

The Politics of Defection: Cross-Carpeting and Its Threat to Electoral Legitimacy and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

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Abstract

The phenomenon of political defection in Nigeria has significant implications for electoral legitimacy and the consolidation of democracy. The study explores the dynamics of party defections and their impact on the political landscape, particularly during electoral cycles. Defections often lead to shifts in party power and influence, raising concerns about the stability of political parties and the integrity of electoral processes. This study examines the factors behind defections, including personal ambitions, ideological shifts, and the pursuit of political survival. It also addresses the repercussions of these defections on public trust in democratic institutions and the overall legitimacy of electoral outcomes. The study relies on Rational Choice Theory, arguing that the frequency and nature of defection have affected the integrity of the electoral process and weakened the institutional development of political parties. By analyzing recent case studies and electoral events, this research highlights underlying factors driving party defections, such as a lack of party ideologies, personal interests, and a weak regulatory framework, and also suggests the need for reforms aimed at addressing the challenges posed by defection, ultimately contributing to a more stable and credible democratic framework in Nigeria. The study concludes by recommending institutional and constitutional reforms, judicial enforcement, and political education as a yardstick to mitigate the growing threat of cross-carpeting in Nigeria.

Key words: Electoral legitimacy; Cross-carpeting;

Democratic consolidation; Party politics and Nigeria's democracy

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INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian political system has seen a steady trend of party realignments and defections since gaining independence in 1960, particularly during politically delicate times like cycles leading up to and following elections. Instead of being an exception, the culture of political defection has been institutionalized as a recurrent tactic used by political elites to obtain a competitive edge or avoid political obsolescence. In particular, the growing politicization of governance and the influence of political parties on democratic outcomes have contributed to the phenomenon's intensification between 2015 and 2025 (Adebajo & Yusuf, 2021). A prevalent and recurrent aspect of Nigeria's democratic environment is the phenomenon of political defection, sometimes referred to as cross-carpeting, party-switching, or decamping. Leaving political parties for new alliances is known as political defection, and it is frequently driven more by personal ambition than by ideological realignment (Nwanegbo, Odigbo, & Nnorom, 2014). The first known instance of defection was in 1951, when members of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) defected to the Action Group (AG), denying Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe the chance to form a regional government. Since Nigeria's independence, defection has been a significant factor in determining the political development of the nation, frequently resulting in instability and weak party

discipline (Adejuwon, 2013).

Defection in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999-present) has been primarily caused by a lack of internal party democracy, elite opportunism, a weak party ideology, and lax legal deterrents. The growing trend of political defection in Nigeria poses a serious challenge to democratic consolidation by eroding party discipline, weakening institutional structures, and undermining the very essence of representative governance. While the 1999 Constitution, through Section 68(1)(g) and Section 109(1)(g), attempts to regulate defection among legislators by stipulating conditions under which elected officials may change parties without forfeiting their seats, these provisions have proven largely ineffective in practice. Legal ambiguities and political interference often render them toothless, allowing politicians to exploit loopholes for personal or strategic gain (Eme & Ogbochie, 2020). This widespread and seemingly unchecked practice not only trivializes the electoral process but also calls into question the sanctity of electoral mandates and the will of the electorate. As more politicians switch allegiances with little regard for ideological coherence or accountability, public trust in the political system continues to wane, threatening the credibility of elections and the legitimacy of democratic institutions (Omilusi, 2021). The normalization of cross-carpeting reflects deeper systemic issues that demand urgent reform to restore integrity, transparency, and stability within Nigeria's political landscape.

Nigeria has seen several high-profile defections between 2015 and 2025, which have affected governance on several levels. For example, the recent defection of Governor of Akwa-Ibom, Governor Umo Eno, from PDP (People's Democratic Party) to APC (All Progressives Congress) on 6th June, 2025, and the Governor Sheriff Oborevwori (Delta State) on 24th April, 2025, former governor of Kaduna state, Mallam Nasiru El-Rufai on 10th march, 2025 from APC (All Progressives Congress) to SDP (Social Democratic Party). Also, Similar defections took place before the general elections in 2023. In December 2023, for instance, 27 members of the Rivers State House of Assembly defected from the PDP to the All-Progressives Congress (APC). The Labour Party tried to have the vacant seats of the departing MPs ruled invalid as a result of this mass defection because constitutional restrictions prohibited such actions (Arise News, 2024). However, in September 2024, the Federal High Court in Abuja dismissed the complaint because it was statute-barred (Punch, 2024). Nigerian Party dynamics are infamously unstable, as evidenced by a number of well-known Senate defections. In October 2023, Senator Ifeanyi Ubah, who represented Nambra South, switched from the Young Progressives Party (YPP) to the ruling APC following a calculated meeting with Senate leaders (NASS, 2023). According to NSS

(2022), Senator Ezenwa Francis Onyewuchi of Imo East also defected in 2022, declaring his intention to join the "New Nigeria" movement by merging with the Labour Party. The political landscape in the National Assembly has drastically changed as a result of these defections, with the APC gaining more seats (Ojo, 2023). The switch to the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP) by Yusuf Abba Kabir, a former PDP veteran and gubernatorial candidate, was another event that significantly changed the political landscape (Frank & Oputa, 2025). These significant changes affected the priorities of governance and the results of the election (Okonkwo & Akinola, 2023). Because politicians regularly switch parties without facing electoral repercussions, Nigeria's political instability has been made worse by the absence of robust legal frameworks to control defections. There have been significant repercussions on policy continuity, party cohesion, and public trust from high-profile defections by governors, senators, and members of the House of Representatives, such as the mass split between the PDP and the APC. The reasons behind these defections are frequently not ideological but rather self-preservation instincts, access to state resources, and alignment with the interests of the ruling party. This undermines the core democratic tenet that elected officials answer to the electorate rather than just their political backers or personal goals (Omilusi, 2021). The study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of party defection and its impact on electoral legitimacy and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

Political Defection: An Overview

In Nigeria's democratic environment, party defection, also known as party-switching, has been a notable occurrence. It involves politicians switching parties, often as a result of ideological disagreements, personal ambitions, or strategic political moves. It is the practice whereby elected officials switch allegiance from the political party on whose platform they were elected to another, often without relinquishing their seat. Political defections have been on the rise in Nigeria since the country's return to democracy in 1999, raising questions about the stability of its democratic institutions and governance (Omotola, 2019). This act has become a recurring feature of Nigeria's political landscape and is deeply rooted in the country's political history. It can be traced as far back as the First Republic, where notable figures like Chief Samuel Akintola shifted political alliances, an action that significantly contributed to political unrest and the eventual collapse of that era's democratic experiment (Ibeanu, 2013).

From a democratic standpoint, this practice is highly contentious. Scholars such as Ojukwu & Olaifa (2011) characterize defection as a violation of the political contract between elected officials and their constituents. By abandoning the party that provided the platform for their election, defectors effectively sidestep the expectations of their electorate, thereby weakening the foundation of democratic accountability and the legitimacy of representation. As such, political defection is not just a procedural anomaly but a deeper symptom of Nigeria's fragile party system and the personalization of power in its democratic processes. In Nigeria, political defection presents a serious threat to democratic stability and governance. Voter disenchantment, inconsistent policies, and weak political institutions are the results of the rising rate of political defections (Obiora, 2019). Although a stable party system is necessary for democracy to flourish, Nigerian politicians' frequent changes of allegiance have sparked worries about a lack of political accountability and ideological commitment. The effect that defections have on electoral credibility is one of the main problems in Nigeria. The electorate's faith in the democratic process is weakened when politicians change parties primarily for personal benefit rather than ideological alignment (Ajayi, 2020). Furthermore, political party crises brought on by defections frequently result in factionalism and internal strife that erode governance frameworks (Eze & Adeyemi, 2021) party defections are said to be when Politicians who switch parties, frequently for tactical reasons. Nigeria's multiparty democracy is now characterized by this phenomenon, which raises questions about the lack of solid ideological underpinnings in political parties. Numerous factors have been identified by scholars as contributing to defection, such as personal ambition, economic motivations, lack of party ideology, and internal democracy (Nokken & Poole, 2002; Malhotra, 2015).

The prevalence of money politics in Nigeria, where political loyalty is typically influenced by financial incentives rather than political convictions, is the reason for the high rate of defections (Jinadu, 2014). Additionally, disenchantment among party members has resulted in defections as a result of political parties' disregard for democratic ideals like open primaries and equitable nomination procedures. Notwithstanding constitutional clauses like Sections 68 and 109 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), which are intended to prevent party defections, politicians routinely take advantage of legal loopholes. For example, defections are frequently excused by arguments of factional mergers or party division, avoiding legal consequences. Former Vice President Atiku Abubakar's repeated splits between the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) serve as an example of how politicians take advantage of legal loopholes to change parties without facing repercussions (Omotola, 2009).

Democratic Consolidation: Conceptual and Contextual Perspectives

Democratic consolidation is the process through which a democracy becomes resilient, stable, and deeply rooted in political norms, institutions, and citizen expectations. According to Linz and Stepan (1996), it goes beyond conducting regular elections to include adherence to the rule of law, political accountability, respect for opposition, and active civic engagement. In such settings, both political elites and ordinary citizens view democratic competition as the only legitimate route to power. Democratic consolidation is a political process in which citizens widely and deeply accept democracy, making it less likely to collapse through unlawful means like military takeovers. Consolidation entails institutional and behavioural adjustments that normalize and lessen the uncertainty of democratic politics (Rustow, 1970). Originally, the phrase referred to the difficulty of protecting emerging democracies from authoritarian threats. It necessitates ensuring political institutionalization, growing a mature civil society, and increasing citizen access. The secret to this process is high institutional routine (Rustow, 1970). The authors contend that the proportion of voters who believe democracy is essential and are prepared to defend it is the primary measure of democratic consolidation. This is still a major problem for Nigeria.

In Nigeria, however, democratic consolidation has been consistently undermined by recurring problems such as electoral violence, judicial inefficiency, weak institutions, corruption, and, notably, frequent political defections. As Aiyede (2015) argues, the widespread practice of cross-carpeting reveals a lack of commitment to party ideology and democratic norms. Politicians often switch parties for personal or strategic advantage, undermining the development of stable party systems and weakening democratic culture. This trend has serious implications: it distorts electoral mandates, weakens opposition parties, and reduces political competitiveness. Omotola (2010) emphasizes that without loyal opposition and stable parties, democratic consolidation remains elusive. In the legislature, mass defections can shift power dynamics overnight, fostering instability, legislative paralysis, and executive dominance, further eroding public trust (Udeuhele, 2017). Compared to countries like Ghana and South Africa, where stricter laws uphold party discipline and internal democracy, Nigeria lags. The constitutional provisions Section 68(1)(g) and Section 109(1)(g), intended to regulate defections, are either poorly enforced or manipulated for political gain. Unless these legal ambiguities are addressed and institutional frameworks are strengthened, Nigeria risks remaining a procedural democracy, holding elections without embedding genuine democratic values.

Electoral Legitimacy

Electoral legitimacy is built on the general public's confidence that election outcomes genuinely reflect the will of the people. It is a foundational element of representative democracy, where elected officials derive their authority from a process that is transparent, competitive, and inclusive. As Diamond (2008) notes, for an election to be considered legitimate, voters must not only have the freedom to choose among candidates but also believe that their choices will be respected and upheld throughout the officials' tenure.

In Nigeria, however, this legitimacy is frequently called into question due to the rampant practice of political defection. When politicians switch parties, often to the ruling party, without consulting or returning to the electorate for a renewed mandate, they undermine public trust in the electoral system. This behavior disregards the voters' original choice and violates the unwritten social contract that binds representatives to their constituents. It sends a troubling message that elections are merely procedural rather than meaningful exercises of democratic choice. Over time, such actions erode the credibility of elections and foster political cynicism among citizens, weakening the very foundation of democratic governance (Ojukwu & Olaifa, 2011). When elected officials defect from the party under which they were voted into office, they effectively disenfranchise the electorate. Voters cast their ballots not just for individuals but for the ideologies, policies, and promises that political parties represent. For example, a citizen who voted for a Labour Party or PDP candidate because of their progressive agenda may suddenly find themselves represented by a member of the APC, often the ruling party, following a defection. This switch typically occurs without any form of public consultation or referendum, thereby nullifying the original electoral choice and rendering it both meaningless and illegitimate. This breach of trust has serious consequences for democratic engagement. As Udeuhele (2017) explains, defection without consequences constitutes a betrayal of the electoral mandate and breeds widespread public disillusionment. It sends a message that electoral choices can be manipulated post-election, leading voters to question the purpose and value of participating in elections at all. Over time, this erodes confidence in democratic institutions and weakens the legitimacy of governance, as citizens begin to see elections not as a tool for accountability and representation, but as a hollow ritual easily circumvented by political opportunism.

Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, through Section 68(1)(g) and Section 109(1)(g), was designed to serve as a check on arbitrary political defection by stipulating that elected officials should lose their seats if they defect from the party on whose platform they were elected. However, these provisions have been consistently undermined by vague terminology, particularly the word "division"

within a political party. This ambiguity has provided a legal loophole that politicians exploit to justify their defections while retaining their positions. The judiciary, instead of closing these loopholes, has on multiple occasions validated such defections, interpreting internal disagreements or factional disputes within parties as sufficient grounds for crossing over (Eme & Ogbochie, 2015). As a result, the constitutional intent to protect electoral mandates and ensure party discipline has been significantly weakened. This legal uncertainty fuels a culture of impunity, where politicians defect without fear of consequences. It undermines the integrity of elections by making electoral outcomes appear fluid and negotiable rather than final and binding. Consequently, the electorate becomes increasingly disillusioned, and political stability suffers as defection cycles are normalized and even strategically weaponized for personal or partisan advantage.

The growing trend of political defections in Nigeria especially the surge between 2023 and 2025 highlights a troubling shift in political culture where personal survival and access to power often outweigh ideological commitment or respect for the electorate's will. During this period, there was a wave of defections, particularly from opposition parties to the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), both at the state and federal levels. These defections were largely tactical, aimed at securing proximity to the central government for political protection, patronage, and influence, rather than rooted in genuine ideological alignment or policy differences. What makes this trend more concerning is that these shifts occurred without public input no referenda, by-elections, or formal consultations were held to validate the new affiliations. As a result, electoral mandates were effectively hijacked for political convenience, sidelining the voters who had made their choices based on party programs and promises. This conduct deeply undermines the legitimacy of elections. When power transitions are determined not by votes but by elite negotiations and defections, the essence of democracy is hollowed out. Citizens begin to perceive elections as mere rituals, while the real decisions about leadership and governance are made behind closed doors through political maneuvering and opportunistic realignments.

Electoral legitimacy goes beyond merely holding elections; it hinges on respecting the outcomes, maintaining consistent representation, and honoring the mandate given by voters. When politicians defect to other parties without seeking a renewed mandate through by-elections or public consultation, they violate these democratic principles. Such actions turn elections into symbolic exercises rather than genuine expressions of the people's will. In Nigeria, the rampant and unchecked practice of cross-carpeting has become a major threat to the integrity of the democratic process. Defections, often

driven by political opportunism rather than ideological conviction, distort the electoral landscape and foster deep public disillusionment. Voters begin to question the value of their participation when their choices can be unilaterally altered after the fact. This breeds cynicism, weakens the bond between the electorate and elected officials, and ultimately undermines representative governance. To protect electoral legitimacy and rebuild public confidence, Nigeria must undertake comprehensive legal reforms that close loopholes in defection laws. Equally important is the consistent enforcement of these laws by institutions and the promotion of political accountability. Without these measures, democracy risks becoming a façade, where elections are held, but their outcomes are negotiable.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopts Rational Choice Theory as the theoretical framework. Rational Choice Theory offers a compelling lens through which to understand the persistent trend of political defection, or cross-carpeting, in Nigeria. Rooted in the work of Downs (1957), the theory posits that individuals, including politicians, make decisions by weighing the costs and benefits, ultimately acting in ways that serve their personal or strategic interests. In the Nigerian political context, this framework helps explain why elected officials often switch party allegiance, particularly in the aftermath of elections.

Politicians frequently defect when the perceived advantages, such as aligning with the ruling party, gaining access to federal resources, securing legal or political protection, or enhancing their chances of future electoral success, outweigh the potential downsides, like public backlash or accusations of betrayal. These defections are often calculated moves to maintain political relevance, especially in scenarios where the federal government is controlled by a different party than the one dominant in their home state. Rather than being anomalies, such decisions are rational responses to a political environment where power and access to state resources are heavily centralized.

Nigeria's political landscape is characterized by weak party systems, a lack of clear ideological commitments, and underdeveloped institutional checks. These structural deficiencies create a fluid and unpredictable political environment where defection is often viewed not as a betrayal, but as a pragmatic survival strategy. In such a system, party loyalty becomes secondary to personal political calculations, and Rational Choice Theory offers a useful framework for understanding this behavior. As Aiyede (2015) notes, when politicians face political insecurity, marginalization, or a decline in influence such as losing a primary election or sensing their party's waning popularity they are likely to defect to a stronger party, typically the one in power at the federal level.

Recent high-profile defections illustrate this cost-benefit logic. Governor Umo Eno of Akwa Ibom State and Senator Neda Imasuen's moves from the PDP (People's Democratic Party) and Labour Party to the APC can be seen as rational decisions aimed at securing greater influence, federal alignment, and policy leverage. These actions, though often criticized publicly, reflect a political culture in which access to central power and resources is crucial to maintaining relevance and protecting political capital. Within this context, defection is not an anomaly, but a strategic response to systemic weaknesses in Nigeria's democratic institutions. In Nigeria's political arena, defections are often timed around elections, with politicians strategically switching parties either during campaigns or shortly after results are announced. Rational Choice Theory offers a clear explanation for this behaviour, framing it as a calculated effort to remain close to power and safeguard political interests. Given the executive's dominant control over state resources, political appointments, and coercive instruments, aligning with the ruling party at the federal level frequently ensures access to patronage, protection, and continued relevance. This logic extends beyond individual behavior. Rational Choice Theory also accounts for mass defections as coordinated or reactive strategies, where politicians act not only out of self-interest but in response to the behavior of others. As Nwosu and Awofeso (2019) observe, when a significant number of legislators or influential figures defect to a dominant party, it creates a bandwagon effect. In such cases, staying behind may lead to political isolation, while defecting appears to be the safer and more beneficial option. The result is a cascading shift in allegiance that reinforces the dominance of the ruling party and further weakens opposition structures revealing how systemic incentives shape the fluidity and opportunism of Nigeria's political class.

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) assumes that political actors make decisions within the context of existing institutional constraints. In Nigeria, however, the weak enforcement of these constraints significantly shapes politicians' cost-benefit calculations. Although Sections 68(1)(g) and 109(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution theoretically provide a basis for seat forfeiture following defection, their implementation has been sporadic and largely ineffective. As Eme and Ogbochie (2015) observe, this inconsistency reduces the legal risk associated with defection, allowing politicians to view it as a low-cost, high-reward strategy. With minimal consequences, the incentives to switch parties especially for access to federal power, patronage, or legal protection often outweigh any potential drawbacks. Moreover, political parties in Nigeria rarely impose internal sanctions on defectors. Rather than punishing those who cross over, parties especially dominant ones tend to embrace them, particularly when they bring electoral value, financial resources, or

strategic influence. This tolerance, and in some cases encouragement, further legitimizes defection as a rational strategy for political survival and advancement. Within this environment, defection is not merely opportunistic but entirely consistent with RCT's framework: actors navigating a system with weak institutional constraints and strong personal incentives will naturally pursue the most advantageous path.

Criticisms and Limitations of the Theory

While Rational Choice Theory (RCT) offers valuable insights into the strategic motivations behind political defections, it is not without limitations. One major critique of the theory is its tendency to adopt an overly individualistic lens, assuming that all political behavior is driven by self-interest and utility maximization. In doing so, it often overlooks the broader normative, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts within which political decisions occur. Not all acts of defection are purely instrumental; some may be guided by ideological beliefs, personal loyalty, or moral considerations, which RCT struggles to account for. In the Nigerian context, political behaviour is frequently shaped not only by rational calculations but also by collective identities such as ethnicity, religion, regional affiliation, and long-standing historical legacies. These factors play a crucial role in shaping political alignments and loyalty, especially at the grassroots level. By focusing narrowly on cost-benefit analysis, RCT can understate the influence of these deeper structural and normative dynamics.

Nonetheless, when applied to elite political conduct particularly among Nigeria's ruling class RCT remains a potent analytical tool. It helps explain why defection persists as a strategic choice, even when it undermines democratic consolidation. Among political elites who operate in a highly transactional system with weak party ideology and enforcement mechanisms, RCT effectively captures the logic behind actions driven by political survival, access to power, and personal gain.

Rational Choice Theory offers a compelling framework for understanding the persistent phenomenon of political defection in Nigeria. It frames defection as a strategic, utility-maximizing decision in which politicians weigh the potential rewards such as proximity to power, access to resources, and political protection against relatively low risks, including minimal legal consequences or public backlash. In a political environment marked by weak institutional enforcement, shallow ideological commitments, and transactional party politics, defection becomes not only rational but, for many actors, the most logical route to maintaining influence and relevance. The theory helps explain why elected officials frequently abandon the platforms that brought them to power: they are responding to a system that incentivizes loyalty to power, not principles. When defecting to the ruling party offers greater benefits than remaining with a weaker or

oppositional bloc, political actors act in their self-interest as Rational Choice Theory predicts.

To address this trend, Nigeria must recalibrate its political incentive structures. Legal and constitutional reforms should strengthen the penalties for defection, ensure stricter enforcement of seat-forfeiture provisions, and enhance internal party democracy. At the same time, promoting ideological clarity and making party loyalty politically and materially rewarding could help reduce the appeal of defection, thus reinforcing electoral integrity and democratic consolidation.

METHODOLOGY

The study relies exclusively on secondary data obtained from a wide range of credible sources, which include official party reports, documentation from local and international election observers, reports from civil society organizations, and articles journals. Using qualitative content analysis, the study examines how party defection threatens democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

RECENT DEFECTION IN THE NIGERIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

In recent years, Nigeria's democratic landscape has become increasingly defined by the phenomenon of political defection commonly referred to as cross-carpeting, particularly to the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC). This trend has exposed the fragile nature of party loyalty and the superficiality of ideological commitment among the political elite. Rather than functioning as stable vehicles for policy development or public accountability, political parties in Nigeria are often perceived as platforms of convenience, frequently abandoned and adopted to serve personal or strategic ends (Aiyede, 2015).

The surge in defections following the 2023 general elections is a testament to this pattern. In June 2025, Senator Neda Imasuen of Edo South defected from the Labour Party (LP) to the APC, citing internal conflicts within his party. Similarly, Governor Umo Eno of Akwa Ibom State officially left the People's Democratic Party (PDP) to align with the APC, a move interpreted by many as a calculated step to secure federal patronage and political survival under the Tinubu-led government. In a particularly symbolic shift, Governor Sheriff Oborevwori of Delta State abandoned the PDP for the APC in April 2025, altering the political trajectory of a state traditionally dominated by the opposition. This wave of defections was not limited to executive officeholders. Senator Abdulrahman Kawu Sumaila of Kano South left the New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP) for the APC, while Nasir El-Rufai, former Governor of Kaduna State, took the unusual step of defecting from the APC to the Social

Democratic Party (SDP), citing disillusionment with the internal dysfunctions of his former party. At the legislative level, the pattern continued: Representatives Adamu Tanko (Niger State) and Hussein Jallo (Kaduna State) moved from the PDP to the APC. Senators Onyewuchi Ezenwa (Imo East) and Ned Nwoko (Delta North) similarly abandoned the LP and PDP, respectively, for the APC. Crucially, none of these defections were preceded by by-elections or referenda to revalidate the politicians' mandates. This lack of electoral re-endorsement raises serious questions about the legitimacy of such political realignments. As Eme and Ogbochie (2015) argue, while Sections 68(1)(g) and 109(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution seek to regulate defections by mandating seat forfeiture under certain conditions, the vague interpretation of terms like "division" within a political party and the judiciary's inconsistent enforcement have rendered these provisions largely ineffective.

The implications of this trend are far-reaching. Electoral mandates, supposedly sacrosanct expressions of the people's will, are routinely disregarded in favor of political expediency. Voters who supported a candidate based on party ideology or manifesto are often left disillusioned when their representative switches allegiance without consultation or accountability. As Udeh (2017) notes, such behaviour erodes public trust in political institutions and contributes to declining voter turnout, as citizens begin to question the value of electoral participation.

Furthermore, the APC's growing dominance now holding 71 Senate seats as of mid-2025 has prompted alarm among analysts and civil society organizations. Also, May, 2025, at the House of Representatives, 6 PDP lawmakers Hon. Nicholas Mutu, Hon. Victor Nwokolo, Hon. Thomas Ereyitomi, Hon. Nnamdi Ezechi, Hon. Julius Pondi, and Hon. Ukodhiko Ajiroghene Jonathan from Delta State who defected to APC and 2 legislators Hon. Mark Obetta and Hon. Dennis Amadi Agbo from Enugu State who defected from the Labour Party to the ruling PDP in the State citing internal crisis and leadership disputes within their former parties (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2025). They warn that unchecked defections are threatening the essential ingredients of democracy: political pluralism, robust opposition, and institutional checks and balances. A one-party dominant system may breed complacency, stifle dissent, and weaken the accountability mechanisms necessary for a healthy democracy (Omotola, 2010).

FACTORS THAT ENHANCE POLITICAL DEFECTION IN NIGERIA

Political defection in Nigeria has become a recurring and deeply entrenched feature of its democratic experience, particularly in the Fourth Republic. Although defection

is not unique to Nigeria being a recognized occurrence in many democracies the frequency, strategic timing, and often opportunistic motivations behind it in the Nigerian context point to underlying systemic enablers that extend well beyond personal ambition or ideological realignment. These factors are driven by the institutional, political, legal, and socio-economic context of Nigeria's democratic patterns. The factors are;

Weak political parties' Ideologies: Nigerian political parties, for the most part, operate without clear ideological foundations or consistent policy frameworks. Rather than being driven by enduring values, principles, or issue-based agendas, many parties are organized around influential personalities, elite coalitions, and short-term electoral calculations. This personalization of political parties significantly weakens institutional cohesion and blurs the ideological lines that should distinguish one party from another. As Olayiwola (2014) notes, the dominance of personality politics and the absence of structured party identities make it remarkably easy for politicians to defect from one party to another without facing any meaningful ideological contradiction or political consequences.

Legal Loopholes and Constitutional Ambiguities: Sections 68(1)(g) and 109(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria were designed to discourage indiscriminate political defections by setting conditions under which elected legislators may forfeit their seats. However, these provisions include a notably vague clause that allows defection if there is a "division" within the political party under which the legislator was elected. This ambiguous language has become one of the most exploited loopholes in Nigeria's constitutional framework. In practice, politicians and their legal teams have routinely invoked the "division" clause, often citing internal party disagreements, leadership crises, or factional disputes as justification for defecting to other parties, especially the ruling party. Unfortunately, the judiciary has not consistently interpreted or enforced this provision, and in many cases, it has sided with defectors, further diluting its effectiveness (Eme & Ogbochie, 2015). The lack of a clear legal definition of what constitutes a "division" has allowed for broad, subjective, and often politically convenient interpretations.

Executive Dominance and Access to State Resources: Nigeria's political system is heavily centralized, with significant power and resources concentrated in the executive arm of government, particularly at the federal level. This structure creates strong incentives for politicians to align themselves with the ruling party, not necessarily out of ideological affinity, but to gain or maintain access to state resources, influence, and protection. In this context, political defection becomes a strategic tool for survival and relevance within a patronage-driven political order. As Aiyede (2015) observes, executive dominance over key

levers of power such as federal appointments, government contracts, security apparatus, and even judicial influence makes proximity to the ruling party a critical factor in political longevity. Defection is often timed to coincide with changes in federal leadership or general elections, as politicians rush to realign themselves with those in control of executive power. This was evident in the wave of defections to the All Progressives Congress (APC) following its victories in the 2015 and 2023 general elections.

Political Survival: Many Nigerian politicians approach politics primarily as a career path rather than a platform for public service or ideological advocacy. This careerist perspective aligns closely with the assumptions of Rational Choice Theory (RCT), which posits that individuals make calculated decisions to maximize personal benefits while minimizing risks. Within this framework, defection is often a strategic move designed to ensure political survival, re-election, or access to material rewards. According to Nwosu and Awofeso (2019), politicians defect when their current party no longer serves their ambitions, whether due to declining popularity, internal marginalization, exclusion from patronage networks, or diminishing electoral prospects. Rather than remain in a weakened or divided party, they rationally shift allegiance to a more advantageous platform, often the ruling party, where the likelihood of securing appointments, protection, or re-election is higher. This behaviour is especially common after general elections, when the balance of power shifts and political actors scramble to reposition themselves for relevance (Eze & Okonkwo, 2023).

IMPLICATIONS OF POLITICAL DEFECTION ON ELECTORAL LEGITIMACY AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA

Political defection in Nigeria, particularly among elected public office holders, carries significant consequences for both electoral legitimacy and the broader health of democratic governance. At its core, defection disrupts the representational contract between elected officials and the electorate. When politicians switch parties after securing office, often without seeking a fresh mandate, it calls into question their accountability and undermines the trust placed in them by voters. This practice raises critical concerns about the sanctity of electoral choices. Citizens cast their ballots not just for individuals, but for the parties, ideologies, and manifestos those individuals represent. When defections occur post-election, voters are effectively denied the outcome they chose, making the original mandate meaningless. As Udeuhele (2017) observes, this erosion of representational integrity weakens

the democratic process and fosters disillusionment among citizens. Moreover, the prevalence of such defections often signals a broader systemic failure, where party platforms are weak, ideology is secondary to personal gain, and institutional safeguards against opportunism are ineffective. In this context, political defection becomes not just an individual decision but a symptom of deeper structural issues within Nigeria's political system. Addressing these challenges is essential to restoring public trust and ensuring that electoral outcomes truly reflect the will of the people. The study explores ways in which political defection has eroded electoral legitimacy and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The implications are stated below;

Undermine the strength of opposition and democratic pluralism: Political defection weakens the strength of opposition parties and diminishes the essence of competitive democracy, which is against the principles of democracy. When the majority of the opposition parties defect to the ruling party, it creates a lopsided political structure, which is against democratic checks. For example, the defection of well-known opposition leaders in states like Rivers and Kano following the general elections in 2023 further weakened opposition parties, reducing their ability to bring people together and stop presidential overreach (Omodia, 2022). This trend became particularly pronounced during the 2023-2025 political cycle, as a significant number of elected officials from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Labour Party (LP) defected to the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC). These defections have not only expanded the APC's dominance in the National Assembly but also deepened concerns about the health of Nigeria's democratic institutions. With the opposition increasingly depleted, the legislature risks becoming less effective in fulfilling its oversight functions and holding the executive accountable. Aiyede (2015) emphasizes that such imbalances weaken the principle of checks and balances, enabling executive overreach and undermining the pluralism that is essential for a functioning democracy. When one party dominates the political landscape through defections rather than through fresh electoral mandates, the result is a diminished capacity for dissent, debate, and alternative policy propositions. This, in turn, deprives voters of meaningful choices and contributes to the erosion of democratic competition. Ultimately, these developments undermine the vibrancy of Nigeria's democratic process and make electoral legitimacy increasingly fragile.

Chances of one-party Dominance: Defections allow ruling parties to gain an overwhelming majority, which paves the way for authoritarian behaviour. Long-term one-party rule may cause democratic norms to erode, dissent to be suppressed, and state institutions to be manipulated in favour of the governing class (Frank

& Oputa, 2025). If defections, opposition party internal disintegration, and unbridled power consolidation persist, Nigeria might be on the verge of becoming a de facto one-party state. The ramifications for civic engagement, democratic pluralism, and electoral credibility could be severe and long-lasting (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2025).

Political and Institutional Instability: The occurrence of mass defections often leads to factional warfare, intra-party conflict, and political crises. According to Ojo (2020), these disagreements frequently turn into protracted legal battles that further unstable the government and impede the efficient implementation of policies. Defections have led to changes in leadership across different state Assemblies, delay in budget passing, and power tussles between the legislators and the governor in the case of Rivers state.

Weakening Internal Party Politics: In Nigeria, defections are another sign of insufficient internal party democracy. Due to feelings of exclusion or unfair treatment during party primaries or decision-making processes, many politicians leave their positions. Ajayi (2021) asserts that a candidate's lack of transparency, Members of other parties look for better opportunities due to selection procedures, candidate imposition, and a lack of inclusive party structures MPs would be less inclined to defect if internal party democracy were strengthened because they would have more faith in their parties' open and honest procedures and fair competition.

In a nutshell, Political defection in Nigeria continues to exert corrosive effects on electoral legitimacy, democratic governance, and institutional stability. When elected officials abandon the parties under which they were voted into office often without seeking a fresh mandate it distorts the principle of representation and diminishes the value of the electoral process. This behavior weakens opposition parties, concentrates power within the ruling elite, and disrupts the policy-making process by fostering unstable legislative alliances. Moreover, the prevalence of defection fuels public cynicism and voter apathy. Citizens who see their electoral choices routinely overridden by elite political deals may begin to view elections as meaningless exercises. More critically, political defection undermines the consolidation of democracy by normalizing opportunism, weakening party discipline, and exposing the fragility of institutions meant to uphold democratic norms (Udeuhele, 2017; Aiyede, 2015).

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of defection, particularly cross-carpeting among political parties in Nigeria, poses significant challenges to the integrity and legitimacy of the electoral process. This practice undermines the principles of accountability and loyalty, leading to a

fragmented political landscape where electoral outcomes can be heavily influenced by individual self-interest rather than party ideologies or public welfare. As political actors prioritize personal gains over collective goals, the trust of the electorate in democratic institutions wanes, threatening the very foundation of democratic governance. To mitigate these effects, policymakers must establish robust frameworks that discourage opportunistic defection and promote party loyalty, ultimately fostering a more stable and legitimate electoral environment in Nigeria. Addressing these issues is essential for enhancing democratic governance and ensuring that the voice of the people is genuinely represented.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the challenges posed by defection and cross-carpeting in Nigeria's political landscape, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

Electoral System and Constitutional Reform: Consider reforming the electoral system to minimize the effects of defection. This could involve adopting proportional representation systems that reduce the emphasis on individual candidates and promote party stability. Sections 68(1)(g) and 109(1)(g) of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution require urgent amendment to address the persistent abuse of the defection clause. The current wording particularly the ambiguous reference to a "division" within a political party has been frequently exploited by politicians to justify switching parties without consequence. This loophole undermines the intent of the law and erodes the integrity of electoral mandates. To restore accountability and strengthen democratic norms, the Constitution should be amended to eliminate the "division" clause. In its place, a clear and enforceable provision should be introduced mandating that any elected official who defects from the political party under which they were elected must immediately vacate their seat and seek re-election under their new party. This would ensure that the electorate, not backroom political deals, determines who represents them, thereby reinforcing the sanctity of the democratic mandate.

Enact an Anti-Defection Law for Executive Positions: current constitutional provisions focus exclusively on legislators, leaving executive officeholders such as governors, deputy governors, and the president unaccountable when they defect. To close this gap, Nigeria should enact a comprehensive anti-defection law that extends to executive positions. Such legislation should require defecting executives to either seek a renewed mandate through fresh elections or face impeachment via a clearly defined and enforceable legal process. These reforms are essential to curbing opportunistic defections, strengthening party systems, and enhancing the credibility of Nigeria's democratic institutions.

Public Awareness Campaigns: Public campaigns are essential to addressing the widespread culture of political defection in Nigeria. While legal and institutional reforms are critical, empowering the electorate through sustained civic education is equally vital. Many voters remain unaware of the broader implications of cross-carpeting, particularly how it undermines the value of their votes, distorts representation, and weakens democratic governance. Targeted public enlightenment campaigns should be launched by civil society organizations, the media, the National Orientation Agency (NOA), and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). These campaigns should focus on educating citizens about the significance of party ideology, the meaning of electoral mandates, and the accountability mechanisms available to them. Voters should be made to understand that when politicians defect without justification or public consultation, it is not merely a political decision it is a betrayal of the democratic contract between the electorate and their representatives.

Enforce the Internal Party Democracy: The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has a crucial role to play in curbing political defections by ensuring that party primaries are conducted in a free, fair, and transparent manner. A significant number of defections in Nigeria can be traced back to grievances arising from manipulated or undemocratic primary elections, where party elites handpick candidates or impose outcomes that marginalize legitimate contenders. This undermines internal party democracy and fuels frustration among aspirants, many of whom defect to rival parties in search of political opportunity or justice. To address this, INEC must go beyond its current supervisory role and actively enforce standards that promote transparency and fairness during primary elections. This includes monitoring internal party processes, ensuring compliance with party constitutions and electoral guidelines, and sanctioning parties that violate democratic procedures. Strengthening internal party democracy will not only reduce the incidence of defections but also improve the quality of political representation by promoting merit-based candidacies and inclusive participation. Ultimately, when party primaries are credible and transparent, they foster greater loyalty among candidates, enhance voter confidence in the political system, and reinforce the legitimacy of the electoral process, thereby contributing to the stability and consolidation of Nigeria's democracy.

Defection Monitoring Team: To effectively address the persistent abuse of political defection in Nigeria, a special tribunal under the National Judicial Council (NJC) should be established to adjudicate defection-related disputes. Presently, delays in court proceedings and inconsistent judicial interpretations, especially of the ambiguous "division" clause in Sections 68(1)(g) and 109(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution, have allowed defectors to exploit the legal system with impunity.

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