



Political Party Defection in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: An Analysis of Normative and Political Implications

GODWIN Daniel¹ & OLUWALOGBON Leke²

¹Department of Political Science, Faculty of the Social Sciences
University of Ibadan, Nigeria

²Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences

Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria

Corresponding Author's Email: danielharry700@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examined the normative and political implications of party defection in Nigeria's fourth republic. Party defection is increasingly becoming a characteristic of party politics in Nigeria, which comes with several costs to party institutionalization and democratic governance. A qualitative case study design was employed. Three political parties were used: the All Progressives Congress (APC), the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). However, references were made to other political parties. Key Informant Interviews were conducted with politicians, party leaders, academicians, and heads of civil society organisations to elicit relevant information. They are the National Publicity Secretaries of the three parties, Party National Directors, members of the National Assembly. Others were Director Generals, one each from the Electoral Institute of Nigeria and Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD); respondents from United Nations Development and National Institute for Legislative Studies. Secondary data were sourced from the national constitution, party constitutions, party guidelines, and media reports. Content analytical approach was employed in the analysis of data generated for the study. Rational choice theory guided the study. Findings revealed that party defection, normatively, portrays the whimsy transfer of a mandate from one party platform to another. Politically, opposition parties are increasingly weakened as a result of the high rate of party defections. It has further blurred policy distinctions. The study concludes that, together, these implications have led to party weakness. The study recommends the creation of a specialized agency to deal with party matters, and enhanced party discipline.

Keywords: Political Party Defection, Nigeria's Fourth Republic, Normative Implication, Political Implications of Party Defection.



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Introduction

Party defection is relatively less common in developed democracies than is the case in developing democracies. Studies have shown that party defection is common in many countries, including Bolivia, Ecuador, Japan, South Africa, Nepal, Brazil, Russia, and the Philippines (Desposato, 2006; Mainwaring, 1998). This is usually treated as an indicator of system weakness. However, party defection provides a unique window to understand the roles and functions parties play for ambitious politicians and the threats it poses to political party stability, institutionalization and democratic governance (Desposato, 2006; Malhotra, 2005).

In Africa, the emergence of political parties was mediated by colonialism. Ekeh (1975) observed that colonialism is to Africa what feudalism is to Europe, and as such, much of Africa's political experience can hardly be detached from colonial experience. Nigeria's political parties evolved like their counterparts elsewhere in Africa, where legislative institutions were set up by the colonial authorities. Dare (1989), in his analysis, traced the development of political parties in Nigeria to the Clifford Constitution of 1922. It introduced the legislative council alongside the elective principles in Lagos colony and Calabar. Four of the unofficial members of the council were to be elected, three from Lagos and one from Calabar, respectively. In response, political parties became necessary, steering the first political party, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), in 1923, with Herbert Macaulay, Egerton Shyngle, Dr. E. C. Adeniyi Jones as its pioneer leaders (Coleman, 1958; Sklar, 1963; Dare, 1989). It was followed by the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon in 1944, the Action Group in 1948, the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) in 1949, and the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) in 1951. These parties were formed and structured along regional and ethnic ideologies (Coleman, 1958; Sklar, 1963). The political parties of the second and third republics were not markedly different from



the previous parties. They rather followed the regional and religious character of the first republican parties, which terminated in the early 1960s.

The decade of the 1990s witnessed resurgence in multiparty politics in Africa, which was described as the “third wave of democratization” (Huntington, 1991). As a result, Nigeria’s Fourth Republic commenced on May 29, 1999, after decades of military interventions (Adetula, 2008; Yagboyaju, 2011). The Fourth Republic has witnessed seven general elections: 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023, with political parties playing a strategic role in bringing about the needed democratic transition within a framework of a competitive democratic system (Agbaje, 2007; Suberu, 2010; Sule, 2019; Onapajo & Babalola, 2020). However, there are still some negative indicators in Nigeria’s party politics. The manifestations of these negative indicators include: random political party defection and factionalism that culminate in intense and lawless interparty competition and intra-party factionalism. It is against this backdrop that this study examines the normative and political implications of party defection in relation to party institutionalization and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Political Party Defection: Definitions and Discourses

The term party defection is used here as a comprehensive concept to describe any change in party membership, either from a politician occupying an office or a politician competing for elective office or appointed office under a party platform. Political parties are known to be useful for ambitious politicians. Politicians build their careers within political parties. Therefore, it’s also imperative to note that parties allow voters to make their choice, and parties provide the nexus between candidates and voters (William and Carol, 2009). It therefore suggest that when voters make their choice of candidate for any political office, what it means is that they have delegated their rights to public decision-making to parties and their candidates who represent them in parliament. Thus, in a democracy, continued and repeated credible elections offer voters the leverage to hold elected representatives and their parties responsible for public policy decisions as well as their consequences (Schattschneider 1942; Powell and Bingham, 2000; Jinadu, 2011). For instance, in the United States and in several other presidential systems as well as parliamentary democracies, the party with the majority in each of the chambers controls the



flow of activities and policy outcomes (Cox and McCubbins, 2005). Given this task on elected representatives and their parties, it is expected that elected representatives stay put in the party platform they were elected and through which they got the mandate during the election. This expectation is relatively achieved in some established democracies, like those of Western Europe. However, in some other advanced as well as new democracies, it has become an integrated system for elected representatives or party leaders to switch from one party to another, even during their term in office.

Party defection has been noticeable in a number of democracies. For instance, in aspiring democracies such as South Africa, Ecuador, Japan, Bolivia, the Philippines, Brazil, and Italy, party defection is a common phenomenon. It has also been reported in some developed democracies, such as France, Russia, and the United States. For instance, Heller and Mershon (2005) revealed in their studies that about one-fourth (1/4) of the members of the Italian lower House of Representatives defected to another party during the 1996–2001 legislative year. In Brazil, studies have also shown that around one third (1/3) of the parliamentarians moved from one party to another from 1986 to 1990 (Mainwaring and Perez Linan, 1997; Mershon and Shvetsova, 2009). No doubt, since 1999, Nigerian democracy has witnessed volumes of party defection, with politicians moving from one political party to the other. This is becoming a permanent feature of the Nigerian democracy. Mbah (2011) observed that when this happens, the decamped feels dissatisfied with the former party and satisfied with his or her new-found party.

Studies have examined reasons for the increasing instability and movement of politicians from one party to another. In most of the studies, however, the reoccurring themes are political ambition, institutional strength, and constituency characteristics (Desposato, 2006). For instance, Heller and Mershon (2005) associated frequent party defection in Italy with party size, electoral rule, and discipline. They stated that the combination of discipline and policy disagreements was the reason most parliamentarians left their parties. Mejia-Acosta (2004), in his study of party defection in Ecuador, highlighted the function of district magnitude, party size, and party ideology, among others, as factors responsible for the pace of defection in that country. In Japan,



party defection was attributed to factors such as economic issues, policy variation, and institutional preferences, among others (Cox and Rosenbluth, 1995).

Triggers of Party Defection in Nigeria

Studies have also accounted for the factors responsible for party defections in Nigeria. Mbah (2011) outlined and examined the following factors:

Class rule

Party defection is attributed to the role of the Nigerian ruling class. The Nigerian ruling class predominantly sees politics as an avenue for primitive accumulation. For the ruling class, state power provides direct access to the wealth of the nation. They take on any opportunity that will grant them access to public offices where they have the opportunity to build an economic empire for themselves. The interest in joining politics, therefore, is personal and private. Since the state is seen as a platform for looting, party defection becomes inevitable. That is, the Nigerian state is considered a “means of production” and a “means of primitive accumulation” (Ekekwe, 1986; Iyayi, 1986). The direction of defection in the Nigerian case, which is mostly from the opposition party to the governing party, explains the primacy of political power.

Constitutional ambiguities

There are a few loopholes in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which give politicians the leverage to defect from one party to another unchecked. A few sections were identified by Mbah (2011): sections 68 1(g) and 109 (1). He, however, added that, although Section 68 1(a) states that “a member of the Senate or the House of Representatives shall vacate his seat in the House of which he is a member if, being a person whose election to the House was sponsored by a political party, he becomes a member of another political party before the expiration of the period for which that House was elected. Provided that his membership in the latter political party is not as a result of a division in the political party of which he was previously a member or of a merger of two or more political parties or factions by one of which he was previously sponsored” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999:34). The later part of the foregoing section gives politicians leverage to move freely, especially the executives and party



leaders. Politicians in Nigeria take advantage of the caveat to defect to other parties without restraint, since there are and will always be divisions within the parties. This has given political actors who defected the ground to justify their actions within the framework of the constitution, as the constitution is not definite on the nature of a crisis that should warrant defection.

Lack of internal party democracy

Another reason Nigerian politicians defect from one party to another, as found in the literature, is a lack of internal party democracy (Godwin, 2016). The conduct of party primaries in Nigeria has shown that the operators of political parties are not guided by democratic principles. Instances have shown that several political parties do not operate within the party guidelines, as some candidates are imposed on the party without regard to due process (Godwin, 2016). The factor of god-father and god-son is given primacy over the legal provisions that should guide party primaries. This has contributed to some extent to the pace of party defection in Nigeria. Aggrieved members resort to defection in order to further their ambitions where they find platforms. All these, among other factors, have contributed to the observable weaknesses that characterise Nigerian political parties and, in general, have undermined the democratic efforts of the Nigerian state.

Theoretical Framework

The Rational Choice Theory provides the analytical framework. The rational choice theory in the social sciences is used to determine and understand human behaviour. In its classical view, rational choice is used as the procedure for determining and assessing the available options in decision-making and then choosing, from the available options, the most preferred one based on some consistent standards. It basically employs an optimization-centered approach (Jonathan and Paul, 2004). The theory has a long history in economics. However, it has stretched to other disciplines such as Political Science, Psychology, Anthropology and Sociology (Swedberg, 1990; Shapiro, 1998). The Rational Choice Theory works under the assumption that individuals have preferences and make their choices according to those preferences. Put differently, individuals make choices based on their own interests. Adam Smith emphasised this assumption of self-interest in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) when he stated that “it is not from the



benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest." The theory is built around these three core classical assumptions: individuals have selfish preferences; they maximize their own utility when faced with a choice or decision; and they act independently based on information (McGee and Warms, 2013). Following these core assumptions, therefore, Rational Choice Theorists focus on the individual candidate who, as a rational actor, engages in a cost-benefit analysis as he or she chooses to retain or change party affiliation. The rational choice theory provides the theoretical insight for this research to examine how politicians use parties to advance their interests. Thus, decisions to switch parties or to stay put are a function of the strategic interest in utility maximization by political actors. Rational choice, therefore, provides a compelling anchor for analysis, as it illustrates to us the individual motivation for party defection.

Methodology

A qualitative case study design was adopted for the study. Three foremost political parties were used: the All Progressives Congress (APC), the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Though references were intermittently made to other political parties. Key Informant Interviews were conducted with relevant politicians, party leaders, academicians, and heads of civil society organisations. They include the National Publicity Secretaries of the three parties, four National Directors from APC's Headquarters, nine serving members of the National Assembly from the three parties—three APC, two APGA, and four PDP. Others were Director Generals, one each from the Electoral Institute of Nigeria and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD); one programme manager from CDD, one United Nations Development Programme's consultant; and two researchers from the National Institute for Legislative Studies. Secondary data were sourced from books, relevant articles from journals, party constitutions, party manifestos, party guidelines, and media reports. Content Analysis was used for data generated.



Discussion of Findings

The normative and political implications of party defection

Studies have shown that party defection is a pervasive phenomenon in several countries. It is noticeable both in developed and developing democracies: France and Russia have in the past recorded cases of party defection in their party politics. On the other hand, developing democracies like Japan, Italy, the Philippines, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, South Africa, and Nepal had all experienced party defection (Desposato, 2006; Hicken, 2006). In any case, Nigeria has a relatively high occurrence of party defection among elected political officials as well as party members. In some other democracies, party defection is normally a brief transitional phenomenon that is usually associated with democratisation process, when new political parties are introduced into the political system, or due to an unavoidable political realignment that is usually short-term in nature (Desposato, 2006). Nigeria presents a different scenario. Party defection in Nigeria is apparently continual and successful, with several implications for the party system and democratic consolidation. Evidence has shown that most parties in Nigeria are eager to receive new followers, and political actors are prone to switch for personal ends as well as other political incentives.

Normatively, party defection poses a serious concern for representation, especially when electorates and constituencies use party platforms to decide on who to vote for as well as who represents them. Party defection destroys and undermines the meaning of the party platform and eliminates party accountability (Desposato, 2006). Political parties are the platform connecting electorates and party representatives in a modern representative democracy. A stable and meaningful party platform allows voters to make an optimal choice out of several options and cast their votes appropriately. However, in Nigeria, party defection has violated that basic electoral pact between the electorate and their party representatives. The electorate is shortchanged and betrayed when their representatives decide to switch parties without consulting or seeking their approval.

A respondent expressed himself thus:



What party defection tells the non-politicians or the electorate, and whoever is watching from outside, is that there is no conviction. If you are in one party that claims it is drastically different from another and you are sworn in to that party's ideology, suddenly, you leave and start swearing on a different ideology from the first, which means that anybody looking at you will know that you did not believe in that in the first place. So, it undermines the confidence of those who feel they are in the party because of what it stands for. It really does undermine confidence because it is no longer there. (KII, Member House of Rep, Abuja)

Again, party defection leads to membership in an incompatible ideological party with significant consequences. For instance, legislators find it difficult to push their most favoured agenda in such an environment, eventually frustrating their policy goals. The Nigerian experience presents a situation where party members are suspicious of those who defected to their party. Consequently, political parties become mere conglomerates of awkward squads of politicians who rarely agree on any matter of public importance (Galadima, 2014). Galadima further lamented that it is a common practice in Nigeria to see members of the same party sabotaging the programme of their fellow party members for personal gain. Nigerian political parties are collections of people with extreme divergent principles, representing different shades of interest, coming together as party members to either run the government or be in opposition to the governing political party.

Findings have shown that successful and unrestrained party defection has the tendency, in a multiparty system, to make one party dominate and stay in power for a long time, especially when the movement is from the opposition to the governing party. According to Murphy and Blair (2006), when a party keeps on holding onto power for a while, the value of that democracy might become questionable, and in the event that one group keeps up this hold for a long time, the system cannot be called a democracy. It can be referred to as a hybrid regime, pseudo-democracy, neo-patrimonial state, electoral authoritarian state, etc., where autocratic and democratic norms seem to blend and cohabit. This was the case in Nigeria before the emergence of the APC in 2015 as the governing party. The PDP had maintained dominance over the Nigerian political space from 1999 to 2015. Within this period, the PDP had absolute control of the central and constituent governments as well as the parliaments for 16 years.



Politically, evidence has shown that opposition parties are increasingly weakened as a result of continuous party defection, especially when the direction of movement is from the parties in opposition to the ones in government. For example, Van den Walle and Butler (1999) remarked that African political parties are beleaguered by weak associations, a low degree of institutionalization, and a weak connection to the general public they are representing. Michael A., Chege, H. Nordlund, P. and Rukambe J. (2007:54) summarized the symptoms of weak African parties as follows: They are frail and lack organizational orderliness; they do not adhere to party programmes, rules, and regulations; control is usually placed on a principal personality, and decisions are the prerogative of the party leaders; party members are compelled to give their allegiance to the party leader(s), not to the party's constitution; they are always in "fusion and fission," thereby limiting the life span of the party. The parties are characterized by a lack of financial strength, which is why they cannot retain competent staff to run the affairs of the party; mobilization for support and membership is difficult, usually because of the repressive political environment in which they find themselves or the highhandedness of the governing party; opposition parties in most African countries go into political extinction immediately after an election. They resurface to contest elections during electioneering periods. Political parties in Nigeria are increasingly showing the symptoms identified above. A respondent agreed that:

No matter the strength of any party, human beings contribute to that strength. So, the pillars of the strength of the party are human beings. When you have much defection from another party, the party will be weakened. I think for democracy, we need a strong opposition (KII, Member House of Representatives, Abuja).

Another respondent further contended that:

The first thing you notice is that parties are inherently unstable, and they are organisationally weak because of party defection. It also questions their democratic credentials; if institutions that themselves should be the foundation of democracy are deficient in democratic content, democracy is in trouble (KII, GPBT, UNDP Abuja).

The study revealed that party defection deepens party fragmentation in Nigeria. This finding supports Mathisen and Svasand's (2002:2) position that political parties in Africa are fragmented. In Nigeria, since 1999, most parties that parade as opposition parties are very petty and fragile.



This has, to some extent, strengthened the controlling powers of the ruling party. In most cases, members of these weak opposition parties are former members of the governing party. For instance, the ACCORD and the Democratic People's Party (DPP) can be described as fragments of the PDP and the ANPP, respectively. The ACCORD party was founded by former members of the PDP, though with an independent support base. However, the boundaries between it and the PDP are vague and unclear. The leadership of ACCORD has openly admitted that they work closely with the PDP, not in terms of opposition to the PDP but as an alternative platform. In the event of any differences within the PDP, the party becomes a beneficiary (Liebowitz and Ibrahim, 2013). On the other hand, the DPP is a fragment or breakaway from the ANPP without any specific ideology, rather than looking for electoral opportunity. The Nigerian party system has witnessed an ever-increasing fragmentation of political parties since 1999. In 2011, the total number of registered parties soared to 63. It later declined to 56 and 28, on August 16 and December 6, 2012, respectively, when INEC acted in pursuance of the provision of Section 78 (7)(ii) of the Electoral Act 2010, as amended, which states that any party that fails to present candidate(s) for election should be circumscribed. As a result, those parties that were unable to field candidates were de-registered by INEC. In preparation for the 2019 general election, INEC licensed some additional parties, raising the number of political parties to 91. However, acting upon its powers, INEC deregistered 74 political parties out of 91 on Thursday, February 6, 2020. That left the current number of registered political parties at 18, among which the APC, APGA, and PDP are dominant.

What we have is polarization of the party itself. If you look at the APC today, there are so many factions even within the party, which is a result of those people who came from other parties joining them with different types of ideologies and who have the money to spend and throw around. So, you now discover that there is polarization of ideas and projects, etc., and the party can no longer coordinate itself effectively. You see the chairman of the party saying something, and the publicity secretary is saying something different, contradictory, and even insulting. All this is a result of polarization (KII, Executive Secretary, ACE Abuja).

Successive republics in Nigeria have found it difficult to evolve a resilient opposition party that is able to contend with the ruling party in the manner the APC did before it took over power in



2015. The success of the APC in the 2015 general elections, is partly explainable by the movement of some key politicians from the PDP to the APC. In any case, if the reverse were the case, it would have been pretty difficult for the APC to emerge. However, the current trend of defection is tilted toward the governing APC. In effect, APC is emerging as a dominant party, and in a system where one-party dominants, the party tends to have excessive control over both the executive and the legislature uninterruptedly. Benoit and Laver (2006:231) have shown in their studies how the relative sizes of political parties within the parliament or legislature can aid the dynamics of party defection. Bigger or dominant parties seem to be more attractive to politicians. In Nigeria, politicians gravitate more and more towards dominant parties and, in most cases, towards the governing party. Benoit and Laver concluded that, as the size of the dominant party builds up, it is regularly alluring and, in addition, ready to accept switchers. Parties under this circumstance can only serve as a platform to win elections and form a new government. The tendency for parties to develop under a strict ideological platform is improbable. The opposition parties in Nigeria are increasingly weakened by the number of politicians who defect to the governing APC. A respondent argued that:

To me, I feel the problem we have is really both sides. On the part where they are leaving, defection weakens the opposition, and it is not good for democracy. Then, the place they are going, in most cases, amounts to a mixed multitude; they are neither here nor there, and it creates problems for the party that they moved to (KII, APC's National Director for Campaign, Abuja).

Another respondent also argued that:

Party defection kills the idea of sustainable democracy and the general democratic structure of the political party. Because the moment you don't get what you want, you switch over. Parties are built over time, just like the ANC in South Africa, which has been around for over 100 years. In South Korea, there is a party that is almost 70 years old, and then the Republican Party of the US is above 100 years old. So, they have ardent supporters and know what they believe in. But here, we don't have ardent supporters; we don't know what we believe in. Today, we are in party A; tomorrow, we are in party B; confusion everywhere (KII, APGA's National Director of Publicity, Abuja).



Party defection has equally made it difficult for parties to produce alternative policies. One of the problems of political parties in Nigerian democracy is their failure to increasingly press forward distinct policy alternatives and develop a comprehensive political vision for the electorate. Rather, the emphasis is always on the ability of the opposition party aspirant to run the government better than the incumbent party. This type of party politics is responsible for party instability in Nigeria. For instance, Isakpa (2008) observed that, when the ruling elites or government officials are disappointing the people, it is the obligation of the opposition party to step in, in a trustworthy, strong, understandable, clear, and intelligent way, to offer alternative policy decisions on the best way to manage the difficulties that face the nation and most Nigerians. Opposition political parties in Nigeria are expected to provide the electorate with alternate policies and elucidate their strategy as well as their approach to governance. Put differently, their alternative policy approach for healthcare, education, children, the elderly, poverty, the unemployed, agriculture, among others, should be clearly spelled out and distinct. Regrettably, this has not been the case in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Political parties are integral to democratic systems, playing crucial roles in shaping the political landscape and the governance of a state through representation, leadership development, civic engagement, and accountability. However, the menace of defection has made political parties, particularly within developing democracies, less effective in performing these roles. This study therefore concludes that, normatively, party defection destroys the meaning of party platforms and eliminates party accountability. Evidence reveals that the high rate of party defection weakens opposition parties politically. This is especially true when the movement is from the opposition to the ruling party, as the case in Nigeria suggests. Party defection in Nigeria has made it difficult for parties to produce alternative and distinct policy options for the electorate. In the Nigerian context, party defection is apparently continuous and successful, with gross implications for political parties' stability, democratic consolidation, and state security. As a result, the study recommends the creation of a specialised agency to deal with party matters, while INEC concentrates on election matters. Effective party institutions and discipline are



essential to enforcing compliance. Party-guiding regulations should provide a definite penalty for party indiscipline. Effective peace building infrastructure is needed for post-primary election disputes to be resolved.

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