

# Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics: Ticket-Zoning and the Consolidation of Democracy in a Marginalized Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Political parties in several parts of world are as important as the democratic process itself. However, despite this unifying purpose, the modus operandi and philosophical inclination differs across board, one of which is the zoning principle. This paper examined the ‘zoning’ principle as adopted by political parties in Nigeria and its implication for the consolidation of democratic practice in Nigeria using a qualitative methodology which included a scientific review of literature, case studies, and interviews in selected marginalized regions in Nigeria to gain a deeper insight into the impact of ticket zoning on the consolidation of democracy. The theoretical foundation of this paper is based on the duo of Alan Ware’s Theory of Intra-Party Democracy and Robert Michels’ Iron Law of Oligarchy owing to the notion that parties must exercise a considerable amount of internal democracy before laying claim to consolidating same and that political parties though are supposed to carry the will of the majority and showcase democracy are unequivocally dominated by a very small group of people who control the parties from the background respectively. The findings from the survey reveal a nuanced perspective among respondents, with the majority understanding the principle of ticket-zoning well. A significant proportion have voted based on this principle, while divergent opinions exist on its impact on democracy and the emergence of competent leaders. Respondents also highlight the positive and negative impacts of ticket-zoning on power distribution and resource allocation. Recommendations from the study include a call for a delicate balance between ticket-zoning and meritocracy to ensure competent leadership.

**Keywords:** Zoning, Political parties, Democracy, Consolidation, Nigeria.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Political parties from the inception of their existence have been an intricate part of any democratic setting. They perform the very important function of mobilizing, orientating, and recruiting individuals into political offices toward the actualization and consolidation of democratic rule. Democracy in itself is a people-oriented political system that has the entire populace at the core of its principles. This is very well rooted in the popular quote ascribed to Abraham Lincoln; the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America who said democracy is a “government of the people, by the people, and for the people”. (Edosa, 2014). This implies that the people (masses) are actively involved and adequately represented in the running of their affairs.

The principle of democracy dates back to ancient Greek society (5<sup>th</sup> Century BC) when every member of the community gathered in squares and halls to deliberate and decide on matters of general concern. (Becker & Raveloson, 2008). Representative democracy, however, is traceable to modern time as the population of communities continuously increased and such communal gatherings were rather infeasible. A political party is an invention that was developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in response to the appearance of elections involving a large number of voters. It was developed by politicians as a means to

help them and like-minded associates get elected. Subsequently, political parties became an everywhere feature of modern politics, especially in the age of mass participation. In liberal-democratic systems, they help to keep governments accountable to public opinion, and even in autocratic systems, it helps the government maintains its hold on power. (Oinu, 2022). It primarily shows that political parties are an important link between the government and the people. The first modern electoral democracy was the United States of America and also the first place where political parties were developed. (Luther & Muller-Rommel, 2002). By the 1820s, there were well-organized parties such as the Democratic Party which was the oldest amongst the lot, and in Europe, political parties developed whenever a reasonably large and varied electorate was established with the coming of democracy. Just like in Britain, 1867 was the first year there was a reasonably widespread extension of votes. (Luther & Muller-Rommel, 2002). While political parties in Nigeria were developed following the growth of nationalist consciousness, sentiments, and movements in the 1920s.

In Nigeria, political parties emerged from nationalist agitators who formed groups and associations, to take a stand against colonial rule. (Uwaifo, 2016). This was the reason for which the nationalist movements namely the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA), the West African Students Union (WASU), and the Lagos Youth Movement (LYM), with their founders Herbert Macaulay (purported father of nationalism in Nigeria), Ernest Ikoli, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and others were precursors of political parties in Nigeria even as they were the beginning of the nationalist movement they also were at the forefront of the political activities and party formation which resulted from the introduction of Clifford's Constitution by the Colonial government in the 1920s and thereafter. The political parties of the second republic emerged (i.e., after the ban on politics was lifted in September 1978) based on the elections participated in and the states controlled along with the duration the said states were held by the political parties. In the third republic, the transition from military to civil rule allowed for two political parties to be registered according to the constitution of 1989. This was the first time, that Nigeria had a constitutional two-party system. (Jinadu, 2011). The parties of this republic had all the officials, congresses, and national conventions directed by the government. The fourth republic, which is also the current republic had three political parties (the Alliance for Democracy, the All People's Party, and the People's Democratic Party) registered in preparation for elections in 1999 by the Independent Electoral Commission. (Animashaun, 2015). However, since the inception of the fourth republic, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has registered over eighty (80) more political parties in the country. (Oinu, 2022).

To achieve their set aims and objectives, political parties across the world set various plans of action and strategies to help the actualization of their ideologies and manifestos. However, Political parties in Africa and mostly in Nigeria exist and operate quite differently from their counterparts in Europe and America especially due to the extent of advancement in democracy and the nature of the people therein. One of which especially in Nigeria includes the "zoning" principle which involves political parties allocating/allotting political nominations to a specific ethnic and/or religious group. Nigeria is a very vast country with over 250 languages, 200 ethnic groups (categorized into Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Ibo), 3 major religions officially recognized (Islam, Christianity, and Traditional religion) spread across 6 geopolitical zones (North-West, North-Central, North-East, South-West, South-East, and South-South). (OECD, 2023). Political parties in Nigeria therefore to ensure that these ethnic and religious groups are adequately represented in the perpetuation of their affairs, zone political positions to a certain ethnic group and/or religion either on a rotational or unanimous basis. Political parties also adopt this principle to ensure their success at the polls by handpicking a candidate belonging to a religion or ethnic group that has a higher population to be their flag-bearer as in the case of the 2023 general elections where the incumbent party – All Progressives Congress (APC) – decided to though through an electoral process enshrined in its constitution (The All Progressives Congress, 2015) pick its flag bearer from the South-Western part of the country on a conventional rotational basis and the running mate from the largest ethnic and religious group in the country, a strategy that ensured its victory at the polls and in the same vein maintained the zoning and electoral principle concurrently.

However, experts and political stakeholders have argued that the "zoning" principle does not conform to the inherent principles of democracy as postulated by John Locke and other supporting scholars. Modern democracy allows for a representative system where a candidate, regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation is allowed to participate in democratic elections and hold offices accordingly. Igbini and Okolie (2020) argued that party candidacies are zoned/handpicked by a certain few (godfathers) who constitute the leadership of parties either at the central or sub-regional level in order to achieve selfish political ends. This then makes the elected candidate hold their allegiance and loyalty to such a few rather than the people who elected them. A chieftain of the All Progressives Party (APC) and Governor of Cross River State, Ben Ayade in 2022 also sued that democracy does not create the balance that is needed for natural justice. He claimed that Nigeria

“inherited a brand of democracy which is not Afrocentric; neither does it have the sensitivity of the African culture and morality. Democracy is so primitively blind that it reduces itself to numbers and is blind to ethnicity, religion, fairness, and repugnant to natural justice”. (Olafusi, 2022). This paper therefore seeks to assess the zoning principle as adopted by political parties and the implication for the consolidation of democratic practice in Nigeria.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

To conduct this research, a mixed methodology was employed, which includes a literature review, and administration of online questionnaires to professionals and political experts. The literature review provided a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical framework and existing research on the topic.

The primary data for this study was collected through online questionnaires distributed to key informants in North-central region. The questionnaires were semi-structured guides with the aim of facilitating discussions which were subjected to both quantitative and content/thematic analysis in relations to the subject.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW, HISTORICAL OVERVIEW, AND THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

### 3.1 Political Party

Political parties constitute an intricately essential component of modern democratic practice. This is evident because, without political parties, a democracy that is based on the liberal model of majority rule would be practically impossible. (Danjibo and Ashindorbe, 2018). A political party performs so many tasks in the political process that it is almost difficult to establish a single definition. There are as many definitions as many political thinkers are willing to define it. (Oinu, 2022). Edmund Burke (cited in Mito, 2021) defined Political Party as a body of men and women united based on their shared political ideas to promote national interest. According to Mito (2021), Political Parties are “bodies that organize public opinion and interest; transmit public demands to the government; attempt to recruit and propose political leadership; and often attempt to articulate to followers what is desirable in terms of social, economic, cultural and political development.

### 3.2 Types/Classification of Political Parties

As identified by Danjibo and Ashindorbe (2018), the following are types of Political Parties:

1. Cadre Party
2. Mass party
3. Devotee Party

**1. Cadre Party:** This is a political party formed and led by individuals with high socioeconomic status. It is a political party that is dominated by a politically elite group of activists who form a small segment of the population of the party while the rest play the role of spectators rather than active participants. An example is the Chinese Communist Party (CPP) in China, the All-Progressives Congress, and the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria.

**2. Mass Party:** Unlike the Cadre Party which is led by a relatively small number of people, the Mass Party gets its name from the word “masses” because it mobilizes a broad segment of members through the development of a large and complex organization. (Danjibo & Ashindorbe, 2018). It unites a large base of supporters and mobilizes the ordinary citizen or ‘masses’ into the political process. It has a leadership like the cadre party but the members feel more involved and are not mere onlookers. An example of such a party was the German Social Democratic Party and the Labour Party (LP) formed from the Nigerian Labour Congress.

**3. Devotee Party:** This is a party according to Duverger (1954 cited in Danjibo and Ashindorbe, 2018) tied to the veneration of a particular charismatic party leader. The party is formed by/in memory of a particular leader based on his charisma and leadership quality(s). The followership/members constitute admirers and devotees of the leader for/by whom the party was formed. An example is the Leninist Communist Party in Germany and the Action Group by Awolowo in Nigeria.

### 3.3 Ticket-Zoning and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: Historical Perspective

In Nigeria especially since Clifford’s constitution of 1922 which introduced the elective principle and extended a limited and restricted franchise to Lagos and Calabar, Nationalist movements cum political parties have been at the face of democratic practice in Nigeria. Prior to independence in 1960, Political parties were used by Nationalist agitators to fight

and appeal for self-governance from the British colonial administration, a move that was fueled by the popularity of decolonization and democratic practices as propagated in sister African countries and other nations across the world. However, right from this very stage, political parties had taken a regional/tribal outlook as the three political parties of the independence period – Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) led by Azikiwe, Action Group (AG) led by Awolowo and the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) led by Tafawa Balewa each had prominence in the Eastern, Western and the Northern parts of the country respectively and each party contested and won political positions in its various strongholds.

Zoning is a conventional practice among political parties in Nigeria which involves a unanimous agreement among the leadership of the party to allocate their political offices, especially the presidential and vice-presidential candidates, and also alternate the home area of the president among the geopolitical zones of the country. The principle is designed to ensure that no one geo-political zone of the county permanently monopolizes/holds onto or is excluded from political control of power. The concept of zoning was initially introduced in the Second Republic, following the Biafran Civil War of 1967–1970. (Bammeke, 2022). The major factor that accounted for the necessity of this principle is the need to ease inter-ethnic tensions following the post-Biafran civil war era. As the Yakubu Gowon-led military government was putting measures (e.g., National Youth Service Corps, Unity Schools, etc.) in place to unite the country, political parties of the time as important institutions of national development also devised strategies that they employed to help the government to tackle the menace caused by the civil war. One such strategy was the zoning policy which started from the selection of party leaders and executives. According to Ezeibe et.al, (2016), the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) initiated the operation of a zoning system to select party officials. NPN was the first political party that was accepted universally nationwide in Nigeria as everybody's party. It was as a result of this that NPN thought of developing the concept and assuring every member and every segment of Nigeria that the highly revered office of the president could someday be theirs. This way everyone regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation felt involved in the political process without any fear of marginalization.

Much later, during a National Constitutional Conference assembled following the annulment of the 1993 elections and the takeover of power by General Sanni Abacha (1994/1995), several prominent leaders suggested the rotation of the Presidency between Nigeria's six geopolitical zones (North-east, North-west, North-central, South-east, South-west, and South-south). However, though the principle was widely supported by many, the proposal was turned down in favor of a more straightforward technique of rotation between the North and South. This division was particularly selected to reflect the country's religious and ethnic cleavage between the Christian-dominated South and the Muslim-dominated North, though notably, neither region is homogeneous on either side. (Akubo and Yakubu, 2014). This idea of equal distribution of power between the North and the South has also been adopted by some parties. The Federal Military Government of General Sanni Bacha though accepted the zoning arrangement for administrative convenience, did not enshrine it in the Nigerian Constitution like the Federal Character Principle. The Federal Character Principle is a constitutional provision for equal and adequate representation of each subnational entity to depict the federal nature/structure in any political appointment and can be enforced in a court of law.

### **1999 Elections: The Conception of Zoning in Nigeria**

In 1999, Nigeria transitioned from the Abdulsalam Abubakar-led military administration to civilian rule. The transition stemmed from a bargain struck by an elite cabal between 1998 and 1999, right after the death of General Sani Abacha. Listed among the principal points was the presidency which they proposed would alternate every eight years between the south and the north and religious divides. This implied that if the presidential nominee was a Muslim-Northerner, automatically, the vice-presidential nominee would be Christian-Southerner, and vice versa. In essence, the argument was that the presidential and vice-presidential candidates could not be from the same religious and/or similar ethnic identification. This provision despite not being a matter of law was still incorporated into the rules of the soon-to-be-governing People's Democratic Party (PDP). The other major political parties, Alliance for Democracy-All People's Party on the other hand, never formally adopted the principle. (Animashaun, 2015). The 1999 presidential elections marked the beginning of the use of the zoning format as it was practically applied under the presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo. Obasanjo was a South-Western Christian, with his vice being Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, a North-Eastern Muslim, and this respectably adhered to the zoning strategy. (Bammeke, 2022)

### **2007-2023**

In 2007, Obasanjo and Atiku were succeeded by Umaru Musa Yar'adua, a northern Muslim, and his vice president Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, a southern Christian an arrangement which was still in conformity with the zoning principle.

However, when Yar'adua died in office, his term was completed by his hitherto vice, who then picked a North-west Muslim, Namadi Sambo to replace him as vice-president.

In February 2013, ahead of the 2015 general elections, The All-Progressives Congress (APC) was formed through a merger of Nigeria's three biggest opposition parties – the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), the All-Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP). In 2015, the South-West led by Tinubu contributed immensely to the political success of APC at the national level. (Uwaifo, 2016) Consequently, it is believed that an implied agreement reached was that upon the expiration of President Buhari's two-term tenure, power will shift to the South-West. The body language of 'the powers that be' since Buhari's re-election in 2019, however, suggests otherwise. (Oinu, 2022). This was done to reduce hostility and promote inclusion as almost all other political parties have within their constitutions a provision stating that the President and the National Chairman of the party should not come from the same zone. Following this, where the national chairmanship position of any party is zoned to is an indication of where such a party is likely to zone its presidential ticket.

Preceding the 2023 elections, the national leader of the All-Progressives Congress (APC), Bola Tinubu, a Muslim from the South-West felt and claimed he was the natural successor to the Presidential sit (the incumbent president being from the North) owing to the zoning policy contested and won the party's primaries despite critics from within and outside party about his age, antecedents, a record of drug trafficking and money laundry as well as falsification of academic and birth records. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Labour Party (LP) which were the major oppositions opened and zoned their Presidential tickets respectively. The PDP housed internal crises involving Five Governors from the South (G5) not supporting the party's presidential candidate (Atiku Abubakar) since he wasn't from the Southern part of the country. Tinubu was declared winner of the 2023 general elections by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) having satisfied the requirements of the law but was not generally accepted across the country due to allegations of rigging by the opposition.

### 3.4 Ware's Theory of Intra-Party Democracy and Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy

The theory of Intra-party democracy as developed by Alan James Ware in his Book titled "The Logic of Party Democracy" (1979) explains the need for political parties to be both internally democratic and centralized, and that their policy goals should be determined as far as possible by their activists, or members. The origin of it derives from the arguments of 19th-century socialists that political parties needed to be internally democratic if democracy at the level of the state was to be attained. (Ware, 1979). Ware reckons that until a political party achieves a level of democracy within its inherent structure and practice, it would be almost impossible to achieve the same at the level of the state as the parties have to be the agent of what they claim to represent. Similarly, Michels (1915) also concluded that democracy was impossible. Robert Michels on the other hand was a young historian and a member of the German Social Democrats. Michels having participated extensively in party activities concluded that the Socialists did not live up to their ideals. Although the party advocated democracy, it was not internally democratic itself. According to Michels in his Law of Oligarchy, there is always a rather small number of persons in the party organization who make decisions, even if the authority is formally vested in the body of the membership at large. Michels also argued the leaders who have this delegated authority tend to take on more power than the members who selected them. (CSU, 2020). It is therefore imperative according to Michels that political parties be able to achieve a reasonable amount of democracy within their structure and process before they can make claims to consolidate democracy at the governmental level.

## 4. PRESENTATION OF DATA

### 4.1 Demographic Information of Respondents

**Table 1: Age of Respondents**

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-30	250	69.44
31-40	60	16.66
41-50	30	8.33
51 and above	20	5.57
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 2: Educational Qualification of Respondents**

Qualifications	Frequency	Percentage
Bachelors	196	54.44
HND	20	5.55
ND	73	20.27
PhD	16	4.44
Masters	54	15
Others	1	0.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 3: Sex of Respondents**

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	220	61.11
Female	140	38.89
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 4: How well do you understand the principle of ticket-zoning in Nigerian politics?**

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Very well	321	89.16
A little	37	10.27
Somewhat	3	0.57
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 5: Have you ever voted for a political candidate based on Ticket Zoning?**

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	267	74.16
No	81	22.5
Maybe	12	3.34
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 6: Do you think ticket-zoning affects the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria?**

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	273	75.58
No	87	24.42
Maybe	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 7: Do you think ticket-zoning helps or hinders the emergence of competent leaders in Nigerian politics??**

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes		
No		
Maybe		
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 8: What impact do you think ticket-zoning has on the distribution of power and resources in Nigeria??**

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	324	90
Negative	31	8.61
Somewhat	5	1.39
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

**Question 9: What measures can be taken to balance the need for ticket-zoning with the need for competence and merit in Nigerian politics?**

A number of respondents (63) believed that for oneness and national unity, ticket zoning is a good idea of power rotation. However, a significant amount of them posited that despite the benefits of the zoning principle, the country and political parties should embrace meritocracy. For example, a respondent particularly argued that “choosing of leader based on competency and merit will be better than zoning”.

**Question 10: How can ticket-zoning be used to promote inclusivity and diversity in Nigerian politics?**

According to respondents, as a nation of various tribe, ticket zoning really matters for proper inclusiveness, because the country hasn't reached a stage where other options could be considered as a tool for ensuring inclusivity of minority group in politics. Respondents also argued that “All political parties in the country should agree on ticket-zoning. This should cut across the highest political offices such as president, vice president, senate president, deputy senate president, speaker and deputy speaker of house of representatives, secretary to the federal government, etc. This will promote justice, fairness and equity amongst ethno-religious institutions in Nigeria.

**Question 11: In your opinion, should ticket-zoning be abolished or retained in Nigerian politics? Why?**

A majority of respondents submitted that despite its purported inadequacies and challenges, the ticket-zoning principle should be “retained and further enshrined in the Constitution” of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN), 1999 as amended, with set principles and guidelines as it will cater for the countries “wide cultural and ethnic diversity” and to promote and uphold national unity especially avoiding a single majority ethnic group from monopolizing political power and resources. However, another category of respondents suggested that the principle should be abolished as it totally negates the “true” principles of democracy.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, the study sheds light on the intricate relationship between ticket-zoning and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The historical evolution of political parties and the adoption of the zoning principle have significantly shaped the political landscape. The findings suggest a need for careful consideration of the balance between ticket-zoning and merit-based leadership to ensure the emergence of competent leaders while upholding principles of inclusivity and diversity.

Based on the results, it is recommended that Nigerian political parties revisit and refine the ticket-zoning principle, incorporating clear guidelines and principles in the constitution to mitigate potential pitfalls. The study underscores the importance of fostering intra-party democracy, aligning with Ware's theory, to enhance democratic practices at the state level. Furthermore, national leaders and policymakers should engage in a comprehensive discourse on the retention or modification of the ticket-zoning principle, considering the diverse opinions expressed by respondents.

The research contributes to the ongoing dialogue on political party dynamics in Nigeria and provides valuable insights for policymakers, political stakeholders, and scholars seeking to understand the complex interplay between democratic principles and party strategies in the Nigerian context.

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