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Democracy Without Direction: Multi-Party Proliferation, Elite Defection, and the Paradox of Democratic Backsliding in Nigeria

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Abstract: *This study examines the relationship between multi-party politics and democratic consolidation in Nigeria, with emphasis on democratic backsliding between 2023 and 2026. Although the return to civilian rule in 1999 fostered expectations of political stability, institutional development, and accountable governance, Nigeria's democratic process continues to face persistent challenges. Democratic Consolidation Theory, supported by Rational Choice Institutionalism, provides the analytical framework. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study relies on secondary data from textbooks, journal articles, government publications, newspapers, court records, and reports of electoral and civil society organisations. The study explores how electoral irregularities, political defections, weak opposition parties, executive interference, judicial controversies, insecurity, voter suppression, and declining public trust have undermined democratic consolidation. It also argues that the proliferation of political parties and shifting political alignments have contributed to policy inconsistency, legislative conflicts, weak intergovernmental coordination, and ineffective implementation of national development programmes .Findings reveal that while the multi-party system has expanded political participation and representation, institutional weaknesses, elite dominance, ideological inconsistency, party fragmentation, weak enforcement of anti-defection laws, and electoral malpractice continue to weaken democratic governance. The study concludes that strengthening electoral institutions, enforcing anti-defection provisions, promoting internal party democracy, and enhancing civic participation are essential for reversing democratic backsliding and consolidating democracy in Nigeria.*
Keywords: multi-party politics, democratic consolidation, democratic backsliding, political defection, Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's Fourth Republic, which began in 1999, was widely celebrated as the country's longest unbroken period of civilian rule and as a foundation upon which a stable, multi-party democracy could be consolidated. Successive general elections in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023 have taken place within a constitutional framework that guarantees the right to form political parties, contest elections, and alternate power peacefully. On the surface, the existence of numerous registered political parties, nineteen of which were recognised by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) heading into the 2023 elections, would appear to signal a vibrant and competitive democracy. Multi-partyism is, in principle, a cornerstone of democratic governance: it broadens representation, gives voice to diverse interests, and checks the domination of any single political tendency (Omotola, 2010a).

Yet a closer examination of Nigeria's political trajectory between 2023 and 2026 reveals a more troubling picture. Nigerian scholars have long observed that the country's parties are "more of a democratic liability than an asset," lacking the internal democracy, ideological coherence, and institutional discipline that viable parties require (Omotola, 2010a, p. 125). This diagnosis has only sharpened in the current period. Executive offices at the federal and state levels, as well as seats in the National Assembly and State Houses of Assembly, are today distributed across a widening array of parties, sometimes as a direct result of elections but increasingly as a consequence of defection, commonly referred to in Nigerian political discourse as "cross-carpeting" or "decamping" (Ajayi & Ibrahim, 2025). Governors elected on one party's platform, together with senators and members of the House of Representatives, frequently cross to another party mid-term, most often toward the party controlling federal power. The result is a form of multi-partyism that is numerically expansive but programmatically hollow: many parties exist, but few offer a distinct manifesto or development blueprint that survives beyond an election cycle or an individual politician's calculation of advantage.

This study argues that this pattern, the coexistence of numerous parties without corresponding ideological differentiation, is both a symptom and a driver of democratic backsliding in Nigeria. Where governors, senators, and representatives owe their offices to platforms with no binding manifesto, and where mid-term defection is routine and largely unsanctioned, national development plans become vulnerable to constant renegotiation, weak legislative coordination, and short-termism. Using the 2023–2025 Rivers State political crisis and the accompanying national wave of gubernatorial, senatorial, and House of Representatives defections as illustrative cases, the study situates this argument within the broader trends of democratic backsliding observed since the 2023 general elections, including electoral irregularities, executive interference, judicial inconsistency, insecurity, voter suppression, and declining public trust in democratic institutions.

Statement of the Problem

Democratic theory generally holds that multi-party systems, properly institutionalised, deepen representation and improve accountability. In Nigeria, however, the growth in the effective number of parties holding executive and legislative office has coincided with, rather than resolved, a decline in the

quality of democratic governance. Since the 2023 general elections, Nigeria has witnessed a wave of high-profile defections by governors, senators, and members of the House of Representatives, frequently altering the partisan composition of both the executive and the legislature outside the ballot box. One legal-analytical study tracking reported defections found their number rising more than eleven-fold, from fifteen in 2019 to about one hundred and eighty by September 2025, a trend it links directly to the near-total absence of enforceable consequences for executive defectors (IRE Journals, 2025). The Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (2025) similarly documents how successive waves of defection have steadily eroded opposition numbers in the National Assembly, moving the legislature closer to one-party dominance.

This fragmentation raises a central problem: does the proliferation of political parties, in the absence of ideological grounding and effective anti-defection enforcement, strengthen or weaken Nigeria's democratic consolidation? The problem is compounded by three structural gaps repeatedly identified in the literature and in case law: first, weak internal party democracy and the absence of enforceable manifestos (Agbaje, 2011; Omotola, 2009); second, a constitutional anti-defection framework under Sections 68(1)(g) and 109(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution that binds legislators only loosely, and that is entirely silent on governors, deputy governors, and the President (Eu-Opensci, 2025); and third, inconsistent judicial interpretation of what constitutes a valid basis for defection (Abegunde v. Ogun State House of Assembly, 2015). The study contends that the cumulative effect is a governance environment in which continuity of policy and long-term national development planning are perpetually undermined by shifting partisan loyalties among officeholders, even as democratic backsliding proceeds along more familiar fronts such as electoral malpractice, executive overreach, and insecurity.

Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

i. To examine the pattern and extent of political party proliferation and elite defection in Nigeria between 2023 and 2026.
ii. To assess, with reference to specific cases, how the distribution of governors, senators, and House of Representatives members across multiple parties affects ideological coherence and policy direction.
iii. To identify the principal trends of democratic backsliding in Nigeria
iv. To evaluate the implications of party fragmentation, defection, and weak anti-defection enforcement for effective governance and national development planning.
v. To recommend measures for strengthening multi-party politics and reversing democratic backsliding in Nigeria.

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CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Multi-Party Politics and Party Institutionalisation

Multi-party politics refers to a political arrangement in which more than two parties have a realistic opportunity to compete for and win public office. In mature democracies, multi-partyism is typically anchored in identifiable ideological or programmatic cleavages, such as differences over the role of the state in the economy, social policy, or centre-periphery relations, which give voters a genuine basis for choice. Nigerian scholarship has consistently questioned whether the country's parties meet this standard. Omotola (2009) finds that Nigerian parties are not meaningfully differentiated by ideology, but instead function as elite coalitions organised around access to state power, ethnic and regional balancing, and "godfatherism." In a companion study, Omotola (2010a) assesses Nigerian parties against the criteria of viable party institutionalisation, being well institutionalised, internally democratic, coherent, disciplined, and autonomous, and concludes that they fail on nearly every count, rendering them, in his words, more of a democratic liability than an asset to political stability. Agbaje (2011) similarly identifies weak party structure and organisation as "the missing link" in Nigeria's effort at democratic consolidation, arguing that parties which cannot discipline their own members cannot be expected to discipline government. Ibrahim's (1986) earlier analysis of Nigeria's struggle for democracy anticipated this diagnosis, situating weak party institutionalisation within a longer history of elite-driven, rather than programme-driven, political competition.

Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation describes the process by which a democracy becomes so broadly and profoundly legitimate among its citizens that it is unlikely to break down. Rustow (1970) offered one of the earliest dynamic models of this process, distinguishing a preparatory phase of political contestation, a decision phase in which elites accept democratic rules, and a habituation phase in which those rules become routine practice for both elites and citizens. Linz and Stepan (1996) refined this into a multi-dimensional standard: a democracy is consolidated when it is the "only game in town" behaviourally (no significant actor seeks to seize power unconstitutionally), attitudinally (an overwhelming majority believes democratic procedures are the appropriate way to govern), and constitutionally (all actors, governmental and non-governmental, resolve conflict within the bounds of the law), and when this holds across five interlocking arenas: a free civil society, a relatively autonomous political society, the rule of law, a usable state bureaucracy, and an institutionalised economic society. Diamond (1999) adds that consolidation requires deepening the quality, and not merely the durability, of democracy, through accountability, responsiveness, and the rule of law. Schedler (2001) cautions against using "consolidation" loosely, distinguishing minimalist consolidation, which is merely the avoidance of democratic breakdown, from more demanding standards concerned with advancing democratic quality; by this distinction, Nigeria's persistence of civilian rule since 1999 may satisfy a minimalist reading of consolidation while falling well short of a deeper one.

Democratic Backsliding

Democratic backsliding refers to the incremental erosion of democratic institutions, norms, and practices within a formally democratic system, typically achieved through legal or quasi-legal means rather than

outright coups. Bermeo (2016) argues that backsliding is now the most common route by which democracies die, precisely because it proceeds through ostensibly legal channels, executive aggrandisement, strategic manipulation of elections, and the co-optation of courts and legislatures, rather than through dramatic ruptures that are easy to recognise and resist. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) extend this argument, showing how elected leaders can hollow out democratic checks from within by weaponising formally legal powers against rivals, the media, and independent institutions. Applied to Nigeria, Ashindorbe (2018) demonstrates how recurring electoral violence has itself become a mechanism of backsliding, deterring participation and undermining the credibility of electoral outcomes even where elections are formally held on schedule.

Political Defection, "Cross-Carpeting," and Democratic Consolidation

A substantial and growing Nigerian literature treats political defection, colloquially "cross-carpeting" or "decamping," as a distinct threat to democratic consolidation. Nwanegbo, Odigbo, and Nnorom (2014) trace the phenomenon across Nigeria's Fourth Republic from 1999 to 2013 and find that defection weakens the link between electoral mandate and governance by allowing officeholders to change political direction without the consent of the electorate that installed them. Omilusi (2021) examines the ethical and rational dimensions of the practice, arguing that defection has become normalised as a tool of political survival rather than an expression of ideological conviction. Most directly, Ajayi and Ibrahim (2025), drawing on rational choice theory, analyse recent defection case studies in Nigeria and conclude that a lack of party ideology, the pursuit of personal interest, and a weak regulatory framework combine to make cross-carpeting a low-cost, high-reward strategy for Nigerian politicians, with corrosive effects on electoral legitimacy and public trust in democratic institutions. The Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (2025) documents the aggregate institutional consequence of this behaviour within the 10th National Assembly, describing a steady "decimation" of opposition numbers that moves the legislature toward de facto one-party dominance despite Nigeria's formally plural party system.

Party Proliferation and Policy Incoherence

A related strand of the literature links the proliferation of political parties, particularly where such proliferation is not accompanied by ideological differentiation, to weak policy coordination and governance instability. Ibrahim and Ibeanu (2009), examining the 2007 elections, describe a pattern of "direct capture" in which the mechanics of the party and electoral system are turned to elite advantage rather than to the articulation of competing development programmes, a dynamic they argue subverts popular sovereignty even where elections proceed procedurally. Agbaje (2011) contends that this weak organisational foundation is especially consequential in a federal system such as Nigeria's, where governors control substantial fiscal and administrative authority at the state level, and where sustained cooperation between the executive and the legislature, often across shifting party lines, is required to translate development plans into law and budgetary appropriation. Taken together, this literature supports the study's central proposition: that Nigeria's expanding roster of parties has not produced the policy pluralism multi-partyism is meant to deliver, but has instead widened the channels through which elite realignment, rather than programmatic competition, shapes governance outcomes.

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Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Democratic Consolidation Theory, principally as developed by Linz and Stepan (1996), Diamond (1999), and Schedler (2001), as its guiding macro-level framework. The theory holds that democracies move through stages, from transition, to consolidation, and potentially to stagnation, backsliding, or breakdown, depending on the strength of institutions, the behaviour of political elites, and the depth of societal commitment to democratic norms. Consolidation requires more than the holding of elections; it requires the institutionalisation of rules that make democratic outcomes predictable and binding on all political actors, including the party system itself, across each of Linz and Stepan's five arenas of a consolidated democracy, most relevantly here, an autonomous and institutionalised political society.

Applied to Nigeria, the theory helps explain why the existence of many political parties and regular elections has not translated into a consolidated democracy. Read through Linz and Stepan's (1996) behavioural, attitudinal, and constitutional dimensions, Nigeria's party system shows a persistent behavioural gap: elite actors, specifically governors, senators, and representatives, repeatedly circumvent the electoral mandate through defection rather than accepting party competition as the sole legitimate route to office change. Schedler's (2001) distinction between minimalist and deeper consolidation further clarifies the puzzle at the centre of this study: Nigeria has avoided the outright breakdown associated with military rule for over two decades, satisfying a minimalist reading of consolidation, while the persistence of unsanctioned elite defection, weak party discipline, and judicially contested anti-defection enforcement indicates that political society, one of Linz and Stepan's core arenas, remains only weakly institutionalised. Because Democratic Consolidation Theory operates chiefly at the systemic and institutional level, the study supplements it with the rational choice institutionalist perspective advanced by Ajayi and Ibrahim (2025) to explain individual-level defection behaviour. On this complementary view, officeholders are treated as rational actors who weigh the costs and benefits of remaining within their original party against the benefits of aligning with the party controlling federal patronage; where the constitutional and judicial costs of defection are low or inconsistently enforced, as case law discussed in Section 7 demonstrates, rational officeholders will defect whenever the material or political benefits of doing so exceed the (minimal) costs. Combining the two frameworks allows the study to connect macro-level assessments of Nigeria's democratic consolidation to the micro-level, elite-driven decisions, principally defection, that most directly generate policy incoherence and institutional instability at the state and federal levels.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive research design, relying on secondary sources of data and a case-study approach to the analysis of party proliferation and defection. Data sources include academic textbooks and peer-reviewed journal articles on Nigerian politics and comparative democratisation; publications and reports by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the National Assembly, and relevant government agencies; primary legal materials, including the 1999 Constitution (as amended) and reported court judgments on defection disputes; newspaper and online media reports covering the period 2023 to 2026; and reports and position papers issued by election-monitoring and civil society organisations, including the Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre. Data drawn from these sources

were subjected to qualitative content analysis and organised around two illustrative cases, the 2023–2025 Rivers State political crisis and the national wave of gubernatorial and legislative defections since 2023, which are analysed in Section 7 through the combined lens of Democratic Consolidation Theory and rational choice institutionalism.

Analysis: Party Proliferation, Defection, and the Erosion of Policy Direction

The Changing Party Arithmetic of Executive and Legislative Office

A defining feature of Nigeria's political landscape since the 2023 general elections has been the widening distribution of executive and legislative offices across a growing number of political parties, driven substantially by defection rather than by the outcome of fresh electoral contests. As of late 2025, the All Progressives Congress (APC) controlled roughly twenty-seven of Nigeria's thirty-six state governorships, with the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) reduced to a handful of states and single governorships held by the Labour Party (LP), the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP), and Accord (Legit.ng, 2025). By March 2026, tracked party affiliations in the federal House of Representatives showed a similarly fragmented spread beyond the two historically dominant parties, with smaller blocs held by the African Democratic Congress, the NNPP, the Social Democratic Party, the Youth Party, the National Democratic Congress, the Labour Party, and Accord, in addition to APC and PDP majorities (Nigeria Open Data, 2026). Much of this arithmetic reflects post-election defection rather than voter realignment: the PDP, Nigeria's oldest surviving major party and principal opposition force, had by mid-2026 been reduced to control of only two states after successive waves of defection to the APC (Current Affairs Nigeria, 2026).

Instance One: The Rivers State Crisis, 2023–2025

The clearest illustration of how party fragmentation can paralyse governance is the political crisis that engulfed Rivers State from October 2023. A power struggle between Governor Siminalayi Fubara and his political predecessor, Nyesom Wike, over control of the state's political structures split the thirty-two-member State House of Assembly into a twenty-seven-member bloc loyal to Wike-aligned Speaker Martins Amaewhule and a four-member bloc loyal to the governor. The dispute escalated to attempted impeachment proceedings against Fubara, and the Assembly complex was set ablaze amid the unrest (Africa Check, 2025; Punch, 2025). The twenty-seven-member bloc subsequently defected from the PDP to the APC, a move whose legality was repeatedly contested in court; as late as April 2026, lawyers for one of the affected lawmakers, Kingsley Chinda, argued before the Assembly that the defection was "defective and therefore null and void" under Section 68 of the Constitution, since the criterion established by the Supreme Court in Abegunde v. Ogun State House of Assembly (2015) 8 NWLR (Pt. 1461) 314, that a lawful defection requires proof of an internal crisis rendering the original party unable to function, had not been met (Daily Post, 2026).

The political impasse halted the passage of the state budget and brought state governance functions to a standstill (Africa Check, 2025). On 18 March 2025, President Bola Tinubu invoked Section 305 of the 1999 Constitution to declare a state of emergency in Rivers State, suspending Governor Fubara, Deputy Governor Ngozi Nma Odu, and the entire State House of Assembly, and installing a sole administrator for

an initial six-month period (Punch, 2025; Leadership, 2025). The National Assembly endorsed the declaration (National Assembly Task Force, 2025). Emergency rule was lifted on 18 September 2025 following a reconciliation brokered by the presidency, restoring the suspended officials to office (Punch, 2025). The episode is instructive on several fronts at once: it shows how unresolved intra-legislature defection can produce a genuine paralysis of governance at the state level; how that paralysis can, in turn, be used to justify an extraordinary suspension of an elected government, an exercise of executive power that itself raises separate democratic-backsliding concerns; and how the courts, more than two years after the underlying defection, remained unable to deliver a settled ruling on its validity, illustrating the judicial inconsistency identified in the literature (Abegunde v. Ogun State House of Assembly, 2015; Eu-Opensci, 2025).

Instance Two: The 2024–2025 Wave of Governor- and Legislator-Led Defections

Beyond Rivers State, the period from 2024 to 2026 saw a broader wave of defection toward the ruling party. In April 2025, Delta State Governor Sheriff Oborevwori and the entire PDP structure in the state defected to the APC, citing a desire for "alignment with the centre" (Aljazirah News, 2026). In January 2025, Senator Ned Nwoko defected from the PDP to the APC, citing the need for "stronger national connections" (Aljazirah News, 2026). In Kebbi State, three senators and several members of the House of Representatives defected to the APC in 2024, a pattern in which a governor's move typically triggers alignment across the wider state political structure (Aljazirah News, 2026). At the National Assembly, the PDP separately sought, in 2025, to have the seats of four lawmakers, Fadahunsi, Fadeyi, Olusanya, and Ajilesoro, declared vacant after their defection to the APC, directing its suit at the Senate President and the Speaker for their alleged failure to enforce Section 68(1)(g) of the Constitution (Gazette NGR, 2025). These episodes sit within a longer pattern of largely unpunished executive defection. Governor Aminu Tambuwal of Sokoto State defected from the APC to the PDP in 2018, months before the 2019 elections, and completed his term without legal challenge to his tenure. Governor David Umahi of Ebonyi State defected from the PDP to the APC in November 2020; a Federal High Court initially declared his seat vacant in PDP v. Umahi & Ors (2022), but the Court of Appeal overruled that decision, holding that the Constitution does not mandate the removal of a governor upon defection. Governor Bello Matawalle of Zamfara State defected from the PDP to the APC in 2021 and likewise faced no legal sanction (Eu-Opensci, 2025). The constitutional root of this asymmetry lies in Sections 68 and 109, which prescribe loss of seat for legislators who defect without a qualifying division in their party, but say nothing about the President, Vice-President, governors, or deputy governors, a gap the courts affirmed in Attorney-General of the Federation v. Atiku Abubakar in relation to the 2007 defection of then Vice-President Atiku Abubakar (The Nation, 2026). One legal-analytical review of these patterns concludes that Nigeria's constitutional silence on executive defection has "emboldened opportunistic political migration" and finds reported defections rising from fifteen in 2019 to roughly one hundred and eighty by September 2025 (Eu-Opensci, 2025; IRE Journals, 2025).

What the Instances Show: Three Governance Consequences

Read together, these cases point to three specific governance consequences of party proliferation without ideological anchoring. First, policy inconsistency: development priorities negotiated between an executive and a legislature of a particular party composition are vulnerable to renegotiation whenever the underlying

party balance shifts through defection rather than election, as the halted budget process in Rivers State illustrates concretely rather than hypothetically (Africa Check, 2025). Second, legislative and judicial friction: with lawmakers and courts repeatedly contesting the legal basis of specific defections, sometimes years after the fact, as in the Chinda case, legislative coalitions around specific bills, including appropriation legislation, become harder to build and more vulnerable to challenge (Daily Post, 2026). Third, weak vertical and horizontal coordination: Nigeria's federal structure already requires cooperation between the federal government, thirty-six states, and the National Assembly to implement national development plans; this coordination is further complicated when governors, state assemblies, and federal lawmakers representing the same state or region belong to different, and sometimes rival, political parties with no shared manifesto commitments binding them to a common development agenda, and when, as in Rivers State, unresolved party conflict can itself trigger direct federal suspension of an elected state government (Punch, 2025).

Trends of Democratic Backsliding in Nigeria, 2023–2026

Electoral Irregularities

The 2023 general elections, and the state and off-cycle elections that have followed, continued to raise concerns about the transparency of results collation and the reliability of technology deployed for accreditation and results transmission. Disputes over specific state outcomes, including protracted contests in states such as Kebbi, and litigation challenging results in others, sustained public scepticism about the credibility of electoral outcomes even where results were ultimately upheld by tribunals and courts (Nigerian Queries, 2026).

Political Defections and Weak Opposition

As detailed in Section 7, the period since 2023 has been marked by a sustained wave of defections by governors, senators, and House of Representatives members, overwhelmingly in the direction of the ruling party, substantially narrowing the effective strength of the opposition and moving the legislature toward what the Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (2025) describes as one-party dominance.

Executive Interference and Judicial Controversies

The suspension of Rivers State's elected government under Section 305 of the Constitution in March 2025 is the starkest instance of executive interference with an elected sub-national government in this period, and it remains contested precisely because it followed, rather than resolved, an underlying dispute over the legality of legislative defections that the courts had not conclusively settled (Punch, 2025; Daily Post, 2026). More broadly, inconsistent judicial outcomes across defection cases, compare the Court of Appeal's reversal of the trial court in PDP v. Umahi & Ors (2022) with the Supreme Court's stricter evidentiary standard in Abegunde v. Ogun State House of Assembly (2015), have fed public concern about the predictability of judicial adjudication in politically sensitive matters.

Insecurity and Voter Suppression

Insecurity, including banditry, kidnapping, and communal violence in parts of the North West, North Central, and South East, has continued to constrain voter turnout and candidate campaigning in affected

areas. Ashindorbe (2018) demonstrates that electoral violence in Nigeria functions not merely as a by-product of political competition but as a deliberate tool for suppressing turnout and shaping outcomes in contested constituencies, a dynamic that has persisted into the period under review.

Declining Public Trust in Democratic Institutions

The steady erosion of opposition strength documented by the Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (2025), combined with contested defections and the Rivers State emergency, has coincided with continued public scepticism about INEC, the National Assembly, and political parties generally, even as normative support for democracy as a system of government remains comparatively resilient. This gap, continued commitment to democracy alongside declining trust in the institutions meant to deliver it, is precisely the pattern that Bermeo (2016) identifies as characteristic of gradual, legally-clothed democratic backsliding.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study suggest that Nigeria's experience with multi-party politics between 2023 and 2026 is characterised by a paradox that the cases in Section 7 make concrete rather than abstract. The country has more electorally active political parties than at almost any point since 1999, a fact that, on its face, should widen representation and deepen democratic choice (Omotola, 2010a). Yet this proliferation has coincided with several converging trends, defection-driven realignment of governors and legislators (documented in the Delta, Kebbi, and National Assembly cases), weak internal party democracy (Agbaje, 2011), inconsistent judicial enforcement of anti-defection provisions (Abegunde, 2015; PDP v. Umahi & Ors, 2022), and, in the extreme case of Rivers State, the direct federal suspension of an elected government, that together constitute meaningful democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

The dynamic explored in this study, the growing dispersal of governors, senators, and House of Representatives members across multiple parties without corresponding ideological differentiation, adds a distinct governance dimension to this backsliding. Consistent with Ajayi and Ibrahim's (2025) rational choice account, the evidence suggests that party proliferation in Nigeria functions less as a mechanism for expanding voter choice and more as a mechanism for redistributing political patronage among elites, largely detached from the manifestos on which officeholders were originally elected. The constitutional silence on executive defection, combined with weak internal party institutionalisation, allows this redistribution to occur with minimal legal or electoral consequence, as the unpunished defections of Tambuwal, Umahi, and Matawalle illustrate, further weakening the link between electoral outcomes and subsequent governance. Read through Linz and Stepan's (1996) arenas, this points specifically to the weak institutionalisation of Nigeria's "political society," the arena in which parties, elections, and legislatures are meant to aggregate and discipline competing interests. The result, consistent with Democratic Consolidation Theory, is a democracy that continues to hold elections and sustain formal multi-party competition while struggling to consolidate the institutional predictability, policy continuity, and elite accountability that genuine consolidation, in Schedler's (2001) deeper sense, requires.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the relationship between multi-party politics and democratic consolidation in Nigeria, with particular attention to trends of democratic backsliding between 2023 and 2026. It has shown, through the cases of the Rivers State political crisis and the national wave of gubernatorial and legislative defections, that the proliferation of political parties in Nigeria, while formally consistent with democratic pluralism, has not been accompanied by the ideological differentiation or programmatic commitment needed to give voters a genuine basis for policy choice, or to give elected officials a durable stake in the platforms on which they were elected. The growing distribution of governors, senators, and House of Representatives members across an increasing number of parties, driven substantially by largely unsanctioned defection rather than by fresh electoral mandates, has contributed to policy inconsistency, legislative and judicial friction, and weak coordination between the federal government, the states, and the National Assembly, thereby complicating the pursuit of a coherent, sustained national development direction. Combined with electoral irregularities, executive interference exemplified by the Rivers State emergency, judicial inconsistency, insecurity, voter suppression, and declining public trust in democratic institutions, this fragmentation represents a significant, and comparatively underexamined, dimension of Nigeria's democratic backsliding since 2023. Nigeria's democracy, more than two decades after the return to civilian rule, therefore satisfies only a minimalist standard of consolidation, in Schedler's (2001) terms, the avoidance of outright breakdown, while remaining fragile and susceptible to regression on the deeper, institutional measures that Linz and Stepan (1996) and Diamond (1999) associate with genuine democratic consolidation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

i. Extend anti-defection provisions to executive officeholders: The National Assembly should consider constitutional amendment to Sections 68, 109, and related provisions to close the gap, affirmed in cases such as Attorney-General of the Federation v. Atiku Abubakar and PDP v. Umahi & Ors, that currently exempts the President, Vice-President, governors, and deputy governors from any consequence for defection.
ii. Clarify and consistently enforce the statutory test for lawful defection: Courts and the National Assembly should apply the Supreme Court's Abegunde (2015) standard, requiring demonstrable division within the original party, consistently and promptly, rather than allowing years-long uncertainty of the kind seen in the Rivers State defection dispute.
iii. Strengthen internal party democracy: INEC guidelines and party constitutions should require clearer manifestos and more transparent, democratic candidate-selection and leadership-succession processes, reducing the incentives for elite-driven defection identified by Agbaje (2011) and Omotola (2009).
iv. Safeguard against the use of emergency powers as a substitute for political mediation: Given the precedent set in Rivers State, clearer constitutional guidance and legislative oversight should govern the invocation of Section 305 in cases of intra-state political conflict, to prevent emergency

suspension of elected governments from becoming a routine response to party-driven legislative paralysis.

v. Strengthen institutional coordination for national development planning: Mechanisms for federal-state-legislative coordination should be institutionalised in ways that are less dependent on the shifting party composition of any given administration or assembly.

vi. Intensify civic education and electoral reform: Civil society organisations, the media, and INEC should strengthen public demand for programmatic party competition, improve the transparency of results collation, and address the insecurity that Ashindorbe (2018) identifies as a driver of voter suppression.

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