



The Round Table

The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ctr20

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To cite this article: Dele Babalola (2024) Party politics, dearth of political ideology, and the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, *The Round Table*, 113:5, 434-450, DOI: [10.1080/00358533.2024.2410544](https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2024.2410544)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2024.2410544>



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Published online: 23 Oct 2024.



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Party politics, dearth of political ideology, and the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This article undertakes a critical examination of the paucity of political ideology within Nigeria's party system, with a particular focus on the 2023 presidential election. It further explores the ramifications of this deficiency on the political landscape and developmental trajectory of the country. In liberal democracies, political ideology plays a crucial role in shaping the political system and determining the course of a state's political and economic development, but Nigeria's political landscape currently suffers from a lack of ideology. Political parties in Nigeria are not driven by ideas, beliefs, and values. They are not groups of individuals who share a common ideology, but rather serve as platforms for patronage and wealth accumulation for the political elites. This article advances the argument that the lack of political ideology in Nigerian politics weakens the political system and creates a democratic deficit. These factors challenge the process of democratic development in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS

Nigeria; political party;
political ideology;
presidential election

Introduction

Political ideology is fundamental in shaping the operational dynamics of political parties and the overall political system. It guides the direction of a nation's political and economic development. A party's ideology is its primary differentiator (Awa, 1974; Hill & Leighley, 1993; Ostrowski, 2023). During the struggle for decolonisation in Nigeria, nationalism was the predominant political ideology (Awa, 1974; Coleman, 1958) but following the attainment of independence in 1960, the sentiment of nationalism became moribund. This is understandable given that the parties of that era emerged as a response to the realities of colonial administration (Coleman, 1958). Political parties in the initial phase following Nigeria's attainment of independence, commonly referred to as the First Republic (1960–1966),¹ were predominantly shaped by conservative ideology (Northern People's Congress, NPC), pragmatic socialism (National Council of Nigerian Citizens, NCNC), and democratic socialism (Action Group, AG) (Awa, 1974; Ayoade, 1985). Similarly, the political parties that competed for electoral positions during the Second Republic (1979–1983), which were a revival of the previous parties, were driven by

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comparable ideologies. In the two-party system of the aborted Third Republic (1992–1993), the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC) were the only political parties with national recognition. While the SDP was positioned slightly towards the left end of the ideological spectrum, the NRC leaned slightly towards the right. The imposition of these two parties on Nigerians resulted in unusual political coalitions, which played a part in the annulment of the 1993 presidential election (Babalola, 2020).

By 1999, as Nigeria transitioned back to democratic governance (Fourth Republic, 1999 – present), the nature and quality of party politics had undergone a transformation, with political parties no longer being driven by ideology. The failed Third Republic, together with prolonged military dictatorship, undermined the democratic culture that formerly defined politics. Today's political landscape is characterised by the pursuit of electoral gain and emphasis on sharing the country's wealth among the political elites. Political parties formed after 1999 lack a clear sense of what they stand for, as they were formed, not by individuals with similar ideologies but by individuals only interested in enriching themselves. As will be demonstrated shortly, the political parties that contested the 2023 presidential election were not ideological platforms and the results reflected this reality. Are political parties and voters in Nigeria interested in political ideology? Does political ideology play a part in how the 2023 presidential election was won and lost? What are the impacts of political ideology (or lack of it) on the development of party system in Nigeria? These are the pertinent questions this article aims to answer.

This article is organised into six distinct sections, including this one, which provides the work's foundation. While the following section conceptualises political party and elucidates the intricate nature of the concept of ideology, the third section examines the character of Nigeria's political parties during the pre- and early post-independence eras within the context of political ideology. The fourth section focuses on the meaninglessness of political ideology in the 2023 presidential election. The important questions answered in this section are whether political parties in Nigeria care about political ideology, and whether the voters are interested in ideology. The fifth section examines the consequences of the absence of ideology in Nigerian politics, while the sixth section serves as the conclusion.

Definition of concepts: political party and political ideology

What is a political party?

Scholars and political commentators often engage in discourse about political parties as the primary elements of modern democratic systems or essential components of democratic institutions, to the extent that they assert that democracy is inconceivable without political parties (Crotty, 1970; Morse, 1896, Stokes, 1999). In other words, political parties are essential for the functioning of democracy, and modern democracy cannot exist without them. Stokes (1999, p. 245) posits that 'political parties are endemic to democracy', and they organise politics in modern democracies. Thus, political parties occupy an important place within the realm of politics, and it is difficult to envision politics without them, but what is a political party?

According to Morse (1896, p. 68), a political party is:

a durable organisation which, in its simplest form, consists of a single group of citizens united by common principles . . . and which, contrary to the view usually held, has for its immediate end the advancement of the interests and the realisation of the ideals, not of the people as a whole, but of the particular group or groups which it represents.

Morse's notion of a political party implies that the primary aim of a political party is not necessarily to promote the welfare of the entire populace, but rather the advancement of the interests of the party and its members. Furthermore, it implies that members are bound together by shared interests. For Crotty (1970, p. 272), a political party is an organised group that fulfils various roles, including educating the public about the political system and the immediate consequences of policy issues, recruiting and supporting individuals for public positions, and establishing a connection between the public and those responsible for making governmental decisions.

After a thorough examination of the definitions provided above, one may contend that a political party is a group of persons who possess a common set of ideas or ideology, aiming primarily to advance their own interests and secondarily the interests of the state. Another commonality inherent in the definitions is the notion that political parties are organisational entities that mobilise individuals with the aim of achieving electoral successes and exerting political influence, specifically by assuming governance of the state. Yet another theme is that political parties are instrumental in establishing a relationship between government and society by aggregating diverse interests and transmitting these to government. Political parties have a significant role in shaping electoral decisions, particularly in democratic systems. Drawing from these definitions, we define a political party as an association of persons who are united by a shared ideas and principles, and with the explicit purpose of acquiring and exercising political power.

What is political ideology?

Politics serves as a medium for the contestation of power, wherein political parties, politicians, and electors play a significant role. At the centre of this process are the ideas and beliefs pertaining to the world otherwise referred to as ideology. The world of politics is markedly shaped by ideology (Awa, 1974; Friedrich, 1965; Loewenstein, 1953; Seliger, 1976), with a prevalent method of categorisation being left-centre-right (Ostrowski, 2023). Political parties and politicians are often categorised as adhering to one ideology or another as is the case in mature democracies and even in authoritarian states, or being devoid of any discernible ideology as is the situation in contemporary Nigeria. So, what is political ideology?

As a concept, ideology has several definitional qualities that are directly at odds with one another (Gerring, 1997, p. 957). However, scholars have sought to define the concept. According to Loewenstein (1953, p. 691), ideology is 'a consistent and integrated pattern of thoughts and beliefs, or thoughts converted into beliefs, explaining man's attitudes toward life and his existence in society, and advocating a conduct and action pattern responsive to, and commensurate with, such thoughts and beliefs'. Similarly, ideology may be defined as 'a set of literate ideas – a reasonably coherent body of notions concerning practical means of how to change and reform (or, indeed, how to preserve) a given body politic and the society which it orders' (Friedrich, 1965, p. 613) or 'sets of ideas by which men posit, explain and justify ends and means of organised social action,

and specifically political action, irrespective of whether such action aims to pre-serve, amend, uproot or rebuild a given social order' (Seliger, 1976, p. 11). As demonstrated in these definitions, ideology is a system of ideas and beliefs which offers a lens through which one can understand the nature of the political realm. The definitions also imply that ideology serves a dual purpose in facilitating an understanding of public affairs, while also serving as a guiding principle for action. Moreover, they connote that ideology pervades all aspects of human existence, including politics, religion, and economics. In other words, ideology provides a framework for understanding the operation of a political system and acts as a prism through which we view the world and serves the objective of either seeking to change the current sociopolitical system or maintaining and protecting the status quo.

Awa (1974, p. 359) contends that political ideology is a vehicle that propels political parties into positions of political authority. Ideologies play a pivotal role in shaping and driving political dynamics. They shape our political actions and draw individuals towards a particular group, party, or movement. It is, therefore, anticipated that every political party, regardless of whether it operates in a democratic or authoritarian setting, will be guided by an ideology. However, in many African democracies where patronage culture drives politics, political parties are not driven by ideologies as the pursuit of political office takes precedence above all other considerations. In the Nigerian context, political parties are coalitions of ethnic or regional alignments, rather than assemblages of persons predominantly united by shared ideologies. Typically, these alliances are led by affluent and influential persons who are considered party patrons. Unlike in Africa, individuals in developed democracies align themselves with political parties or exercise their voting rights in favour of a particular party based on the ideological orientation espoused by the party.

Considering the foregoing, ideology, therefore, may be defined as a comprehensive framework of ideas, beliefs, values, and doctrines that exert influence over individuals, groups, or societies. It serves as a fundamental basis for shaping political, social, and cultural structures. Moreover, it determines the nature of a political system and shapes political actions and choices. Political parties in established democracies and authoritarian states operate within the confines of distinct ideologies such as liberalism, conservatism, communism, or socialism.

Early political parties and political ideology

If we were to accept that political ideology encompasses a set of ideas and beliefs that provide a framework for understanding the fundamental nature of the political sphere, and a political party is an association of individuals who share a common ideology, can one argue that political parties in the pre-independent and immediate post-independent periods were ideologically driven?

Early political parties and their respective leaders were driven by ideology in their struggle against colonialism. The National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), formed in 1944 and under the leadership of Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, was the first political party to have a widespread presence across Nigeria. The Action Group (AG), established in 1951 and led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, sprang from the pan Yoruba cultural society known as the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa*,² which was formed in 1945. Azikiwe was described as an

exceptional illustration of an ideology and a prominent proponent of Marxism (Awa, 1974, p. 362) while Awolowo was described as 'probably the most thorough-going Marxist' of the political leaders of that era (Awa, 1974, p. 371). The Northern People's Congress (NPC), established in 1951, was the third most influential party of that era (Coleman, 1958; Dudley, 1982). Like the AG, the NPC was an offshoot of a pan-Northern Nigeria cultural association, the *Jammiyyaar Mutanen Arewa* (Northern People's Congress), which was formed in 1949 (Coleman, 1958; Dudley, 1982). The common objective of these leaders and their parties was the attainment of independence for Nigeria. To this end, nationalism became their common 'language' and served as their ideology. Awa (1974, p. 361) puts this more clearly, arguing that, during the colonial era in Nigeria, 'nationalism took the form and substance of a political ideology'. Nationalism was understood in terms of self-determination, which serves as the fundamental basis for all other rights. Based on this perspective, the goal of nationalism was to achieve 'equality as expressed in sovereign independence' (Awa, 1974, p. 361). It was believed that attaining economic progress was not possible under colonial authority.

After gaining independence, the feeling of nationalism swiftly waned and the NCNC adopted a form of socialism that the party leaders described as pragmatic socialism. According to the party, pragmatic socialism aimed to promote the principles of fellowship, freedom, and opportunity for all, as well as the equality of all persons, communities, and nations (Awa, 1974, p. 368). It was not until election year in 1959 that the AG formally declared that it was adopting democratic socialism as its ideology (Ayoade, 1985, p. 171). Leaders of the party maintained that democratic socialism aimed to guarantee equal opportunity for all Nigerians by adopting programmes that sought to provide economic opportunities for the populace and national greatness (Awa, 1974, p. 371). Prior to 1959, the party favoured welfarism as reflected in its slogan of 'life more abundant' and 'freedom for all' (Dudley, 1982, p. 47), and as a 'vote-catching device' (Ayoade, 1985, p. 173). Welfarism here refers to the conceptualisation of a welfare state that prioritises the safeguarding of workers' interests and the enhancement of the overall standard of living for the population. The party held the conviction that the welfare state would not only alleviate poverty, illiteracy, and sickness, but also eradicate them entirely, ensuring a basic quality of living that no person would be permitted to fall below (Ayoade, 1985, p. 176).

The NPC adopted a conservative ideology, with its leaders upholding their traditional elite privileges and expressing their intention to support the northern 'natural rulers' in fulfilling their responsibilities (Coleman, 1958, p. 358). The conservative stance of the party led to the breakaway of a small group of northern youths in August 1950. The new group, led by Mallam Aminu Kano formed an alternative association, the Northern Elements' Progressive Union (NEPU), which is translated as *Jamiyar Naman Sawaba* in Hausa (Coleman, 1958, pp. 358–366). NEPU, which decried the NPC's excessive deference towards the traditional rulers in northern Nigeria and the British authorities, became a political party in 1952 and focused on the reformation of institutions in the northern region, as well as the liberation of the socioeconomically disadvantaged group known as the *talakawa* in Hausa language. NEPU provided a platform for left-wing politicians.

The Second Republic (1979–1983), which began with the establishment of a democratically elected government in 1979, saw the involvement in the electoral

process of five major political parties. The Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), which emerged as a reincarnation of the AG and led by Chief Awolowo, and the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), which was a coalition of the remnants of the defunct NPC and factions of all the other former political parties (Abba & Babalola, 2017). Other parties included the Nigerian People's Party (NPP), led by Dr Azikiwe, which originated from the dissolved NCNC, the People's Redemption Party (PRP), a reincarnate of NEPU, led by Mallam Aminu Kano, and the Great Nigerian People's Party (GNPP), headed by Alhaji Ibrahim Waziri.

The NPN, like the previous NPC, can be characterised as a conservative party in terms of its ideological stance and was positioned towards the centre-right. The NPN acknowledged that it had no intention of altering the class structure of Nigerian society (Dudley, 1982, p. 194). Not only that, but it also demonstrated a strong dedication to safeguarding traditional institutions (Kurfi, 1983). Expectedly, like the now defunct AG, the UPN, which was positioned towards the centre-left, continued with socialist and welfare-oriented policies such as the provision of free education and healthcare. The PRP, which Dudley (1982, p. 196) describes a 'residual party' due to its composition primarily consisting of persons who have been unable to align themselves with the principles of other political parties provided a platform for left wing politicians. Affiliation with the party was motivated by a deep-rooted dedication to a specific set of ideas. In terms of ideological orientation, both the NPP and the GNPP expressed liberal ideologies and proposed programmes that aimed to operate within the framework of a mixed economy (Dudley, 1982, p. 196).

Parties of the aborted Third Republic (1992–1993) may also be described as ideologically driven. For example, the SDP was characterised as having a slightly left-leaning ideological stance, whereas the NRC was positioned somewhat to the right on the political spectrum or 'a little to the left' and 'a little to the right' respectively (Abba & Babalola, 2017). In practice, however, the two parties were not distinguishable.

How relevant is political ideology in today's party system?

After demonstrating that early political parties were ideologically motivated, the question that remains is whether political parties in the present democratic dispensation are. The re-establishment of civilian rule in 1999, after a prolonged period of military dictatorship, signalled the resurgence of a multiparty system in the country, with a significant number of political parties engaging in electoral politics. Prominent among these parties were the Alliance for Democracy (AD), the All People's Party (APP), and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) which were registered by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in 1998. PDP's origins can be traced to 1997, when a collective of 34 prominent Nigerians, including politicians and ex-military officers, led by Alex Ekwueme, Nigeria's vice-president in the Second Republic expressed their displeasure towards Abacha's militarisation of the political space and his apparent intention to transition from a military leader to a civilian one (Hamalai et al., 2016, p. 80; Katsina, 2016, p. 4). The PDP was founded by this group, which went by the moniker G-34. Put simply, the party sprang from the G-34. Though it lacks a clear ideology, the PDP is a nationally recognised political party that is not associated with any one ethnic or religious group in the country.

In the run-up to the 2015 general elections, the political landscape saw a significant transformation with the formation of the All Progressives Congress (APC) which constituted a formidable opposition to the governing PDP. APC was formed in early 2013 through the merger of three ethnically based opposition parties, the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP), and the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) (Babalola, 2020). The formation of APC did not stem from a shared ideological commitment, rather from a strategic alliance between the Hausa-Fulani elite and their Yoruba counterparts (Babalola, 2018). The alliance was based on the understanding that securing a majority of votes from any two of the three major ethnic groups,³ along with some support from a few minority groups, would be sufficient to secure victory in the presidential election. This calculation yielded results, as evidenced by the party's victory in the 2015 presidential election.

In contrast to other presidential elections that have taken place in the post-1999 era, the 2023 election witnessed a three-way contest among the APC, PDP, and the Labour Party (LP). The LP was originally founded in 2002 under the name Party for Social Democracy (PSD) by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), an organisation renowned for its advocacy for the rights and well-being of workers (Mimiko, 2007). In addition to playing active role in conventional labour disputes, the NLC has a reputation for serving as a formidable opposition against the excesses of the government, particularly during the period of military rule. Not only that, but it has actively participated in politics.⁴ During Nigeria's First Republic (1960–66), a faction of the NLC formed the Socialist Workers' and Farmers' Party (SWAFP) and the Nigerian Labour Party (NLP) (Tar, 2009, p. 174). Similarly, during the failed Third Republic, the NLC made a formal request to the National Electoral Commission (NEC) to officially establish its own political party, known as the National Labour Party (NLP), but the request was denied (Tar, 2009, p. 174). The effort by a faction of the NLC at the beginning of the Fourth Republic to rejuvenate the NLP yielded result in 2002 with the registration of the LP. The party's mission was to 'address the issue of political power not as an end, but as the vehicle for the transformation of the country and for governance consistent with the ideology of social democracy' (LP, 2006, p. 5). It seeks to 'promote and defend social democratic principles and ideals for the purpose of achieving social justice, progress and people's democracy and unity in the country' (LP, 2006, p. 8), and to provide 'basic social welfare services for the socio-economic benefits of the citizens' (LP, 2006, p. 13). In its current form, the party lacks ideology, despite its historical origins. Mimiko (2007, p. 121) puts this more poignantly arguing that the party lacks ideology and 'remains essentially a middle-of-the-road formation'. Its laudable objectives were not enough to garner national support until 2023, when Peter Obi was announced as the party's presidential candidate. It must be said, however, that the party only gained recognition in Ondo State where Dr Olusegun Mimiko was elected governor in 2009 under the party's banner.

The New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP), a small political party based in the north-west state of Kano, also took part in the 2023 presidential election. Like the major parties, the NNPP has been primarily focused on pragmatic considerations rather than a strong dedication to a certain ideology. These parties lack ideological alignment with both the general population and specific interest groups such as labour, human rights, and student movements. There is no denying that they have manifestoes, but these documents alone do not suffice in offering a thorough understanding of their underlying ideological

framework. Attempts to build parties based on ideology, particularly in the years after 1999, have not achieved success. For instance, political parties with radical and ideological affiliations like Gani Fawehinmi's National Conscience Party (NCP) and Balarabe Musa's People's Redemption Party (PRP) were not officially recognised until 2003 (Yagboyaju, 2011, p. 97). This occurred when the political environment underwent further liberalisation due to a legal ruling on the registration of political parties. While the NCP does not adhere to socialist principles, its founder, Chief Gani Fawehinmi, was a prominent champion of human rights and aligned himself with the challenges faced by the working class and young people, particularly students. Although these parties have had formal recognition, they have been unable to attain electoral success due to their lack of financial resources to compete with the major parties, which are often led by wealthy individuals.

Thus, the 2023 presidential election witnessed the participation of political parties that were devoid of any clear ideology. During the election, the APC was represented by Chief Bola Tinubu, a Yoruba Muslim from the south-west,⁵ the PDP by Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, a Muslim from the north-east, the LP by Mr Peter Obi, a Christian from the south-east, and the NNPP had Alhaji Rabiu Kwankwaso, a Muslim from the north-west, as its presidential candidate. It is worth noting that ideology had no influence on the contenders' choice of vice-presidential candidates. Obi selected a Muslim running mate from the north-west, Abubakar opted for a Christian vice-presidential candidate who hails from the south-south geopolitical region, whereas Kwankwaso picked a Christian from the south-south. In contrast, Tinubu opted for a fellow Muslim from the north-eastern region. Unsurprisingly, Tinubu's choice of a Muslim running mate received substantial backlash from influential Christian politicians, including those in the APC, Christian clerics, and a portion of the Christian population nationwide. The combination was deemed imbalanced and religiously insensitive in a society marked by religious plurality. Tinubu strategically selected a Muslim running mate from the north-east, the same region as his main competitor Abubakar, with the intention of bolstering support for the APC in that region. As seen in the following section, this calculation paid off. In the Nigerian context, it is customary for political parties vying for the presidency to adhere to the unofficial 'principle' of a 'balanced ticket' (Babalola, 2020). This principle entails that when a candidate seeks a political position, especially at the national level, their running mate is typically selected from a different ethnic and religious background. The only instance in Nigeria's electoral history where an 'unbalanced ticket' was presented was during the 1993 presidential election, which was subsequently annulled by the Babangida military regime (Babalola, 2020).

In the run-up to the 2023 presidential election, the parties focused on primal identities in their political calculations rather than employ ideology as a tool for mobilisation. Ethnicity and religion took the place of political ideology as they had in previous elections. While demonstrating less concern for matters such as corruption, insecurity, and the state of the economy, politicians engaged in heated rhetoric and hate speeches throughout the campaign period. The rivalry between political actors and their supporters showed a division that was mostly based on religious and ethnic affiliations, rather than ideological differences. The campaign assumed ethnic and religious dimensions, with various ethnic associations and religious groups engaging in competition to secure endorsements for their preferred candidates.

The conspicuous absence of ideology within the three main political parties became apparent during the period leading up to the election, as notable political actors either switched their allegiance or formed alliances with opposing parties. This trend was observed across the entire political landscape, from the governing APC to the main opposition party, the PDP, and even the newcomers, the LP. One significant instance of anti-party conduct was carried out by the G-5, a group of five aggrieved PDP governors. This group was led by Nyesom Wike, the governor of Rivers State⁶ who had experienced defeat in the party's primary elections and had not been nominated as the vice-presidential candidate. The governors refused to support their party's presidential candidate, Abubakar, arguing that the presidency should be assumed by a person from the southern region after the eight-year tenure of President Buhari, who hails from the northern region. According to them, this was consistent with the PDP's power-sharing arrangement, which aims to balance the influence between the northern and southern regions (Babalola & Onapajo, 2024). Moreover, the governors demanded the replacement of Professor Iyorchia Ayu, the national chairman of the party, with a candidate from the southern region, given that both the presidential nominee of the party, Abubakar, and Ayu hail from the northern region. The party refused to give in to pressure from the G-5, resulting in the group actively opposing the party during the election. Although the G-5 governors were united in their opposition to Abubakar's candidature, they were not united in their support for an alternative candidate.⁷

The actions of the G-5 had a historical basis. In the prelude to the 2015 presidential election, a group of seven PDP governors, collectively referred to as the G-7, expressed their dissent over the selection of President Goodluck Jonathan as the party's nominee in the election. As with the G-5, one of the reasons behind their opposition stemmed from the potential disruption of the power rotation arrangement between the northern and southern regions since President Jonathan's bid for re-election was perceived as a threat to the established party dynamics. Five of the governors formed the n-PDP faction and switched their allegiance to the APC while the remaining two chose to remain in the PDP and engaged in acts of internal sabotage, just as the G-5 did. According to Babalola (2020), actions of the G-7 had a significant impact on the outcome of the 2015 election, resulting in the defeat of President Jonathan.

Another instance of anti-party behaviour during the 2023 election occurred when Yakubu Dogara, a Christian and former Speaker of the country's House of Representatives, defected from the APC to the PDP due to his objection to the party's Muslim-Muslim ticket. He publicly expressed support for the presidential candidate of the PDP, while actively campaigning for the governorship candidate of the APC. Dogara justified his position by stating that he supports specific candidates rather than his political party and cannot defend the religious insensitivity of his party (The Guardian [Nigeria], 2023). Like Dogara, a sizeable number of prominent Christian APC members, including party spokespersons like Daniel Bwala and Kenneth Okonkwo defected to the PDP and the LP respectively citing the APC's Muslim-Muslim ticket. Bwala and Okonkwo were subsequently appointed Abubakar and Obi's spokespersons respectively. During the election, several high-ranking politicians openly supported candidates affiliated with parties other than their own, citing grievances with the internal selection process. This development led to the emergence of several factions within the major political parties. It is interesting to note that these new factions were driven more by

disagreements over how to share positions than by ideological differences. This trend is unsurprising, as party membership was not determined by ideological factors in the first place. Not only that, but the concept of party supremacy, which emphasises the complete authority of a party's leaders elected by the majority of its members, was not respected (Abba & Babalola, 2017).

The 2023 presidential election and the meaninglessness of political ideology

Political scientists and political sociologists have always been interested in examining the fundamental factors that influence voters' decisions (Butler, 1955; Campbell et al., 1960; Goldman, 1966; Lijphart, 1979). These scholars have observed, in different ways, that voter decisions are usually influenced by such factors as political ideology, party manifestoes, prevailing economic conditions, and the demeanour of candidates. Tinubu emerged victorious from the keenly contested election but how much of an impact did political ideology or any of these factors have on the results of the election? Analysing the election's outcome through a geo-political lens may provide an answer to this pertinent question. In Nigeria, the intersection of ethnic, religious, and regional identities gives rise to political divisions that are acknowledged as tangible political realities (Babalola, 2019). The north-eastern and north-western areas are characterised by a significant Muslim population and are mostly populated by the Kanuri and Hausa-Fulani ethnic groups. The north-central region has a significant degree of cultural and religious diversity. The Igbo, who are predominantly Christians, primarily reside in the south-eastern region while the Yoruba, mainly found in the south-western region, exhibit religious diversity but possess a shared cultural heritage. The south-south geopolitical region, often known as the Niger Delta region, is home to several ethnic groups that are commonly categorised as 'minority' and predominantly adhere to the Christian religion.

Figure 1 demonstrates that Tinubu achieved remarkable results in the south-west, however he lost his home state, Lagos to Obi. Tinubu, who previously served as both a senator and governor of the state, had extensive backing from the population. How, therefore, did he lose the state? There are many plausible explanations for this. One is that, while many Yoruba in the state supported the APC candidate, a significant proportion of Obi's votes were from Igbos residing in Lagos. Lagos is the former capital of Nigeria and serves as the nation's commercial hub, explaining why the state attracts many Nigerians, particularly the Igbo, who are primarily traders. Another reason could be that a considerable portion of the state's Christian population supported Obi based on

	APC	%	PDP	%	LP	%	NNPP	%
NC	1,670,091	42	1,087,893	28	1,133,840	29	55,540	1
NE	1,185,458	35	1,741,846	52	315,107	9	126,343	4
NW	2,652,235	40	2,329,540	35	350,182	5	1,268,250	9
SE	127,605	6	91,198	4	1,960,589	90	9,227	0
SS	799,957	29	717,908	26	1,210,675	44	17,167	1
SW	2,279,407	56	941,941	23	846,478	21	16,664	0
FCT	90,902	20	74,194	16	281,717	62	4,517	1
Total	8,794,726	36.61	6,984,520	29.07	6,101,533	25.40	1496687	6.23

Figure 1. The 2023 presidential election results. Source: Compiled from Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) official results

religious affinity. The Pentecostal churches, including the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and the Winners Chapel, have a significant presence in Lagos (Obadare, 2006, p. 673). In Nigeria, religion holds considerable sway in shaping voting decisions (Babalola, 2020; Obadare, 2006; Onapajo, 2012). For example, during the tenure of Olusegun Obasanjo as President from 1999–2007, several members of the Christian community held the belief that a Christian presidency presented ‘an opportunity to recover lost ground’, following several years where Muslim leaders held positions of power in the country (Obadare, 2006, p. 672). Likewise in 2023, a subset of Christians maintained the conviction that a potential President Obi would provide them with an opportunity to regain previously lost influence after the eight-year tenure of President Buhari, who is a Muslim. Without a doubt, the result in Lagos state was influenced by ethnic and religious identity, rather than political ideology, and the most suitable explanation to explain the conduct of the voters is sociological voting behaviour, which is based on the social alignment of the voter (Lijphart, 1979).

The media also played a significant role in Obi’s impressive performance in Lagos. The state houses the majority of the prominent media organisations in the country. Moreover, the populace is renowned for their high level of enlightenment compared to those of other states. During the election, Obi’s supporters, who were mostly young people and called *Obidients* (a term coined from Obi), used the media, particularly, social media to project an image of him as charming, engaging, and youthful. Simultaneously, they depicted other candidates as aged and without vigour thereby fostering a bandwagon effect of support for Obi (Anigbolu, 2022; La Presse, 2023). The inclination towards Obi and the aversion towards other candidates were not motivated by the candidates’ ideas but rather aimed at enhancing Obi’s electoral prospects. Undoubtedly, Peter Obi’s LP managed to disrupt the expected outcomes, but it is premature to conclude that this will have a lasting impact, considering the unpredictable nature of Nigerian politicians, who often lack ideological dedication.

Tinubu also lost Osun to the PDP candidate. Those factors that contributed to the outcome of the election in Lagos were not relevant to the electoral dynamics observed in Osun. Tinubu’s loss in Osun can be linked to the internal wrangling within the state’s APC, where influential party members actively worked against their candidate.

Despite Obi and Abubakar’s victories in Lagos and Osun states, Tinubu was able to secure around 56% of the total votes in the south-west. The reason for this may not be far-fetched. In their analysis of the 2011 presidential election, Hamalai et al. (2016, p. 105) observed that voters in the south-west region made rational voting decisions based on their perceptions of the candidates’ ability to deliver effective performance. Similarly, while analysing the 2015 presidential election results, Babalola (2018, 2020) argued that south-west voters attached less importance to ethnic and religious identities. These observations indicate that Yoruba voters are rational, but these assertions were contradicted during the 2023 election, where Tinubu, a candidate of Yoruba ancestry, was involved. The rational-choice theory of voting is grounded upon the premise that voting is a rational act, wherein citizens use their voting rights to make logical choices (Butler, 1955). This form of voting is commonly referred to as ‘issue voting’ due to the assumption that voters possess considerable understanding of the issues at stake and align their issue preferences with party platforms. Rational-choice voters place emphasis on the ideology, manifestos, and the competence of the candidates and parties.

The situation in the south-east is also intriguing as Obi received about 90% of the votes cast in the region. Historically, the south-east voters had consistently demonstrated a collective preference for the PDP since 1999. This support was not driven by rational or ideological factors. As stated earlier, the PDP is an ‘ideologically inarticulate congeries of politicians whose great common enterprise is the doling out of patronage along ethno-geographical lines’ (Suberu, 2007, p. 101). The popularity of the party in this area might be ascribed to the fact that one of its prominent founders, Dr Alex Ekwueme, comes from the Igbo ethnic group. Obi, a former governor of Anambra state in the south-east, served as Atiku Abubakar’s running mate in the 2019 presidential election, during which the region demonstrated overwhelming support for the PDP. According to Babalola (2020), the selection of Obi by the PDP in 2019 was a strategic move aimed at strengthening Abubakar’s support in the south-east, where the incumbent, Buhari experienced significant electoral setback in the previous election in 2015. This strategy proved to be advantageous as Abubakar gained significant popularity among the Igbo population. The party identification theory, which is grounded in the enduring psychological connection and allegiance that a voter maintains towards a particular political party, may be used to explain this type of voting behaviour. The theory argues that voting choices are primarily shaped by partisanship rather than party platforms, political ideologies, or the persona of candidates (Campbell et al., 1960). Election campaigns have minimal influence on party identifiers, as voters often determine their voting preferences prior to the commencement of the campaign.

The resounding endorsement of Obi in the south-east during the 2023 election cannot be said to be motivated by ideology, but by the region’s aspiration to have a representative from their ethnic group, the Igbo, assume a prominent position in national governance. The Igbos, who have continuously expressed their concerns regarding the perceived political marginalisation of their ethnic group, viewed the emergence of Obi as an opportunity to foster a sense of inclusion in the Nigerian project. The Igbos have made relentless attempts to secede from Nigeria frequently citing grievances regarding the perceived systemic exclusion of their group from the federal power dynamics, especially after the civil war (1967–1970) (Babalola, 2020; Babalola & Okafor, 2024; Babalola & Onapajo, 2024).

The northeastern region, which is Abubakar’s region, yielded another interesting result as he garnered about 52% of the votes in the region. Abubakar emerged victorious in all states within the region, except for Borno, which is the home state of Kashim Shettima, the vice-presidential candidate running alongside Tinubu of APC. In Borno, Abubakar garnered a total of 190,921 votes, while Tinubu secured 252,282 votes. This shows that the APC’s decision to select Shettima was evidently motivated by a strategic calculation to boost support for Tinubu in the highly populated state, while simultaneously undermining Abubakar’s backing in both the state and the broader region. This provides further evidence for Babalola’s (2020) assertion that Nigerian political elites use ethnic and religious affiliations as a means of determining electoral outcomes. Borno state’s results provide a clear explanation for why politicians continually show a high preference for mobilising by appealing to these deeply ingrained emotions. Undoubtedly, Tinubu’s triumph in the state was not swayed by political ideology.

Tinubu displayed commendable performance in the north-west, surpassing Abubakar and Kwankwaso, both of whom are northerners. However, it is noteworthy to examine

Kwankwaso's performance in Kano state, where he garnered a significant total of 997,279 votes, compared to Tinubu's 517,341 votes. The remarkable achievement of Kwankwaso in Kano could be ascribed to his deep-rooted affiliation with the local population. The candidate was endeared to the electorate in the state mostly due to his personal popularity more than his or party's ideas and beliefs.

Dearth of political ideology in Nigerian politics: implications for national development

As has been established, one of Nigeria's present challenges is that its political system is not characterised by well-defined political ideologies. In the 2023 presidential election, political ideology was of little relevance to either the political parties or the electorate. What does this portend for the country? Political parties in Nigeria are weak and lack internal cohesion and often prioritise the mobilisation of ethnic, regional, or religious support bases over the development of an overarching ideology that transcend these divisions. As observed during the 2023 presidential election, there is the inclination of politicians and voters to affiliate themselves with political parties that can best serve their ethnic, regional, or religious interests. This tendency promotes identity politics, which deepens pre-existing differences and heightens diversity-related conflicts. This is the situation in Nigeria today, where presidential elections have been trailed by ethno-regional and religious enmity.

As previously contended, political parties function as the critical infrastructure of democratic systems, facilitating citizen engagement in the political process. At the core of political party operations lies the existence of distinct political ideologies which provide direction for their policies, and decision-making processes. Nevertheless, a lack of discernible differences in the ideologies of various political parties may engender apathy among the public, leading to a decline in voter participation as shown in recent presidential elections in Nigeria. During the 2023 presidential election, around 93.5 million citizens registered to vote, 87.3 million acquired their permanent voter cards (PVC), and the overall voter turnout was just 27% (Hassan, 2023).

The Nigerian political space is marked by a ruthless pursuit of power, which arises from the zero-sum nature of Nigerian politics. Politicians rarely engage in ideological conflicts. As was observed during the 2023 presidential election, political parties prioritised the acquisition of power by adopting tactics such as defections, appeal to ethnic and religious sentiments, election fraud, and vote buying, rather than promoting a distinct political ideology and using such as a tool of mobilisation. This elucidates the rationale for politicians placing personal gain ahead of the collective good. Leaders perceive the money spent on elections as a strategic investment that has the potential to provide profitable returns. This inclination fosters corruption and opportunism as leaders prioritise immediate benefits over the progress of the nation. This, in turn, retards the country's economic development. Political ideologies have a crucial role in shaping a country's economic path, and a lack of ideology might lead to a lack of a distinct vision for the nation's progress. The lack of a clearly defined economic ideology has the potential to result in inconsistent economic policies and the existence of weak and ineffective institutions as is the case in Nigeria. Babalola and Okafor (2024) contend that Nigeria possesses

essential institutions required for a functional democratic system, but these institutions are weak and have not effectively served the populace, unlike comparable institutions in countries like the United States, and Canada. The absence of a clear ideological foundation adds to the widespread occurrence of short-term decision-making, policy reversals, and the absence of sustainable development. In addition, it makes long-term planning more difficult.

Conclusion

If one were to acknowledge the definition of ideology as a framework of ideas and beliefs it is plausible to assert that Nigeria's political parties in the immediate post-independent era were distinguished by their adherence to ideology, whereas parties in the current democratic dispensation exhibit a paucity of ideology. As previously stated, ideology serves as a mechanism for individuals to define their own identities, as a formula for prescribing actions, and as a force that mobilises and unifies groups. When evaluated in line with these criteria, it is evident that earlier political parties in Nigeria were motivated by political ideology, but it is difficult to refute the notion that the current political parties lack political ideology. Although parties in the immediate post-independent era displayed a shared characteristic of ethno-regional identity, with the aim of attaining and consolidating political control within their respective regions, they were, nonetheless motivated by certain ideas and beliefs. Moreover, if we were to consider a political party as an assemblage of persons united by a shared ideology, a group whose functions include interest articulation and aggregation, establishing connection between the public and decision makers, one may argue that contemporary political parties in Nigeria are not political parties in the real sense of the concept. Of course, they compete for elective positions, but they have a greater inclination towards prioritising electoral victories and the allocation of governmental positions. They serve as platforms for the acquisition of power and the expansion of material wealth.

After analysing the results of the 2023 presidential election, one may claim that ideology had no bearing on the results. The election was a battle between religious, ethnic, and regional identities, as opposed to a conflict of ideas. Election results seemingly demonstrate that the underlying factors that influenced previous electoral outcomes were also evident in the election, wherein religion and ethnicity were the key determinants. The meaninglessness of political ideology in the 2023 presidential election has consequently deepened the perilous confluence of identity politics, voter apathy, and ruthless pursuit of power. We have demonstrated how politicians placed electoral success above all else. This has exacerbated pre-existing ethnic, regional, and religious divisions. Not only that, but it has also discouraged citizens from participating in the political process, thereby limiting the quality of the country's democracy. The lack of political ideology in the country's political system also has the tendency to give rise to inept elected leaders, foster a lack of foresight among state officials, result in substandard governance, and hinder political and economic development. To overcome these challenges, Nigeria must confront the underlying causes of a lack of ideology in its political system, consider electoral reforms that encourage ideologically driven parties, and empower civil society to advocate issue-based politics. Only then can the country hope to build a truly democratic society and a more enduring political system.

Notes

1. In the Nigerian context, the term 'Republic' refers to the period of civilian democratic governance. The First Republic was the initial period of civilian governance that commenced upon Nigeria's independence in 1960 and collapsed in 1966, when the military overthrew the civilian government and established the first military regime, which lasted until 1979. The Second Republic spanned from 1979 until 1983. The Third Republic began in 1992 but was prematurely terminated in 1993 due to the invalidation of the 1993 presidential election, while the Fourth Republic commenced in 1999 following the end of military rule.
2. Egbe Omo Oduduwa refers to the association of the descendants of Oduduwa, the legendary progenitor of the Yoruba-speaking people.
3. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic country consisting of about 350 ethnic groups, but the three dominant ones are the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo.
4. The NLC's policy on politics states that: (1) Nigerian workers desired their own party (2) Workers could be organised to create and develop their own party; (3) The leadership of a worker's party must emerge from the ideologically most advanced, committed persons having their deep roots within the labour movement; (4) The party of the working class must have a programme one distinct from all other parties; (5) The party of workers should be based on working class membership and should be sustained by workers, not by assistance, or 'alliance' with segments of the ruling class etc (see NLC's Labour Policy on Politics, cited in Tar, 2009, p. 174).
5. Nigeria is a federation of thirty-six states; however, it is organised into six geopolitical zones or regions. This classification is based on geographical closeness and, in some cases, ethnic similarity. The regions are: North-Central (Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau states), North-East (Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba and Yobe states), North-West (Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara states), South-West (Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo states), South-East (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo states) and South-South (Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers).
6. Others include, Governors Samuel Ortom (Benue), Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi (Enugu), Okezie Ikpeazu (Abia), and Seyi Makinde (Oyo).
7. Governors Ugwuanyi, Ortom, and Ikpeazu supported Peter Obi, while Governors Wike and Makinde supported Bola Tinubu.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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