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- Author (s):** Adekunle Saheed Abiola
- Affiliation (s):** Fountain University, Osogbo, Nigeria
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Cross Carpeting in Nigeria: Implications for Nigerian Democracy

Adekunle Saheed Abiola*

Fountain University, Osogbo

Abstract

Carpeting is significantly increasing in the Nigerian political terrain. The impacts of cross carpeting or party defection, as it is usually referred as, are thoroughly reviewed in this paper. The paper also examines its effects on the elected politicians, particularly the legislators who defect from the political parties upon which they were elected. The paper also analyzes how frequent defections of politicians from the political parties upon which they were elected affect public trust and confidence in democratic institutions and political stability. The paper further analyzes the relevant provisions of the constitution and actions of the politicians in explaining the problems arising from defection. These problems include loss of effective representation, the deterioration of legislative quality and the impediment to democratic advancement. As part of the major findings of this paper, the researcher revealed that while cross carpeting has its place in a democratic society, its current practice in Nigeria poses significant risks to the democratic process. The paper recommended legal reforms for the effective management of politics within a party. The paper concluded that the absorbent nature of cross carpeting can be addressed through legislative and institutional reforms aimed towards strengthening the country's democracy.

Keywords: cross-carpeting, democracy, governance, party defection, political instability

Introduction

Cross carpeting or party defection has been prevalent in Nigeria's political system since the country's return to democracy in 1999. This practice is often motivated by strategic advantages, political survival and personal ambitions. Party defection involves an elected representative or party member leaving their current political party to join another. Section 68(1)(g) stipulates that a member of the legislature will lose their seat if they defect from the party on whose platform they were elected, unless the party is experiencing a division or merger with another party.

*Corresponding Author: Abiola.saheed@fuo.edu.ng

The nature of party defection can be understood through its causes, manifestations, and consequences. Ideological differences can prompt defections when party members feel that their principles and policy preferences are no longer aligned with their party's direction. This is not common in Nigeria. Politicians often defect to advance their careers, seeking positions or opportunities that may not be available within their current party and may also defect to another one due to internal party conflicts. It entails a situation where politicians defect from the party that elected them to another political party (Awofeso & Irabor, [2017](#)). Cross-carpeting is a double-edged sword. It offers the political system both merits and demerits (Badejo & Obah-Akpowoghaha, [2015](#)). This paper examines the implications of cross carpeting for Nigerian democracy. It also highlights the practices and experiences of other countries in order to identify ways for Nigeria to manage the issue of cross carpeting. It also highlights the reforms that can assist in balancing political flexibility with the stability necessary for democratic consolidation (Awofeso & Irabor, [2017](#)).

Why cross carpeting?

Defection allows politicians to express their political freedom and conscience. The former Speaker of the House of Representatives, Yakubu Dogara defected from the All Progressives Congress (APC) to the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in 2018 (Ayetogo, [2019](#)). Ayetogo, while justifying that defection allows members of political parties to express their dissatisfaction, stated that Dogara made his decision based on internal issues with the APC's leadership, bad governance, and security challenges in his state, Bauchi State. Dogara's defection is a manifestation of his political freedom and conscience. He believed that APC's objectives were no longer in line with his objectives, personal conviction and values, rendering him unable to handle the immediate crisis facing his constituents.

Senator Dino Melayea, former member of the All Progressives Congress (APC), returned to the People's Democratic Party (PDP) after defecting from the APC in 2018. Prior to joining the All Progressives Congress (APC), Melayea was a member of the PDP. He, however rejoined the PDP in 2018 stating the objectives of the party no longer aligned with his objectives. Melayea was a vocal opponent of the government's alleged violations of human rights and what he perceived as the APC's dictatorial tendencies. His decision to defect to a party that he believed represented his

democratic beliefs and principles more accurately was an act of political freedom and conscience. (Busari, [2018](#)).

It is noteworthy to state that while political party defection in Nigeria is often viewed negatively due to its potential to disrupt political stability and weaken democratic institutions, it also has several reasons as well, as discussed. In addition to these reasons, others include argument such as voter choice during election, adequate representation of one's interests in the country, and choice of ideology for both the voters and politicians (Obi, [2019](#)).

Operation of Cross Carpeting under the Nigerian Legal System

Appraisal

There are criticisms that party defection threatens the country's political stability, despite these criticisms, it has advantages that can support the country's party system. One of the merits of cross carpeting or party defection is the freedom for the politicians to express their dissatisfaction and request for accountability within the political party (Omotola, [2010](#)). This was relied on by the former Benue State Governor Samuel Ortom in his defection in 2018. Ortom left the All Progressives Congress (APC) for the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in 2018. He claimed that the All-Progressives Congress (APC) failed to address the farmers-herders crisis in his state (Uwaj, [2018](#)). The defection was seen as a response to the APC's inability to manage the security issues between farmers and herders, and to safeguard Benue State residents. This is a diplomatic way to register displeasure against a political party in power, and form alliance with a party whose objectives are similar to that of the defector.

This action demonstrated accountability. Since the ruling party had failed to address the crisis, he defected to a party that would better represent the interest of his state. Defections like this can highlight dissatisfaction, and prompt political parties towards ensuring that they reassess their strategies and governance priorities in the state (Uwaj, [2018](#)).

It has been argued that competition is a vital component of democracy. Therefore, by allowing politicians to defect to other parties, the system fosters a competitive environment where political leaders must remain responsive to the needs and interests of their constituents (Omotola, [2010](#)). If a party's leadership or policies become unpopular or ineffective, elected officials have the option to switch allegiance, potentially aligning

themselves with parties that better reflect their interest and perhaps, will of the people (Ayoade, [2006](#)).

Another significant benefit is that defection can also serve as a check against the concentration of power within a single political party. A good example is the defection of Atiku Abubakar who defected from PDP to APC in 2013 in order to break the monopoly of PDP as a dominant party for more than 16 years since its inception 1999.

Implications for Nigerian Democracy

The prevalence of carpet crossing weakens democratic accountability and the rule of law. Although Section 68(1)(g) and Section 109(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution attempt to regulate defections, their ambiguous interpretation, particularly the exception of “division” within a party, has been exploited by politicians. This selective compliance with constitutional provisions undermines the supremacy of the constitution and weakens public confidence in democratic institutions (Obi, [2019](#)).

“Democracy” under the Nigerian Legal System

Democracy refers to a constitutional form of government in which sovereign power belongs to the people and is exercised in accordance with the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) through elected representatives, the rule of law, and respect for fundamental rights. Democracy in Nigeria is founded on the principle that all authority and legitimacy of the government is derived from the people.

The Role of Cross Carpeting in Repositioning Democracy in Nigeria

Democracy is premised on constitutionalism, party supremacy, and the sovereignty of the electorate, all of which are affected by frequent defections. From a constitutional perspective, the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) attempts to regulate cross-carpeting, particularly in legislative houses. Section 68(1)(g) and Section 109(1)(g) assert that a legislator shall vacate his seat upon defection, except where there is a division in the sponsoring political party. Judicial interpretations of this provision aim to strike a balance between freedom of association and the need to preserve the sanctity of the electoral mandate.

Cross-carpeting exposes the weakness of political parties in Nigeria, particularly their lack of clear ideology, internal democracy, and effective conflict-resolution mechanisms. When parties fail to accommodate dissent

or manage internal disputes transparently, defections become more frequent. Addressing these structural deficiencies is essential if cross-carpeting is to contribute positively to democratic repositioning rather than democratic regression.

Cross-carpeting plays a dual role in Nigeria's democracy. It enhances political freedom, realignment, and responsiveness on one hand, while its prevalent misuse has weakened democratic accountability and voter confidence on the other. Repositioning democracy in Nigeria therefore requires stricter adherence to constitutional provisions, stronger political institutions, internal party democracy, and a value-driven political culture where cross-carpeting is guided by principle rather than expediency.

Appraisal

The implications of cross carpeting are far-reaching, influencing the stability of political parties, the coherence of government policies and the overall democratic process (Badejo & Obah-Akpowoghaha, [2015](#)). Cross carpeting is more than just a change of party membership. It is often a reflection of the fluidity and instability within the Nigerian political party system (Edet, [2017](#)). This instability is further compounded by the lack of strong ideological foundations within Nigerian parties, leading to a political culture where party loyalty is often secondary to personal or political expediency (Omotola, [2010](#)).

The Nigerian experience is in sharp contrast to the practice in the more established democracies. In established democracies, cross carpeting is done on principle, rather than on selfish and personal interest. It is considered political treason for a member of one party to defect to another in the United States, where generations of families vote and/or affiliate with a single party (Omotola, [2010](#)).

A member of the Kennedy family turning a Republican, a Bush family member becoming a Democrat, or a Clinton family member becoming a Republican is absurd and would devastate politics. The British public is dominated by the same mindset (Badejo & Obah-Akpowoghaha, [2015](#)). Consider a Labour Member of Parliament (MP) switching to the Conservative (Tory) party, or vice versa. As a result, voters adopt the same mindset that leaders do in some of these climes. Men and their families often vote for the same party for many years; hence, voting for the other party only happens in dire situations (Awofeso & Irabor, [2017](#)). The best way to

characterize current political conditions in Nigeria is as political prostitution, which is devoid of morals and decorum.

The legal framework that enables cross carpeting in Nigeria is the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 as amended. The constitution has significant provisions addressing the conditions under which elected legislators can defect to another political party without losing their seats. Section 68(1)(g) of the Constitution of the federal Republic of Nigeria, as amended, stipulates that a member of the National Assembly (Senate or House of Representatives) shall vacate their seat if they become a member of another political party before the expiration of their term. The only exception to this rule is if there is a division within the political party, of which they were previously a member, or if there is a merger of two or more political parties or factions by one of which they were previously sponsored (Ajayi & Ojo, [2014](#)).

The provisions of the constitution aim to ensure political stability and accountability, towards preventing elected legislators from defecting for personal gain without consequences. Several landmark court cases have been decided on the provisions of the constitution. In the case of *Attorney General of the Federation v. Atiku Abubakar* (2007) 2 All N.L.R. 58 the Supreme Court held that the vice president of Nigeria could not be removed from office merely for defecting from his party. The case of Atiku is distinguishable from the case of *Hon. Ifedayo Abegunde v. Ondo State House of Assembly & Others* (2014) LPELR- 23683 where the court clarified that a legislator must vacate his seat if he defects to another party unless the condition of a party division or merger is met. The Supreme Court in this case emphasized the need to maintain political stability and prevent defection for personal gains.

Learning From International Best Practices

In the United States, cross carpeting is constitutionally protected under the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of association. However, the strong ideological foundations of political parties, coupled with a well-established primary election system, significantly discourage opportunistic defections.

Lessons from other Countries

The practice of other states can assist in addressing the challenges posed by cross-carpeting in Nigeria's political terrain and perhaps for advancing

the benefits. Countries with established democracies like United States, United Kingdom and India have developed mechanisms to manage party defection in ways that preserve the integrity of their democracies. Through the examination of these approaches, Nigeria can adopt strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of political defection while fostering a more stable and accountable political environment.

One of such strategies is a robust Legal and Constitutional Frameworks. These refer to stringent legal and constitutional frameworks to regulate party switching. For example, in India, the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution, 1947 commonly known as the 'Anti-Defection Law,' was enacted to combat the frequent defections that threatened the stability of the government. Unless they are a part of a merger with two-thirds of the party's lawmakers, this law permits elected members to change parties after the election (Hoeane, [2008](#)).

The Indian practice is in contrast to Nigeria, where legislators are free to leave if there is division in the party. It is noteworthy to state that Nigeria can benefit from adopting a similar legal measure, which would ensure that elected officials are faithful to the mandate that the voter has reposed on them and stop a widespread defection of lawmakers.

Furthermore, the practice has continued with minimal repercussion in Nigeria due to the absence of a strong legislative structure to control defections. The lack of explicit sanctions or disincentives for party switching has encouraged politicians to leave without worrying about losing their seats, undermining the political institutions that are supposed to protect democratic principles. It is becoming more and more important to address this issue through legal reforms, like those found in India's Anti-Defection Law, as Nigeria looks to strengthen its democratic processes (Ayoade, [2006](#)).

Promotion of Democracy in Countries like the United Kingdom and Germany emphasizes the importance of internal party democracy, which plays a key role in minimizing defections. In these nations, political parties often engage in robust internal debates and elections to select candidates and form policies, ensuring that members feel represented within their own parties (Sacarrow, [2006](#)).

When party members have a say in decision-making processes, they are less likely to defect. Nigeria can learn from these practices by strengthening

internal democracy within its political parties, allowing for greater member participation and reducing the impetus to switch parties due to dissatisfaction with party leadership or policies.

Looking forward, it is imperative for Nigeria to strengthen its political parties by fostering internal democracy, promoting ideological clarity, and ensuring that party members are genuinely committed to the platforms on which they were elected (Abiola & Adisa, [2025](#)). Additionally, both politicians and the electorate should be educated about the long-term implications of cross carpeting on democratic governance. This can be done by public sensitization and enlightenment of electorates on the consequences of party defection. By doing so, Nigeria can move towards a more stable and mature democracy, where political loyalty and ideological consistency are valued, and the will of the people is truly represented.

Strengthening political ideologies is another strong strategy that should be emulated. A strong ideological foundation is another factor that can reduce the incidence of cross-carpeting. Political parties in many Western democracies have strong philosophical foundations that inform their governing principles and programs. Strict rules for defection can help achieve this. Politicians are less likely to transfer parties in the US, for example, because the Democratic and Republican parties have different ideological platforms that outline their governing philosophies (Fiorina et al., [2011](#)).

In contrast, the lack of clear ideological distinctions among Nigerian parties contributes to frequent defections. To counter this, Nigerian political parties should work on defining and adhering to clear ideologies, which would provide a more stable and consistent political environment. Every party's objectives and manifestos must be designed to advance a particular philosophy and all of the party members must share that ideology.

Another worldwide practice that may be taken into consideration is the implementation of political education programs. Enhancing the electorate's comprehension of the consequences of cross-carpeting and the significance of political stability requires political education. Sweden and Denmark have put measures in place to educate people about their rights and obligations in democracies. This is termed as civic education initiatives (Milner, [2002](#)). This includes amending the curriculum in schools to include programmes relating to risks associated with party defection, public trust, political

representation and stability (Yakubu & Bamalli, [2019](#)). This is another measure that may be taken against the defectors in Nigeria.

African countries have enacted laws to manage political party defections in their countries. A very good example is the South African Anti-Defection Law. This law was enacted in 2002 and designed to prevent the political instability caused by party defections (Southall, [2011](#)). The South African law disqualifies defectors from retaining their seats unless on ideological grounds. This South African law has assisted in ensuring political stability in their political system. This idea could be implemented in Nigeria to balance the need for political freedom with the imperative of maintaining government stability (Obi, [2019](#)). This anti defection law, if implemented, is recommended for all elected and appointed offices.

Nigerian government can develop a law for managing political defections from the practices highlighted. The legal framework should be targeted towards legal measures that will promote internal party democracy, strengthen political ideologies, and educate the electorates. These steps are essential toward reducing the negative impacts of cross-carpeting on Nigeria's democratic process. If these strategies are adopted, it will enhance political stability in Nigeria and contribute immensely to the overall consolidation of democracy in Nigeria (Edet, [2017](#)).

Way Forward

With the current struggle of the country regarding the challenges of cross carpeting, it is critical to take its democratic development into account. Political education and legal reforms are urgently needed. This is evidenced by the prevalence and effects of party defections in the nation. Cross carpeting has the potential to further disrupt the political system, undermine public confidence in the democratic process and compromise the institutional integrity of political parties if it is allowed to go unchecked (Omotola, [2010](#)).

Nigeria could learn from developed democracies that have effectively reduced the detrimental effects of party defection in order to have a more stable political system (Milner, [2002](#)). The United Kingdom's strict party discipline and emphasis on party loyalty, for example, could be used as a template. Defection by party members in the United Kingdom has serious political and social repercussions, such as by-election to fill the vacancy of the member of the parliament where the seat belongs to the political party,

and marginalization among the new party members discourages frequent party switching. This is in stark contrast to Nigeria, where defections frequently appear to be motivated more by self-interest than by changes in ideology or moral convictions (Badejo & Obah-Akpowoghaha, [2015](#))

In addition, the Tenth Schedule of the Indian Constitution of 1947 contains the Anti-Defection Law, which provides another important lesson. A more stable party structure has been maintained in large part to this law, which was created expressly to stop the political instability brought on by frequent party defections. This is to ensure that elected officials continue to answer to the parties and the voters who elected them (Badejo & Obah-Akpowoghaha, [2015](#)). Subsequently, Nigerian political parties must also fortify their ideological basis and internal governance frameworks. This would entail cultivating a political culture that places a higher value on party allegiance, maintaining party values, and advancing group interests over individual goals. Defection rates might be considerably decreased by a more ideologically cohesive party system, which would promote a more secure and developed democracy (Ayoade, [2006](#))

Nigeria's democratic future depends on its capacity to control the cross-carpeting problem. Nigeria can create a more robust and efficient democratic system that genuinely represents the will of the people and promotes sustainable governance by adopting stronger party ideology, enforcing harsher laws and studying best practices from around the world (Fiorina et al., [2011](#)).

Conclusion

This work examined the nature of carpet crossing in Nigeria and the likely danger it can cause to the Nigerian democracy. While the advantages of carpet crossing cannot be overemphasized, its implications to Nigerian democracy are numerous. It is notable to mention that it causes political instability. The major advantage is that it introduces dynamism in the state democracy by allowing elected individuals to defect to any political party of their choice where the instant political party that nominated them is no longer habitable. It must be unequivocally stated that where it is allowed without any stringent condition, it is capable of affecting the political system of that state. The current practice in Nigeria is capable of creating danger for the Nigerian democracy as elected officials focus on re-election once elected and this is the reason for merger and re-alignment. It is

therefore safe to conclude that party defection should be allowed with stringent conditions where if it is abused, such elected officials should be recalled.

Author Contribution

Adekunle Saheed Abiola: sole author

Conflict of Interest

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