

Defection, the Pathway to a One-Party Democracy in Nigeria: Threats and Challenges to Liberal Democracy

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Abstract

In liberal democracies, especially those that conduct regular elections, strong opposition parties perform the duties of holding the government accountable, exposing corruption, waste, and bad governance, as well as offering alternative policies and protecting the rights and welfare of vulnerable citizens. Weak, compromised, self-serving, and easily co-opted opposition parties cannot perform these duties and are, therefore, bad for democracy. Recently, political defection became so rampant in Nigeria, with several members of opposition parties crossing over to the ruling party or other electorally viable political organisations, that people are now expressing the fear that Nigeria might soon practically become a one-party state. This apparent drift towards a one-party state is dangerous, given the well-known downsides of that system of government, namely, lack of political choice, dictatorship, no checks and balances, massive corruption and ineptitude, lack of free speech and socioeconomic bottlenecks. All of these would be curtailed in liberal democratic settings through the watchdog and whistle-blowing roles of opposition political parties, thereby securing a level-playing field for all politicians, and enhancing the delivery of social and economic goods to the people. A one-party system of government, whether formally instituted or informally practised, is antithetical to the tenets of participatory democracy and good governance. It is against this background that this paper explored the topic, “Defections, the pathway to a one-party democracy in Nigeria: threats and challenges to liberal democracy”. The paper adopted capture theory as its theoretical framework while secondary qualitative data collection techniques, involving observation and document analysis, were utilized. The paper concluded that although some sections of the 1999 constitution as amended, especially 68(1)(g) and 109(1)(g), stipulate conditions for defections, these safety nets portend grave danger to liberal democracy in Nigeria.

Keywords: defection, liberal democracy, opposition, good governance, watchdog

Introduction

Right from antiquity politics has been an interesting game of intrigue, which makes the result of a given electoral event often difficult to predict. Politics, essentially, is aimed at capturing power and influence, which may also involve different forms of permutations and calibrations (Weber, 1919). In his essay, *Politik als Beruf* (Politics as a Vocation), Weber defined politics as

“striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power” (Weber, 1946, p. 78). This notion of defining politics through the lens of power dynamics and resource allocation is also shared by Lasswell (1936). Following this view, it can be said that politicians generally decamp or move from one party to another in order to have a piece of the power cake or influence the distribution of the power cake. For many politicians, reflecting the interest of their constituency and that of the country in general is a secondary matter. Politics is embedded in every human interaction, where it is often covert (Easton, 1953); however, in political party activities, it is often actively expressed.

A political party is crucial in the capture of political power and is ideally formed by like-minded individuals for accessing power and influence. The primary reason for joining a political party is to gain political and economic power (Oko & Okgbuo, 2024). Thus, in liberal democratic settings all over the world, political parties are the vehicles by which the electoral process is driven (Mbah, 2011; Ogundiya, 2011). In most liberal democracies, political parties serve as instruments of electoral choice. An election is the process of staging a political contest for the electorate to choose which political party or contestant should occupy established elective position(s) in the polity. However, election is not only limited to political party affairs; organizations, communities and religious bodies also organize elections for filling positions of authority.

On the specific subject of a politician defecting from one party to another, a very common practice in Nigeria, one could say that a major cause of it is infighting within political parties. In the country’s political landscape, personality differences, rather than opposing ideological leanings, often provoke such rifts. When the fence-mending mechanism of a political party fail to reconcile such rifts, the aggrieved politician, to protect his interest or advance his political ambition, may see the need to cross over to another political party, sometimes with his ardent followers or allies. However, according to the Electoral Act of 2026, an aspirant who loses a primary election cannot validly switch to a new party's register or platform to run for that same election cycle (crossriverwatch, 2026).

Prevalence of Defection in Nigeria

Globally, defection has become part of electoral democracy; it is common in developing countries, where Nigeria stands as a notable example (Ogundiya, 2011). According to Desposato (2002), defection is also frequently practised in Japan, Ecuador, Nepal, Russia, Philippines, France, Italy and Brazil; Nokken (2000) posits that US, from 1947-1999 experienced frequency of

defections. Defections, however, are more prevalent in Nigeria. For instance, in the first half of 2026, many state legislators, particularly those of Kano State House of Assembly, defected to other parties. In Kano, many lawmakers moved from the NNPP to the APC, the President's party. Notable defections also took place in the two chambers of the National Assembly – the Senate and the House of Representatives (*See Tables 1 and 2*).

Table 1: Notable Senate Defections in March 2026			
	Name of Senator	Constituency	Defected ...
1	Aminu Waziri Tambuwal	Sokoto South	from PDP to ADC
2	Enyinnaya Abaribe	Abia South	from APGA to ADC
3	Ireti Kingibe	Federal Capital Territory	from LP to ADC
4	Victor Umeh	Anambra Central	from LP to ADC
5	Tony Nwoye	Anambra North	from LP to ADC
6	Mohammed Ogoshi Onawo	Nasarawa South	from PDP to ADC
7	Binos Dauda Yaroe	Adamawa South	from PDP to ADC
8	Austin Akobundu	Abia Central	from PDP to ADC
9	Lawal Adamu Usman	Kaduna Central	from PDP to ADC

Source: NTA Network News, March 12, 2026

Table 2: Notable Defections in the House of Representatives, March 2026	
1. Aliu Madaki (Deputy Minority Leader) — NNPP to APC — Dala (Kano) 2. George Ozodinobi (Deputy Minority Whip) — LP to ADC — Njikoka/Anaocha/Dunukofia (Anambra) 3. Philip Agbese — APC to LP — Ado/Okpokwu/Ogbadibo (Benue) 4. Ugochinyere Michael Ikeagwuonu — PDP to APP — Ideato (Imo) 5. Abdussamad Dasuki — PDP to ADC — Kebbe/Tambuwal (Sokoto) 6. Tijjani Abdulkadir Jobe — NNPP to APC — Tofa/Dawakin-Tofa/Rimingado (Kano) 7. Seyi Sowunmi — LP to ADC — Ojo (Lagos) 8. Mohammed Bassi — PDP to APC — Mayo Belwa/Ganye/Jada/Toungo (Adamawa) 9. Ghali Tijjani Mustapha — NNPP to APC — Ajingi/Albasu/Gaya (Kano) 10. Shehu Bello — NNPP to APC — Fagge (Kano) 11. Dankawu Idris — NNPP to APC — Kumbotso (Kano) 12. Hussain Hassan Shehu — NNPP to APC — Nassarawa (Kano) 13. Rabiu Yusuf — NNPP to APC — Sumaila/Takai (Kano) 14. Garba Mohammed Chiroma — NNPP to APC — Gezawa/Gabasawa (Kano) 15. Ibrahim Mohammed (Kano) — NNPP to APC — Gwale (Kano) 16. Jaafaru Yakubu — PDP to APC — Bali/Gassol (Taraba) 17. Sadiq Abbas Tafida — PDP to APC — Jalingo/Yorro/Zing (Taraba) 18. Ibrahim Mohammed (Kebbi) — PDP to APC — Birnin-Kebbi/Kalgo/Bunza (Kebbi) 19. Bello Shinkafi — PDP to APC — Shinkafi/Zurmi (Zamfara) 20. Harris Okonkwo — LP to ADC — Idemili North/South (Anambra) 21. Yaya Bauchi Tongo — PDP to ADC — Gombe/Kwami/Funakaye (Gombe) 22. Mustapha Abdullahi — APC to ADC — Ikara/Kubau (Kaduna) 23. Mani Maishinko Katami — PDP to ADC — Binji/Silame (Sokoto) 24. Umar Yusuf Yabo — PDP to ADC — Yabo/Shagari (Sokoto) 25. Nwogu Mathew — LP to APP — Aboh Mbaise/Ngor Okpala (Imo) 26. Akanni Clement Ademola — PDP to Accord — Boluwaduro/Ifedayo/Ila (Osun) 27. Oladebo Lanre Olomololaye — PDP to Accord — Ayedaade/Irewole/Isokan (Osun)	

Source: Punch Newspaper, March 31, 2026

Defection is prevalent in the developing democracies because of the near absence of strong party ideology; those who defect in developed democracies do so more for ideological reasons than for the goal of capturing power or resources. However, the underlying reason for defection is self- or group-interest. In politics, such interest is subject to change; and when some party members are faced with intractable challenges that may hinder their access to political power, defection becomes an escape route (Oko & Okgbuo, 2024; Ogundiya, 2011). Because power is fleeting, party members occasionally see the need to align or realign to enhance their chances of capturing power and influence (Eme, 2011). This situation, common in electoral democracies, is rampant in Nigeria, and is not good for the stability of political parties and their ideological focus. As Miskin (2002) has observed:

Parties cannot achieve their goal, if politicians continually choose to pursue their own individual agenda. A constant stream of floor-crossings undermines the ability of Party leaders to maintain coherent policy platform, which may damage the party's reputation with voters, who may withdraw their support for a fractious and divided party.

History and Causes of Defection in Nigeria

The history of defection in Nigeria is as old as the nation. The first defection occurred in 1951 when 20 members of National Congress of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) defected to Action Group (Ibrahim, 2023; Aniche, 2018) and the second occurred in 1964 when some members of AG of Chief Samuel Akintola faction defected to Nigeria National Democratic Party (NNDP). This arose as a result of personality clash between Chief Samuel Akintola and Chief Obafemi Awolowo (Oko & Okgbuo, 2024). Since then, defections have become a permanent feature in Nigerian political space during or after elections (Ibrahim, 2023).

Defection in itself is not bad since interests are expected to clash, hence political alignment and realignment may, occasionally, become expedient. Even so, the 1999 constitution as amended, especially sections 68(1)(g) and 109(1)(g) stipulate conditions for defections. Scholars, however, have argued that these safety nets portend grave danger to liberal democracy in Nigeria. The sections were not ambiguous; they clearly emphasise that it is only when divisions in a party are irreconcilable that party members are at liberty to decamp.

Defections may sometimes seem spontaneous but they are often precipitated by internal rivalries, externally induced pressure, and deep-seated reflections: these are properly considered to avoid making hasty decisions that would amount to political miscalculation and ruin. To defect and remain politically

relevant in one's constituency, one must be charismatic, financially strong, and closely aligned with a politically influential group. The defector would need to spend money and engage in inner-caucus political maneuvering in order to outsmart original party members who may be interested in being nominated for the same ticket the defector is interested in. A great deal of negotiation and political reengineering is needed to avoid the eruption of wrangling among the party members. If roughly handled, this may lead to series of litigations and possible disintegration of affected political parties.

Position-seeking is one of the reasons why people defect (Oko & Okgbuo, 2024; Ogundiya, 2011). But defection is not always a smooth crossover as the defector has to contend with original party members on who should be the party's flag bearer during key elections. Not resolving this matter amicably may create a group of disgruntled party members who may carry out overt or covert campaigns aimed at undermining the party's chances of winning the election. Examples abound in Nigeria. In the 2023 presidential general election, Barrister Nysom Wike, former governor of oil-rich River State and Seyi Makinde reportedly sabotaged their Peoples Democratic Party by encouraging their supporters to vote en-mass for Ahmed Bola Tinubu of All Progressive Congress (APC) against Atiku Abubakar of the PDP. Nysom Wike was aggrieved because Atiku did not nominate him as his vice-presidential candidate.

Another factor that facilitates defection is lack of political ideology amongst political parties in Nigeria (Ogundiya 2011). Ideology is important for the functioning of political parties anywhere in the world where liberal democracy is practised. Ideology is the set of policies and programmes upon which a political party is formed. It may be regarded as the mission and vision of the political party.

During the first republic in Nigeria, political parties had ideologies that attracted persons of like minds who worked together with little or no internal party rivalries. Action Group's major political ideology was liberalism with emphasize on free and compulsory education. The Action Group, AG, factored education as an effective tool for nation building and invested tremendously on it. This was the driving force of AG throughout its existence as a political party in Nigeria, and that force made Western Nigeria the most educationally advanced regions of the country. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN) chose "green revolution and national cohesion" as its ideology while the ideology of the National Party of Nigeria (NPP) was neither liberal nor radical.

Since the return of democracy in Nigeria in 1999, the absence of ideology has

made defection a reoccurring pattern (Oko & Okgbuo, 2024; Ogundiya, 2011) because parties that emerged in 1999 for the conduct of 1999 general elections were hurriedly packaged by the military oligarchy, without any emphasis on well thought-out programmes of action (PA) by the political parties. The result of this is the frequency of defections since the emergence of the Fourth Republic (Ibrahim, 2023).

To buttress this point, the table below gives a good indication of the rate of defections in Nigeria since 1999.

Table 3: Major Catalogue of Political Party Defections in Nigeria since 1999

Names	Old Party	New Party	Names	Old Party	New Party
Alhaji Kwatalo (Dep. Gov.)	ANPP	PDP	Chuba Okadigbo (Senator)	PDP	ANPP
Adamu Agungu (Dep. Gov.)	ANPP	PDP	Ike Nwachukwu (Senator)	PDP	NDP
Enyinnaya Abaribe (Dep. Gov.)	PDP	ANPP	Jim Nwobodo (Senator)	PDP	UNDP
John Okpa (Dep. Gov.)	PDP	ANPP	Chukwuemeka Ezeife	AD	UNPP
Buckmor Akerele (Dep. Gov.)	AD	NDP	Mohammed Goni	PDP	UNPP
Gbenga Aluko (Senator)	PDP	ANPP	Chris Okotie	NDP	JP
Khadirat A. Gwadabe	PDP	ANPP	Obinna Uzor (Gov. Aspirant)	PDP	NDP
Daniel Saro (Senator)	PDP	UNDP	Haruna Abubakar (Gov. Aspirant)	PDP	NDP
Peter Ajuwa	ANPP	LDP	Nuhu Audu (Gov. Aspirant)	PDP	UNDP
Mala Kachala (Gov. Aspirant)	ANPP	AD	Nnanna Onyenekon	ANPP	PDP
Mike Mku	PDP	UNDP	Catherine Acholonu	PDP	UNDP
Gbenga Olawepo (Gov. Aspirant)	PDP	NDP	Emma Bassey (HOR)	PDP	ANPP
Mathew T. Mbu Jnr. (Senator)	PDP	ANPP	Graham Ipingasi (HOR)	PDP	ANPP
Omololu Meroyi (Senator)	AD	PDP	Gbenga Oguniyi	AD	PDP
Alli Balogun (HOR)	AD	PDP	Kingsley Ogunlewe (HOR)	AD	PDP
Appolos Amodi (HOR)	PDP	NDP	Dorcas Odunjiri (HOR)	AD	PDP
Alh. M. Koirana-jana	UNPP	PDP	Rowland Owie	PDP	ANPP
Uche Ogbonnaya	PDP	ANPP	Marshall Harry	PDP	ANPP
Ukeje O.J Nwokeforo	UNPP	AD	Sergeant Awuse	PDP	ANPP
Emmanuel Okocha	APGA	PAC	Wahab Dounmu (Senator)	AD	PDP
Adamu Bulkachuwa	PDP	ANPP	Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu	ANPP	PDP
Kura Mohammed	PDP	ANPP	Iyola Omisore (Dep. Gov.)	AD	PDP
Chief Idowu Odeyemi	PDP	AD	Jonan Jang	PDP	ANPP
Chief Ade Akilaya	PDP	AD	Yemi Brinmo-Yusuf	AD	PDP
Olufemi Ojo	PDP	AD	Fedelis Okoro	AD	PDP
Kayode Oguntoye	PDP	AD	Gbolahan Okuneye (HOR)	AD	PDP
James Mako	AD	PDP	Authur Nzeribe	ANPP	PDP
Fedelis Ogodo	AD	PDP	Laken Balogun (Senator)	AAD	PDP
Arinze Egwu	ANPP	PDP	Alex Kadiri (Senator)	ANPP	PDP
Patrick Edediugwu	ANPP	PDP	Funso Williams	AD	PDP
Ray Akanwa	PDP	ANPP	Rochas Okorocha	PDP	ANPP

Bode Olajumoke	ANPP	PDP	Danishi Sango	PDP	AD
Hassan Y. Bagudu	PDP	ANPP	Olusola Saraki	ANPP	PDP
Ambali Amuda	ANPP	PDP	Alh. Abdulaziz Tonu (HOR)	ANPP	UNPP
Khinde Ayoola	AD	PDP	Muhammed Khalie	PDP	ANPP
Alli Balogun	AD	PDP	Mrs. O. Adiukwu Bakare	PDP	AD
Peter Oyetunji	AD	PDP	Audu Damsa	PDP	ANPP
Ramota Okemakinde	AD	PDP	Dapo Sarumi	PDP	PAC
Salisu Matori	PDP	ANPP	Toyin Anifowose	JP	NDP
Ibrahim Lame	PDP	ANPP	Bukar Mai Lafiya	ANPP	PDP
Annie Okonkwo	PDP	ANPP	Col. Magji Deb (Rtd.)	ANPP	PDP
Chief Akin Akomolefe	PDP	AD	Alh. Saidu ShehuAwak	ANPP	PDP
Chief (Mrs.) A. Olaye	PDP	AD	Muhammed Dukku (HOR)	ANPP	PDP
Tunde Owolabi	PDP	AD	Leke Kehinde (HOR)	AD	PDP
Emeka Nwajiuba	ANPP	NDP	Ademola Adegoroye	AD	NDP
Magnus Ngie -Abe	ANPP	PDP	Ichie Mike Ejezie	UNPP	ANPP
Prince Ugorji A. Oti	ANPP	PDP	E. Aguariwodo (HOR)	ANPP	PDP
Ben OkeObasi	ANPP	PDP	Toyin Anifowose	NDP	JP
Joseph Egwuta	ANPP	PDP	Alhaji Ibrahim Apata	ANPP	PDP
Linus Okorie	PDP	ANPP	Ikedi Ohakim (Gov.)	PPA	PDP
Jafar Bio Ibrahim	ANPP	PDP	Theodore Orji (Gov.)	PPA	PDP
Raheem Agboola	AD	ANPP	Orji Uzor Kalu (Gov.)	PDP	PPA
Uche Nwole	PDP	ANPP	Rochas Okorocho (Gov.)	APGA	APC
Peter Adeyemo	AD	ANPP	Chris Ngige	PDP	APC
Ayokan Lawani	AD	ANPP	Achike Udenwa	PDP	CAN
O. Odumbaku	AD	ANPP	Chibuike Amaechi (Gov.)	PDP	APC
Prince Elvis Jude Agukwe	PDP	AD	Attahiru Bafarawa	APC	PDP
Effiong Edunam	NDP	PDP	Muritala Nyako (Gov.)	PDP	APC

Catherine Acholonu	UNDP	NDP	Rabiu Kwankwaso (Gov.)	PDP	APC
Chinwoke Mbadinuju (Gov.)	PDP	AD	Abdulfatah Ahmed (Gov.)	PDP	APC
Alhaji Baffa Garkuwa	ANPP	PDP	Aliyu Wamakko (Gov.)	PDP	CAN
Abdulmuminu Abubakar	ANPP	PDP	Ifeanyi Ararume	PDP	CAN
Sa'adu Muhammad	ANPP	PDP	Isa Yuguda	ANPP	PDP
Alhaji Sada Yakubu	ANPP	NDP	Mahmud Shinkafi (Gov.)	ANPP	PDP
Muhammed A. Umar	ANPP	PDP	Ibikunle Amosun	PDP	APC
George Okpagu	UNPP	ANPP	Segun Oni	PDP	APC
Alhaji Ibrahim Ali Amin	ANPP	PDP	George Akume	PDP	APC
Isa Kachoko	ANPP	PDP	Femi Pedro	CAN	LP
Segun Mimiko (Gov.)	LP	PDP	Emmanuel Ukoette	PDP	APC
Saminu Turaki (Gov.)	ANPP	PDP	Chuba Okadigbo (Senator)	PDP	ANPP
Atiku Abubakar (VP)	PDP	CAN	Andy Uba (Senator)	PDP	APC
Timipre Sylva	PDP	APC	Nelson Effiong (Senator)	PDP	APC
Tom Ikimi	PDP	APC	Aminu Tambuwal (Speaker, House of Representatives)	PDP	APC
Dino Melaye (Senator)	PDP	APC	Bukola Saraki (Senate President)	PDP	APC
Godwin Obaseki (Gov.)	APC	PDP	Atiku Abubakar	APC	PDP
Osagie Ize-Iyamu	PDP	APC	Dino Melaye	APC	PDP

Source: Adopted from Edet, L. I. (2017). Politics of Defection and its Implications on Nigeria's Democracy. *Global Journal of Human-Social Science*. Volume 17 Issue 1 Version 1.0. pp. 3 – 4

Patterns and Impact of Defections in Nigeria

There have been arguments on the patterns and impact of defections in Nigeria's political landscape (Ogundiya, 2011). These arguments are grouped into two: the anarchist group (AG) and the liberal group (LG) / middle course group (MCG).

The anarchist group (AG) sees the trend of defections in Nigeria as worrisome and a pathway to a one-party state; it, therefore, raised the concern that democracy in Nigeria, by the going trend would likely collapse or falter (CHRICED, 2025). This might be considered a group of alarmists who believe that democracy can only thrive within a multi-party system and via the electioneering process; the group seems not to be equally concerned with what happens regarding election rigging and falsification of election results.

Democracy is not necessarily about having an election; instead, democracy is essentially about finding answers to questions such as: What happens to the distribution of the commonwealth? What happens to security of lives and property? What about the eradication or reduction of poverty? What about human rights? All the issues touched by these questions are among the indicators of democracy, not only elections. There could be full employment, observance of human rights, rule of law, and reduction of poverty under a military or one-party government or some other unelected regime while these indices may be lacking in some democratic settings where multi-party system is in full swing.

The liberal or the middle course group (LG/MCG) does not see Nigerian state receding to a one-party state due to defections. The group believes that Nigeria cannot become a one-party state because of the presence of a third force in Nigeria, in the form of civil society organizations, the media and international organizations. The group is of the view that as long as political interests differ, realignments in politics are inevitable; therefore, defection should be considered part of the game of politics.

Theoretical Framework: Capture Theory

This paper adopted Capture theory as its theoretical framework. Capture theory describes a situation where a governing body begins to serve the interests of the very group it is supposed to oversee rather than the public good. It is a form of corruption where the "referee" starts playing for one of the teams. The theory was shaped by Nobel laureate economist George Stigler in his seminal 1971 paper, "The Theory of Economic Regulation" (Stigler, 1971). His work, further developed by public choice theorists like Sam Peltzman (1976), argued that regulation is often "acquired" by the industry

and designed for its primary benefit (Stigler, 1971).

The capture theory helps diagnose why Nigeria's defections are a unique threat to its democracy. Politicians are not just switching parties over ideology; they are key actors in a process where the state's resources are captured by the ruling party for the benefit of a small elite (Madueke, 2026).

Defections are almost purely transactional, motivated by "stomach infrastructure" and access to patronage, protection from investigation, and political survival rather than by ideology. As former Sokoto State governor, Aminu Tambuwal, noted, the defections are "motivated not by the people's interest, but by personal benefits". This aligns with the view of political science professor Istifanus Zabadi, who argues that the Nigerian state has been "captured by a brand of elites who have actually now become the owners of the enterprise and they dispense provisions to whom they like," making defection the primary tool to access this patronage network.

The ruling APC effectively acts as the gatekeeper to the nation's vast resources, creating an irresistible pull. Governors and lawmakers defect out of fear of being isolated from federal power in a "winner-takes-all" political system (Madueke, 2026). This aligns with Stigler's (1971) tenet that the industry (in this case, the ruling party) uses the state's power to benefit itself by blocking new entrants, or in this case, absorbing the competition. Defections weaken opposition strongholds, which further incentivizes defection to the ruling party, creating a self-reinforcing cycle where the state's resources are monopolized. Human rights lawyer Deji Adeyanju observed that this trend is a "natural threat to our democracy because a situation where one party is predominant in any democracy is actually a threat to a constitutional democracy". This dynamic sees the ruling APC acting less as a political party and more as a cartel, absorbing competitors to secure a monopoly on power and resources (Madueke, 2026), mirroring how a dominant firm captures a regulator to stifle competition (Stigler, 1971).

Viewed through the lens of capture theory, the trend of defections poses several direct threats to the fundamental principles of liberal democracy. A functioning democracy requires a vibrant opposition to scrutinize the government and offer alternatives. The wave of defections has decimated the opposition, threatening democratic stability. As activist Ebere Ifendu stated, "If there is no opposition, then there is no democracy". Activists warn that a one-party dominant situation is a "natural threat" to constitutional democracy as it removes checks and balances.

When politicians can switch parties without electoral consequences, the mandate given by voters is betrayed. Voters are left feeling powerless and

alienated as elections cease to be a tool for accountability. This erodes public trust in the entire democratic process, a fundamental failure predicted by capture theory when regulators (or governing parties) lose their public-interest focus. As Professor Zabadi lamented, "These defections have nothing to do with the interests of ordinary Nigerians. They are motivated by personal gain and the desire to secure future positions".

A captured state becomes an instrument for political survival, leading to a "civilian dictatorship". The Resource Centre for Human Rights & Civic Education (CHRICED) warns that "the gale of defections from opposition parties to the ruling party is not merely political maneuvering; it is the slow but steady march toward a one-party state, a civilian dictatorship cloaked in democratic garb". The organization further cautioned that prolonged one-party dominance can lead to weakened institutions and authoritarian rule, citing examples such as Zimbabwe, Russia, Cameroon, and Kenya.

Capture theory reframes Nigeria's challenge from a series of unprincipled defections to a systemic crisis of governance (Madueke, 2026; Nwozor et al., 2021). The threat to liberal democracy is not merely the emergence of a one-party state, but the creation of a captured state that serves a narrow elite at the expense of the public good (Zabadi, 2025). Breaking this cycle requires a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach that might include constitutional and electoral reforms to penalize defection, a rejuvenated civil society, a fiercely independent judiciary, and a reorientation of political culture away from patronage and toward ideology and public service.

Methodology

The study adopts qualitative content analysis approach. Content analysis is a systematic research approach that offers detailed interpretation of documents in relation to specific research area. Content analysis uses systemic method to analyze, interpret and report textual, visual, or multimedia content to identify various structures, themes, contexts and meanings. It adopts various processes such as classification, categorization and coding of texts, interviews, images, or other forms of communication. The main advantage of this method for our study is that it paid detailed qualitative attention to the various reasons of defections in Nigeria and liberal democracy documents as they are subjected to detailed and systemic review.

Building on this methodology, we conducted detailed analyses of the defections, the pathway to a one party democracy in Nigeria: threats and challenges to liberal democracy.

Models of Defection in Nigeria's Political System

Politicians globally, and Nigerian politicians in particular, are driven by several factors which range from ideological leanings to selfish interest. The models of defection in Nigeria include office-seeking and policy-seeking models. The office-seeking model is the potent reason for major defections in Nigeria. According to the office-seeking model, the reason behind any defection in Nigeria's political space is to get office or power (Castle & Fett, 2006; Aldrich & Bianco,1992).

Aldrich and Bianca (1992) posit that politicians would choose political parties that would help them to access office or power. In Nigerian political milieu, the quest for political office and power is largely behind the series of defections since the return of democratic rule in 1999. The office-seeking model is in tandem with ambitious theory which extrapolates that individual politicians would prefer to seek a higher position than a lower one. However, in whatever that may induce defection, the individual politician would weigh alternative options – gain, benefit and election patronage – before canoe-jumping (party-switching or throwing in the towel). It shows that every defector is rational and weighs all possible alternatives since the overriding factor is personal interest. Since no one would intentionally harm oneself, and since interests clash, the tendency is that politicians would always defect, which may fractionalize political party cohesion and likely undermine internal democracy.

The policy-seeking model believes that the reason why politicians may defect is for policy preference or ideology. Politicians defect to other parties that offer credible policy and they may also defect as a show of vengeance to demonstrate to the old party they are defecting from that they have the capacity to ruffle the party structure. However, no matter the currency of the policy model, the model is alien to the Nigerian political space as politicians do not defect based on policy preference but on “stomach infrastructure” (self interest).

Typologies of Defections in Nigeria and the Reversal of Democracy

Although the name and meaning attached to the word defections varies but the most used in political parlance is when one individual or a group leaves their political party or affiliation to another opposing political party or association (Ogundiya, 2011). Different scholars and practitioners call defection different names. To some, defection means canoe-jumping, floor-crossing, carpet-crossing, party hopping, political party-switching (Ogundiya, 2011); most times, carpet crossing happens in legislative assemblies.

This paper would not waste its space on the meaning of defection but would rather focus on the types of defections as found in Nigeria's political space, an area most scholars have paid little attention to. In Nigeria's political space the paper identified two broad types of defections: proxy defection and elite defection. The other types of defections identified by other researchers are national defection, elite defection, and mass defection.

Elite defection is rampant in the Nigerian political milieu and happens when governors and lawmakers leave the political party upon which they were elected to another party. Often, they do so because they have lost faith in the political party or because the political party may not guarantee their return to power. First-term governors and lawmakers are the politicians who are mostly involved in elite defection. In a particular state, local government area or constituency, mass defection occurs when politicians massively abandon a political party and move to another party where, they perceive, their interest would be better served. These defections are interest-induced but the most terrible and disturbing type of defection is the one this paper identified as proxy defection.

Proxy defection happens when an aggrieved individual or some members of a political party chose not to leave or move to another political party but rather stays put in their political party while they work and vote with their supporters for the success of another political party. Usually, they are sponsored by an opposing political party to operate as spoilers in their own party. The politician(s) who engage in this type of defection are usually the elites who have become so powerful that their political party cannot sanction nor expel them from the political party for anti-party activities. This is gradually becoming a norm in Nigeria's political space, where some sitting governors would declare that they would bypass their own party's preferred candidate to vote for another political party's candidate in a presidential election.

The politicians that indulge in this anti-party activity are mainly governors serving their second term in office or high-ranking senators, members of the House of Representatives and state houses of assembly. For instance, during the 2023 presidential general election, Barrister Nysom Wike and Seyi Makinde, then governors of River State and Oyo State respectively, sabotaged their Peoples Democratic party candidate, Atiku Abubakar, by encouraging their supporters to vote en-mass for All Progressives Congress (APC) candidate, Ahmed Bola Tinubu.

Findings of the Study

The study found that defection would always be prevalent in Nigeria's political landscape as long as our political parties do not have clear-cut

ideological leanings. The study also found that until Nigerian politicians see politics as service to people rather than service to personal and group interest, defections would persist.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that although some sections of 1999 constitution as amended, especially 68(1)(g) and 109(1)(g) stipulate conditions for defections, Nigeria, as affirmed by the liberal or the middle course group (LG/MCG), cannot recede to a one party state due to defections. The reason is that the presence of civil society organization, media and international organizations would always provide alternative platforms to prevent the emergence of an autocratic one party in Nigeria. Another reason is that the prevalence of ethnicity would make the emergence of a one-party state unthinkable in a multi-ethnic society such as Nigeria. In addition, since interest-induced alignments and realignments are inevitable in political party activities, defections would always be part of the game of accessing political power.

Recommendations

The paper recommends a two-party system for Nigeria as it strongly believes that it would serve as the antidote to the frequent spate of defections in the country. There is a historical basis for this recommendation: the 1993 presidential election, regarded as the country's freest and fairest general election, in spite of the June 12 controversy, was a two-party contest because only two parties, NRC and SDP, were registered and recognized. And in that election, Nigerians voted devoid of ethno-religious and parochial interests. The paper further recommends that sections 68(1)(g) and 109(1)(g) of the 1999 constitution as amended should be repealed and stiffer penalty against defection constitutionally enshrined.

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