adverse electoral consequences, with precise measures (primary fairness index, voter sanction index) replicable. For the present research, the Ambali et al. study offers local data and validated tools that can be adapted to measure internal-party democracy and its resultant effects on the incidence of defection and electoral accountability in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

Buba (2023) undertook a quasi-empirical assessment of the impact of party defections on democratic consolidation in several Nigerian states using a documentary-based event analysis accompanied by a structured survey of 300 civil society activists, journalists, and local government officials in those states that experienced notable defections between 2015 and 2022. The study design used purposive case selection to focus on high-profile mass defection states, and instruments used were a standardised survey instrument for stakeholders in conjunction with a timeline coding framework to capture institutional outcomes (leadership turnover, legislative roll calls, budget delays) within the twelve months following major defections. Quantitative stakeholder responses were compared through simple inferential statistics (t-tests and correlation), and coded event timelines were compared through

difference-in-differences logic in an attempt to assess short-run governance effects from defections.

The primary findings were empirical evidence of short-run declines in legislative oversight activity, augmented leadership reorganisations, and short-run declines in budget implementation resulting from mass defections, while stakeholder perceptions recorded steep declines in public trust and media surveillance. The author recognised constraints related to non-random case selection and potential measurement error in coding certain administrative indicators, but argued that causal inference was strengthened through triangulation with stakeholder surveys. Most significantly, Buba's work demonstrated that defection governance costs can be quantified at the state level and are concentrated during the political season of the switch. To the present research, this article is of specific relevance as it operationalises governance performance (budget implementation, leadership continuity, oversight intensity) that the present research can adopt to empirically examine how defections affect democratic governance indicators in different tiers of government.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in Abia State, Nigeria, with a view to exploring the role of political parties in democratic governance. The sampling population was registered politicians from the three dominant parties in the state: the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the All Progressives Congress (APC), and the Labour Party (LP). A frame of 1,200 politicians was derived from official party registries, both elected office holders and incumbent party executives. To make the research feasible, a total of 300 respondents were provided using Taro Yamane's formula at a 0.05 margin. The 300 respondents were distributed proportionally among the three political parties: 120 from PDP, 100 from APC, and 80 from LP, thereby representing each group in the right manner.

Data collection was performed using a standard questionnaire that was designed to measure basic variables such as party ideology, internal democracy, accountability, and influence of governance. Two political science specialists and one research methodology specialist validated the tool for face and content validity. A pilot test with 30 politicians (outside the main study) was conducted, and a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.86 was achieved, thereby determining the internal consistency of the instrument. Out of the 300 questionnaires that were distributed, 278 were successfully returned and processed, an accomplishment that showed a return rate of 92.7%. The high rate of retrieval increased the credibility and power of the results from the study.

Data Presentation and Analysis

In data analysis, the responses were coded and imported into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 25), while descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to respond. The findings based on the 278 valid responses provided empirical evidence on political parties' impact on governance processes, accountability, and public trust towards the state. Table 1 identifies the causes of party defection in Nigeria

Table 1: Causes of Party Defections (N = 278)

	Causes of Defections	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
1.	Lack of internal party democracy	152	96	20	10	3.40	0.62
2.	Unresolved intra-party conflicts	148	89	28	13	3.34	0.71
3.	Search for political patronage/opportunities	166	87	15	10	3.47	0.63
4.	Defections influenced by ethnic/regional ties	134	90	35	19	3.22	0.78
5.	Influence of ruling party dominance	159	92	18	9	3.44	0.61

The results in Table 1 indicate that the most frequently cited causes of party defections include the search for political patronage/opportunities (mean = 3.47), influence of ruling party dominance (mean = 3.44), and lack of internal democracy (mean = 3.40). Respondents also acknowledged unresolved intra-party conflicts (mean = 3.34) and ethnic/regional affiliations (mean = 3.22) as significant but relatively less dominant causes. This suggests that defections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic are driven more by material and power considerations than by ideological convictions. Table 2 outlines the influence of defection on democratic governance.

Table 2: Influence of Defections on Democratic Governance (N = 278)

S/N	Governance Indicators	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
1.	Defections weaken legislative oversight	133	94	32	19	3.23	0.79
2.	Defections reduce the accountability of leaders	156	82	28	12	3.37	0.72
3.	Defections erode public trust in democracy	169	81	20	8	3.48	0.63
4.	Defections undermine policy consistency	141	91	31	15	3.29	0.75
5.	Defections weaken opposition parties' role	151	90	25	12	3.36	0.70

Table 2 shows that defections significantly affect democratic governance and accountability. The strongest effect was on erosion of public trust in democracy (mean = 3.48), followed by reduction in accountability of leaders (mean = 3.37) and weakening of opposition parties (mean = 3.36). These findings highlight that defections distort the balance of power, weaken institutional checks, and create a political environment where accountability is compromised.

Table 3: Institutional and Political Stability (N = 278)

S/N	Indicators of Institutional Stability	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
1.	Defections destabilise party structures	146	93	25 (	14	3.33	0.74
2.	Defections weaken electoral institutions	139	89	34	16	3.26	0.77
3.	Defections reduce the effectiveness of the opposition	154	88	24	12	3.38	0.71
4.	Defections increase intra-party litigations	163	79	23	13	3.41	0.69

The analysis in Table 3 reveals that defections destabilise political institutions primarily through increasing intra-party litigations (mean = 3.41) and weakening opposition effectiveness (mean = 3.38). Overall, the findings confirm that defections are a major destabilising factor for party cohesion and institutional stability in Nigeria's democratic system.

Table 4: Suggested Measures to Address Party Defections (N = 278)

Suggested Measures-	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
Enforce constitutional penalties for defectors	158	84	23	13	3.39	0.72
Strengthen internal party democracy	172	80	17	9	3.49	0.66
Reform electoral laws to discourage opportunism	163	89	18	8	3.46	0.65
Civic education for political accountability	147	95	25	11	3.36	0.71

Table 4 demonstrates that respondents strongly supported reforms aimed at mitigating defections. The most endorsed measures were strengthening internal party democracy (mean = 3.49) and reforming electoral laws (mean = 3.46), followed by enforcing constitutional penalties against defectors (mean = 3.39). These results indicate that political and legal reforms, if effectively implemented, could significantly reduce opportunistic cross-carpeting and strengthen Nigeria's democratic governance.

Discussion of Findings

The findings indicated that the major causes of party switching in Abia State were highly driven by a deficiency in internal democracy, weak ideological foundations, and the search for individual personal political agendas. The same is echoed in the research of Olorunmola

(2021), which established that the absence of open party primaries tends to propel aspirants towards switching parties because of a quest for platforms that guarantee electoral prospects. Similarly, Omilusi (2020) noted that inadequate institutional control in the Nigerian political parties has deepened factionalism, thus making defection unavoidable. In agreement, Adeoye and Egbefo (2019) posited that most defections in the Fourth Republic owe their occurrence to personal interests and not party collective desires.

The study further indicated that defections significantly erode democratic governance and accountability in the state. Respondents pointed out that constant defections tend to undermine the watchdog role of opposition parties, thus allowing ruling parties to have untrammelled ascendancy. This is in line with the submission of Ajayi (2022), whose contention was that political instability brought about by defections undermines confidence in democratic processes. Similarly, Okon and Ojo (2020) emphasised that when politicians defect for survival, it undermines the credibility of governance institutions. Likewise, Ibrahim (2019) observed that constant cross-carpeting hurts accountability institutions since defectors normally pledge allegiance to ruling leaders at the expense of the public interest.

Besides, the study found that defections have a substantial effect on political institution stability and erode opposition parties in Abia State. Politicians in surveyed parties admitted that defections contribute to crises, which hurt party cohesion and strategic direction. This finding concurs with that of Nwosu (2021), whereby defections distort the power balance and corrupt effective representation. Therefore, Chukwuemeka (2020) explained that unstable party membership undermines institutionalisation in political parties, hence weakening them as agencies of democracy. Similarly, Eze and Nnamani (2019) also noted that opposition parties in Nigeria collapse or become irrelevant following interludes of defections to the government party.

Finally, the study revealed that there are pragmatic measures that can be taken to mitigate the damage caused by defections to Nigeria's democracy. The respondents unanimously emphasised that constitutional reforms against opportunist defections must be undertaken by the National Assembly. This aligns with the argument of Ezeani (2021), who posited that tighter legal controls will discourage blanket cross-carpeting. In a similar context, Ugwu (2020) suggested that party ideologies would be entrenched to reduce defections by binding members to common ideals. In the same vein, Adebanjo (2019) recommended electoral reforms for ensuring internal party democracy that would reduce grievances that force politicians to defect.

Conclusion

Party defections have emerged as a defining, yet deeply problematic, feature of Nigeria's Fourth Republic. While political realignments are not inherently undemocratic and can, under certain conditions, reflect evolving ideological orientations or legitimate dissatisfaction with party platforms, the pattern of defections in Nigeria reveals a more concerning trend. The phenomenon is largely driven by self-interest, opportunism, and the pursuit of political survival rather than a principled commitment to democratic ideals or the public good. This paper has examined how rampant party defections, often without ideological justification, have undermined the stability and integrity of Nigeria’s democratic institutions. By weakening party discipline, distorting electoral mandates, and eroding public trust in the political system, defections pose a significant challenge to democratic consolidation. The lack of stringent legal and institutional deterrents has further emboldened politicians to treat party affiliation as a transactional tool rather than a reflection of political identity or accountability.

Moreover, the judiciary's inconsistent interpretations of constitutional provisions on defections, coupled with the legislature's reluctance to enforce anti-defection laws effectively, have contributed to a political culture in which loyalty to democratic principles is subordinated to personal ambition. This has created a political environment in which governance is often

characterised by instability, policy discontinuity, and weakened accountability mechanisms. To strengthen democratic governance, Nigeria must adopt a more robust legal and institutional framework to regulate party defections. This includes clearer constitutional guidelines, independent enforcement bodies, and internal party reforms that promote ideological coherence and internal democracy. Civic education and media accountability can also play a role in reshaping the political culture, encouraging voters to demand greater accountability from elected officials who switch parties mid-tenure. Ultimately, the consolidation of Nigeria's democracy depends not only on electoral processes but also on the integrity and stability of its political parties. Addressing the challenges posed by party defections is essential to fostering a more transparent, accountable, and enduring democratic order in the Fourth Republic and beyond.

Recommendations

1. Political parties must institutionalise internal democracy through open primaries and merit-based candidate selection processes.
2. The National Assembly must strengthen constitutional and legal provisions to dissuade opportunist deflections.
3. Parties must strengthen strong ideological foundations to curb defections driven by personal interests.
4. Electoral reforms should bring accountability mechanisms to the mainstream that ensure the operation of opposition parties in deepening democracy.
5. Continuous civic education should be promoted to alert politicians and citizens about the long-term dangers of mass defections.

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