

## RATIONAL CHOICE ANALYSIS AND POLITICAL PARTY SWITCHING IN NIGERIAN POLITICS: BEYOND IDEOLOGICAL ALLEGIANCE

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### Abstrak

Studi ini mengkaji peran Teori Pilihan Rasional (RCT) dalam memahami fenomena pergantian partai yang sering terjadi di kalangan politisi Nigeria. Studi ini mengeksplorasi motivasi di balik pergantian partai tersebut, mengevaluasi dampaknya terhadap stabilitas politik, tata kelola, dan konsolidasi demokrasi, serta mengidentifikasi rekomendasi kebijakan untuk memperkuat struktur partai politik dan mengurangi pergantian partai yang bersifat oportunistik. Berbasis pada sumber informasi sekunder dan menggunakan RCT sebagai kerangka teoritis, studi ini berargumen bahwa politisi Nigeria sering melakukan perpindahan partai berdasarkan kepentingan pribadi yang dihitung, mencari keuntungan elektoral, manfaat finansial, dan kelangsungan politik daripada realignment ideologis. Studi ini juga mengungkapkan bahwa perpindahan partai yang sering terjadi telah berkontribusi pada ketidakstabilan politik, melemahkan tata kelola, dan menghambat perkembangan demokrasi dengan memicu ketidakkonsistenan kebijakan, merusak kepercayaan institusional, dan mendorong apatisisme pemilih. Untuk mengatasi tantangan ini, studi ini mengusulkan reformasi kebijakan, termasuk penegakan yang lebih ketat terhadap undang-undang anti-defection, demokrasi internal partai, reorientasi ideologis, regulasi keuangan dalam politik partai, dan peningkatan pendidikan kewarganegaraan. Temuan ini menyoroti kebutuhan akan reformasi sistemik untuk mempromosikan sistem politik yang lebih stabil dan didorong oleh ideologi, yang memperkuat konsolidasi demokrasi di Nigeria.

**Kata kunci:** *Partai politik, Perpindahan, Defection, Pilihan rasional, Politisi, Nigeria*

### Abstract

The study examines the role of Rational Choice Theory (RCT) in understanding the frequent party switching among Nigerian politicians. It explores the motivations behind these defections, assesses their impact on political stability, governance, and democratic consolidation, and identifies policy recommendations for strengthening political party structures and reducing opportunistic defections. Relying on secondary sources of information and using RCT as a theoretical framework, the study argues that Nigerian politicians often engage in defections based on calculated self-interest, seeking electoral

Harriet Omokiniovo Efanodor-Obeten,  
Mohammed Lawal Itakpe

advantage, financial benefits, and political survival rather than ideological realignment. The study further reveals that frequent party defections have contributed to political instability, weakened governance, and slowed democratic development by fostering policy inconsistency, undermining institutional trust, and encouraging voter apathy. To address these challenges, the study proposes policy reforms, including stricter enforcement of anti-defection laws, internal party democracy, ideological reorientation, financial regulation of party politics, and enhanced civic education. The findings highlight the need for systemic reforms to promote a more stable, ideology-driven political system that enhances democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** *Political party, Switching, Defection, Rational choice, Politicians, Nigeria*

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## Introduction

Political party switching in Nigeria has become a systemic feature of the nation's democracy, undermining party institutionalization and democratic accountability. Elected officials frequently abandon their original parties-often immediately after securing mandates-to align with rival platforms. Thus, Political party defections have become a common occurrence in Nigeria's democratic landscape, significantly shaping political stability and governance. Politicians frequently switch parties, often citing ideological differences, internal conflicts, or strategic political advantages.

In advanced democracies, party defections is typically a rare event, one driven by a clash of ideas, conscience, or a principled stance on governance. Politicians in developed democracies often defect because of they disagree with their political party's policy direction of seek a better platform to serve their constituents based on deeply held ideological beliefs (Asabor, 2025). But in Nigeria, defection has become a career strategy, an open market for the highest bidder, and a shameful display of selfish ambition. The principles of party loyalty, ideological commitment, or even the dignity of public service have been eroded in Nigerian politics.

Nigeria's political history shows that party defections have played a significant role in determining electoral outcomes and power structures. The return of democratic rule in the Fourth Republic was enthusiastically welcomed in 1999. However, the situation so far in Nigeria support the view point that liberal democratic ethos as prescribed by globalization failed to take root in Nigeria's fourth republic political process. (Efanodor, 2011). The country has witnessed high-profile defections, especially before major elections in the fourth republic, as politicians seek better chances of winning. These defections are

believed to be largely driven by personal interests rather than genuine ideological shifts. According to Omotola (2009:615), It is argued that despite all pretences to the contrary through political parties manifestoes, as much as the superficial classifications as the “left” and “right”, “progressive” and “conservative” parties, Nigerian parties seem to be bereft of clear ideological commitments. The study therefore draws upon the Rational Choice Theory (RCT) to understand the motivations behind party defections among Nigerian politicians.

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) provides a useful framework for analyzing this phenomenon, as it suggests that individuals make political decisions based on cost-benefit analyses to maximize their personal and political gains (Downs, 1957). Rational Choice Theory, rooted in economic and political science, assumes that individuals act rationally to achieve goals that provide them with the highest possible benefits while minimizing costs (Olson, 1965). In the context of Nigerian politics, this theory helps to shed light on why politicians frequently switch parties often in pursuit of personal advantages such as electoral success, access to resources, and political survival.

Existing research such as Godwin et al. (2024) used the RCT to provide theoretical insight on how politicians use political parties to advance their interest. Olatunji et al. (2024) used the RCT in explaining political ideology and electoral outcomes in Nigerian politics. While Moses et al. (2023) used the RCT to explain party defections and democratic consolidation in Nasarawa state, Nigeria. Similarly, Amadu (2023) used the power-based approach to explain how defections occurs and their effect on the democratic system. Agan, et al. (2020) reviewed some cases of defection prior to the 2019 general elections and its effect on such practices on democratic consolidation in Nigeria. However, there is the need to shed more light on understanding the frequent defections amongst Nigerian politician through the Len of the rational choice theory. The study therefore critically uses the assumptions of RCT to explain how self-interest shapes Nigeria’s political landscape beyond ideological allegiance. Hereby provides valuable insights into the strategic calculations of politicians. The study contributes to existing literature by linking RCT to political behavior in Nigeria and offering recommendations on how to strengthen political institutions to reduce opportunistic defections.

The study utilised secondary sources of information which involve documentary analysis of relevant materials such as party manifestos, political speeches, electoral reports, media coverage, and previous scholarly works on Nigerian politics. Information from the secondary sources was analysed using

Harriet Omokiniovo Efanodor-Obeten,  
Mohammed Lawal Itakpe

thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes relating to rational choice motivations, such as opportunism, political survival, and resource maximization in Nigerian politics.

### **Rational Choice Theory and its Basic Assumptions: Theoretical Analysis**

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is a framework that explains how individuals make decisions by weighing costs and benefits to maximize personal advantage. Rational choice theory was developed by a small number of economists and political scientists working in a handful of American universities in the 1960s. Having initially been confined to the pages of economics journals; rational choice entered the political science mainstream in the early 1980s (Hindmoor, 2010). The theory was popularized by economists and political scientists, with Anthony Downs (1957) being one of its key proponents in political science through his work *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. However, the broader foundations of the theory can be traced back to classical economic theorists such as Adam Smith and later developed in social sciences by scholars like Mancur Olson (1965) and Gary Becker (1976). RCT has since been widely applied in various disciplines, including political science, sociology, and economics, to explain human behavior in decision-making processes.

At its core, Rational Choice Theory assumes that individuals are rational actors who make decisions based on self-interest. This means that when faced with multiple choices, individuals evaluate available options and select the one that offers the greatest benefit while minimizing costs. In political contexts, this theory explains why politicians, voters, and policymakers make specific choices, often prioritizing personal or strategic advantages over ideological commitments. For example, politicians may defect from one party to another if they believe it will increase their chances of electoral success, access to resources, or influence within the political system.

One of the basic assumptions of Rational Choice Theory is that individuals have preferences that are ordered and consistent. This means that when making decisions, a person ranks available options based on their perceived utility and selects the most beneficial one. In Nigerian politics, this assumption helps explain why politicians frequently switch parties, as they perceive the benefits of defection such as better political opportunities, reduced opposition, or increased financial rewards as outweighing the costs of loyalty. The absence of strong ideological party structures further reinforces this behavior, as political affiliation is often seen as a means to an end rather than a commitment to shared principles.

Another fundamental assumption of RCT is that individuals act with full information or, at the very least, make decisions based on available information. Politicians in Nigeria, for instance, analyze political trends, public sentiment, and power dynamics before defecting. They assess factors such as the likelihood of winning elections, potential rewards from the new party, and the risks of remaining in their current political alignment. While complete information is not always accessible, RCT suggests that individuals make the best possible decisions based on what they know at a given time.

RCT assumes that individuals are utility maximizers, meaning they always seek to maximize their benefits in every decision. In the Nigerian political space, this explains why defections often occur when an opposition party gains popularity or when internal party conflicts threaten a politician's career. Political actors strategically switch parties to align with those in power or to gain favor with influential figures who can advance their interests. By applying these assumptions, Rational Choice Theory provides a clear framework for understanding the rational motivations behind frequent party defections among Nigerian politicians.

### **Political Party Defection in Nigerian Politics**

Party defection has become a defining characteristic of Nigeria's political landscape in the Fourth Republic, significantly influencing electoral outcomes, governance, and political stability. Party defection or switching refers to the act of politicians abandoning their political party for another, often for strategic or personal benefits. According to Aleyomi (2013) political party defection or party switching occurs due to myriads of reasons as resulting from personality clash, power tussles, crisis or division within a given party, disagreement on party's position on issues, realization of one's personal political ambition, party leaders reneging on agreed issues of the political party probably on power sharing formula and divergent views on the operations of a political party's philosophy and ideology. The reality of political life across political systems developed or developing, is the fact that there are multiple political options from which inevitably, choice(s) must be made. However, at such critical crossroads, ideology provides a ready guide for appropriate actions (Omotola 2009). However, Nigerian political parties lack deep-rooted ideological foundation hence Nigerian politician often prioritize personal survival over ideological commitments. In Nigeria's fourth republic, defections are frequent, particularly before major elections, as politicians seek better political opportunities. This has led to a political culture where party switching is seen as a norm rather than an exception.

Harriet Omokiniovo Efanodor-Obeten,  
Mohammed Lawal Itakpe

Historically, party defection in Nigeria can be traced back to the First Republic (1960-1966), when politicians switched allegiances to align with dominant regional parties. However, the phenomenon became more pronounced in the Fourth Republic (1999-present), particularly with the defections surrounding the 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections. For instance, In 2014, high-profile PDP figures including governors like Rotimi Amaechi (Rivers), Murtala Nyako (Adamawa), Aliyu Wamakko (Sokoto), and Rabiu Kwankwaso (Kano) defected to the APC, weakening PDP ahead of the 2015 elections. This mass "gale of defections," alongside senators and others, contributed to APC's historic win under Muhammadu Buhari, ending PDP's 16-year rule (Ajakaye, R. (2014). Similarly, in 2018, and 2021 ahead of the elections, numerous defections occurred as politicians sought strategic alliances to increase their electoral chances. For instance, according to Adeyemi (2025) senator Aminu Timbuwal, former governor of Sokoto state who defected from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) to the All Progressives Congress (APC) before the 2015 general elections, returned to the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in 2018. In November 2020, senator Dave Umahi during his second term as governor of Ebonyi state, switched from People's Democratic Party (PDP) to the All Progressives Congress (APC). Also, in May 2021, the former governor of cross river state, sir Ben Ayade switched from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) to the All Progressives Congress (APC). Similarly, in June 2021, Alhaji Bello Matawalle former governor of Zamfare state, switched from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) to the All Progressives Congress (APC), a move motivated by political unrest in the state and a desire to form a strategic alliance (Adeyemi, 2025).

One of the primary reasons for party defections in Nigeria is the weak institutionalization of political parties. Nigerian political parties have primarily emerged along ethnic and regional lines, rather than being grounded in ideological principles. This fragile ideological foundation has fueled rampant political defections, with party affiliation driven more by personal ambition than by collective ideological convictions. Unlike in Western democracies, where parties are structured around clear policies and principles, Nigerian parties often lack distinct ideological differences. This makes party loyalty fluid, as politicians view parties as mere platforms for attaining power rather than vehicles for implementing long-term political visions.

Another factor fueling defections is the pursuit of political survival and electoral advantage. Politicians operate with the understanding that access to power, resources, and legal immunity lies within the orbit of dominant political parties (Gbolahan, et al 2025). Since Nigeria operates a winner-takes-all political

system, being in the opposition often means limited access to political and economic benefits. As a result, politicians frequently move toward parties that control government structures to remain relevant in national and state politics.

Defections are also driven by the need for legal and political protection. In Nigeria, the selective prosecution of corruption charges often corresponds with political alignment. Consequently, maintaining proximity to power becomes a survival imperative (Gbolahan, et al 2025). Also, legal and constitutional loopholes have also contributed to the prevalence of defections in Nigeria. While Section 68(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution prohibits lawmakers from defecting unless their party is experiencing a division, enforcement has been weak and inconsistent (Ogundiya, 2011). Many defections occur under vague justifications, and in most cases, defectors face no legal consequences. The selective application of this law by the judiciary and political actors further emboldens defections, as politicians exploit legal ambiguities to justify their movements.

### **Rational Choice Theory (RCT) and Frequent Party Switching: Beyond Ideological Allegiance.**

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) provides a useful framework for understanding the frequent party defections among Nigerian politicians. The theory, which originated in economics and was later applied to political science by scholars such as Anthony Downs (1957), assumes that individuals make decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis to maximize personal advantage. In the Nigerian political context, party defections are often calculated moves rather than spontaneous decisions. For example, the recent defections of top Delta state politicians which includes the Governor Oborevwo, and his predecessor Dr. Ifeanyi Okowa are glaring examples of opportunistic culture. Their movement to a party they once demonized is not rooted in any philosophical or ideological reawakening. It is a clearcut survival move in anticipation for federal patronage. Defection in Nigeria is about power, access to state resources, and political protection. These defections are not randomized. They are well calculated maneuvers timed around elections, tribunal judgements or impending probes. It is not about the people. It is about the politician. Okowa's defection for instance, come just as the PDP continuous to reel from internal crisis and wanning relevance at the national level. Joining the ruling party is an insurance policy, not a new beginning in governance philosophy even more ironic is the case of Governor Oborevwo, Okowa's political godson, he now has jumped ship (Asabor, 2025).

Harriet Omokiniovo Efanodor-Obeten,  
Mohammed Lawal Itakpe

One of the fundamental assumptions of RCT is that individuals act rationally to maximize utility. Nigerian politicians apply this principle by defecting to parties where they stand a better chance of winning elections or securing political appointments. Their defections were strategic, as aligning with the emerging dominant party increased their chances of remaining relevant in the political space. Thus, the 2014 gate of defections remains one of the most defining moments in Nigeria's political journey. It started with five People's Democratic Party governors Aliyu Wamakko (Sokoto) Rabiw Kwankwaso (Kano state) Murtala Nyako (Adamawa state) Rotimi Amaechi (River's state) and Abdulfalah Ahmed (Kwara state) jumping the ship to the then opposition APC. They claim PDP had derailed and become undemocratic. Many Nigerians believed them at the first time, thinking they were indeed men of conscience. But what followed was a familiar pattern, appointments, contracts and political protection (Asabor, 2025).

Similarly, in another classic episode according to Asabor (2025) the then senate president, Bukola Saraki, defected back to the PDP in 2018 after falling out with the then President Buhari. He cited democratic suppression and lack of internal democracy and more about shielding himself from the political witch hunt that had begun following his emergence as senate president against the wishes of the APC leadership. Yahaya Bello, the former governor of Kogi state, though not a defector himself, has also benefited from the culture of sycophancy where loyalty is not ideology but to whoever holds the power baton. Politicians like Femi-Kayode and Musliu Obanikoro, who were once virulent critics of the APC, are now proud card-carrying members.

RCT also assumes that individuals make decisions based on available information. Politicians in Nigeria often analyze political trends, public sentiment, and the internal dynamics of their parties before defecting. For example, prior to the 2019 general elections, a significant number of lawmakers 27 senators and 57 members of the House of Representatives defected from the parties on which they were elected. This trend is not limited to legislators; governors and other high-ranking officials have also switched parties, often influencing the political landscape in their states and at the national level. Thus, defection is not necessarily an emotional or ideological decision but rather a calculated strategy based on available political intelligence. If a party is experiencing internal crises or has a low probability of winning elections, politicians see defection as a rational move to avoid political extinction. For instance, Senator Ned Nwoko, representing Delta North Senatorial district of Delta state, switched from PDP to APC in January 2025. The senator believe that the APC would provide a better platform for him to fulfil his campaign promises

while citing internal party marginalization as well as irreconcilable factions within the PDP as the motivation for his defection.

Another key aspect of RCT is that actors will choose the option that minimizes costs while maximizing benefits. In Nigeria, being in the ruling party often comes with access to state resources, patronage networks, and political protection. In 2025 Nigerian politics, access to state resources and patronage in the ruling All Progressive Party drove high profile defections, offered defections lucrative perks including federal appointments, contracts, and protection from probes. Governors and the presidency prioritized enticing opposition figures with "juicy offers" over loyalists, reinforcing opportunism (Waziri 2025). Opposition parties, on the other hand, often struggle with limited funding and access to power, relying on opaque elite donations amid monetized politics, which weakened their structures. PDP and Labour Party saw mass exits to APC due to "financial starvation" and lack of access to power, exemplified by fragile alliances unraveling without state backing (Agbor 2025). This behavior was evident in 2018 when several politicians defected from the APC back to the PDP, realizing that the ruling party was losing its grip ahead of the 2019 elections. Also, in preparation for the 2027 elections, this dynamic fueled a "gale of defections," eroding opposition viability ahead of 2027, for instance, Governor sheriff Oborevweri of Delta State has defected to the APC with a number of key Delta state politicians including Dr. Okowa his predecessor as a strategic plan to secure political interest. With the exit of Delta state, the former ruling party PDP now control only ten states trailing the APC which now has a massive twenty-three state. The Labour Party (LP), the New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP) and All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) have one state each (Asabor, 2025).

Moreover, RCT explains why defections are more prevalent in Nigeria compared to more institutionalized democracies. Nigerian political parties are generally weak in terms of ideology and internal democracy, making party loyalty secondary to individual ambition (Ogundiya, 2011). Unlike in Western democracies where party platforms are rooted in clear ideological principles, Nigerian politicians view parties as mere platforms for contesting elections. This fluidity allows them to switch parties easily whenever a more beneficial opportunity arises. Compare this to the political behaviour in the United Kingdom or the United States. When British MPS like Anna Soubry and Chuka Umunna left the conservative and labour parties respectively to form the independent group, it was due to irreconcilable policy disagreement over Brexit. In the United States, Bernie Sanders is known for his progressive ideology, running as an independent candidate while digging with Democratic for

Harriet Omokiniovo Efanodor-Obeten,  
Mohammed Lawal Itakpe

strategic reasons yet remaining firmly rooted in his social democratic values (Asabor 2025).

The frequent defections also highlight the absence of strong legal deterrents against party switching. Although the Nigerian constitution places some restrictions on defections, enforcement has been inconsistent, allowing politicians to act in self-interest without significant consequences (Ojo, 2019). Under RCT, this lack of strong institutional deterrents makes defection a low-cost, high-reward decision. Politicians know that they can defect with minimal repercussions, making the act more attractive when political dynamics shift.

Thus, from the above, the Rational Choice Theory effectively explains the motivations behind frequent party defections among Nigerian politicians. They pursue self-interest through calculated decisions that balance risks and gains, aiming to boost their electoral prospects and career longevity. As long as political actors perceive defection as a rational strategy with high rewards and low risks, party switching will continue to be a defining feature of Nigerian politics.

### **Consequences of Political Party Defections on Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria**

Party defections in Nigeria have had significant consequences on democratic consolidation. The frequent movement of politicians from one party to another has created instability in the political system, often leading to shifts in power dynamics that disrupt governance. Political parties become tools for personal ambition rather than platforms for national development, undermining the effectiveness of democracy.

One of the major impacts of party defections is the political instability it causes. When high-profile politicians switch parties, it often leads to realignments that disrupt government operations, legislative activities, and electoral processes (Ojo, 2019). For instance, mass defections before major elections have, in some cases, led to the collapse of ruling parties or the loss of parliamentary majorities. This instability affects decision-making and governance, as elected officials spend more time strategizing for political survival rather than focusing on policy implementation and national development.

Furthermore, party defections weaken political party structures by promoting a culture of opportunism rather than ideological commitment. In advanced democracies, parties are built on clear ideologies that guide governance and policy choices. However, in Nigeria, defections occur primarily

for strategic political benefits rather than ideological shifts (Ogundiya, 2011). This weakens political parties by reducing their credibility and making them mere vehicles for electoral success rather than institutions for democratic development. As a result, voters become disillusioned with the political process, seeing politicians as self-serving individuals rather than representatives of the people.

The frequent defections by Nigerian politicians present major obstacles to democratic consolidation. The absence of internal democracy within parties intensifies political instability, eroding the fundamental tenets of democratic governance. When defections occur frequently, it undermines the credibility of elections and governance, as parties lose their identities and become platforms for personal gain. This unpredictability of party affiliations breeds voter cynicism, lowers turnout, and diminishes participation as citizens perceive shifts without ideological basis.

In addition, party defections contribute to electoral manipulation and the monetization of politics. This practice undermines fair competition and weakens opposition parties, creating an uneven playing field in elections. When defectors use state influence to gain an advantage, it distorts democracy and promotes corruption, as political loyalty becomes a commodity that can be bought and sold. This further erodes trust in democratic institutions and makes political participation seem meaningless to ordinary citizens.

To address these issues, there is a need for stronger legal frameworks to regulate defections, as well as reforms to strengthen political party structures and ideological commitments. Strict enforcement of anti-defection laws, internal party democracy, and the promotion of issue-based politics could help curb the negative impacts of defections (Ojo, 2019). Without these reforms, party defections will continue to destabilize Nigeria's political system, weaken governance, and hinder democratic consolidation. Building a stable and ideology-driven political system is essential for long-term national development and democratic progress.

### **Strengthening Political Party Structures and Reducing Opportunistic Defections in Nigeria Politics: Policy Recommendations.**

Strengthening political party structures and reducing opportunistic defections in Nigeria require comprehensive legal, institutional, and political reforms. Addressing this issue requires a combination of legislative measures, internal party reforms, and civic engagement strategies to promote political

Harriet Omokiniovo Efanodor-Obeten,  
Mohammed Lawal Itakpe

accountability and discourage defections driven by self-interest rather than ideology.

For democracy to be consolidated in the country, there is need for change in the value orientation of the political elite. The ideological bases of our political parties that facilitate political vagrancy must be altered (Adeosun 2014). According to Omotola (2009) the starting point would be to revisit the ideological framework/foundations of Nigerian parties. Stronger party discipline measures should also be enforced within political parties. Parties should establish internal regulations that impose sanctions on members who defect without just cause. These sanctions could include restrictions on contesting for political office under another party's platform within a specified period (Ojo, 2019). Such measures would discourage defections by making them politically costly.

One of the most critical policy recommendations is the enforcement of stricter legal frameworks to regulate defections. The Nigerian Constitution, specifically Section 68(1)(g) and Section 109(1)(g), prohibits legislators from defecting unless there is a division within their party. However, these provisions are often manipulated or selectively enforced (Ojo, 2019). Strengthening these laws by removing vague justifications for defection and ensuring stricter penalties, such as automatic loss of office for defecting lawmakers, could deter politicians from switching parties for personal gains.

Internal party democracy must also be improved to reduce dissatisfaction among members, which often fuels defections. Many defections occur due to a lack of transparency in candidate selection, imposition of candidates, and disregard for party structures (Ogundiya, 2011). Political parties must institutionalize democratic processes, such as credible primaries and inclusive decision-making, to prevent aggrieved members from leaving. A more democratic party system would encourage commitment and reduce the incentive for opportunistic defections.

Political financing reforms should also be introduced to discourage politicians from defecting for financial incentives. In Nigeria, access to state resources often determines political loyalty, with many politicians switching parties to align with those in power (Ojo, 2019). To curb this, there should be greater transparency in party funding, restrictions on the use of public funds for political activities, and independent auditing of campaign finances. If financial motivations for defection are reduced, political actors will have less incentive to switch parties opportunistically.

The judiciary also has a crucial role in addressing party defections. Courts should expedite cases related to unlawful defections and ensure that legal precedents discourage future occurrences. Delays in judicial decisions often allow defectors to retain their positions despite clear violations of the constitution. It appears that the political class has decided to use the judiciary to consolidate their acts (Oke, et al., 2021). A proactive judiciary that interprets and enforces anti-defection laws consistently will help create a deterrent effect.

Strengthening political education and civic awareness is also crucial in reducing party defections. Civic organizations, universities, and the media should play a greater role in educating the public on the importance of political parties as institutions of democracy. When voters demand ideological consistency and accountability, politicians will be less inclined to defect for personal gain. Additionally, political mentorship programs should be encouraged to instill a sense of discipline and ideological commitment among young politicians. Many defections occur because political actors view parties as mere platforms for elections rather than institutions with long-term visions (Ogundiya, 2011). By training young politicians in ethical leadership and governance, the culture of party switching for short-term gains can be minimized.

It is perceived that addressing the problem of frequent party defections in Nigeria requires a multi-dimensional approach involving legal reforms, institutional strengthening, political education, and financial transparency. The solution to the challenges of democratic political governance will depend on strengthening the various institutions that underpin democracy and good governance (Omodia et al., 2019). Thus, a combination of stricter anti-defection laws, improved internal democracy, clear ideological commitments, and voter engagement is essential for reducing opportunistic defections. By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria can move toward a more stable, ideology-driven, and accountable political system that promotes democratic consolidation and good governance.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the motivations behind frequent party defections among Nigerian politicians through the lens of Rational Choice Theory (RCT). It examines the effects of defections on political stability, governance, and democratic consolidation and proposes policy recommendations to strengthen political party structures. The findings suggest that party defections in Nigeria are largely driven by self-interest, political survival, and strategic calculations rather than ideological differences.

Harriet Omokiniovo Efanodor-Obeten,  
Mohammed Lawal Itakpe

Politicians defect to maximize electoral advantages, gain access to state resources, or align with dominant power structures, reinforcing the applicability of RCT in explaining this phenomenon. The theory effectively illustrates how Nigerian politicians engage in cost-benefit analyses when deciding to switch parties, emphasizing the role of personal incentives in political behavior.

The study also reveals that frequent party defections have destabilized Nigeria's political system, weakened governance, and slowed democratic consolidation. The lack of ideological commitment among politicians, combined with weak party structures, has contributed to a culture of opportunism where loyalty to political parties is often transactional. These defections disrupt governance by causing policy discontinuity, undermining legislative processes, and fostering a cycle of political instability. Furthermore, defections have contributed to voter apathy, as citizens perceive politicians as self-serving individuals rather than representatives committed to public service and national development. This erosion of trust in political institutions threatens the legitimacy of Nigeria's democratic process and weakens the foundation for sustainable governance.

The study underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms to address the root causes of party defections in Nigeria. A stable, ideology-driven political party system is essential for democratic consolidation and national development. Without reforms to curtail opportunistic defections, Nigeria's democracy will continue to face challenges of instability, weak governance, and declining public trust in political institutions. However, with the right policies and political will, Nigeria can strengthen its democratic framework and foster a political culture that prioritizes institutional stability and national interest over personal ambition.

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Harriet Omokiniovo Efanodor-Obeten,  
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