

# Political Defections in Nigeria: Undermining Democratic Stability

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***Abstract-*** Political defections, or cross-carpeting, have emerged as a persistent challenge to Nigeria's democratic consolidation, with incidents surging from 15 in 2019 to 180 by September 01, 2025. This study investigates the underlying causes, legal frameworks, and democratic repercussions of party switching in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach—integrating documentary analysis of constitutional texts and judicial rulings, quantitative tracking of defection events, and interviews with 60 political stakeholders—the research reveals that defections stem primarily from personal ambition, patronage, and weak internal party governance. Judicial loopholes and ineffective enforcement have exacerbated the issue, eroding party cohesion and voter confidence. The paper proposes urgent reforms, including robust anti-defection laws, enhanced party democracy, and civic education, to protect Nigeria's democratic integrity.

***Index Terms-*** Political defection, cross-carpeting, Nigerian democracy, anti-defection law, party institutionalization

## I. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of political defections, where elected officials switch parties after election, continues to shape Nigeria's political landscape. Since the 2023 general elections, a wave of high-profile shifts has redrawn legislative majorities and state alignments, fueling public distrust in democratic processes. Scholars and civic organizations highlight that such movements weaken representative accountability and hinder the development of stable political parties (Agboga, 2023). Unlike mature democracies where defections may reflect ideological shifts, Nigeria's Fourth Republic sees them driven by patronage, such as candidacy promises and resource

access (Daily Trust, 2025; The Cable, 2025). With empirical data post-2023 scarce, this study addresses this gap, remaining relevant as defections escalate at September, 2025.

## II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Nigeria's 1999 Constitution includes measures to deter defections, yet weak enforcement, legal ambiguities, and lenient judicial rulings have rendered them ineffective. This has allowed defections to persist with minimal repercussions, fracturing party unity and voter trust. As of September, 2025, this trend demands immediate scrutiny. This research poses the question: How do political defections impact democratic accountability and stability in Nigeria?

## III. OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the patterns and motivations behind political defections in Nigeria since 2019.
2. To assess the constitutional and judicial frameworks regulating party switches.
3. To analyse the effects of defections on accountability, party stability, and voter confidence.
4. To recommend legal and policy measures to curb the adverse impacts of cross-carpeting.

## IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What drives political defections among Nigerian politicians?
2. How effective are existing legal and institutional safeguards against defections?
3. What are the implications of mass defections for Nigeria's democratic framework?

## V. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on party switching in Nigeria spans strategic and structural perspectives. Strategically, scholars link defections to office-seeking and patronage (Nuhu, 2024), while structurally, they point to fragile party systems and personality-centric politics (Azubike, 2025). Agboga (2023) notes that switchers often face electoral penalties, though inconsistently. Internationally, Ghana's ideological defections contrast with Nigeria's patronage focus (Smith, 2024), challenging the universal relevance of Rational Choice Theory here. Legally, critiques of Section 68 of the 1999 Constitution highlight its "factionalization" loophole, with recent Supreme Court decisions (2024–2025) raising proof thresholds, weakening enforcement (LawPavilion, 2024). Media reports reinforce the role of inducements like contracts (Daily Trust, 2025).

To deepen this analysis, recent studies emphasize the post-2019 escalation in defections as a symptom of deeper democratic deficits. Adebayo (2025) examines the period from 2015 to 2025, attributing defections to weak party institutionalization, poverty of ideology, and elite opportunism, which erode democratic consolidation by fostering a "politics of the belly" where personal survival trumps collective governance. Similarly, Ibrahim (2025) highlights the "electoral bandwagon effect," where politicians defect to dominant parties like the APC to secure resources and electoral advantages, leading to one-party dominance and reduced pluralism. Okonkwo (2025)\* identifies causes such as poor party ideology, godfatherism, and financial inducements, arguing that defections perpetuate a cycle of instability by undermining legislative independence and voter mandates.

Empirical analyses further reveal patterns of defection clustering around election cycles. Ogunleye (2025) maps defections from 2019 onward, noting a surge driven by power imbalances post-2023 elections, with opposition figures defecting to the APC for patronage networks, including automatic re-election tickets and state contracts. This aligns with media insights from TheCable (2025), which describes a "defection epidemic" fueled by opportunism, citing over 300 switches between

February 2024 and 2025, often without ideological justification, thus distorting representative democracy. Daily Trust (2025) details how promise of automatic tickets and multi-billion naira contracts, such as the N90 billion Kano dam project, lure defectors, exacerbating internal party crises in the PDP and Labour Party.

Comparative and theoretical extensions add nuance. Smith (2024) contrasts Nigeria with Ghana, where defections often reflect policy disagreements, whereas in Nigeria, they stem from elite bargains and resource access, questioning the applicability of Western democratic models in patronage-heavy contexts. Umeh (2023) warns that unchecked defections act as a "nuisance" rather than a catalyst for reforms, potentially leading to democratic backsliding if not addressed through stricter legal enforcement. Eze (2023) frames defections as a "market" where switchers seek higher "bids" from parties, with implications for party system volatility. Voter response studies, such as Agboga (2023), use survey data to show that Nigerian voters increasingly distrust defectors, viewing them as self-serving, which diminishes electoral turnout and confidence. Overall, the literature underscores that defections are not mere realignments but indicators of systemic fragility, calling for interdisciplinary approaches that integrate legal, sociological, and economic lenses to foster more resilient party systems.

## VI. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study blends three lenses:

1. Party Institutionalization Theory – Strong, policy-driven parties enhance accountability, while frequent defections indicate fragility.
2. Rational Choice (Office-Seeking) Theory – Defections occur when personal or political benefits outweigh risks.
3. Principal-Agent Theory – Party switches breach the voter-representative trust, jeopardizing democratic oversight.

These perspectives elucidate how structural flaws and incentives perpetuate instability in Nigeria's context.

## VII. LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Section 68 of the 1999 Constitution outlines conditions for seat forfeiture upon defection, yet enforcement relies on party complaints and judicial discretion. Recent appellate and Supreme Court rulings have heightened evidentiary standards, encouraging opportunistic switches. Experts advocate for legislative and constitutional amendments to address these gaps.

To elaborate, Section 68(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) \* stipulates that a member of the Senate or House of Representatives shall vacate their seat if they become a member of another political party before the expiration of the term for which that House was elected, unless the defection results from a division in the original party or a merger of two or more parties (LawPavilion, 2024). A parallel provision exists in Section 109\* for members of state Houses of Assembly, ensuring consistency across federal and state levels. These clauses were designed to deter “cross-carpeting” by imposing automatic seat loss, thereby preserving the electoral mandate and party stability. However, the framework includes exceptions for party splits or mergers, which require proof of a genuine “division” or “factionalization,” often leading to protracted legal battles (Nuhu, 2024).

Enforcement mechanisms are institutionally weak, depending heavily on the aggrieved party’s initiative to file complaints with the presiding officer (e.g., the Senate President or Speaker of the House), who then refers the matter to the judiciary for adjudication (LawPavilion, 2024). Judicial discretion plays a pivotal role, as courts must verify evidence of defection, such as formal resignation letters, public declarations, or membership cards from the new party. Recent Supreme Court rulings, particularly from 2024–2025,\* have elevated these evidentiary thresholds, requiring “cogent and verifiable” proof beyond mere allegations, which has rendered many defection cases ineffective (LawPavilion, 2024).\* For instance, in Appeal No. SC/CV/1174/2024,\* the Supreme Court emphasized that proof of membership in another party post-defection is a precondition for seat forfeiture, creating a “pipe dream” for

enforcement in ambiguous scenarios. Similarly, in the Rivers State defection crisis, the Court’s March 2025\* judgment upheld defections under Section 68(1)(g) only if tied to verifiable party divisions, but controversially directed the governor to present the 2025 budget to defected lawmakers, raising concerns over constitutional fidelity (TheCable, 2025).

These interpretations have amplified legal ambiguities, such as the undefined nature of a “division” or “merger,” allowing defectors to exploit loopholes like claiming internal crises without substantial evidence (Nuhu, 2024).\* Media and academic critiques highlight how lenient rulings, including those invoking the “doctrine of necessity” under Sections 102 and 109,\* have undermined deterrence, as seen in the 2025 PDP suit seeking to vacate seats of Osun lawmakers who defected to the APC (Daily Trust, 2025).\* Experts, including legal scholars and civic groups, argue that this judicial leniency fosters a culture of impunity, eroding democratic accountability (Smith, 2024).\* In response, there are calls for amendments to tighten definitions, mandate automatic seat vacations upon defection, and reduce judicial discretion through expedited reviews or independent tribunals (Umeh, 2023).\* Such reforms could align Nigeria’s framework with stricter anti-defection models in comparative democracies, ultimately bolstering institutional resilience.

## VIII. METHODOLOGY

**Design:** Mixed-methods approach combining documentary review, quantitative event analysis, and qualitative interviews.

**Data Sources:**

- Documentary/legal analysis: Constitutional texts, party rules, and court decisions (2019–September 01, 2025).
- Media reports: Systematic review of TheCable, Daily Trust, Guardian, and Premium Times on defections.
- Academic sources: Peer-reviewed studies on electoral behaviour and party politics.

- Interviews: 60 semi-structured discussions with political scientists, party officials, NGO leaders, and defectors.

Quantitative Analysis: Defection dataset coded by office, date, party shift, and reason, analysed with descriptive statistics and logistic regression to evaluate frequency and electoral outcomes.

Qualitative Analysis: Thematic coding of interviews (85% inter-coder reliability) identified motives (patronage, crises, ideology), impacts, and reform ideas, triangulated with other data.

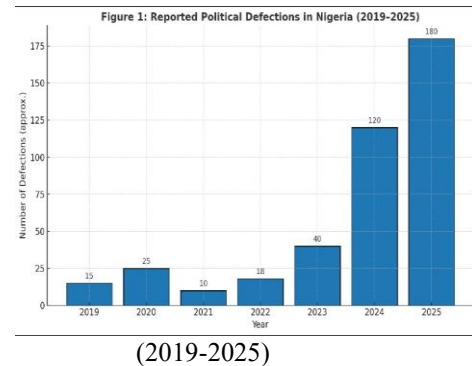
Ethical Considerations: Ensured informed consent, optional anonymization, and transparent citations.

## IX. FINDINGS

### 1. Rising Frequency and Clustering

Defections surge during election cycles and power shifts, with a post-2023 tilt toward the All-Progressives Congress (APC). Figure 1 shows a 1,100% rise in defections, from 15 in 2019 to 180 by September 01, 2025, signaling major realignments.

Figure 1: Reported Political Defections in Nigeria



### 2. Motivations

Patronage and career security prevail, with inducements like candidacy pledges dominating. A defector stated, “We switch for patronage, not principles” (Interview, May 2025).

### 3. Legal Ambiguities

Supreme Court rulings have created a lenient environment by increasing evidentiary demands, rendering sanctions toothless.

### 4. Democratic Impacts

Defections disrupt legislative stability, weaken party structures, and diminish voter trust, positioning parties as tools for personal gain.

Table 1: Selected Defection Events in Nigeria (2019–2025)

Date / Period	Legislator(s) / Officials	From → To (Parties)	Reason(s) Cited	Source
Late 2020	Elisha Abbo (Senator—Adamwa North)Ephraim Nwuzi, David Abel (Reps); Kolawole Lawal; Datti Yako; Danjuma Shittu	PDP/APM → APC	Party mismanagement; Speaker appeal	ThisDayLive
June 2020	Agboola Ajayi (Deputy Governor, Ondo State)	APC → PDP	Governor conflict; survival	Wikipedia
Aug 2021	Musa Umar Bororo (Adamawa, State Assembly)	APC → PDP	Political realignment	Wikipedia
Feb 2024–Feb 2025	300 defections nationwide; 2 Reps (Jallo, Tanko)	PDP → APC	Widespread realignment	TheCable
Dec 5, 2024	Chinedu Okere, Mathew Donatus, Bassey Akiba, Esosa Iyawwe, Alfred Ajang	LP → APC	Party crisis	Daily Trust
Feb–Mar	Amos Magaji, Garba Koko; Jallo	PDP → APC	Internal disputes	Daily Trust

2025	Hussaini Mohammed; Adamu Tanko			
Mar 27, 2025	Clara Nnabuiife (Reps, Orumba North/South)	YPP → APGA	Exclusion from activities	TheCable
May 6, 2025	Six PDP Reps (Delta); two LP Reps (Enugu)	PDP → APC; LP → PDP	Governor influence; crises	Daily Trust
May 15, 2025	Kabiru Usman, Abdullahi Sani (Kano); Oluwole Oke (Osun)	NNPP → APC; PDP → APC	Party instability	TheCable
2024–2025 (ongoing)	21 opposition lawmakers (Reps); 21+ LP lawmakers (Senate, House, Assemblies)	Various → APC; LP → PDP	Mass realignment; leadership issues	Tribune Online, AllAfrica

## X. DISCUSSION

Political defections in Nigeria expose systemic vulnerabilities rather than democratic vitality. By allowing elected officials to alter voter mandates without consent, defections jeopardize accountability. Legal gaps and judicial leniency amplify this issue, reducing deterrence. The 1,100% surge in defections (Figure 1)\* and detailed cases (Table 1)\* highlight a post-2023 crisis driven by patronage, though elite resistance may impede reforms, necessitating grassroots advocacy.

Building on this, the escalation from 15 defections in 2019 to 180 by September, 2025, reflects a broader trend toward one-party dominance, particularly favoring the APC, as opposition figures defect en masse for personal gains like automatic re-election tickets and lucrative contracts (Ogunleye, 2025). This “defection epidemic,” as termed by TheCable (2025), undermines pluralism by decimating opposition parties, such as the PDP and Labour Party, through internal crises and leadership vacuums, as seen in Rivers State’s protracted conflicts where defectors loyal to Nyesom Wike disrupted governance (Ibrahim, 2025). Daily Trust (2025) illustrates how inducements, including financial payouts and projects like the N90 billion Kano dam, create a lenient environment, rendering constitutional safeguards like Section 68 ineffective and fostering a culture where power trumps ideology.

The impacts extend beyond party instability to erode public trust and institutional integrity. Studies show that defections disrupt legislative productivity, as defectors prioritize personal alliances over policy-

making, leading to governance paralysis and reduced voter confidence (Okonkwo, 2025). For example, Adebayo (2025) documents how the Senate’s opposition ranks have thinned due to defections, risking authoritarian tendencies despite constitutional provisions. Voter surveys indicate widespread disillusionment, with defectors often penalized at the polls, yet the lack of enforcement perpetuates the cycle, as highlighted in Agboga (2023). Economically, this patronage-driven system diverts resources from public needs to elite bargains, exacerbating inequality and hindering development, as noted in Eze (2023).

Comparatively, while mature democracies tolerate ideological shifts, Nigeria’s context—marked by godfatherism and financial incentives—amplifies negative effects, potentially leading to democratic backsliding similar to historical one-party eras (Smith, 2024).<sup>\*</sup> Elite resistance to reforms, such as the failed 2022 bill mandating resignation upon defection, underscores the challenge, but grassroots movements and civil society advocacy could pressure for change (Umeh, 2023). Ultimately, addressing defections requires not just legal tweaks but a cultural shift toward ideology-based politics, as without it, Nigeria risks entrenching a system where collective governance is overshadowed by individual opportunism, threatening long-term stability.

## XI. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen Anti-Defection Legislation: The National Assembly should revise Section 68

within 18 months, closing loopholes with expedited judicial reviews.

2. Promote Internal Party Democracy: Mandate transparent membership lists and fair candidate selections to deter opportunistic exits.
3. Reform Political Incentives: INEC should implement public funding within 12 months to reward policy-focused parties and curb patronage.
4. Enhance Civic Education: Civil society and electoral bodies must launch voter awareness campaigns on defection impacts within six months.
5. Judicial Clarity: Develop consistent guidelines balancing individual rights with electoral integrity, effective within 24 months.

### CONCLUSION

Political defections pose a critical threat to Nigeria's democratic stability, with numbers climbing to 180 by September, 2025, driven by patronage over ideology. This study reveals their destabilizing effects on party systems and voter trust. Urgent collaboration between scholars and policymakers is essential to enact these reforms, preventing the entrenchment of a system where personal gain overshadows collective governance.

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