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Party Defection and Youth Inclusivity in Governance: Trends, Drivers and Implications for Peacebuilding in Nigeria

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Abstract

Youth constitute over 60 percent of Nigeria's population, yet their influence on political decision-making remains relatively limited. The increasing incidence of political defection (cross-carpeting) among young politicians has raised concerns about its implications for democratic consolidation and political stability. This paper examines the trends, drivers, and implications of party defection on peace, security and development in Nigeria . The study is anchored on Elite Theory and Clientelism Theory, which explain how elite domination, patronage networks, and political incentives shape the behaviour of young political actors. Using a qualitative methodology based on documentary analysis of scholarly publications, policy documents, newspaper reports, and electoral records, the study investigates the factors influencing youth participation and defection in party politics. Findings reveal that youth defection is primarily driven by patronage politics, weak party ideology, economic insecurity, limited opportunities for political advancement, and manipulation by political elites. The study further finds that while digital activism and youth mobilization have expanded political participation, structural barriers continue to constrain meaningful youth influence in political decision-making. The paper concludes that persistent youth defection undermines party institutionalization and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. It recommends strengthening internal party democracy, promoting ideological party development, creating sustainable avenues for youth political inclusion, and implementing reforms that reduce the influence of patronage politics.

Keywords: Youth, political defection, party politics, Nigeria, political participation

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Introduction

The population of youth in Nigeria represents one of the largest in the world, with individuals under the age of 35 accounting 60% of the total population (National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2025, Actionaid, 2025). This demographic reality positions youth as a potentially transformative force within the country's political system. In democratic theory, young people are often regarded as drivers of political innovation, accountability, and social change (Dalton, 2008). However, youth political participation in Nigeria has been long constrained by structural exclusion, elite domination, and lack of economic power. Defection has become a recurring feature of Nigeria's political system (Punch, 2025).

One of the major characteristics of Nigeria's political landscape is the recurrence of political defection, or "cross-carpeting," where politicians often switch party allegiance without ideological justification. While this phenomenon has long been associated with elite politicians, recent trends show increasing youth involvement in party switching (Aleyomi, 2013). Political defections are always intensifying ahead of elections (Premium Times, 2026; The Nation, 2026). Young party members, youth leaders, and mobilizers are often at the forefront of defections, either following political patrons or seeking improved opportunities within rival parties.

Suleiman & Jega, (2018) argue that despite youth numerical strength in politics, their political influence remains limited in Nigeria. They are always the tools used in campaigns and protests, but their inclusion in policy decision is minimal. Though digital activism has expanded youth engagement, online visibility is without substantive influence (Morozov, 2011).

The paper aims to answer three key questions: (1) What are the dominant patterns of youth involvement in party defection in Nigeria? (2) What factors drive youth to defect from one political party to another? (3) What are the implications of party defection for democratic consolidation and political development in Nigeria?

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Youth is a contested and context-specific social construct rather than a fixed biological category. Internationally, the United Nations defines youth as persons aged 15–24 years for

statistical consistency, while the World Bank uses 12–24 years. Scholars like Hilker and Fraser argue youth is a "transitional stage between childhood and adulthood" based on social roles, not just age. Youth refers to Nigerians aged 18–35 years, conceptualized as a socio-political category characterized by transition, agency, and potential for transformative change. With over 60% of Nigeria's population and 52.2 million people aged 18–35, youth constitute a demographic dividend that remains underrepresented in decision-making.

In the African context, these age brackets are considered too narrow due to prolonged economic dependency and socio-cultural realities. Consequently, the African Youth Charter and Nigeria's 2009 National Youth Policy operationalize youth as persons aged 18–35 years. This 18–35 bracket is also adopted by INEC for electoral engagement.

Political Participation

Anikwe, Ogbuka, & Udenta,. (2025). Argue that political participation is classically activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take". They add that it is voluntary, non-professional, and concerns government, politics, or the state. Youth political participation therefore refers to "the involvement of young people in political activities like governance, elections, civic duties, and policy making".

Afolayan (2018). frames it as recognizing and nurturing youth strengths by providing opportunities to be involved in decision-making, not using them as "pawns for electoral victory of older politicians". Onyewuchi defines it as youth involvement in decision-making on issues that affect them, plus entrusting them with knowledge and skills for governance.

Forms include both conventional activities: voting, joining parties, contesting elections; and unconventional/modern forms: protests, petitions, trending topics online, civil society engagement. In Nigeria's Fourth Republic, youth participation has ranged from political thuggery to agenda-setting protests like #EndSARS, which significantly increased youth political activism. Despite this, youth occupy <1% of elective positions despite being 50% of voters.

Youth political participation encompasses a wide range of activities, including voting, party membership, campaigning, protests, and digital engagement (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). In Nigeria, youth participation has evolved from conventional electoral involvement to more unconventional forms such as online activism and social movements, exemplified by the #EndSARS protests of 2020 (Ojebode et al., 2022). Despite increased participation, scholars argue that youth involvement often remains instrumental rather than influential. Young people are frequently mobilized as foot soldiers during elections but excluded from decision-making processes within parties and government institutions (Adesina, 2020).

Political Defection and Party Switching

Political defection refers to the movement of politicians or party members from one political party to another, often motivated by strategic considerations rather than ideological alignment (Heller & Mershon, 2009). Defections are driven by internal party crises and strategic positioning (Premium Times, 2026). In weakly institutionalized party systems such as Nigeria's, defection is common and often linked to patronage, electoral calculations, and access to state resources (Omotola, 2010). For youth, defection can be understood as both a survival strategy and a reflection of broader systemic weaknesses. Without stable ideological commitments or internal party democracy, young politicians may view defection as a rational response to exclusion and marginalization.

Political defection, also called "cross-carpeting" or "decamping", is defined in Black's Law Dictionary as "Abandonment of allegiance or duty; the forsaking of a person or cause; desertion". In political terms, it is "the forsaking of one's political party for the opposition". In Nigeria, it connotes a situation where an elected officeholder "elopes along with the mandate of his electorate to another political platform irrespective of the differences in the mandate". The practice predates independence, with NCNC members defecting to Action Group in 1951, but has become "commonplace especially in the Fourth Republic".

Scholars conceptualize defection as driven by rational choice: politicians defect based on cost-benefit calculations of political power, patronage, immunity, and relevance. The "defection effect syndrome" can alter the balance of power among parties once it reaches critical mass. Causes include weak party ideologies, lack of internal democracy, personal

ambition, factional crisis, and pursuit of political relevance. Effects include erosion of public trust, weakened democratic institutions, and political instability.

Youth underrepresentation creates a vacuum that political elites fill through patronage politics and defection. When youth lack pathways to contest, they are often mobilized as "thugs" by defecting politicians seeking new power bases. Hence, strengthening youth participation is posited as a check against opportunistic defection and for democratic consolidation.

Methodology

This paper employed a quantitative method to examine patterns within the dataset. An inductive approach was adopted, allowing themes to emerge directly from participants' responses rather than imposing pre-existing categories. Data were coded manually, with repeated patterns grouped into broader conceptual themes. The dataset for this study consist of 124 participants selected across multiple states in Nigeria, with diverse professional backgrounds (public servants, business persons, students, development practitioners) were statistically and thematically analysis.

Trends in Youth Political Defection in Nigeria

Historical Patterns

Political defection has been a persistent feature of Nigerian politics since the First Republic. However, youth participation in defection became more visible during the Fourth Republic (1999–present), as youth were increasingly incorporated into party structures (Aleyomi, 2013). Defections often spike before elections, suggesting strategic motivations linked to electoral advantage rather than ideological disagreement. Defection trends are raising fears of one-party dominance (Associated Press, 2025). Youth politicians frequently follow influential leaders when they switch parties, reinforcing patron-client dynamics.

Electoral Cycles and Youth Defection

Election periods in Nigeria are characterized by intense competition and uncertainty. Studies show that youth defection tends to increase during pre-election periods, particularly when internal party primaries are perceived as unfair (Akinsanya & Erinosho, 2020). Young

aspirants who lose primaries often defect to smaller or opposition parties in search of tickets, highlighting the lack of internal democracy within parties.

Social Media and Visibility of Defection

The rise of social media has increased the visibility of youth defection. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook allow young politicians to publicly announce defections and justify their decisions, often framing them as principled choices (Ojebode et al., 2022). However, critics argue that these narratives often mask material motivations.

Drivers of Youth Defection in Nigerian Politics

Economic Factors and Financial Incentives

Economic precarity is a major driver of youth defection. Nigeria's high youth unemployment rate creates conditions where political participation becomes a source of livelihood (World Bank, 2021). Financial inducements, access to stipends, and promises of appointments often influence youth loyalty. Several studies identify money politics as a key factor shaping youth behavior, with party allegiance frequently tied to immediate economic benefits (Adetula, 2016).

Weak Party Ideology

Nigerian political parties are often described as ideologically shallow, making it difficult for youth to develop long-term loyalty (Omotola, 2009). Without clear ideological distinctions, switching parties carries little reputational cost. Youth who initially join parties based on perceived ideology often become disillusioned, leading to defection.

Elite Manipulation and Godfatherism

Political godfatherism remains a dominant feature of Nigerian politics. Youth are often mobilized by elite patrons who control access to resources and opportunities (Joseph, 1987). When conflicts arise between patrons and parties, youth followers are compelled to defect. This dynamic limits youth autonomy and reinforces dependency on elite networks.

Statistical Analysis of Survey Data (N = 124)

1. Demographic Distribution

Age Distribution

Age Range	Frequency	Percentage
40-55 years	37	30%
18- 35 years	87	70%

(Survey 2026) Majority fall within 35–50 years (70%) with a mean of 41 years distribution

Education Level

Educational Level	Frequency	Percentage
Bachelor's degree / equivalent	40	33%
Master's degree:	52	42%
PhD / Postgraduate	21	17%
Others (A-level, diploma, etc.):	10	8%

(Survey 2026) shows highly educated sample (59% postgraduate).

2. Awareness of Political Issues

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	114	91.7%
No	10	8.3%

(Survey 2026) This Indicates very high political awareness among respondents.

3. Causes of Political Defection (Multiple Responses Allowed)

Factor	Frequency	Percentage
Unfulfilled promises	88	70.8%
Lack of opportunities	56	45.8%
Money/political incentives	67	54.2%
Political violence	36	29.2%
Other factors	20	16.7%

(Survey 2026) Most dominant factor: Unfulfilled promises

4. Perceived Impact of Political Defection

Impact	Frequency	Percentage
Increased tensions	77	62.7%
No impact	36	29.2%
Improved governance	31	25.0%
Other responses	15	12.5%

(Survey 2026) Majority of respondents associated defection with negative societal tension.

5. Perception of Political Process

Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Negative	88	70.8%
Positive	21	16.7%
Neutral	15	12.5%

(**Survey 2026**) Strong dominance of negative perception.

6. Key Drivers of Political Behavior

Factor	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Money	103	83.3%
Ethnicity	77	62.5%
Religion	72	58.3%
Social connection	62	50.0%

(**Survey 2026**) Money is the most significant influencing factor.

7. Willingness to Support Change

Responses	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Yes	119	95.8%
No	5	4.2%

(**Survey 2026**) Respondents' responses indicated strong readiness for reform.

8. Preferred Political Solutions

Solution	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Inclusive politics	72	58.3%
Job opportunities	31	25.0%
Community outreach	26	20.8%
Dialogue/mediation	15	12.5%
Others	10	8.3%

9. Recommended Actions

Action	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Advocating for transparency		70.8%
Engaging in politics	31	25.0%

Community outreach		16.7

(Survey 2026) Transparency is the dominant recommendation.

Key Statistical Insights

1. High awareness (91.7%) but low confidence (70.8% negative perception)
2. Unfulfilled promises (70.8%) and money (83.3%) are the strongest drivers
3. Political defection is largely seen as destabilizing (62.5%)
4. Respondents show strong reform orientation (95.8%)
5. Transparency emerges as the most critical intervention (70.8%)

Thematic Analysis of Survey Data.

Structural Drivers of Political Defection and Instability

A dominant theme across responses is the perception that political behavior is driven by systemic and structural deficiencies, others are: Unfulfilled political promises, Lack of economic opportunities and Influence of money and political incentives

Political violence

Participants consistently framed political defection and engagement as instrumental rather than ideological, driven by material or survival considerations. This suggests a clientelist political system, where loyalty is contingent upon access to resources rather than policy alignment. The recurrence of "unfulfilled promises" indicates erosion of political trust.

Political Defection as a Source of Social and Political Tension

Political defection is widely perceived as destabilizing, undermining democratic consolidation. Rather than strengthening governance, it contributes to fragmentation and uncertainty within the political system. Most respondents associated political dynamics with negative societal outcomes, particularly: Increased tensions, political apathy, weakening of opposition and accountability structures.

Predominantly Negative Perception of Political Processes

A strong majority of participants expressed negative evaluations of political practices. This reflects low public confidence in political institutions, reinforcing the idea of a legitimacy

crisis. Even among educated respondents, optimism about political processes remains minimal.

Identity Politics and Patronage Networks

Respondents identified several key factors influencing political behavior: Money (most dominant factor), Ethnicity, Religion and Social connections. This highlights the persistence of patronage politics and identity-based mobilization. Political participation is shaped less by policy issues and more by informal networks and socio-cultural affiliations.

Strong Support for Inclusive and Participatory Governance

There is a strong desire for broad-based political inclusion, suggesting that citizens are not disengaged but rather dissatisfied with current structures. Despite negative perceptions, respondents showed clear normative preferences for reform: Frequently suggested solutions are: Inclusive politics (most recurring), Job creation, Community outreach, and dialogue and mediation.

Emphasis on Transparency and Civic Engagement

Participants emphasize accountability as a central solution, indicating awareness of governance deficits. This also reflects willingness among citizens to engage constructively, rather than withdraw completely. The most consistent recommended action across respondents was: Advocating for transparency (dominant), Engagement in politics and Community-level initiatives.

The findings reveal a paradoxical political landscape aligning with some scholarly research High awareness of political dysfunction, Low trust in political actors and Strong desire for reform and inclusion. This suggests that political disengagement is not due to apathy alone but is rooted in systemic dissatisfaction. The data aligns with broader literature on neo-patrimonialism and clientelism in African politics, where material incentives override ideological commitments, political defection becomes a rational survival strategy and democratic institutions are weakened by elite maneuvering (Reuters, 2025; AI Jazeera,2023). At the same time, the emphasis on transparency and inclusivity indicates potential for bottom-up democratic renewal, if institutional reforms are implemented.

Implications of Youth Defection for Nigerian Democracy

1. Democratic Stability and Party Institutionalization

Frequent youth defection weakens party institutionalization by disrupting internal cohesion, organizational memory, and programmatic continuity. When defection is normalized among youth actors, it entrenches transactional politics and undermines democratic accountability. This trend reinforces clientelist logics over ideological commitment, thereby eroding public trust in democratic institutions and weakening the normative foundations of representative governance (Omotola, 2010; The Guardian Nigeria, 2024; Channels Television, 2025).

2. Political Socialization and Norm Formation Among Youth

Youth defection constitutes a critical socialization mechanism through which political norms and values are transmitted. Exposure to patronage-driven party switching socializes young political actors into a system where loyalty is instrumental rather than principled. Drawing on political socialization theory, this pattern cultivates a cohort of leaders who internalize opportunism as normative, potentially reproducing cycles of weak democratic culture across generations (Adetula, 2016; UNDP, 2024).

3. Governance, Legislative Coherence, and Policy Continuity

Defection introduces volatility into legislative processes and disrupts policy continuity. Youth legislators who defect often prioritize individual political survival over constituency representation, leading to fragmented legislative agendas and weakened oversight functions. This undermines the capacity of democratic institutions to deliver consistent, long-term public goods, and compromises the responsiveness of governance structures to citizen needs (Daily Trust, 2024; Vanguard Nigeria, 2025).

These measures could shift youth participation from transactional engagement to meaningful political influence (Oni & Joshua, 2019)

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that political instability and defection are widely perceived as outcomes of structural economic challenges, weak institutional accountability, Patronage-driven political systems. However, the presence of strong reform-oriented attitudes among respondents suggests that prospects for democratic strengthening remain viable, provided governance reforms address transparency, inclusion, and economic opportunity.

The data indicates a politically aware and educated population that: Strongly associates political behavior with economic and patronage factors, holds predominantly negative views of political processes, demonstrates high support for systemic reforms, especially transparency and inclusivity.

While youth are increasingly visible in political processes, their influence remains constrained by economic vulnerability, elite domination, and weak party systems. Defection, rather than empowering youth, often reinforces the very structures that marginalize them. For Nigeria to harness its youth demographic dividend, political institutions must move beyond symbolic inclusion and address the systemic drivers of youth defection. Only then can youth participation contribute meaningfully to democratic consolidation and political development.

Recommendation

1. **Institutionalize Youth Inclusion Through Party Reform**

   To address youth marginalization, political parties must institutionalize meaningful inclusion beyond symbolic youth wings. This can be achieved by mandating a minimum 30% youth quota in all party executive committees, NECs, and candidate lists through INEC guidelines, ensuring youth hold real decision-making positions. Parties should also be required to conduct transparent, monitored primaries with youth observers, with penalties including ballot disqualification for violations. Additionally, each party should establish a funded youth policy caucus tasked with drafting manifesto sections and signing off on policy commitments. When youth have real power and see their ideas implemented, loyalty shifts from individual patrons to party institutions, reducing defections driven by exclusion.

2. **De-commodify Political Participation and Reduce Economic Vulnerability**

Since economic precarity and money politics are the strongest drivers of party defection, political participation must be de-commodified. Government and INEC should create a non-partisan Democracy Participation Fund to provide modest stipends to verified youth delegates, ward executives, and volunteers, reducing dependence on godfathers for basic support. The Electoral Act's campaign spending limits must be enforced with real penalties, and direct cash payments to youth for "mobilization" should be criminalized as a campaign finance violation. Complementing this, NYSC and SMEDAN should partner to offer business grants and soft loans to youth who complete non-partisan civic education and community projects. Providing an economic base outside patronage networks makes youth less likely to defect for survival.

3. Strengthen Party Ideology and Create Accountability for Defection

The absence of party ideology and weak consequences for defection undermine democratic consolidation. INEC should require every registered party to publish and annually audit a clear ideological charter and policy track record, with parties lacking ideological substance losing access to public funding and broadcast time. The Constitution should be amended to narrowly define defection and impose real costs: lawmakers who defect should lose their seat and be barred from appointments for four years unless re-elected, with INEC maintaining a public "Party Switching Tracker" for voter accountability. Civil society and youth groups should also build a digital "PromiseWatch.ng" platform to track manifesto delivery and publicly score party performance. When defection carries electoral and reputational costs, youth loyalty will be based on ideology and performance rather than patronage.

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