

Democracy without Competition? Analyzing the Crisis of Genuine Multiparty Practice in Nigeria

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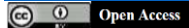
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ABSTRACT

Nigeria operates a constitutionally mandated multiparty democratic system, yet the structural conditions that undergird genuine political competition ideologically distinct parties, free and fair electoral contests, credible institutions, and meaningful opposition have progressively eroded since the return to civilian rule in 1999. This article critically examines through the lens of competitive authoritarianism, elite circulation theory, and institutional decay frameworks. Drawing on secondary data from INEC electoral reports, party registration records, voter turnout statistics, defection analyses, and scholarly literature on African party politics, the study finds that Nigeria's multiparty system is characterized by an illusion of competition: formal plurality coexists with substantive hegemony, rotating between dominant parties that share structural similarities, patronage logics, and governance deficits. Key indicators include historically low voter turnout (declining from 57% in 2003 to 26.72% in 2023), mass party defections, particularly since 2023, the absence of programmatic ideological distinction between major parties, weaponization of state institutions against opposition actors, and the APC's control of at least 31 of 36 state governorships as of 2026. The article argues that Nigeria has democracy without genuine competition - procedural democracy in which elections occur but meaningful choices systematically foreclosed. It recommends electoral party financing and judicial system structural reforms as requirements for restoring genuine multiparty practice.

Introduction

The normative promise of democracy is inseparable from political competition. Classical democratic theorists argue that democracy derives its legitimacy not merely from periodic elections but also from the existence of meaningful alternatives through which citizens can exercise genuine political choice. Therefore, electoral competition constitutes the foundational mechanism through which democratic systems ensure accountability, representation, responsiveness, and peaceful power transfers. Without meaningful competition, elections risk becoming procedural rituals that provide democratic appearances while concealing deeper forms of political monopolization and elite domination. Scholars of democratic consolidation maintain that democracy without competition produces formally democratic institutions that are substantively hollow (Dahl, 1971; Schumpeter, 1942).

The theoretical relationship between democracy and competition has received substantial attention within comparative political studies. Democratic theorists argue that political competition creates incentives for governments to remain accountable because ruling parties must continually seek popular legitimacy while opposition parties serve as institutional mechanisms for oversight and policy alternatives (Przeworski, 1991). Conversely, democratic institutions gradually evolve toward dominant-party systems or competitive authoritarian arrangements characterized by unequal political playing fields when opposition parties become structurally disadvantage or systematically weakened (Levitsky & Way, 2002). Such systems preserve electoral procedures while undermining the substantive conditions for meaningful democratic competition. Consequently, the mere existence of multiple political parties cannot automatically be equated with genuine multiparty democracy.

Nigeria presents one of the most important contemporary cases for examining this democratic paradox. As Africa's largest economy and most populous democratic state, Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999 following prolonged military authoritarianism and subsequently adopted a constitutional

multiparty framework intended to institutionalize competitive politics. Since the beginning of the Fourth Republic, regular elections have been held every four years across the federal and subnational levels, and constitutional provisions have guaranteed citizens' right to establish and participate in political parties. Over the course of democratic practice, the number of registered political parties fluctuated significantly from periods of extensive party proliferation involving as many as 91 registered parties to subsequent reductions that left only 18 registered parties before the 2023 elections. These developments initially demonstrate the expansion of political pluralism and democratic institutionalization.

The institutional trajectory of Nigerian democracy has produced moments often interpreted as evidence of democratic consolidation. The defeat of an incumbent ruling party in 2015 marked the first successful transfer of presidential power from one party to another in Nigerian history, while the continuity of civilian governance was maintained in subsequent elections. These developments encouraged optimistic interpretations that Nigeria was gradually overcoming its authoritarian past and consolidating democratic norms. However, procedural continuity alone provides an incomplete measure of democratic health. Contemporary democratic scholarship increasingly emphasizes that competitive quality, rather than electoral frequency, constitutes more meaningful indicator of democratic resilience (Schedler, 2006).

Evidence increasingly showed the emergence of a crisis of substantive political competition beneath Nigeria's procedural democratic architecture. One of the clearest indicators of this crisis is declining citizen participation. Electoral participation has steadily decreased since the early years of the Fourth Republic, with voter turnout declining from approximately 57.5% in 2003 to only 26.72% during the 2023 presidential election, the lowest turnout recorded since the democratic transition in 1999. From a registered voter population exceeding 93 million, approximately 24.9 million citizens voted, indicating growing disillusionment between citizens and electoral institutions. Such declining participation raises important questions regarding citizens' perceptions of electoral competitiveness and democratic efficacy.

The weakening of substantive competition is also evident in the organizational characteristics of Nigerian political parties. Rather than functioning as programmatic organizations competing through ideological alternatives, parties increasingly operate through patronage distribution networks, elite bargaining structures, ethnic coalitions, and personalized political machines. Party platforms frequently display minimal ideological differentiation, resulting in widespread elite mobility across competing parties and reducing electoral competition to contests between political personalities rather than competing visions of governance. Existing scholarship on African party systems suggests that such weak institutionalization significantly contributes to democratic fragility because parties become vehicles for office acquisition rather than institutions for representation (Van de Walle, 2003; Cheeseman, 2015).

Recent patterns of elite defections further intensify concerns regarding democratic competitiveness. Since the 2023 general elections, unprecedented defections among governors, legislators, and political elites have dramatically altered Nigeria's political landscape. By early 2026, the ruling party controlled approximately 31 of Nigeria's 36 governorship positions, representing over 86% of state-level executive offices. This situation generated concerns about increasing political concentration and the erosion of viable opposition structures. Such developments have revived scholarly debates regarding whether Nigeria's multiparty system is gradually transitioning toward effective one-party dominance despite maintaining formal democratic procedures.

Beyond party dynamics, institutional concerns further complicate Nigeria's democratic trajectory. Electoral management bodies, judicial institutions, and security agencies constitute essential components of competitive democracies because they provide the necessary neutral infrastructure for credible contestation. However, increasing allegations of institutional capture, selective enforcement, judicial inconsistencies, and uneven application of electoral regulations have raised questions regarding these institutions' neutrality. Comparative democratic literature proved that competitive systems become vulnerable when institutions responsible for regulating competition gradually lose their perceived impartiality (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Consequently, democratic erosion may occur incrementally through institutional distortions rather than abrupt authoritarian breakdowns.

Collectively, these developments raise an important paradox: can a political system remain genuinely democratic when competition becomes increasingly constrained despite maintaining formal

multiparty structures? Existing literature on Nigerian democracy has extensively examined elections, electoral violence, ethnic voting patterns, and democratic consolidation; however, relatively limited attention has been devoted to systematically interrogating the distinction between the existence of formal and substantive multiparty practices across the entire Fourth Republic period. This distinction is important because democracies rarely collapse through constitutional abandonment alone; more commonly, they experience gradual erosion through declining competitiveness, institutional imbalance, and weakening of opposition.

Therefore, this study interrogates Nigeria's crisis of genuine multiparty practice by addressing three central questions. First, what structural conditions have produced the crisis of substantive multiparty competition in Nigeria's Fourth Republic? Second, Nigeria's formal multiparty architecture compares with empirical indicators of political competitiveness between 1999 and 2026? Third, what institutional reforms are necessary to restore meaningful political competition as a foundation for democratic accountability and consolidation?

By examining these questions, this study contributes to broader debates concerning democratic quality, party system institutionalization, and political competition in emerging democracies. More importantly, it advances the argument that the survival of democracy depends not only on the existence of elections or political parties but also on the preservation of meaningful competition capable of sustaining accountability, representation, and citizen trust.

Statement of the problem

This article addresses the disjuncture between Nigeria's formal multiparty constitutional design and the substantive reality of political competition as experienced by citizens, parties, and democratic institutions. Nigeria's political system formally satisfies many of the procedural criteria for multiparty democracy: parties are registered and legally permitted to contest elections; elections are conducted on a regular schedule; and the constitution provides for freedom of association and equal suffrage. However, formal compliance with multiparty procedures has not produced the substantive goods that multiparty competition is theorized to deliver: accountability of incumbents to voters, genuine choice between programmatic alternatives, credible rotation of power across distinct political formations, and meaningful protection of opposition rights.

Several interlocking problems constitute the core of this crisis. First, party institutionalization is profoundly weak: Nigerian political parties function primarily as platforms for accessing state patronage rather than as organizations for translating citizen preferences into policy. Without internal democracy, ideological coherence, or stable organizational structures, parties cannot sustain genuine programmatic competition. The ease with which major political figures including five sitting governors in 2013 and a wave of legislators, governors, and senators between 2023 and 2026 defect from one party to another illustrates the essentially personal and transactional nature of party affiliation in Nigeria (Punch Nigeria, 2025).

Second, electoral institutions have failed to guarantee the credibility necessary for elections to function as genuine mechanisms of popular choice. INEC's failure to consistently deploy the BVAS and the IReV result portal during the 2023 elections despite these having been presented as transformative technological innovations deepened a crisis of institutional confidence at a critical juncture. The 2023 presidential election, conducted at a cost of approximately \$2 billion, returned a voter turnout of just 26.72%, indicating that a significant majority of eligible citizens no longer regard elections as meaningful determinants of political outcomes (Chatham House, 2023a).

Third, the weaponization of state institutions against opposition actors including the use of anticorruption agencies, security forces, and election tribunals as instruments of political competition, has progressively eroded the level playing field without which multiparty competition cannot be genuine. When courts systematically favor ruling party candidates in election petitions, security agencies are deployed to intimidate opposition voters in their strongholds, and anticorruption investigations disproportionately target political opponents while ruling party figures enjoy impunity, the formal architecture of multiparty democracy becomes, in practice, a legitimizing façade for a hegemonic political order.

This article argues that Nigeria is experiencing what Levitsky and Way (2002) call "competitive authoritarianism" a system in which the formal institutions of democracy exist and elections are held,

but incumbents systematically violate their norms, creating an uneven playing field that makes genuine competition exceedingly difficult. Addressing this crisis requires not merely electoral reforms but also fundamental transformation of the conditions of the political economy party financing, institutional independence, and elite accountability.

Objectives of the Study

This study is anchored on the following specific objectives:

- i. To examine the historical evolution of multiparty practice in Nigeria's Fourth Republic from 1999 to 2026, identifying patterns of party dominance, competition, and decline
- ii. To analyse the structural conditions, party institutionalization electoral integrity, institutional independence and, money politics that have undermined genuine multi-party competition in Nigeria
- iii. To assess the empirical indicators of democratic competition, voter turnout, party system fragmentation, defection rates, election petition outcomes, and opposition party viability across the study period
- iv. This study situates Nigeria's multiparty crisis within comparative theoretical frameworks of competitive authoritarianism and party system institutionalization and proposes evidence-based institutional reforms to restore the conditions for genuine multiparty competition as a foundation of democratic accountability.

Conceptual Clarification

Democracy

In its Schumpeterian procedural formulation, democracy is those institutional arrangements for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote (Schumpeter, 1943, p. 269). This minimalist definition emphasizes competition and elections as the definitional features of democracy. Richer substantive conceptions associated with Robert Dahl's (1971) concept of "polyarchy" add the requirements of inclusive suffrage, effective participation, enlightened understanding, freedom of expression, and responsive government. For this study, democracy is understood as a system that combines procedural regularity (free and fair elections, constitutional governance, and rule of law) with substantive conditions (genuine political competition, protection of minority rights, and accountable institutions) that enable citizens to exercise meaningful political agency.

Multiparty System

A multiparty system is a political arrangement in which more than two parties compete for governmental power, with no single party commanding a permanent majority (Sartori, 1976). Sartori's classic typology distinguishes between limited pluralism (three to five relevant parties), extreme pluralism (five to seven), and atomization (more than seven parties with negligible individual impact). A multiparty system is "genuine" when parties are institutionalized processing, stable organizational structures, distinct ideological or programmatic identities, autonomous leadership, and legitimacy among voters rather than merely registered as legal entities. Genuine multiparty competition requires that multiple parties have a credible probability of winning power and that their presence meaningfully constrains incumbents' behavior.

Political Competition

Political competition, as understood in democratic theory, refers to the contested struggle for voter support and governmental power among distinct political actors, parties, candidates, and coalition through legitimate, rule-governed electoral processes. Genuine political competition requires a level playing field, equal access to media and campaign finance, independent electoral management, impartial application of electoral law, and freedom from political intimidation. When structural advantages, control of state resources, capture of institutions, money politics, or violent intimidation systematically favor one actor over others, competition becomes nominal or illusion. Norris (2014) conceptualized this as the spectrum between "electoral integrity" and "electoral malpractice" which Nigeria consistently placed in the latter category across multiple Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (PEI) surveys.

Competitive Authoritarianism

Levitsky and Way (2002, P. 52) defined competitive authoritarianism as "civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their

opponents''. In competitive authoritarian regimes, elections are held but are not genuinely free or fair, legislatures and courts exist but are periodically subordinated to executive power and civil liberties are formally guaranteed but frequently violated. The concept is analytically distinct from full authoritarianism (which denies the formal institutions of democracy) and liberal democracy (in which competition is genuinely open). It captures with precision the Nigerian political condition where elections matter enough that incumbents feel the need to manipulate them, but the manipulation is systematic enough to preclude genuine competition.

Party Institutionalization

Following Mainwaring and Scully (1995), party institutionalization refers to the degree to which parties achieve stable rootedness in society, regular and competitive electoral behavior, legitimacy, and solid organizational structures that exist independently of individual leaders. Nigeria's low level of party institutionalization is manifested as high electoral volatility, prevalence of personality-centered rather than organization-centred parties, shallow voter-party linkages and the vulnerability of party organizations to elite exit and defection. Institutionalized party systems cause more stable, predictable, and accountable democratic competition; de-institutionalized systems, such as Nigeria's, make genuine multiparty practice structurally precarious.

Theoretical Framework

Three distinctive frameworks were deployed to analyze the article for a comprehensive and effective delivery of the subject matter which includes, Competitive Authoritarianism Theory, Elite Circulation and Patronage Theory and Party system Institutionalization Theory.

Competitive Authoritarianism Theory

The primary theoretical lens applied in this article is Levitsky and Way's (2002, 2010) competitive authoritarianism framework, developed in their influential work *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. This framework accounts for regimes that emerge from the third wave of democratization but fail to consolidate into liberal democracy, instead settling into a stable hybrid form characterized by the coexistence of formal democratic institutions and systematic incumbent advantage. Levitsky and Way identified four arenas of democratic contestation the electoral process, the legislature, the judiciary, and the media. They argued that in competitive authoritarian regimes, incumbents systematically tilt all four arenas in their favor without formally abolishing any of them.

This framework explains how the ruling party, whether the PDP before 2015 or the APC thereafter has maintained dominance through subtler mechanisms: differential access to state resources, deployment of security agencies, manipulation of INEC processes, and strategic use of anticorruption prosecutions against political opponents. In the 2023 electoral cycle, INEC's technological innovations failed under contested circumstances, election tribunal judgments were widely perceived as politically inflected, and the winning candidate secured victory with just 37% of total votes cast amid historically low turnout exemplifies the defining features of competitive authoritarianism.

Elite Circulation and the Patronage Theory

Vilfredo Pareto's elite circulation theory developed in *The Mind and Society* (1935) and applied to African politics by scholars such as Mkandawire (1999) and Van de Walle (2003) provides a complementary analytical lens. Elite circulation theory argues that obvious political change in patrimonial political system consists less of genuine shifts in governing ideologies or policies than of the rotation of elite factions in and out of access to state resources. The circulation of Nigeria's political class with the same individuals, families, and networks appearing in successive ruling parties across different electoral cycles supports an elite circulation interpretation of what has been presented as democratic competition.

Van de Walle's (2003) neopatrimonial model of African party politics, which identifies the big-man system, clientelism, and the use of state resources for political reproduction as the defining features of African party systems, is directly applicable to Nigeria. In this model, parties are instruments of elite access to state patronage rather than organizations of programmatic governance; defections signal rational elite repositioning in response to change in the landscape rather than ideological conversion and elections are fought less around competing visions of governance than around competing networks of patronage distribution.

Party System Institutionalization Framework

The third analytical pillar is Mainwaring and Scully's (1995) framework for assessing the institutionalization of party system in developing democracies. Their four dimensions of institutionalization, including stability in inter-party competition, stable roots of parties in society, legitimacy of parties and elections, and solid party organizations, allow a systematic assessment of why Nigeria's multi-party system generates such poor democratic quality. The analysis of Nigeria reveals low scores across all four dimensions: extreme electoral volatility (evidenced by the PDP's total collapse from a dominant hegemon to a fractured opposition); shallow societal rootedness (parties are organized around ethnicity and patronage rather than class, ideology, or programmatic interest); declining legitimacy (evidenced by historically low voter turnout and widespread perception of electoral fraud); and weak organizational structures vulnerable to personalization and elite exit.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive research design grounded in the interpretivist epistemological tradition that situates political phenomena, including democratic practice, party competition, and institutional behavior, as socially constructed and contextually embedded. A qualitative design is appropriate for this research because the central questions concern the structural conditions, mechanisms, and dynamics of democratic competition, which require interpretive analysis of institutional patterns, elite behavior, and political-historical context rather than quantitative causal inference. This study employs a combination of historical-analytical and case study approaches: historical-analytical to trace the evolution of multiparty practice across the Fourth Republic (1999–2026) and a case study to examine specific critical junctures, the 2015 and 2023 presidential elections, and the post-2023 defection crisis in-depth.

The study relies exclusively on secondary data sources, which are appropriate for a research question that focuses on systemic political patterns documented across a longitudinal period. Secondary data were drawn from the following source categories: (a) official electoral records from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), including reports on registered parties, voter registration statistics, election results, and party deregistration decisions; (b) academic literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles on Nigerian party politics, competitive authoritarianism, and African democratic governance, drawn from Tandfonline, Oxford Academic Press, Sage Publications, and the Journal of Democracy; (c) policy and civil society reports from Chatham House, Freedom House, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), and YIAGA Africa; (d) media analysis drawing on investigative journalism and opinion documentation from Punch Nigeria, Sahara Reporters, and The Cable; (e) quantitative data from Dataphyte, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, and the Afrobarometer survey series.

The data were analyzed using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), supplemented by process tracing to identify causal mechanisms linking structural conditions to observed outcomes. The following key thematic categories were developed from the theoretical framework and applied as analytical lenses to the data: party institutionalization, electoral integrity, opposition viability, institutional independence, and money politics. Quantitative indicators of democratic competition (voter turnout rates, number of registered parties, party defection counts, and governorship distribution) were compiled into summary tables and analyzed as proxies for the overall health of multiparty practice. To enhance analytical credibility, triangulation across official records, academic literature, and media documentation was employed.

Findings

Nigeria's multiparty framework presents a surface picture of significant pluralism. At the high point of party registration in 2019, 91 political parties were registered with INEC, the largest number since the democratic transition of 1999 (Freedom House, 2023). Following INEC's controversial deregistration of 74 parties in 2020, which was partially reversed on appeal before the Supreme Court reinstated the INEC decision in 2021, 18 parties contested the 2023 general elections (Freedom House, 2023). The formal multiparty architecture, multiple registered parties, regular elections, and constitutional guarantees of political freedom satisfy the Schumpeterian minimum for democratic classification.

However, beneath this formal plurality, effective competition has been concentrated in two hegemonic parties: the PDP from 1999 to 2015 and the APC from 2015 to the present. As Table 1



demonstrates, the pattern across the six presidential elections is not one of genuine multiparty competition but of alternating party hegemonies, each commanding overwhelming legislative and executive majorities while nominally competing against fragmented opposition.

Table 1

Presidential Election Results and Party Dominance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–2023)

Year	Winner/Party	Vote Share (%)	Registered voters (M)	Actual Votes Cast (M)	Voter Turnout (%)	Dominant Party at the State Level
1999	Obasanjo (PDP)	62.8	57.9	30.3	52.3	PDP: 21/36 States
2003	Obasanjo (PDP)	61.8	60.8	35.0	57.5	PDP: 28/36 States
2007	Yar'Adua (PDP)	69.6	61.6	35.4	57.5	PDP: 31/36
2011	Jonathan (PDP)	58.9	73.5	38.2	53.7	PDP: 23/36
2015	Buhari (APC)	54.0	68.8	29.4	43.7	APC: 24/36
2019	Buhari (APC)	55.6	84.0	29.4	34.7	APC: 21/36
2023	Tinubu (APC)	36.6	93.5	25.0	26.7	31/36

Sources: INEC, 2023; Dataphyte, 2023; Freedom House, 2023; Oxford Academic, 2024 Tinubu won 36.6% of the declared votes but only 26.72% of the overall turnout, representing approximately 8.8% of the total registered electorates.

Defection Crisis and Erosion of Opposition Viability (2023–2026)

The period between the 2023 general elections and the present has witnessed an unprecedented and constitutionally concerning wave of party defections that threatens to collapse Nigeria's competitive multiparty politics. Table shows the scale and pattern of these defections.

As of June 2026, the APC controlled at least 31 of 36 state governorships, a level of subnational dominance unprecedented in the Fourth Republic and comparable only to the hegemony of the PDP at its height between 2003 and 2011.

Period	Notable Defectors/Events	Party Origin	Party Destination	Impact on the Opposition
2023 post-election	Multiple Senators, Representatives and State Legislators	PDP, LP, and NNPP	APC	APC Legislative majority strengthened nationally
2024Q1-Q2	Several State Govs. Including PDP strongholds	PDP	APC	The PDP loses governorship control in additional states
2024-2025	LP Factional Crisis: Abure vs. Nenadi Usman faction dispute	LP(internal Crisis)	—	LP paralyzed by leadership tussle momentum dissipated in 2023.
2025 Q3	LP accuses APC of orchestrating infiltration of its party congress (Tony Akeni LP Pub. Sec.)	—	—	Institutional infiltration of alleged opposition
2025Q4	ADC alleges APC infiltration of branches	ADC (internal crisis)	—	Threatened third-party alternatives before consolidation
2025-2026	PDP factional split: Seyi Makinde vs. Nyesom Wike	PDP (internal Crisis)	—	The PDP governance crisis deepens; Wike is



				effectively aligned with APC
June 2026 Cumulatively)	APC controls 31/36	—	APC Dominant	Multiparty competition is structurally imperilled ahead of 2027

Sources: Sahara Reporters, 2026; Punch Nigeria (2025, 2026); TheCable, 2026; Within Nigeria, 2026.

Electoral Integrity and Institutional Credibility

The 2023 general elections, the seventh consecutive since the democratic transition of 1999 delivered several indicators of profound institutional stress. Voter turnout fell to 26.72%, its lowest recorded level in the Fourth Republic, representing a decline of more than 8 percentage points from the 34.74% recorded in 2019 (Dataphyte, 2023). The winning presidential candidate, Bola Tinubu of the APC, secured 36.6% of declared votes translating his mandate which was endorsed by fewer than 10% of Nigeria's total registered electorate when the overall turnout rate is considered. Table 3 presents the performance of the major parties in the 2023 presidential election.

Table 3

Results of the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election and Vote Distribution

Candidate	Party	Total Votes	% of the declared votes	% of registered voters
Bola Ahmed Tinubu	APC	8,794,726	36.6%	9.4%
Atiku Abubakar	PDP	6,984,520	29.1%	7.5%
Peter Obi	LP	6,101,533	25.4%	6.5%
Rabiu Kwankwaso	NNPP	1,496,687	6.2%	1.6%
Others (14 parties)	Various	257,855	1.1%	0.3%
Did not vote (eligible)	—	68,470,282	— (non-voters)	73.3% of registered voters

Sources: INEC, 2023; Dataphyte, 2023; Wikipedia, 2025 Note: 'did not vote' represents the gap between the total number of registered voters (93,469,008) and the total number of the valid votes declared (25,286,616) -reflecting a combination of non-collection of PVCs, voluntary abstention, voter suppression, and logistical disenfranchisement.

The 2023 elections were accompanied by widespread reports of INEC technological failures, delayed polling unit openings (YIAGA Africa estimated that only 41% of units had commenced voting one hour after the scheduled 8:30am start), voter intimidation, particularly, in Lagos and Rivers States, and incomplete result uploads to the IReV portal at the time results were announced (Chatham House, 2023a, 2023b). The Supreme Court and Court of Appeal subsequently upheld the election results following petitions from Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi — but the judgments were widely criticized by legal scholars, civil society organization, and international observers as failing to adequately address the substantive electoral irregularities raised (Medium, 2025; Tandfonline, 2025).

Party Institutionalization Indicators

Table 4 presents a comparative assessment of party institutionalization scores for Nigeria's major parties across the four Mainwaring-Scully dimensions based on the available documentary evidence.

Table 4

Party Institutionalization Assessment - Major Nigerian Parties (Fourth Republic, 1999–2026)

Party	Electoral stability	Societal Rootedness	Legitimacy/Public Trust	Organizational Strength	Overall Assessment
PDP (1999–2015)	High (dominant for 16 years)	Medium (pan-national but patronage-based)	Declining (fraud allegations)	Medium (bureaucratic but corrupt)	Moderately institutionalization

PDP (2015–2026)	Low (fragmented opposition)	Low (losing base, defections)	Very low	Weak (factional paralysis)	De- institutionalizing
APC (2015–2026)	High (currently dominant party)	Medium (patronage- based coalition)	Medium (declining post- 2023)	Medium Presidential dominance)	Moderately institutionalized
Labor Party (2022– 2026)	Low (2023 high point, now fragmented)	Low- Medium (middle- class base in urban areas	Medium (initial; declining after the crisis)	Very weak (factional split 2024–25)	Not institutionalized
NNPP (2022– 2026)	Low (regional, Kano- centered)	Low (personality -driven)	Low-Medium	Weak	Not institutionalized
Others (combined)	Very low or negligible	Very low	Very low	Very weak	Not institutionalized

Sources: Freedom House, 2023; Oxford Academic, 2024; Tandfonline, Tandfonline, 2025; author's assessment based on documentary evidence.

Money Politics and the Structural Exclusion of New Entrants

A critical finding of this study is the role of money politics, specifically, the extraordinarily high cost of political participation in structurally foreclosing genuine multiparty competition. The INEC's guidelines for candidate nomination fees which range from N14 million (approximately \$15,000) for senatorial aspirants to N100 million (approximately \$73,000) for presidential aspirants, effectively restrict participation to the financially privileged (Freedom House, 2023). Campaign finance in practice is several orders of magnitude higher: credible estimates suggest that competitive senatorial campaigns require N500 million to N2 billion in expenditure, while presidential campaigns require N50 billion or more (Tandfonline, 2025). The structural condition ensures that political competition is confined to those with access to private wealth and typically through patronage networks connected to state resources and fundamentally compromises the democratic principle of equality of political opportunity in the absence of public campaign financing.

Discussion of The Findings

Democracy as Performance: Competitive Authoritarian Interpretation

The findings strongly support a competitive authoritarian interpretation of Nigeria's political system, one in which the formal institutions of democracy are maintained as performance but systematically distorted to ensure incumbent advantage. Levitsky and Way (2010) argue that competitive authoritarian regimes are distinguished from liberal democracies not by the absence of elections but by the systematic violation of their norms: the uneven playing field, the targeted use of state power against opponents, and the selective application of the rule of law. All three characteristics are empirically documented in the case of Nigeria.

The data in Tables 1- 4 collectively paint a portrait of a political system in which formal competition occurs but substantive competition is structurally constrained. The decline in voter turnout from 57.5% in 2003 to 26.72% in 2023 is not merely a technical administrative failure; it is a systemic signal from the electorate that elections have ceased to be perceived as meaningful determinants of political outcomes. When nearly three-quarters of eligible voters do not participate in an election, the democratic legitimacy of the resulting government is fundamentally compromised, irrespective of whether the procedures were technically followed (Chatham House, 2023b).

Elite Circulation vs Democratic Alternation

The 2015 election was celebrated domestically and internationally as evidence of democratic maturation because it produced the first opposition victory over a sitting president in Nigerian history

and exemplified the limits of elite circulation analysis. What occurred in 2015 was less a genuine democratic alternation driven by citizen preference than the successful reorganization of elite factions dissatisfied with the PDP's patronage distribution under Jonathan. The APC was formed through the merger of the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), and the New PDP bringing together politicians whose careers had been formed entirely within the PDP system's patronage architecture (Oxford Academic, 2024). Buhari's election represented the rotation of the elite coalition rather than its replacement.

The 2023-2026 events confirm and deepen this analysis. The mass defection of politicians from the PDP, the LP and other parties to the APC was rationalized by individual defectors in terms of ideological affinity or developmental vision but widely understood as repositioning for access to federal patronage and reproducing the dynamics of elite circulation in the most explicit possible form. When former PDP governor Nyesom Wike operates as a de facto APC ally while nominally remaining a PDP member; when the labor Party is torn apart not by ideological disagreement but by competition between personal factions; when the African Democratic Congress struggles to establish itself as a coherent opposition because its prospective leadership is susceptible to co-optation and NDC struggling to survive from different ligations after the defection of Peter Obi and Kwankwaso's realignment, the mechanics of elite circulation are operating with full transparency (Punch Nigeria, 2025; TheCable, 2026).

Institutional Decay and Democratic Regression

Huntington's (1968) analysis of political decay, the deterioration of effective political institutions relative to the social mobilization demands placed upon them, is apposite to understanding the trajectory of Nigerian democratic institutions. INEC, the judiciary, and the security agencies, which are the three most essential institutions to genuine multiparty competition, all exhibited signs of institutional decay over the study period. INEC's failure to consistently deploy transformative technologies (BVAS, IReV) at the most critical electoral moment in 2023, despite these having been presented as the institutional response to decades of electoral manipulation, suggests institutional capture or capacity failure at the highest stakes moment. The pattern of election tribunal and Supreme Court judgments that have consistently favored ruling party candidates, particularly in the post-2023 period has effectively removed the judiciary from being a reliable redress mechanism for electoral victims (Medium, 2025; Tandfonline, 2025).

Comparative Dimension: Nigeria Against African Democratic Peers

Nigeria's democratic crisis acquires additional analytical depth when situated within the comparative context of MPD in Africa. Ghana, which conducted its ninth consecutive successful multiparty election in December 2024 including the fifth peaceful transfer of power, demonstrates that with comparable developmental indicators, genuine multiparty competition is achievable in an African context. Senegal's 2024 election, which produced an opposition victory widely celebrated as a triumph of democratic consolidation, and Liberia's 2023 election, which produced a peaceful second-round transfer of power, further illustrate that institutional arrangements can sustain genuine competition where the political will to maintain them exists. Nigeria is a country with vastly greater economic resources, larger electorates, and a longer formal democratic history that has produced inferior democratic quality by virtually every measure, suggesting that the problem is not structural inevitability but political choice.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Nigeria's Fourth Republic has produced, and is now intensifying, a system of democracy without genuine competition, a procedural multiparty arrangement that satisfies formal criteria while systematically foreclosing the substantive conditions on which democratic accountability depends. The empirical evidence is compelling: voter turnout at a historic nadir of 26.72% in 2023; the APC's control of 31 of 36 governorships by 2026 following an unprecedented wave of defections; the structural inability of opposition parties PDP, LP, NNPP, NDP, and ADC to institutionalize and sustain credible electoral challenges; the weaponization of INEC, the judiciary and security agencies against opposition actors; and the prohibitive cost of political participation that structurally reserves competition for elite patronage networks.

These conditions meet the analytical criteria of competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2002), elite circulation without genuine democratic alternation (van de Walle, 2003), and party system de-institutionalization (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995). What Nigeria's democratic experiment has

produced, 27 years after the transition from military rule, is not democracy understood as a system of genuine political competition with meaningful consequences for governance but its procedural facsimile: elections without choice, parties without ideology, competition without accountability.

The stakes of this analysis transcend academics. Nigeria's democratic credibility has implications for the stability of West Africa, the legitimacy of the African Union's democracy agenda, and the quality of governance, public services and economic opportunity of the more than 224 million Nigerians whose quality of governance, public services, and economic opportunity are directly shaped by the quality of their political system. A democracy that does not compete does not deliver.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings and discussion, this study advances the following recommendations:

1. **Electoral Reform: Restructuring INEC Governance and Funding** INEC's institutional independence must be structurally guaranteed, not merely proclaimed constitutionally. This requires reforming the appointment process for INEC commissioners and replacing the current presidential appointment model with an independent selection panel comprising the judiciary, legislature, civil society, and professional bodies. INEC's budget should be directly charged to the CRF rather than subject to executive discretion, removing a critical leverage point for executive interference.

2. **Party Finance Reform: Introducing Public Campaign Financing.** The Nigerian government should establish a Political Parties Development Fund, modeled on Germany's party finance system, to provide public subsidies to registered parties proportional to their electoral performance. Strict caps on nomination fees, campaign expenditure, and individual donations should be legislated with enforcement by an independent Campaign Finance Monitoring Commission (ICFMC). The current system, in which access to state patronage networks is the primary determinant of competitiveness, structurally corrupts both incumbents and challengers.

3. **Constitutional Amendment: Strengthening Anti-Defection Provisions.** The 1999 Constitution's anti-defection provisions should be strengthened to cover executive officeholders (governors, deputy governors, and the president) alongside their current application to legislators. A sitting governor who defected from the party on whose ticket they were elected should forfeit their office, as is the case in several other constitutional systems. This would significantly reduce the structural incentive for opportunistic defection and constrain the ability to accumulate subnational dominance through coercive repositioning.

4. **Party institutionalization: Internal Democracy.** The Electoral Act should be amended to require political parties to conduct primaries according to independently verified democratic procedures as a condition of INEC recognition and ballot access. The minimum threshold of intra-party democracy, including merit-based and transparent candidate selection, women and youth inclusion quotas, and financial accountability should be enforceable by a strengthened INEC.

5. **Constitutional Amendment: Strengthening Anti-Defection Provisions.** The 1999 Constitution's anti-defection provisions should be strengthened to cover executive officeholders (governors, deputy governors, and the president) alongside their current application to legislators. A sitting governor who defected from the party on whose ticket they were elected should forfeit their office, as is the case in several other constitutional systems. This would significantly reduce the structural incentive for opportunistic defection and constrain the ability of the APC to accumulate subnational dominance through coercive repositioning.

Judicial Independence: Strengthen the Electoral Offences Court and make it more dedicated for electoral offences with independent appointment of judges drawn from outside the regular judicial service and serving fixed, non-renewable terms to adjudicate election petitions. Election petition timelines should be shortened to ensure that judicial outcomes arrive before the next electoral cycle, thereby restoring the corrective function of electoral justice.

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