



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Waka waka politician: what are the drivers of party switching in Nigeria?

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Abstract

Most existing literature on the causes of party switching both in Africa and around the world is built on tenuous empirical foundations. The question of why members of parliament (MPs) switch parties has hardly been asked directly either to the MPs themselves or to everyday voters. While MPs could lie or give more favourable accounts that suit their interests, putting this question to them could uncover other crucial factors that have fallen through the cracks in previous theorizations. This article takes a triangulation approach by drawing from the viewpoints of researchers, voters and MPs themselves to give a more holistic picture of the drivers of party defection. Through a combination of a nationwide representative survey and elite and key informant interviews, I situate the trend of party switching in Nigeria within broader comparative literature on the subject, showing how Nigeria conforms and deviates from existing conceptualizations of party switching around the world. I find evidence of interactions between formal and personal drivers of party switching in Nigeria. I also discover that while a majority of Nigerian voters are suspicious of defectors, defectors point accusing fingers at the lack of internal democracy within political parties, thereby exposing an issue not adequately addressed in existing literature.

Résumé

L'essentiel de la littérature existante sur les causes du transfuge politique en Afrique et dans le reste du monde repose sur des fondements empiriques ténus. La question de pourquoi des membres de parlement (MP) changent de parti a rarement été posée directement aux MP eux-mêmes ou aux électeurs ordinaires. Les MP pourraient certes mentir ou invoquer des motifs favorables à leurs intérêts, mais le fait de leur poser cette question pourrait révéler d'autres facteurs déterminants qui ont jusqu'à présent échappé à la théorisation. Cet article présente une approche de triangulation en s'appuyant sur les points de vue de chercheurs, d'électeurs et de MP eux-mêmes pour dresser un tableau plus holistique des déterminants du transfuge politique. À partir d'une enquête représentative à l'échelle nationale et d'entretiens auprès d'élites et d'informateurs clés, l'auteur situe la tendance de transfuge politique au Nigeria dans la littérature comparative plus large sur ce sujet, en montrant en quoi le Nigeria se conforme aux conceptualisations existantes du transfuge politique à travers le monde, et en quoi il s'en éloigne. L'auteur met en évidence des interactions entre

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les déterminants formels et personnels du transfuge politique au Nigeria. Il découvre également que, tandis qu'une majorité des électeurs nigériens se méfient des transfuges, ces derniers pointent un doigt accusateur vers le manque de démocratie interne au sein des partis politiques, exposant ainsi une question que la littérature existante n'aborde pas suffisamment.

Resumo

A maior parte da literatura existente sobre as causas da mudança de partido, tanto em África como em todo o mundo, assenta em bases empíricas ténues. A questão de saber o porquê de deputados mudarem de partido é raramente colocada diretamente aos próprios deputados ou aos eleitores comuns. Apesar dos deputados poderem mentir ou dar relatos mais favoráveis que sirvam os seus interesses, colocar-lhes esta questão poderia revelar outros factores cruciais que passaram despercebidos na teorização anterior. Este artigo adopta uma abordagem de triangulação, recorrendo aos pontos de vista de investigadores, eleitores e dos próprios deputados para dar uma imagem mais holística dos factores de deserção partidária. Através de uma combinação de um inquérito representativo a nível nacional e de entrevistas a elites e a informadores-chave, situo a tendência de mudança de partido na Nigéria no âmbito de uma literatura comparativa mais vasta sobre o assunto, mostrando como a Nigéria se conforma e se desvia das conceptualizações existentes sobre a mudança de partido em todo o mundo. Encontro indícios de interações entre factores formais e pessoais da mudança de partido na Nigéria. Também descubro que, embora a maioria dos eleitores nigerianos desconfie dos desertores, estes apontam o dedo acusador à falta de democracia interna nos partidos políticos, expondo assim uma questão que não é adequadamente abordada na literatura existente.

The expression '*waka waka*' in Nigerian Pidgin English coincidentally has similar meanings in New Zealand. In the former, it is used to describe a restless person who perambulates from one place to another, while in the latter (where the precise term is '*waka jumping*') it refers to the movement or defection of politicians from one political party to another – hence the title of this article. I analyse the phenomenon of party switching in Nigeria, Africa's largest democracy, with over 93 million registered voters at the 2023 polls (INEC 2023), and with over 200 cases of party switching in the Nigerian federal legislature from 2011 to 2019, known as the Nigerian 7th and 8th assemblies.¹ The 9th assembly (2019–23) was omitted from this article because it was still in session when this work was being written, and the dust was yet to settle around the 2023 general elections. Nonetheless, I have counted forty-seven cases of party switching in the 9th assembly, demonstrating that defection is still prevalent among Nigerian members of parliament (MPs). While party switching occurs in all tiers and branches of government, for the sake of a manageable scope, I concentrate on the federal legislature – the National Assembly, which is composed of the Senate

¹ I counted a total of 214 incidences of party switching in the Nigerian federal legislature (House of Representatives and Senate) between 2011 to 2019. It should be noted that party switching occurs at other levels (state and local government) and in arms of government (governors and ministers switch parties). However, this work limits its analysis to federal legislators alone, with the particular opportunities and constraints facing them as lawmakers.

and House of Representatives. A logical place to commence the discourse on party switching both within and outside Africa is the drivers of party defections. While certain existing research on party defection around the world has touted re-election, patronage, perks of office and ideological/policy considerations as the major drivers of switching (Desposato 2006; Fashagba 2014; Klein 2019), others have pointed to broader formal institutional arrangements that could facilitate or remove deterrents for party nomadism, such as weak party institutionalization (Heller and Mershon 2008a; Kreuzer and Pettai 2008), non-existent or tepid enforcement of anti-defection laws (Janda 2009; Okeke *et al.* 2019), and candidate-centred as opposed to party-centred electoral systems.

Particularly for African democracies, weak party institutionalization, politicians' bid to remain in power, patronage politics and a lack of clear ideological demarcation among parties have been theorized as the major drivers of party defection on the continent (Blunt 1964; Fashagba 2014; Okeke *et al.* 2019). These create opportunities for MPs who lose confidence in their re-election prospects in their current party, who see better perks in another party, and/or who have ideological and policy disputes with their present party to switch their allegiance. The case study of this research exhibits a combination of the dearth of ideological clarity among parties, weak enforcement of anti-defection laws but a contestable candidate-centred electoral system, coexisting with MPs shopping for the best platform for re-election and better perks of office.

While these are important, the question of why MPs switch parties has hardly been asked directly either to the MPs themselves or to everyday voters for research purposes. Admittedly, MPs could lie about their reasons for switching or give more favourable accounts to suit their interests, so researchers largely ignore these accounts and rely on independent conceptualizations of events surrounding the switching of MPs. Although this independent theorization zooms out to the broader picture of the general causes of shifting political affiliations, putting this question directly to politicians could uncover other hidden but crucial factors that have fallen through the net in broader theorizations. Similarly, everyday voters' responses to party switching have been measured chiefly through election results to check how the electoral outcomes of switchers compare with those of non-switchers (Klein 2016; O'Brien and Shomer 2013; Tavits 2009; Zielinski *et al.* 2005). This is yet another missed opportunity because it is difficult to hold constant all factors that could affect electoral outcomes while isolating the impact of switching on electoral success or loss. In fact, voters' perceptions of why MPs cross-carpet could influence how they eventually vote at the polls. I take a triangulation approach by drawing from the viewpoints of researchers, voters and MPs themselves to give a more holistic picture of both the formal and informal propellers of party defection. Through a combination of a nationwide representative survey of eligible voters across Nigeria and elite and key informant interviews, as well as a critical evaluation of press statements by party defectors, I discover that the majority of voters in Nigeria are indeed suspicious of party defectors and would choose a non-switcher over a switcher, all things being equal. However, defectors point accusing fingers at party leaders and lack of internal democracy within Nigerian political parties, thereby exposing an issue not adequately addressed in existing literature on party switching, and often missed by analysts in their theorization of the causes of switching in Nigeria. Indeed, because party leaders

in Nigeria have the discretion to choose between direct and indirect primaries as well as the logistics of the primaries, their influence over eventual party flagbearers is enormous. I argue that, while fairer party primaries are not the silver bullet that would stem the tide of defections in Nigeria, they would limit defections of those aggrieved MPs who fall victim to botched party primaries.

In addition, the nationwide survey revealed that the majority of voters believe that the personal interests of MPs, such as contracts, appointments and other perks of office, are the major reason for party defections, with re-election coming second and minimal acknowledgement of ideological switching. However, I argue that it would be difficult for MPs to pursue their personal interests if they were not re-elected into office in the first place, and the fact that most switching occurs close to elections reinforces this point. Re-election bids therefore stand as the major driver of party switching in Nigeria, with personal interests and even ideology subsisting on this. The discrepancy between the perspectives of voters and politicians on the drivers of switching is consistent with the general lack of trust of the intentions of politicians in Nigeria, and in Africa more broadly. Switchers therefore generally have the herculean task of convincing voters that their move was based on collective as opposed to personal interests.

Research method

I utilized a combination of key informant interviews, a critical review of media sources, and original survey data on Nigerians' perception of party switching, to produce a holistic account of the drivers of defections in Nigeria. I conducted thirteen key informant interviews involving three MPs who switched, one senior aide of the former Senate president (who also switched), five party executives from the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) (the two biggest political parties in Nigeria), three political analysts and commentators, and one gubernatorial candidate who switched parties twice. To triangulate, verify and give more context to the interview data, I included relevant media reports on incidents of switching in Nigeria, including press statements from switchers themselves and editorials from media watchdogs. In addition, I conducted a nationwide representative survey to gauge the attitudes of everyday Nigerians towards party switching, and to bring their voices to the fore, as these have often been overlooked by existing literature on the subject.

The nationwide representative telephone² survey utilized a proportionate random sampling to select respondents in all of Nigeria's thirty-six states and the federal capital, with the sample comprising 1,023 respondents. With this sample size, and the selection method, the results obtained represent the opinions of Nigerians with 95 per cent confidence level and a 4.65 per cent margin of error, with a design effect of 1.5. Enumerators from NOI Polls, a polling organization in Nigeria, were contracted to conduct the national representative survey in February 2022. The eclectic combination of data sources places this research on firm empirical foundations.

² Active telephone numbers were derived in partnership with the Nigerian Communications Commission.

Drivers of party switching

Causes of party switching have been broadly discussed from two major perspectives: structural factors that provide opportunities for switching; and factors based on interaction among political agents (MPs, parties and voters) (O'Brien and Shomer 2013). So, I categorize the diverse drivers of party switching in the existing literature from around the world under the frames of formal and personal drivers, and consider perspectives from voters and MPs themselves to examine which of these factors apply in the Nigerian case. Formal factors entail the presence or absence of codified rules, regulations, systems and prohibitions that either provide opportunities or serve as deterrents for switching, while personal factors comprise issues that influence party defection based on the personal interactions between MPs, voters and political parties, especially where formal arrangements permit defection. The formal drivers can be considered enablers of the personal drivers, as the former prepare the ground for party defection by limiting or totally removing institutional constraints.

Formal drivers of party switching

Party institutionalization and ideological delineation

On formal drivers of party switching, while scholars such as Klein (2019), Kreuzer and Pettai (2008) argue that the lack of institutionalization of political parties is a major driver of party defection, defining party institutionalization itself is another contested issue. According to Huntington (1968: 12), '[i]nstitutionalization is the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability', with four major dimensions – adaptability, complexity, autonomy and coherence. Mainwaring (1999) defines party institutionalization not only as the extent of ideological polarity among political parties, as Sartori (1976) before him emphasized, but as the presence of established party practices and principles that shape the activities of members and ensure stability over time. Mainwaring further states that institutionalized parties are often longstanding, with solid roots in and links to society, thereby improving their representative legitimacy.

If we consider the particular assessment of the general performance of political parties in Africa with these indicators, such parties have often been described as weak, formless and lacking in representation (Bayart 1993; Manning 2005; Sartori 1976). Sartori (1976: 244) described postcolonial African parties as 'formless polities', while Bayart (1993) portrayed them as unrepresentative and composed of co-opted political elites detached from the people. Even after the so-called third wave of democratization in the 1990s, which witnessed the transition of several African states from one-party states or military dictatorships to multiparty competitions, van de Walle (2003; 2007) and Manning (2005) have lamented how obstructive factors have markedly diverted the consolidation of parties in Africa. Such factors include personalistic and ethnic politics as well as clientelism, where private goods are gifted to targeted groups based on ethnic ties or informal relationships in return for political support rather than the provision of public goods. Tetzlaff (2002) and Mbah (2011) likewise claim that parties in Africa are simply vehicles used by political entrepreneurs and elites to attain power, and are less about representing the different groups in society.

Conversely, I admit the familiar issues and obstacles of clientelism and ethnic politics, but argue that labelling African parties as weakly institutionalized is reductionistic, as many of them have roots in society with clear party structures. Similarly, Riedl (2014) returned to old indicators of institutionalization (stability, roots in society, legitimacy and party organization) as proposed by Sartori (1976) and Mainwaring (1999), but found variations within and among African states. In other words, she discovered that Africa is composed of political parties with different levels of institutionalization. LeBas (2011) confirms this variation among African parties, and traces it to interactions between opposition groups and pre-democratic regimes. Therefore, I side with scholars who argue that using a broad brush across the continent to paint it as composed of weakly institutionalized parties is oversimplistic and lacks empirical grounding.

In addition, it is difficult to wave aside political parties in Nigeria as weakly institutionalized since most of them at least have clear structures and modes of operation. In fact, before a political party is registered in Nigeria, it is expected to meet some key criteria including submitting to the electoral commission a draft of the party constitution, code of conduct, manifesto and office addresses; this applies in at least twenty-four of the thirty-six states in the country (INEC 2014). The electoral commission also has the power to deregister parties that fail to win any seat at the local government, state or national level. This is aimed at ensuring that existing parties have public recognition and roots in society by virtue of winning elections. Additionally, despite irregularities in some of their electoral successes, the APC and PDP dominate the news cycle both during and outside election season, evidence of their visibility and name recognition. Nonetheless, Nigerian parties generally lack ideological clarity, which could have helped to better demarcate parties from one another and to provide different policy and ideological alternatives to the public. So, it could be argued that Nigerian parties have structures but are deficient in ideological clarity.

This, however, was not always the case. Parties in Nigeria's first republic shortly after independence showed signs of ideological polarities. While Action Group (AG), a pre-independence party based in the western region, showed signs of progressive politics and had a strong mass education agenda, the Northern People's Congress comprised core conservative Muslim politicians with different visions for the country (Abegunrin 2015). Admittedly, these were largely ethnic parties and struggled to win elections outside their core ethnic base. The ethnic tensions and ideological polarity among them undoubtedly heated up the polity of the newly independent country, which eventually succumbed to a civil war seven years after independence. While the war is often attributed to the horizontal inequalities experienced by the Igbos in eastern Nigeria, the failed attempted multiparty alliance and massive election irregularities orchestrated by party operatives contributed to this sense of chaos, lack of solidarity and military coups before the war (Kirk-Greene 1975). In my interviews for this research, one Nigerian researcher argued that, while the parties in the first republic were better demarcated than the parties in the present fourth republic, political violence – which culminated in a civil war – was more common then than now.³ The parties in the brief second and third republics were weak copies of those of

³ The interviews were anonymized because they were conducted less than a year before the next general election, and participants were sceptical about discussing issues concerning party affiliations

the first and showed signs of ebbing ideological clarity for the sake of broader national appeals. So, the price paid for the present parties' national outreach was a move from ideological and ethnic polarization to catch-all parties that lack ideological demarcations (Bogaards 2010). In fact, the present Nigerian constitution prohibits the formation of parties along ethnic or religious cleavages,⁴ and it seems that ideological preferences among parties have also been lost in the process.

This move to catch-all parties for the sake of national peace and stability has far-reaching effects on party defection, as switching could become more frequent when parties become less ideologically demarcated. This lack of demarcation enables legislators to switch parties without incurring any significant ideological incompatibility with the new party since there is no clear party differentiation in the first place. Klein (2019) generally observes that, because of the distinct ideological standings of many western parties, switchers are likely to find their new party ideologically incompatible. Klein also comments on the transactional cost of switching parties in ideological settings, where switching could be interpreted as a sign of political betrayal of those voters who supported the switchers because of the ideological position of the former party, a costly move for re-election. It would therefore take a significant ideological or policy shift, often following consultation with their electoral base, for legislators in ideological party settings to switch. This seems to imply that in a case with no ideological difference, as in Nigeria, voters would not mind if MPs switched since the parties are the same ideologically. But despite this lack of ideological polarization, I contend that Nigerian parties still have core attributes that distinguish one from another, one of which is party legacy. The two major parties in Nigeria, the PDP and the APC, have both won control of the federal government (PDP for sixteen years, APC for more than eight), and Nigerians can now compare the performances of both parties. In addition, despite the relative nationwide popularity of these parties, they still have their strongholds where they dominate, with the APC more popular in the north while the PDP often takes the south. This might not be unconnected to the fact that, since the return to multiparty democracy in 1999, the APC has produced a northern president and one from the south, while the PDP has produced two presidents from the southern part of the country, making the PDP stronger in the south by virtue of ethnic/identity politics, and the APC in the north. So, when an MP switches from a party in its stronghold, it is expected that voters will mind.

This idea of party core, which does not necessarily constitute ideological delineations among parties, has been discussed by other scholars of African politics. Bob-Milliar (2012) points out the boundaries between the two major parties in Ghana in what he calls 'founding mythology', and shows how this guides party mobilization strategies and representation. Bertrand (2020) refers to these as historical values and party cores that enable African parties to mobilize support and endure over time, drawing from her research in Burkina Faso and Uganda. LeBas (2011) makes a case for the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), a political party in Zimbabwe with strong roots in the country's trade unions, and Riedl (2014) discusses the sentimental

close to the election. Three random letters were assigned to the interviewees with their office/positions specified. Interview with IAE, a Nigerian researcher and political scientist, 25 February 2022.

⁴ Sections 221, 222 and 223 of the 1999 Nigerian constitution.

appeals of parties in Senegal. There have been attempts to categorize parties in Nigeria as either market- or state-oriented, as Obe (2019) and some public analysts in Nigeria have tried to do,⁵ but this has been dismissed more vigorously by another set of Nigerian researchers and analysts, and even by politicians themselves, as a forced categorization of the catch-all parties in Nigeria.⁶ These debates suggest that, despite the ideological convergence among African parties, they still possess party cores that distinguish them.

This absence of ideological delineation is related to the valence issues raised by Bleck and van de Walle (2013) – that parties in sub-Saharan Africa have similar policy preferences. They argue that most political parties, both ruling and opposition parties, agree on the primacy of certain issues such as employment, security and education, but they often avoid issues that require unequivocal ideological commitment because of uncertainties. Instead of taking opposing ideological positions, parties adopt similar policy preferences but argue among themselves on who is best positioned to deliver, pointing to their past achievements in either their private businesses or previous political office. In their words, ‘the absence of economic ideological debate should not be confused for a dearth of programmatic politics . . . political parties do invoke salient political issues – but usually through valence appeals, rather than by taking positions’ (*ibid.*: 1395). Interestingly, they further observe that appealing to those valence issues that do not require rigid ideological positions makes it easier for politicians to switch political allegiance with ease. ‘Valence issues around which there is broad consensus,’ they reveal, ‘offer a safer strategy for politicians who may be considering switching parties or alliances in the near future’ (*ibid.*: 1398). I proffer that this prevalence of valence appeals in African parties seems to offer a better explanation for switching than the argument of weakly institutionalized parties, since, as discussed earlier, many African parties have structures and public support, factors that constitute features of institutionalized parties, but the lack of ideological delineation among Nigerian parties could make switchers feel less out of place after they defect. So, the issue of lack of ideological clarity in Nigerian political parties should be disentangled from the general argument of lack of party institutionalization, which might not apply.

Anti-defection laws

Another issue raised by existing literature on party switching is the absence or weak enforcement of anti-defection laws. Desposato (2006) discusses the presence or absence of punitive measures against party defection as another determinant of the occurrence of switching. In other words, states that have laws and regulations against party switching are likely to experience fewer defections. However, Steytler (1997) reveals that longstanding democracies such as the USA and the UK have no

⁵ Interview with CEN, a former senior legislative aide to the Senate president, who switched from the APC to the PDP in 2018, 26 January 2022; interview with REO, a Nigerian sociologist and public analyst, 11 February 2022.

⁶ Interview with IAE, 25 February 2022; interview with PAE, a member of the PDP in Benue and of the National Executive, 25 January 2022; interview with RTE, a newspaper editor and public analyst, 2 November 2022; interview with SIO, a former MP from the Niger Delta area who switched parties from the PDP to the APC, 2 March 2022.

anti-defection laws but experience fewer incidents of switching compared with several late democracies that have tough rules but, ironically, higher numbers of defections. This could be a result of the ideological polarization among parties in these countries, which makes switching rare, as opposed to the ideological convergence found in newer democracies such as in Africa. Furthermore, Blunt (1964) observes that, in spite of the presence of anti-defection laws, MPs in Nigeria have been able to find loopholes to avoid sanctions. For instance, party switching is often not prosecuted because ‘the parties would support the prohibition of carpet-crossing when their members were being enticed away to other parties but would oppose it in the reverse circumstances’ (Blunt 1964: 90). Still, in Nigeria, the loopholes in sections 68(1)(g) and 109(1) of the Nigerian constitution, which mandate MPs to relinquish their seat after defecting but permit defection in times of party mergers and significant party division, have effectively been exploited by Nigerian legislators (Fashagba 2014; Ikechukwu 2015; Nwanegbo *et al.* 2014). Ikechukwu (2015: 80) describes this equivocation in the Nigerian constitution as ‘an escape route for politicians to cross-carpet since there are always divisions within the political parties’.

Giving that both the PDP and the APC have benefited (and suffered) from these defections, it is difficult to imagine that they would seek court injunctions to compel switchers to vacate their seats. Both parties have accommodated defectors, often offering incentives for legislators to defect. According to Awofeso and Irabor (2016: 37), ‘the then ruling PDP [in 2014–15] was said to have promised US\$2 million to each senator who returns to the PDP, US\$1 million to each member of the House of Representatives and US\$10 million to each “leader” who abandoned the APC for the PDP’.

I have observed that, until recently, it was only private individuals – usually political opponents of the defectors – or civil society groups who sought rulings from the court on the issue of party switching. In May 2012, a member of the House of Representatives, Ifedayo Abegunde, representing Akure North/Akure South federal constituency, was forced to relinquish his seat after a federal high court sacked him for switching from the Labour Party to the Action Congress of Nigeria.⁷ The court ruled that there were no significant party crises or mergers in the Labour Party that would have justified switching according to the 1999 Nigerian constitution. This case, which eventually made its way to the Supreme Court of Nigeria, ended with the same judgment: the justices ruled that Ifedayo Abegunde’s defection warranted the relinquishing of his seat in the House of Representatives. This case was filed by a political opponent of the defendant as opposed to one of Nigeria’s political parties.

In April 2019, another federal court sacked Senator Sonni Ogbuoji for defecting from the PDP to the APC and ordered him to refund all salaries and allowances received after switching after some of his political rivals dragged him to court.⁸ Nonetheless, by the time the judgment was made, Senator Ogbuoji had already left the Senate and was gunning for the governor’s mansion. Although there were other cases of courts sacking defecting MPs in state legislatures, the majority of switchers – especially in the federal legislature – retained their seats and emerged unscathed. In another case from 2018–19, an NGO under the aegis of the Legal Defence and

⁷ ‘Court sacks House of Rep. member over party defection’, *Channel News*, 30 May 2012.

⁸ ‘Defection: court sacks Nigerian senator’, *Premium Times*, 18 April 2019.

Assistance Project (LEDAP) sued fifty-four legislators who switched parties without vacating their seats between 2014 and 2018. However, the federal high court in Abuja dismissed the case due to technicalities. While the judge conceded that the legislators had acted against the constitution, he stated that LEDAP was the wrong plaintiff.⁹ In other words, the legislators would have been found guilty if the case had been brought by their respective former parties and not the NGO.

I also suggest that timing could be a major issue here, as the majority of switching in the National Assembly in 2014–15 and 2018–19 occurred a few months before the general elections. This implies that the electorates, instead of the courts, were left to judge through their votes whether they approved of those defections that occurred close to elections. In the cases of Ifedayo Abegunde and Senator Sonni Ogbuoji, they both switched outside the election period. Awofeso and Irabor (2016) reveal that, within a year of the 2015 election, five state governors, eleven PDP senators and thirty-seven members of the House of Representatives defected in the same month. And in 2018, another thirty-seven members of the House of Representatives (not necessarily the same MPs) and fifteen senators defected on the same day about six months before the 2019 election.¹⁰ Nigerian political parties have often shown more interest in litigating defections when they occur outside the election season. More recently, the PDP sued the former speaker of the House of Representatives, Yakubu Dogara, who switched to the party before the 2019 election and then returned to the APC a year after winning the election.¹¹ In a case pending in court, the PDP asked for the sacking of the former speaker in line with the anti-defection laws in the constitution. Yet another case is pending in court in which the PDP has sued three senators from Zamfara State who switched parties a few months after winning their elections on its platform.¹² The party would have probably reacted differently if the defections had occurred close to an election – it would have condemned the switching but would not have litigated it, leaving voters to make their own judgement in the imminent polls.

Party leadership and party defections

Heller and Mershon (2008b: 32) note that ‘the wider the array of tools available to party leaders for disciplining their rank and file, in general, the fewer incentives individual MPs have to buck their party line (because it is likely to be more costly in the end)’. However, they caution that when parties become too restrictive, MPs are forced to devise exit options. So, they theorize that party discipline has a curvilinear relationship with switching. Similarly, Nielsen *et al.* (2019) observe that defection could help check the excesses and highhandedness of party leaders, forcing them to take on board the concerns of the electorate and those of their members simultaneously. Nielsen *et al.* (*ibid.*: 43) further comment that ‘[i]t may also reflect situations in which the party leadership makes decisions that contradict the party

⁹ ‘Court declines to sack Saraki, Dogara, Akpabio, 51 others over defection’, *Vanguard News*, 17 May 2019.

¹⁰ ‘Updated: 37 House of Reps members dump APC’, *Premium Times*, 24 July 2018.

¹¹ ‘Defection: court fixes March 9 to hear PDP’s suit against Dogara’, *Vanguard News*, 4 February 2021.

¹² ‘Defection: PDP wants court to sack 3 senators, Gov Matawalle, others’, *Vanguard News*, 15 October 2021.

manifesto', and so 'legislators therefore decide to leave their party to stay loyal to their voters'. This issue of the culpability of party leaders in the wave of defections, especially in Nigeria, has largely been understudied. While most accusing fingers point to MPs who jump ship, the same criticisms are rarely levelled against party leaders, who in some cases either provoke MPs to switch or open the doors for switchers to jump in. In the interviews and media report analysis I conducted for this research, several defecting MPs pointed to the lack of internal democracy in Nigerian parties, exemplified by unfair candidate selection processes.¹³ The wave of defections from the PDP to the APC before the 2015 election was greatly influenced by aggrieved MPs who disputed the party's candidate selection process (Owen and Usman 2015).

President Goodluck Jonathan wanted to run for another term in office in 2015 after completing the term of late President Yar'Adua in 2011 and another four years from 2011 to 2014. While this was constitutional and supported by the courts, many politicians, especially those from the north, saw this as a breach of the power rotation agreement in the PDP constitution and a ploy to perpetuate a southerner in power. With the use of presidential influence, Jonathan succeeded in winning over the party executives and emerged as the top PDP candidate for the 2015 presidential election. This led to internal party squabbles and, eventually, the switching of at least eleven senators and thirty-seven members of the House of Representatives from the PDP to the APC (Owen and Usman 2015). The switchers, many of whom had presidential ambitions, blamed their move on party executives who failed to take their concerns seriously and who were heavily under the influence of the president. This massive movement out of the PDP forced the party chairman to resign,¹⁴ but the damage had already been done – the PDP lost the presidential election and control of the National Assembly to the APC.

In the months leading up to the 2019 election, switchers who moved from the ruling APC to the PDP (the opposite of what happened in 2015) once again pointed accusing fingers to presidential interference in the candidate selection process and highhanded party executives. The then speaker of the house, Yakubu Dogara, raised similar concerns that he would not pander to the APC party leadership to obtain a ticket to contest the elections. 'They said they would give me a ticket in the APC,' he stated, 'but that I must go and beg for it. I said I did not need the ticket. In politics, I have never gone to anybody's house to beg for a ticket.'¹⁵ Likewise, the APC chairman at the time, Adams Oshiomhole, was accused of manipulating party primaries to suit those who paid homage to him. Former Senate president Bukola Saraki accused him thus: 'Oshiomhole is somebody who has been told to have been collecting not even naira but dollars from candidates and he is being accused by his party's aspirants and governors.'¹⁶ The shambolic primaries held by the APC were the

¹³ Interview with CRE, an APC local government chairman based in South-South, 10 March 2022; interview with ITA, a former gubernatorial candidate with previous affiliations to the PDP and the APC, 15 March 2022; interview with MDS, a former MP from the Niger Delta area who switched parties, 2 March 2022; interview with SIO, 2 March 2022.

¹⁴ 'Nigerian ruling party chairman Bamanga Turuk resigns from post', *Bloomberg*, 16 January 2014.

¹⁵ 'Dogara speaks on APC reconciliation but says he won't beg for ticket', *Premium Times*, 14 September 2018.

¹⁶ 'For whom the bell tolls: 9 sins of Oshiomhole that may quicken his fall from power', *Ripples Nigeria*, 3 June 2019.

subject of several lawsuits before and after the election. In fact, the Supreme Court barred the APC from fielding candidates in Zamfara and Rivers States in the 2019 gubernatorial and federal legislative elections due to lack of transparency in party primaries.

Interestingly, this issue of controversial primaries often plagues the ruling party more than the opposition parties in Nigeria; the PDP, the ruling party before the 2015 elections, was hit with candidate selection squabbles, while the APC plunged into a similar position as the ruling party before the 2019 elections. I argue that, while the ruling party is often an attractive option for politicians because of its power of incumbency, fierce intraparty competition for the party ticket exposes the party to internal squabbles, which boil over into the defection of disgruntled members. This was the case for the PDP a few months before the 2015 elections, and for the APC ahead of the 2019 elections. In fact, both parties, by virtue of their popularity and the benefits and access to power that they provide, often suffer from intra-elite squabbles over party tickets and leadership positions.

Beyond the scenarios noted above, politicians have continued to lament the political interference of the presidency and state governors as well as compromised party leaders. Three former MPs and one gubernatorial candidate whom I interviewed for this research recounted how they lost their positions because ‘Abuja’ or the governor of their state preferred another candidate, compelling them eventually to switch parties.¹⁷ Since the electoral act permits either direct or indirect primaries, party leaders have been accused of selecting the option that best suits their preferred candidates. ‘All manner of mechanism [sic] are crafted to thwart democratic processes especially in the choice of candidates for elective positions,’ Obianyo *et al.* (2022: 22) lament, ‘ranging from exorbitant fees for would be contestants, national executives veto power to nullify primaries, impose candidates or disqualify candidates with winning potentials.’

In the same vein, the electoral commission revealed that 890 (53.35 per cent) out of 1,689 court cases arising from the 2019 general elections were based on pre-election matters, particularly disputed party primaries.¹⁸ The APC chairman was eventually forced out of office because of his abysmal performance, including in the shambolic primaries, and his dwindling support in the party. So, while the discourse on party switching in Nigeria has often been framed as opportunistic politicians changing party affiliations with reckless abandon (Blunt 1964; Fashagba 2014; Okeke *et al.* 2019), this issue of problematic party executives, their interference in the internal candidate selection process and its effects on party switching has not been adequately addressed until now. The curvilinear relationship between party discipline as enforced by party leaders and party switching, as discussed by Heller and Mershon (2008a), rings true in the Nigerian case, and this shows the value of bringing in different viewpoints, with the phenomenon also viewed from the perspective of switchers themselves. This insight into internal party wranglings has often slipped through the net in previous theorizations on the drivers of party switching because

¹⁷ Interview with ITA, 15 March 2022; interview with MDS, 2 March 2022; interview with SIO, 2 March 2022.

¹⁸ ‘INEC records over 1,689 litigations from the 2019 general elections’, *Premium Times*, 13 June 2019.

many researchers have shunned talking to politicians directly or considering their perspective.

Personal drivers of party switching

These drivers include factors other than institutional structures or regulations that motivate individual legislators to switch parties, especially in settings where institutional prohibitions against defections are relaxed or non-existent. According to the existing literature, these can be broken down into three major drivers: re-election bids, patronage or perks of office, and ideology or policy incompatibility (Desposato 2006; Fashagba 2014; Klein 2019). In the words of Desposato (2006: 63), 'the strongest motives for party affiliation are access to distributive resources, electoral opportunities, and compatible policy positions'.

Heller and Mereshon (2008a) observe that the quest for re-election serves as a key motivating factor for most legislators and often influences their policy decisions and whether to switch parties or not, if such an option exists. Desposato (2006) also finds that switchers often consider the prospects of their re-election before defecting. This implies that when legislators feel that their re-election bid is being threatened in their current party, they might switch to another where they believe their chances of re-election are higher. In the same vein, Klein (2019: 1) reveals that 'parties that fail to provide their members with re-election prospects or government access are likely to witness switching', especially in new democracies. Similarly, Gianmarco *et al.* (2020) disclose that parties that fall out of favour with the public because of scandals often suffer from heavy defections because even politicians who were not directly involved do not want to ruin their electoral chances by associating with a disgraced party because of the negative label. In the interviews for this research, switchers in Nigeria confirmed that re-election or the general quest to remain in public office was a reason for switching.¹⁹ When re-election prospects are dampened through disputes with party executives, waning party popularity or fierce intraparty competition, which they suspect would work against them, they move to another party with an easier path to getting ballot access. Aldrich and Bianco (1992) and Mann (2000) have discovered in the general literature that legislators can switch parties in order to avoid party primaries, especially when a strong challenger emerges who enjoys huge support within the party. In Nigeria, these strong challengers in many cases have the backing of the presidency or the governor, as some switchers have alleged.

However, the interviewees also admitted that additional perks of office, such as appointments and contracts, were gifted to them by their new party.²⁰ Sometimes, even if they do not get re-elected, they are placated by the perks they get from their new party. This is often common in defections to the ruling party at the state or federal level, where defectors are rewarded with privileged access to government resources. Some of the switchers interviewed for this research who moved to the ruling party got lucrative positions and contracts. This is in line with Desposato's

¹⁹ Interview with MDS, 2 March 2022; interview with PAE, 25 January 2022; interview with SIO, 2 March 2022.

²⁰ Interview with EPL, an APC chieftain, 14 March 2022; interview with MDS, 2 March 2022; interview with SIO, 2 March 2022.

(2006) findings in the general literature on party switching that the need to align with the ruling party in order to benefit from juicy appointments could motivate legislators from opposition parties to switch. There were also situations in which politicians defected to the ruling party to avoid investigations. Senator Godswill Akpabio, the former minority leader of the 8th Senate, evaded investigation by switching allegiance from the PDP to the ruling APC. Akpabio, who was governor of Akwa Ibom State for eight years and moved to the Senate after his tenure as governor ended, all under the PDP, was investigated for corruption and money laundering, but the investigation was abruptly ended days after he switched to the APC. In reaction, the media was awash with news of how Senator Akpabio evaded investigation by switching allegiance to the ruling party.²¹ An APC chieftain admitted in one of the interviews for this research that Senator Akpabio, who was an outspoken critic of the APC, switched to the party to save himself from investigations by the Nigerian anti-graft agency – binning the investigation was part of the agreement the APC had with him.²² However, even with these lucrative positions, contracts, shielding from investigations and other perks, switchers interviewed for this research expressed their intention to return to elected office, either in the legislature or in other positions.

Ideological and policy incompatibility have also been raised as possible drivers of party switching. Kreuzer and Pettai (2008), Fashagba (2014) and Klein (2019) agree that this form of switching is more common in advanced democracies than in new democracies, and that it occurs less frequently compared with other forms of defection. In protest against certain policies that legislators judge to be detrimental to their base, lawmakers might decide to switch parties. For instance, a fallout in the Brexit negotiation made some agitated MPs leave the Conservative Party to stand as independents. The same applies to those who left the Labour Party over the antisemitism debacle. Nielsen *et al.* (2019) observe that MPs might also switch when their party strays from their core values, using switching as a way to register their dissatisfaction with the changing ideological position of the party.

Almost all interviewees for this research – analysts, legislative aides and politicians alike – alleged that there is a dearth of ideological switching in Nigeria, arguing that Nigerian parties have no ideological clarity in the first place. They cited re-election, or the bid to remain in power in general, and perks of office as the major drivers of switching. However, MPs who switched in Benue State before the 2019 election attributed their defection to the poor state of security in the state. Benue has been the epicentre of bloody clashes between farmers and herders, a crisis that the federal government, which controls the security agencies, failed to address adequately.²³ So, the governor of the state and six MPs switched out of the ruling APC in protest at the lackadaisical handling of the security crisis.²⁴ On whether this qualifies as ideological/policy switching, one of the PDP party executives in Benue who received the switching governor and MPs said that it was more a question of political survival

²¹ 'Akpabio's defection puts Buhari's anti-corruption war under the spotlight', *Punch News*, 11 August 2018; 'I didn't order EFCC to stop investigating Akpabio – Buhari', *The Guardian Nigeria*, 8 January 2019.

²² Interview with EPL, 14 March 2022.

²³ 'Herdsman killing: Benue youths protest', *Punch News*, 3 January 2018; interview with SWI, an MP from Benue State who switched before 2019 from the APC to the PDP, 12 April 2022.

²⁴ 'We left APC due to herdsman killings, says Benue Rep', *Punch News*, 29 August 2018.

for the switchers to seal their re-election rather than ideological switching.²⁵ A top Nigerian researcher and academic also described it as politically expedient for the switchers, a convenient cover for re-election;²⁶ this was echoed by two APC local government chairmen interviewed for this research.²⁷ This regional case deserves more in-depth analysis since it recorded the highest number of switchers re-elected in 2019 when re-election among switchers nationwide was barely 10 per cent. They seem to have successfully convinced voters to re-elect them.

While Fashagba (2014) neatly classifies switchers in the Nigerian Senate from 1999 to 2011 according to these personal drivers of defection and finds no ideological switchers, he fails to acknowledge that MPs could have multiple reasons for switching and that this would complicate his somewhat simplistic categorization. He also claims that his categorization was based on media sources, but again fails to recognize the limitations of his sources – that is, not everything gets reported by the media. A combination of both media sources and key informants' interviews could have been more comprehensive.

Voters' perception of party switching in Nigeria

By way of improvement on previous research on party switching in Nigeria, I also asked voters directly which factor best explains why politicians switch, from their perspective. This perspective is important because it tests the effect of party switching on democratic representation, interrogating whether the public was carried along when defection occurred. From the Nigerian voters surveyed for this research, 48 per cent believe that politicians switch because of personal benefits such as getting contracts and appointments. Re-election bids emerged second, with 24 per cent, while 14 per cent opted for ideological/policy considerations (see Figure 1). This is an improvement on Fashagba's subjective categorization, and could give an indication of how voters will behave during elections. If they believe that the personal interests of MPs are the major drivers of switching, one would expect them to be less likely to vote for them.

Indeed, voters also signalled that they would choose a non-switcher over a switcher, all things being equal, as seen in Figure 2. A staggering 61 per cent responded that they would vote for a non-switcher as opposed to a switcher if faced with the choice; this compares with 21 per cent who would vote for a switcher. The response in favour of non-switchers was above 50 per cent in all geopolitical zones in Nigeria. Despite this response, I argue that re-election or closeness to power in general remains the major driver of party switching in Nigeria as it serves as a way to pursue personal benefits, as pointed out by Nigerian voters in the survey. In other words, switchers would largely not be able to access these contracts and appointments without re-election.

While there are cases where unelected switchers got some perks after switching, details from the interviews reveal that they still have their eyes on elected positions

²⁵ Interview with PAE, 25 January 2022.

²⁶ Interview with IAE, 25 February 2022.

²⁷ Interview with BNE, an APC local government chair in Benue State, 9 April 2022; interview with TYE, an APC local government chair in Benue State, 12 April 2022.

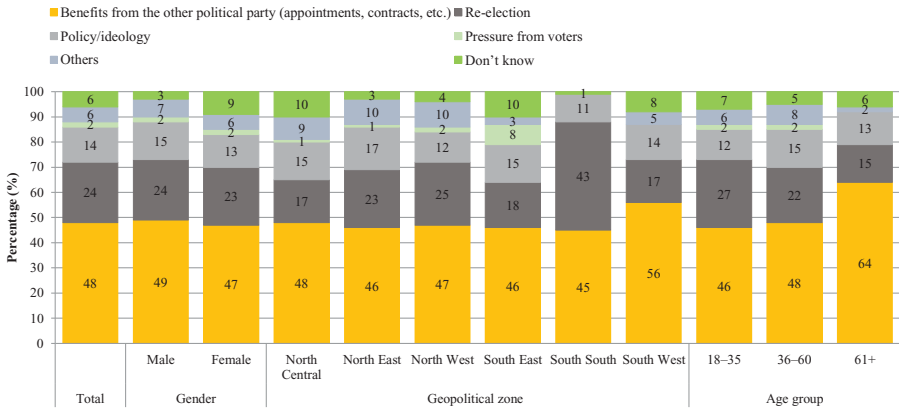


Figure 1. What do you think is the main reason why elected politicians switch parties?

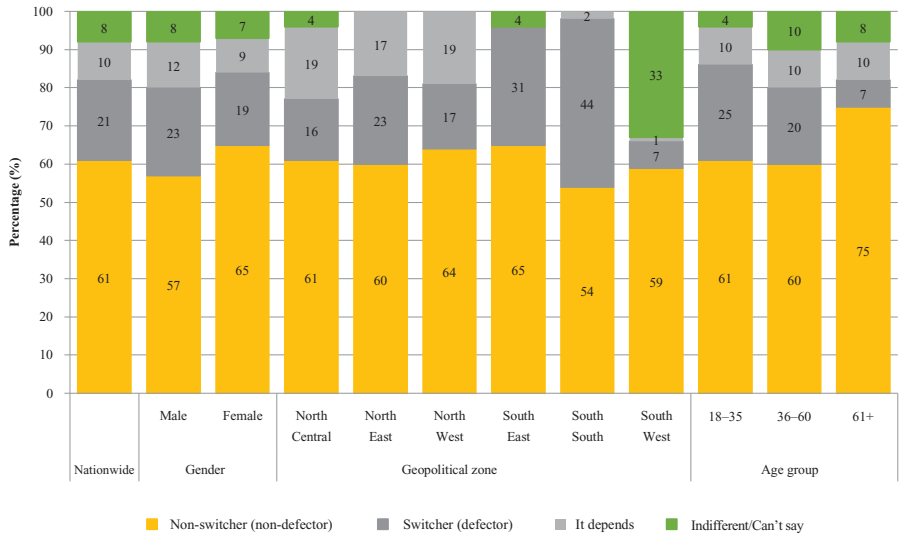


Figure 2. Suppose there are two politicians who are equal in every aspect except that one switched party and the other one didn't. Who would you likely vote for?

where larger perks of office exist. This negative public perception that party switching is largely motivated by the personal interests of MPs as opposed to the dearth of internal democracy within Nigerian parties, as pointed out by many MPs, is consistent with the general lack of public trust in Nigerian politicians, especially federal legislators. While the lack of internal democracy is a legitimate issue and backed up by some evidence, the existing lack of public trust influences the majority of voters to perceive party switching as a pursuit of personal interest. An Afrobarometer survey conducted in 2020 (see Figure 3) also showed that MPs have the lowest public trust compared with governors and the president.

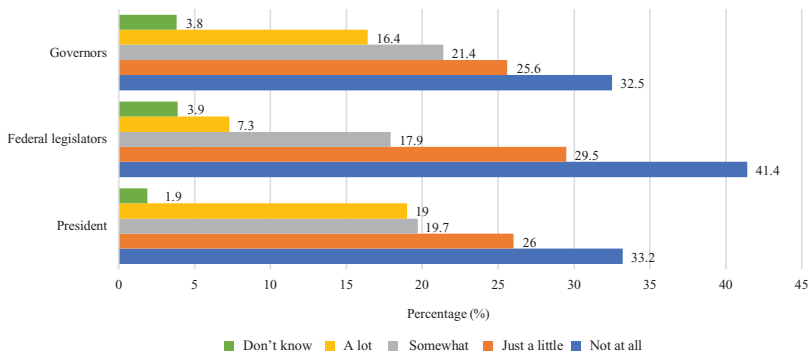


Figure 3. How much do you trust each of the following? Source: Afrobarometer (2020).

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated where Nigeria stands in the literature on the drivers of party switching. Through utilizing data from elite and key informant interviews, a voters' survey and media sources, I uncovered that lack of ideological clarity among Nigerian political parties creates fertile grounds for party defections. The weak implementation of anti-defection laws in the Nigerian constitution, with few MPs sanctioned for defecting, also fails to create a deterrence. Also, the clause in the constitution that permits switching during party divisions has been exploited by switchers to justify cross-carpeting. In addition, interviews with politicians were quite revealing as they unravelled an issue sparsely addressed in the literature on party defections. Lack of transparency in party primaries, influence on party proceedings from the presidency and state governors, and compromised party executives could drive MPs into searching for other places to pitch their tent. Voters, on their part, revealed in the survey conducted for this research that personal benefits such as appointments and contracts are perceived to be the major reasons why MPs switch parties. This paper, however, argues that without re-election it would be difficult to attain these perks of office.

Furthermore, voters signalled a general dislike for party switching among elected MPs and would choose a non-switcher over a switcher if faced with the choice. Moving forward, comparing the electoral outcomes of switchers with those of non-switchers would show if voters followed through with their chastisement of switchers in elections. One major contribution of this research is that it tests existing theories of the drivers of party switching around the world by using evidence from Nigeria. It also brings to light how internal party squabbles, often more prevalent in the ruling party in Nigeria, could provide justifications for switching.

I argue that formal institutional factors such as weak enforcement of anti-defection laws and the absence of ideological demarcation among Nigerian parties provide fertile grounds for defections. Personal factors such as re-election bids, the pursuit of patronage or perks and policy clashes capitalize on the weak formal institutional constraints, allowing MPs to switch with ease. Nonetheless, the deficiency of internal democracy in parties and the lack of transparency in their

candidate selection processes are valid reasons that could provoke affected MPs to switch. But, unfortunately for switchers, the existing lack of public trust in politicians makes it hard for them to convince voters that they defected for public as opposed to private interests.

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Cite this article: Agboga, V. (2023). 'Waka waka politician: what are the drivers of party switching in Nigeria?' *Africa* 93, 615–633. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000197202300075X>