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DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN NIGERIA AND BENIN
REPUBLIC SINCE 1999-2025

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of democracy and the role of political parties in Nigeria and the Benin Republic from 1999 to 2025. Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999 marked the beginning of the Fourth Republic, characterized by regular multiparty elections and alternating political power between major parties such as the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC). Despite persistent challenges including electoral violence, corruption, and security issues, Nigeria's democratic institutions have endured. In contrast, the Benin Republic has maintained a relatively stable and peaceful democratic system since the early 1990s, with regular elections and smooth transitions of power. The country's political landscape is dominated by parties such as the Cowry Forces for an Emerging Benin (FCBE) and the Republican Bloc, although recent years have seen concerns over political centralization under President Patrice Talon. This comparative analysis highlights the differing trajectories of democratic consolidation in the two neighbouring West African states, reflecting their unique political contexts and challenges.

Key words: Democracy, Political parties, Benin Republic, Military regime, Civilian rule, Fourth Republic

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Introduction

Since 1999, both Nigeria and the Benin Republic have experienced significant developments in their democratic journeys. Nigeria marked its return to civilian rule after decades of military regimes, ushering in the Fourth Republic with a new constitution and a multi-party political system. This period has been defined by competitive elections, evolving political parties, and ongoing efforts to strengthen democratic governance despite various challenges.

Similarly, the Benin Republic has been recognized as a stable democracy in West Africa since the early 1990s, continuing to build on its democratic foundations through peaceful elections and respect for constitutional order. The country's political landscape is characterized by a vibrant multi-party system where coalitions play a crucial role in governance.

This introduction explores the evolution of democracy and political parties in both countries from 1999 to 2025, highlighting their similarities and differences in democratic consolidation and political Dynamics.

How do political party systems influence democratic consolidation in Nigeria and the Benin Republic? What role do political parties play in promoting democratic governance in Nigeria compared to the Benin Republic? How effective are political parties in representing diverse interests in Nigeria and the Benin Republic? What are the challenges facing political party

development in sustaining democracy in Nigeria and the Benin Republic? To what extent do political party structures and internal democracy affect electoral outcomes in Nigeria and the Benin Republic?

Country-Specific Questions, Nigeria: How has the dominance of major political parties affected democratic practices in Nigeria? What is the role of ethnicity and religion in shaping political party alignment in Nigeria? Benin Republic: How has Benin's multi-party system contributed to or hindered democratic stability since the 1990s? What impact has party fragmentation had on democratic governance in the Benin Republic? Would you like to focus on a specific angle—such as elections, governance, party ideology, or political reforms?

INSTITUTIONAL THEORY, DEMOCRACY, AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN NIGERIA AND BENIN REPUBLIC

Institutional theory emphasizes the role that institutions—defined as formal rules, procedures, and organizations, as well as informal norms and conventions—play in shaping political behavior and outcomes. When applied to democracy and political parties in Nigeria and Benin Republic, the theory helps explain how institutional structures, both inherited and created, influence the development and functioning of democratic systems and party politics in these West African nations.

Institutional Theory and Democracy

Institutional theory suggests that the quality and durability of democracy depend importantly on institutional arrangements such as constitutions, electoral laws, judicial independence, and party systems.

Nigeria: Nigeria has a formal democratic structure with regular elections, a constitutionally mandated federal system, and an independent electoral commission (INEC). However, weak institutions, widespread corruption, and the personalization of political power have undermined democratic consolidation. Informal institutions such as patronage networks often override formal democratic rules.

Benin Republic: Often referred to as a success story in West African democratization (particularly in the 1990s), Benin has benefited from relatively stable democratic institutions. The 1990 National Conference laid the foundation for a more transparent and participatory political system. However, recent trends suggest some democratic backsliding, such as controversial electoral reforms and restrictions on opposition parties.

Political Parties:

Political parties serve as the primary means of political organization and representation in democracies. Institutional theory helps analyze how electoral rules, party laws, and state structures shape the party system.

Nigeria: Highly fragmented party system with over 80 registered parties (although

INEC has delisted many). The institutional environment, especially the federal structure and zoning arrangements, has encouraged ethnic and regional party alignments. Dominance of elite-driven parties with weak ideological foundations; parties often act as vehicles for personal ambition rather than policy advocacy. Electoral institutions and court decisions shape party behaviors and internal democracy.

Benin Republic: Initially had a more competitive multiparty system with peaceful transitions of power. Institutional changes in electoral laws (such as increased thresholds for party representation) have weakened the opposition and consolidated power around fewer, often pro-government, Parties. Parties are often personality-driven, lacking strong ideological identity, and subject to elite manipulation.

Comparative Insights: Aspect of Nigeria and Benin Republic base on democracy fragile, with institutional weaknesses, but regular elections, stronger democratic foundation post-1990, but recent authoritarian trends are common to all. Party System: Multiparty, but dominated by a few major elite-controlled parties increasingly centralized around government-aligned parties. Institutional Challenges Ethnic polarization, weak rule of law, electoral violence Electoral restrictions, shrinking opposition space.

Reforms are needed to strengthen internal democracy, enforce party regulations, reduce corruption, rebalance power

among institutions, and ensure fair access for opposition parties. Institutional theory provides a valuable lens for understanding the dynamics of democracy and political parties in Nigeria and Benin Republic. While both countries have formal democratic institutions, their effectiveness is often undermined by informal practices, elite dominance, and weak enforcement mechanisms. Strengthening institutions—both formal and informal—is essential for fostering more resilient and inclusive democracies in both nations.

Theoretical Framework (Democratic Theory and Party Systems Theory)

To understand the relationship between democracy and political parties in Nigeria and the Benin Republic, this study adopts a combination of Democratic Theory and Party Systems Theory.

Democratic Theory: Democratic theory examines how political power is exercised through participation, accountability, representation and rule of law. It explains the quality of democratic governance in both countries. Helps to assess how democratic institutions function, including elections, the judiciary, and civil liberties. This allows comparison of citizen participation and government accountability in Nigeria and Benin.

Party Systems Theory: This theory analyzes the organization, number, and behavior of political parties in a political system. It helps to evaluate how political parties contribute to or hinder democracy. It explains differences in party

dominance, fragmentation, and ideological clarity between Nigeria and Benin. It also analyzes the role of internal party democracy, candidate selection, and political competition. Linking the Theories, democracy depends on the functionality of political parties to represent citizens, structure choices in elections, and hold leaders accountable. The quality of party systems directly affects how democracy is practiced and perceived in both countries. Comparing Nigeria and Benin shows how different political party structures can lead to different democratic outcomes, even within similar presidential system.

Democracy and Political Parties in Nigeria since 1999

Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999 after decades of military dictatorship. The transition marked the beginning of the Fourth Republic, with the adoption of a new constitution and free elections. This era has been characterized by the establishment and consolidation of democratic institutions, electoral processes, and greater political participation by citizens. The 1999 Constitution is the foundation of the current democratic framework. The regular elections include the Presidential, gubernatorial, and legislative elections held every four years. Despite progress, democracy has faced challenges including electoral fraud, political violence, corruption, and ethnic tensions.

Since 1999, Nigeria has had a multi-party system, but two major parties have dominated: People's Democratic Party

(PDP): Dominant from 1999 to 2015; produced several presidents including Olusegun Obasanjo, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, and Goodluck Jonathan. All Progressives Congress (APC): Formed in 2013 through a merger of opposition parties; won power in 2015 with Muhammadu Buhari as president, breaking PDP's dominance. Other Parties: Include the Labour Party, Social Democratic Party (SDP), and various regional and ethnic-based parties, though none have wielded significant national power. The political landscape is marked by intense competition, party defections, and occasional controversies, but democratic governance has largely endured.

Democracy in Benin republic since 1999

Benin is often cited as a stable democracy in West Africa since the early 1990s. Its democratic consolidation continued smoothly after 1999, with peaceful transitions of power, regular elections, and respect for constitutional governance. Democratic Stability: Benin has held multiple credible elections, contributing to political stability. Constitutional Framework: The 1990 constitution remains the basis for governance. Political Challenges: Include occasional political tensions and concerns over judicial independence, but generally peaceful political environment.

Similarities between Nigeria and Benin Republic (1999–2025)

(1). *Return to Civilian Rule*: Both countries transitioned from military or

authoritarian rule to democracy before or by 1999, marking a significant shift toward constitutional governance.

(2). *Adoption of Democratic Constitutions*: Each country operates under a constitution that promotes democratic principles such as separation of powers, rule of law, and fundamental human rights (Nigeria – 1999 Constitution; Benin – 1990 Constitution).

(3). *Multiparty Political Systems*: Both nations embrace multiparty democracy, allowing the formation and operation of multiple political parties, giving citizens a choice during elections.

(4). *Regular, Scheduled Elections*: Nigeria and Benin conduct regular presidential, parliamentary, and local government elections in line with their constitutions.

(5). *Peaceful Transitions of Power*: Both countries have experienced multiple peaceful handovers of power through the ballot box, demonstrating commitment to democratic norms.

(6). *Role of Independent Electoral Bodies*: Each has an independent electoral commission (INEC in Nigeria, CENA in Benin) tasked with organizing and overseeing elections.

(7). *Challenges to Democratic Governance*: Despite progress, both face similar challenges such as political corruption, voter apathy, and in some cases, attempts to limit political opposition.

8). *International Observation and Support*: Elections in both countries are regularly monitored by regional and international observers to ensure transparency and fairness.

9). *Youth and Civil Society Engagement*: Civil society organizations and youth movements have played vital roles in demanding electoral reforms and accountability in both nations.

Challenges facing democracy and political parties in Nigeria

1.) *Electoral Malpractices*: Vote buying, rigging, intimidation, and violence undermine free and fair elections.

INEC's independence is often questioned due to interference and lack of transparency.

2.) *Political Godfatherism*: Influential individuals ("godfathers") manipulate political processes and candidates for personal gain. This weakens internal democracy within political parties.

3). *Weak Political Institutions*: Institutions like the judiciary, police, and legislature are often compromised by corruption or executive influence. Poor enforcement of laws and accountability mechanisms.

4.) *Ethno-Religious Politics*: Parties often form alliances along ethnic and religious lines rather than ideological or policy differences. This fuels division, marginalization, and conflicts.

5). *Lack of Internal Democracy in Parties*: Party primaries are often

manipulated; candidates are imposed rather than elected. This limits merit-based leadership and discourages grassroots participation.

6). *Corruption*: Rampant corruption within parties and public offices erodes trust in democracy. Party funding is often opaque and influenced by illicit sources.

7.) *Voter Apathy*: Many citizens distrust the process and avoid participation due to past disappointments. Low voter turnout affects the legitimacy of elected officials.

8.) *Insecurity*: Terrorism, banditry, and political violence create an unsafe environment for campaigns and voting. Some regions experience voter suppression due to security concerns.

9.) *Poor Civic Education*: Many Nigerians lack awareness of their democratic rights and responsibilities. This allows manipulation and misinformation to thrive.

10). *Defections and Political Instability*: Frequent cross-carpeting (defections) among politicians weakens party ideology and trust. Parties often lack a clear and consistent political agenda.

Challenges facing democracy and political parties in the Benin Republic

1). *Electoral Reforms and Exclusion*: Controversial reforms, such as the 2019 Electoral Code, led to the exclusion of opposition parties from parliamentary elections. This has raised concerns about fairness and inclusivity in the democratic process.

2). *Weak Opposition*: Many opposition parties are fragmented, underfunded, and lack national influence. Government pressure and legal challenges have weakened organized opposition.

3.) *Limited Media Freedom*: Independent journalists and media outlets face harassment and censorship. This limits the ability of political parties to campaign freely and engage citizens.

4). *Judicial and Institutional Independence*: The judiciary and electoral commission are sometimes seen as lacking independence. Allegations of government influence erode trust in democratic institutions.

5). *Voter Apathy and Low Participation*: Citizens are increasingly disillusioned due to perceived lack of genuine political choice. Low voter turnout undermines the legitimacy of elected officials.

6.) *Political Violence and Repression*: Protests and opposition gatherings have been met with arrests and crackdowns. Human rights groups have raised alarms about suppression of dissent.

7). *Presidential Dominance*: The executive branch holds significant power over other branches of government. This centralization limits checks and balances essential for a healthy democracy.

8). *Lack of Internal Democracy in Parties*: Party leadership is often centralized, with limited input from grassroots members. Candidate selection is rarely transparent or democratic.

Democracy in both countries is presidential, but Benin has had more peaceful transitions. Nigeria has more political parties, but both systems suffer from weak ideology and elite dominance. Benin recently tightened rules to reduce the number of parties, while Nigeria still struggles with overcrowded party lists and electoral misconduct.

Recommendations

1.) Reform Electoral Laws: Amend restrictive electoral laws to promote inclusiveness and reduce barriers for all political parties to participate. Ensure fair access to the ballot and reduce excessive registration fees.

2.) Strengthen Independent Institutions: Guarantee the independence and impartiality of the electoral commission (CENA) and judiciary. Appoint officials based on merit, not political affiliation.

3). Promote Internal Party Democracy: Enforce regulations that require transparent and democratic processes for party primaries and leadership selection. Provide civic education for party members on democratic principles.

4.) Enhance Media Freedom: Protect the rights of journalists and media outlets to report freely without fear of harassment. Encourage balanced media coverage for all political actors during elections.

5). Improve Civic Education: Launch nationwide civic education campaigns to increase voter awareness and participation. Focus on citizens' rights,

responsibilities, and the importance of democratic processes.

6.) Encourage Political Dialogue: Foster open dialogue between the government and opposition parties to build trust and resolve political tensions. Establish forums for regular consultation among stakeholders.

7.) Ensure Security and Human Rights: Protect the right to peaceful assembly and expression for all citizens and political groups. Investigate and punish cases of political violence or human rights abuses.

8.) Limit Presidential Powers: Review constitutional provisions to strengthen checks and balances. Enhance the role of parliament and civil society in governance.

9.) Support Opposition and Minor Parties: Provide public funding or support for parties that meet fair performance thresholds. Allow space for diverse political opinions and ensure fair competition.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of democracy and political party development in Nigeria and the Benin Republic reflect both shared and different experiences within West Africa's democratic landscape. While both nations have transitioned from authoritarian regimes to democratic governance, the strength and effectiveness of their political institutions remain varied. Nigeria, with its complex ethno-regional dynamics and larger political landscape,

continues to grapple with issues such as electoral violence, party fragmentation, and weak internal party democracy. Conversely, the Benin Republic, despite being a smaller polity, has experienced both early democratic promise and recent concerns over political inclusivity and electoral competitiveness.

Political parties in both countries play a central role in shaping democratic practices, yet they often face challenges related to institutional weakness, lack of ideological clarity, and elite dominance. Strengthening party systems, promoting transparency, and ensuring genuine political participation are crucial for deepening democratic governance in both contexts. Therefore, sustained democratic consolidation in Nigeria and the Benin Republic requires not only institutional reforms but also a commitment to democratic norms, civic engagement, and political accountability.

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