

The Wike Phenomenon, Political Dualism and Trans-partisan Hegemony in Contemporary Nigeria: The Rivers State Experience

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This paper examines a new trend in Nigerian politics that is defined by the increasing power of elite players who operate outside of official party lines. The paper examines how political players maintain their relevance in the face of rival party formations, the institutional framework that permits this kind of dual positioning, and the consequences of these dynamics for Nigerian democratic governance, party ideology, and accountability. **Method:** The study uses a qualitative and descriptive research design based on media reports, documentary sources, and previously published literature on Nigerian party politics. It is grounded in elite theory and patron-client theory. **Results:** The results show that through elite broking, institutional penetration, patronage networks, electoral coordination, and discursive control over political narratives, dominant political actors have been able to simultaneously influence both ruling and opposition parties due to weak party institutions, patronage-driven politics, and the personalisation of power. **Novelty:** The paper conceptualizes "political dualism" and "trans-partisan hegemony" as analytical frameworks for comprehending the growing convergence between ruling and opposition political structures in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, using Nyesom Wike's political trajectory as a case study. The study comes to the conclusion that the "Wike phenomenon" is a reflection of a larger structural situation in which formal party systems are increasingly replaced by transpartisan elite structures as a means of exercising substantive political authority.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's Fourth Republic has been defined by long-standing tensions between formal democratic institutions and informal elite power structures. Although the return to civilian rule in 1999 raised hopes for ideological party competition, institutional consolidation, and democratic accountability, political practice has remained heavily influenced by patronage networks, elite bargaining, and fluid alliances that frequently cross constitutional and partisan lines. In this situation, powerful subnational political players have evolved with influence that goes beyond formal office, territorial jurisdiction, and party allegiance. Among the most important is Nyesom Wike [1].

The "Wike Phenomenon," a political condition marked by the simultaneous exercise of influence across opposing institutional and partisan arenas, is conceptualized in this research as exemplified by Wike's political trajectory. The phenomena is indicative of a larger shift in Nigeria's political system, as power is being maintained by elite alliances, personal networks of loyalty, patronage, and coercive control rather than just constitutional office or party institutions. Despite rising inside the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Wike's sustained significance within an All Progressives Congress (APC)-

led federal administration while maintaining influence within the opposition is a remarkable example of cross-partisan political embeddedness [2], [3].

The study proposes two interconnected ideas—political dualism and transpartisan hegemony—to explain this situation. Political dualism is the simultaneous occupation and dominance of several political domains by a single actor, especially the cohabitation of federal power and state-level control, or the upholding of party loyalty while forming alliances with opposing parties. A situation known as "trans-partisan hegemony" occurs when a political player exerts power that goes beyond institutional constraints, party lines, and ideological commitments. When taken as a whole, these ideas offer a framework for comprehending how elite actors perpetuate and solidify power in democracies with inadequate institutionalization [4].

The political economy of Rivers State, which has historically been marked by conflicts over oil rents, elite division, militarized patron-client relationships, and struggles for state control, is a prime example of these dynamics. In this context, Wike's rise from governor of Rivers State to a key figure in federal political arrangements illustrates how political power in Nigeria is frequently individualized rather than institutionalized. His prolonged influence after leaving office further demonstrates how power often transcends constitutional tenure through deeply ingrained informal networks that conflate opposition and ruling coalitions, state and party, and incumbency and succession.

Although political godfatherism in Nigeria has been studied in the past, the Wike phenomenon is a more advanced form of elite dominance. The Wike instance illustrates hegemonic power functioning both within and beyond partisan boundaries, in contrast to traditional godfatherism, which is typically limited to patron-client succession arrangements within a single party. Therefore, political influence is maintained through overlapping elite networks that allow intervention across institutional layers and political tendencies rather than being limited by geography or ideology. This is consistent with Mustapha's concept of the "federalization of elite networks," in which political actors uphold flexible coalitions that transcend official party structures and ideological divisions [5].

The post-2023 dispute between Wike and Governor Siminalayi Fubara sheds additional light on the processes of political dualism in Nigeria's democratic system. The partnership, which at first appeared to be a smooth succession plan, eventually devolved into a protracted conflict over control of state institutions, especially the House of Assembly, local government structures, and the larger apparatus of state authority. The crisis showed the weakness of institutional autonomy under individualized political control and revealed the continued existence of two centers of power under a theoretically unified constitutional framework. The Rivers crisis demonstrated how much Nigerian political authority is still individualized rather than institutionalized, as noted by Elumoye [6].

In a similar vein, Adebayo contends that when political energies turned from providing public services to battles for political survival and supremacy, governance was

sacrificed to elite rivalries. This supports Lindberg's claim that African states have formalized democratic institutions without accompanying institutional autonomy or democratic deepening. The Rivers problem is also seen in newspaper analysis and policy commentary as a sign of a larger governance conundrum based on hegemonic struggle and elite contestation.

These developments are consistent with the claims made by Chabal and Daloz that political instability in African governments is frequently used as a tool for elite dominance, accumulation, and negotiation. As a result, the Wike phenomenon illustrates fundamental conflicts within Nigeria's neo-patrimonial democratic order, where formal democratic institutions coexist uneasily with informal hegemonic organizations, rather than being reduced to a dispute between a godfather and successor [7].

Beyond Rivers State, the concept of transpartisan hegemony is further highlighted by Wike's ongoing significance in national political calculations. His capacity to maintain strategic significance across party lines indicates that, rather than ideological rivalry or institutional coherence, modern Nigerian politics increasingly function through transactional allegiance and negotiated elite networks. By exposing a system in which political players can concurrently operate inside ruling and opposition structures without ideological contradiction, this challenges conventional understandings of party politics.

There are significant ramifications for the consolidation of democracy. A state of political dualism where authority is both constitutional and highly personalized results from the presence of formal democratic institutions and unofficial hegemonic networks. In such circumstances, democratic institutions run the risk of being subservient to the interests of the elite, and government is molded more by unofficial discussions than by institutional rules and practices [8], [9].

In the end, the Wike phenomenon offers a critical prism through which to examine the changing dynamics of legitimacy, power, and governance in modern Nigeria. It reveals a new political order where elite actors' ability to create, maintain, and replicate transpartisan hegemonic networks that can influence outcomes across institutional and partisan divides determines dominance in addition to electoral mandates or constitutional authority.

The study's primary issue is the enduring tenacity of individualized political power in Nigeria's democratic Fourth Republic. Nigeria's political system still exhibits serious institutional flaws, with official democratic processes often being subservient to powerful political actors, even after more than 20 years of continuous civilian administration, constitutional federalism, and multiparty competition. The nation's democratic experience has mostly strengthened elite bargaining, patron-client relationships, and individualized networks of political power rather than solidifying institutional accountability, ideological competition, and democratic government [10].

In this regard, the political trajectory of Nyesom Wike offers an interesting case study of the structural contradictions within Nigeria's democratic order. Wike's sustained relevance across partisan divides, his continued influence over the political architecture of Rivers State after leaving office as governor, and his strategic integration

into a federal administration led by the All Progressives Congress (APC), despite his longstanding association with the People's Democratic Party (PDP), reveal a form of hegemonic power that transcends conventional democratic norms and party boundaries. This study conceptualises the phenomenon as political dualism and trans-partisan hegemony.

Political dualism is the simultaneous occupation and manipulation of overlapping political spheres of authority that dominant actors use to retain influence across competing institutional and partisan structures. In Wike's case, this is evident in his ability to operate as a major federal player in an APC-led government while controlling political developments in Rivers State through entrenched networks of loyalty, patronage and institutional leverage associated with the PDP. This configuration reveals the fragility of party discipline and how clientelist networks often supersede ideological commitments and institutional accountability in Nigeria's political system [11].

More fundamentally, the Wike Phenomenon is symptomatic of a wider crisis of democratic institutionalisation in Nigeria. Democratic institutions such as political parties, legislatures and the judiciary are formally included in the constitutional framework but their operational autonomy is often compromised by informal structures of elite control and personalised political influence. As Lindberg observes, many African democracies are defined by hybrid political characteristics in which formal democratic institutions coexist with informal power networks that obstruct democratic consolidation. In a similar vein, Bratton and Van de Walle argue that the personalisation of political authority in African states hinders institutional development and perpetuates elite control over governance structures.

The continued presence of trans-partisan hegemonic actors in Nigeria's political arena also indicates the ideological crisis that plagues the party system in the country. Within classical democratic theory, political parties are viewed as devices of ideological aggregation, political socialisation, representation and structured democratic competition [12]. But in Nigeria, party structures are usually built around dominant personalities, instead of coherent ideological programmes or policy alternatives. Political loyalty is therefore flexible, transactional, and a matter of strategic bargaining. This is what the Wike Phenomenon is all about, where political loyalty is often subordinated to personal influence, elite bargaining and political survival.

The consequences for governance and democratic stability are evident in the recurring political tensions in Rivers State. The long-standing feud between Governor Siminalayi Fubara and his godfather, Wike, shows how personal battles for political supremacy can undermine democratic institutions and disrupt governance processes. The use of legislative processes, executive power and broader state structures to pursue factional interests reveals the susceptibility of democratic institutions to elite capture and political manipulation [13]. In such circumstances, governance priorities become subordinated to elite contestation, weakening accountability, institutional neutrality, public trust and the rule of law.

This paper therefore posits the Wike Phenomenon as a representation of a deeper structural tension within Nigeria's democratic experiment, which is the contradiction between formal institutional authority and embedded informal systems of power. Political godfatherism, elite dominance and neo-patrimonialism in Nigeria have been studied, but little scholarly attention has been paid to how such influence metamorphoses into a dualistic system of governance that runs concurrently within and outside of party structures and maintains trans-partisan hegemonic dominance.

This gap poses critical questions on political legitimacy, independence of democratic institutions and the implications of trans-partisan hegemonic control on governance, institutional stability and democratic development in Nigeria. In this context, Intellectual and Political, is placed the present study [14]. This study interrogates the intersection between political dualism and trans-partisan hegemony through the analytical lens of the Wike Phenomenon and contributes to broader debates on democratic consolidation, elite politics, institutional fragility and governance in contemporary Nigeria.

The paper is thus guided by the following questions: How does the Wike Phenomenon signify the emergence of political dualism in contemporary Nigeria? How does trans-partisan hegemony manifest in the political practices and alliances of dominant actors in Nigeria's Fourth Republic? And what are the implications of the Wike Phenomenon, political dualism and trans-partisan hegemony for governance, institutional stability and democratic practice in contemporary Nigeria?

The Wike phenomenon is an ever-changing idea. This is the authors' coinage. The concept denotes a contemporary pattern of political behaviour where a dominant political actor exercises broad influence across formal party lines through networks of patronage, elite alliances, institutional penetration and strategic political bargaining. The Wike Phenomenon is a system in which political power is personalised, network-driven and sustained beyond formal office unlike conventional political leadership that is mostly within the framework of party ideology and constitutional authority.

The phenomenon is exemplified in the political trajectory of Nyesom Wike in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. While Wike was essentially aligned with the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), he was strategically important within the federal government led by the All Progressives Congress (APC), and still able to exercise considerable influence over the political architecture of Rivers State. An outstanding example of cross-partisan political influence is his appointment as Minister of the Federal Capital Territory under President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's APC administration, despite his continued identification with the PDP [15]. This demonstrates that in Nigeria political relevance is increasingly divorced from ideology and party lines.

The Wike Phenomenon is conceptually what this study refers to as political dualism and trans-partisan hegemony. The dualism, in Wike's case, is observed in his capacity to act as a federal player in an APC led government, whilst still holding sway over PDP political structures in Rivers State. This creates overlapping centres of authority

where political control can be exercised both within and outside formal constitutional office.

The Wike phenomenon is also a reflection of the larger crisis of party institutionalisation in Nigeria. In classical democratic theory, political parties are understood as ideological platforms for representation and competition. But Nigeria's party system is becoming more and more marked by fluid alliances, strategic defections and personality politics. In these situations political actors are often more powerful than the institutions to which they formally belong. This is in line with Joseph's notion of prebendal politics, where political office and institutional structures are appropriated as tools of elite accumulation and influence.

Another defining feature of the Wike Phenomenon is the persistence of influence beyond formal office. In democratic systems, political authority is traditionally expected to expire at the end of the constitutional tenure. But Wike's continued grip on Rivers' political landscape after his tenure as governor shows that in Nigeria political power is often based on long-standing patron-client networks and not solely on constitutional authority. His influence over lawmakers, local government structures and party actors implies that political control can exist without formal office holding [16].

This is yet another example of how electoral processes are becoming elite-managed rather than purely democratic contests. Wike's political machinery and endorsement were believed to have played a role in the succession process that saw Siminalayi Fubara emerge as governor in 2023. This suggests that electoral outcomes in Nigeria are frequently mediated by elite orchestration and patronage networks, not just as a result of voter preference.

Ultimately, the Wike Phenomenon is more than the agency of a single political actor. Rather, it is a symptom of a wider transformation of Nigeria's democratic order where the terrain of institutional autonomy, ideological coherence and constitutional boundaries is being encroached upon by elite networks, political pragmatism and personalised authority. The phenomenon thus provides an important analytical framework for understanding the changing dynamics of power, governance and democratic practice in contemporary Nigeria [17].

Political dualism is the coexistence of formal governing institutions and informal power networks within a political system. It describes the production of political order through two parallel and interacting logics, rather than one institutional structure. It captures the tension between formal institutions—executive, legislature, judiciary, electoral institutions, and political parties—and informal arrangements such as patronage networks, clientelism, and elite bargaining that determine real political results. In many post-colonial states therefore, political authority is negotiated across both spheres rather than determined solely by constitutional rules.

The idea also has several sources of legitimacy [18]. Authority may rest on formal legal-rational institutions or informal bases, such as ethnicity, loyalty, and patronage. The "two publics" of Ekeh elaborates on this duality as it distinguishes between the civic and primordial spheres that jointly structure political behaviour. In African contexts, Bratton

and van de Walle and Joseph demonstrate that formal democratic institutions often co-exist with deep-rooted informal networks of elites. Thus, while elections and parties signify institutionalised competition, outcomes are frequently determined by informal negotiation and elite coordination. Political dualism thus denotes the disjunction between formal democratic institutions and informal realities of political power [19], [20].

In this study, political dualism refers to the strategic positioning of political actors in multiple and sometimes conflicting political spheres simultaneously. It describes a situation where elite actors are not strictly bound by party ideology, institutional loyalty or formal political boundaries, but instead move across intersecting spaces of political engagement to maximise influence, access to resources and political relevance. This dualism reflects the wider crisis of party institutionalisation in weakly institutionalised democracies, where ideological coherence is low and elite mobility is high. This understanding is in line with Sartori's contention that weakly institutionalised party systems are often less driven by ideological competition and more by elite bargaining and strategic positioning. Likewise, Randall and Svåsand argue that political parties in many emerging democracies operate more as vehicles for elite mobilisation than as stable ideological entities, enabling fluid alignments and cross-party political activities.

Ultimately, political dualism is a sophisticated conceptualisation of the complex and hybrid nature of political authority in contemporary political systems [21]. It reveals how formal democratic institutions often co-exist with informal networks of power and how political actors strategically navigate both spheres in the pursuit and consolidation of influence.

The notion of hegemony is central to political science, sociology and critical theory. More generally, hegemony is a condition of leadership by a dominant group, exercised not only through coercive means, but also through consent, ideological power, and institutional dominance. It shows the capacity of powerful actors to shape political values, norms and social expectations in ways that render their authority legitimate and natural.

The intellectual underpinning of hegemonic theory is most closely associated with Gramsci who diverged from orthodox Marxist conceptions of domination grounded in force and economic control alone. According to Gramsci, the ruling groups maintain power through moral, intellectual and cultural leadership by universalising their interests and securing the consent of subordinate groups [22]. Hegemony is therefore the institutionalisation of dominance through ideology, political culture and social institutions rather than coercion alone. Subsequent scholars have since expanded on this conception, focusing on the discursive and institutional aspects of hegemonic power. Laclau and Mouffe for instance, redefined hegemony as a process whereby different political interests and social demands are articulated into wider political projects. Their intervention showed that hegemonic formations are always built through negotiation, accommodation and political alignment [23].

These insights are further supported by contemporary scholarship on party systems and democratic governance. Katz and Mair's cartel party thesis suggests that

political parties are becoming more concerned with elite co-operation and the institutional maintenance of parties and less with ideological competition, and that this is weakening substantive democratic alternatives. Likewise, Mair argues that contemporary parties have become uncoupled from their traditional ideological and social bases, producing a context in which political pragmatism, elite negotiation and strategic alliances take precedence over doctrinal commitments. It is in this wider intellectual context that the idea of trans-partisan hegemony is born. Although not yet fully established in the mainstream political science literature, the concept expands hegemonic and elite theories to make sense of political systems with weak party institutionalisation and fluid alignments [24], [25].

The “Wike Phenomenon” is a case in point, and trans-partisan hegemony is a nascent concept emerging from Nigeria’s democratic experience, particularly during the presidency of Bola Ahmed Tinubu. The term describes a political situation in which powerful actors or networks of elites wield influence across a plurality of political parties and institutional spheres in order to affect political outcomes regardless of formal partisan lines. Rather than the classical notion of hegemony based on one-party rule, trans-partisan hegemony is exercised through elite coordination across parties, patronage networks, strategic alliances, and informal arrangements of influence. The idea is especially pertinent in political systems with weak party ideology and high elite mobility. In such conditions, political actors exert influence within governing and opposition formations alike, rendering party boundaries increasingly fluid and politically secondary.

This has led to political competition that is less about ideological contestation and more about elite bargaining, strategic positioning and access to state resources. This is in line with the scholarship on hybrid and weakly institutionalised democracies. As Diamond points out, many emerging democracies have formal democratic institutions but substantive political power is rooted in informal elite networks [26]. Likewise, Levitsky and Way show how competitive authoritarian and hybrid regimes maintain formal electoral competition while entrenching real political power in the hands of dominant elites. For example, in the African political analysis, Joseph, Bayart and Chabal and Daloz show how patron-client relations, prebendal politics and elite reciprocity influence political results in post-colonial states. In these conditions, political actors tend to move between party formations, remaining within reach of broader elite networks of influence. Party loyalties thus become secondary to elite continuity, political survival and access to state resources.

Conceptually, trans-partisan hegemony is marked by several inter-related features. First, it is the elite continuity across party lines, where the dominant actors retain influence despite electoral turnover or partisan realignment. Secondly, it is a sign of ideological convergence, whereby political parties become increasingly similar in terms of policy orientation and political practice. Third, through institutional embeddedness where elite actors remain influential in key state institutions and political structures [27].

Finally, trans-partisan hegemony is contingent upon the reproduction of legitimacy and consent, as political dominance is normalised within the wider political culture.

Crucially, trans-partisan hegemony is not the same as one-party dominance or hegemonic party systems. While these ideas stress the supremacy of one political party, trans-partisan hegemony is about the preeminence of elite networks that operate across multiple parties at once. In this way, the actual centre of power is not so much in the formal party organisations, but in the networks of political actors who are able to cross party lines.

Trans-partisan hegemony provides a particularly useful analytical lens to understand political systems that combine formal democratic competition with elite continuity and institutional stagnation [28]. It shifts scholarly attention from parties as discrete institutions to the broader networks of power, negotiation and elite coordination that shape political outcomes. The outcome is a more subtle interpretation of modern political systems in which electoral competition may replace office-holders without major changes in the basic framework of political power.

Contemporary Nigerian politics is characterised weak ideological differentiation among political parties, personalised structures of authority, and the increasing centralisation of political influence within dominant elite networks. Within this context, political behaviour is frequently shaped less by formal institutional rules and more by informal arrangements of bargaining, patronage, and elite accommodation [29]. In order to analytically explain these dynamics, this study is anchored on two interrelated theoretical frameworks: elite theory and patron-client theory. These perspectives are combined because they jointly illuminate how political influence is generated, structured, and sustained within Nigeria's hybrid democratic environment. Elite theory explains the concentration of power, while patron-client theory clarifies the relational mechanisms through which political loyalty and support are produced.

Elite theory provides the basic explanatory lens for understanding the concentration and reproduction of political power in a small segment of society. Classical elite theorists (see Pareto, 1935; Mosca, 1939 and Michels, 1915/1962) argue that all societies, irrespective of formal democratic arrangements, are ultimately ruled by a minority group which monopolises political decision-making. Mosca underlines the necessary domination of organised minorities over unorganised majorities and Pareto thinks of society as a circulation between ruling elites and non-elites. Michels further argues that even democratic organisations tend to become structures dominated by a small leadership core through the "iron law of oligarchy".

This structural argument is buttressed by modern elaborations of elite theory. Elite cohesion and consensus are essential to political stability, while elite circulation and institutional dominance are stressed in modern political systems. In the Nigerian context, Ayoade and Omotola observe that political elites dominate party structures, electoral processes and governance outcomes, thereby limiting the autonomy of formal democratic institutions [30].

In this theoretical frame, elite theory accounts for the transcendence of political authority in Nigeria beyond formal party boundaries and institutional roles. Political actors remain relevant by participating in overlapping elite networks rather than ideological or organisational loyalties. This helps explain the persistence of political dualism, whereby actors simultaneously exercise influence across a number of political arenas. It also offers an explanation of trans-partisan political behaviour as a rational strategy of elite survival, bargaining and power-consolidation in a competitive, but weakly institutionalised system [31], [32].

Patron-client theory sees politics as asymmetric but reciprocal exchanges between individuals of unequal power. Classical formulations describe patron-client relationships as dyadic arrangements where patrons provide resources, protection or opportunities in return for client loyalty, support and political mobilisation. Eisenstadt and Roniger extend this analysis to show how patronage systems become institutionalised where formal bureaucratic systems are weak or unevenly enforced [33]. Similarly, Lemarchand and Legg, Médard, and Bratton and Van de Walle emphasise the role of patronage networks in African political systems.

Patron-client theory is especially germane for grasping the persistence of personalised politics and the fluidity of political allegiance in Nigeria. Political relationships are often based on access to state resources, appointments, contracts, and protection, not on ideological commitment or programmatic compatibility. This interpretation is further supported by Joseph's concept of prebendalism, which illustrates how public office is frequently seen as a way of distributing resources within networks of loyalty and obligation [34]. In this sense, patron-client theory offers an explanatory framework for how political influence is maintained beyond formal institutional positions. Political actors stay relevant by weaving themselves into large dependency networks that cut across party lines. These networks maintain influence during periods of electoral change or formal institutional transition.

In this study, patron-client theory entails the relational infrastructure that enables the construction and maintenance of trans-partisan political dominance. It shows how political loyalty is constantly reproduced through material exchange, reciprocal obligation and strategic patronage [35]. This in turn allows political actors to remain influential within governing and opposition structures and consolidates political dualism and trans-partisan hegemony.

Together, these two theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for the analysis of contemporary Nigerian politics. Elite theory describes the concentration and circulation of power among a ruling minority. Patron-client theory describes the relational mechanisms by which political loyalty and influence are built and sustained. When synthesised, these frameworks offer a coherent analytical basis for understanding the emergence of political dualism and trans-partisan hegemony as structural features of Nigeria's political system [36]. Together they show how political authority is not simply institutional or party-based but is embedded in elite networks, systemic interactions, and patronage relationships that cut across formal partisan lines.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is qualitative, descriptive and is based on an interpretivist orientation to investigate political dualism and trans-partisan hegemony in Rivers State. It privileges the analysis of elite behaviour, informal power relations and cross-partisan influence within a hybridised political environment in which formal party structures are often shaped by personalised networks of authority and broking.

The data, mostly in qualitative forms, were primarily obtained from secondary sources such as the scholarly literature on Nigerian politics, elite theory and hybrid democracy, newspaper reports, political commentaries and publicly available statements of key political actors. This documentary base allows for a critical investigation of how elites manipulate and manoeuvre institutional arrangements to maintain political influence. Thematic content analysis was used to identify recurrent patterns, including elite broking, institutional capture, patronage coordination, and cross-partisan alignment. This perspective places the “Wike phenomenon” in the context of broader structural processes rather than an isolated political event.

The study also draws on the authors' contextual closeness as indigenes of Rivers State and sustained observation of its political developments. This experiential insight was triangulated with documentary evidence to improve analytical rigour and reduce subjectivity. This combination of interpretative proximity and source triangulation enhances the credibility of the findings, while maintaining scholarly objectivity.

To move beyond abstract theorisation, this study operationalises trans-partisan hegemony through empirically observable indicators, applied to the political trajectory of Nyesom Wike. This approach enables a systematic demonstration of how cross-partisan dominance is constructed, reproduced, and sustained within Nigeria's subnational political space, particularly under conditions of weak party institutionalisation and entrenched elite bargaining.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The political trajectory of Nyesom Wike provides a compelling illustration of political dualism and trans-partisan hegemony in contemporary Nigerian politics. Although formally affiliated with the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), his political conduct-particularly in the post-2023 period-reflects sustained engagement with the All Progressives Congress (APC)-led federal administration under Bola Ahmed Tinubu. His appointment as Minister of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) in an APC administration despite retaining visible influence within the PDP represents a striking departure from conventional expectations of rigid partisan loyalty. This dual positioning demonstrates how elite political actors increasingly navigate multiple centres of power simultaneously, thereby reinforcing fluid configurations of influence that transcend formal party boundaries [37].

Empirically, this phenomenon became particularly visible during the 2023 general elections. Wike emerged as a central figure within the G-5 Governors-a bloc of influential PDP governors comprising Seyi Makinde, Samuel Ortom, Okezie Ikpeazu, and Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi-who openly resisted the presidential candidacy and party leadership structure of the PDP. Although the group did not formally defect, its internal opposition weakened party cohesion and indirectly benefited the APC presidential campaign. Wike's refusal to support the PDP presidential candidate, Atiku Abubakar, while simultaneously maintaining strategic relations with APC power brokers, exemplified a form of elite bargaining that prioritised political leverage over ideological commitment or partisan consistency.

This pattern is structurally enabled by three interrelated dynamics. First, weak party institutionalisation in Nigeria has significantly eroded ideological discipline, transforming political parties into loose coalitions of competing elite interests rather than programmatic organisations. The frequent movement of politicians across party lines-illustrated by recurring defections between the PDP and APC since 2015-demonstrates the limited ideological distinction between major parties [38]. Electoral competition therefore increasingly revolves around access to state power, patronage distribution, and elite negotiation rather than policy alternatives or ideological contestation.

Second, Wike's influence is anchored in extensive personalised patronage networks that operate independently of formal party structures. During his tenure as Governor of Rivers State (2015-2023), he consolidated substantial influence over local political actors, state institutions, and grassroots mobilisation structures through strategic appointments, infrastructural projects, and political sponsorship. His ability to influence electoral outcomes beyond Rivers State-including interventions in gubernatorial contests and party disputes across several states-demonstrates the extent to which personalised networks increasingly rival formal party institutions as mechanisms of political control. Even after leaving office as governor, his continued dominance within Rivers politics, particularly through the prolonged political conflict involving his successor, Siminalayi Fubara, further illustrates the durability of these patron-client structures beyond formal constitutional tenure [39].

Third, strategic ambiguity-the deliberate maintenance of formal identity within one political platform while pragmatically engaging rival blocs-enhances bargaining power and expands access to state resources and elite settlements. Wike's simultaneous association with the PDP and collaboration with the APC-led federal government enabled him to occupy a politically advantageous intermediary position. Such ambiguity reduces the risks associated with rigid opposition politics in highly competitive political systems where access to federal power often determines resource allocation, institutional protection, and political survival.

The "Wike phenomenon" therefore refers not merely to an individual political actor but to a patterned form of elite political practice characterised by assertive leadership, institutional leverage, patronage consolidation, and cross-party influence. It emerged prominently during his tenure as Governor of Rivers State and has persisted

into his federal political role. Comparable tendencies can also be observed in broader Nigerian politics where elite actors frequently sustain informal alliances across party lines despite formal partisan differences. Examples include coalition-building arrangements preceding the 2015 elections, strategic defections during the 2019 and 2023 electoral cycles, and the recurrent formation of intra-party factions that cooperate with rival parties for tactical advantage [40].

Within Nigeria's broader political economy-defined by weak ideological differentiation, prebendal politics, patron-client relations, and intense elite competition for state resources-the Wike phenomenon reflects a rational adaptation to systemic conditions rather than an isolated aberration. In many respects, it illustrates the gradual transformation of Nigerian party politics from ideology-driven competition to elite-managed networks of negotiated influence [41], [42]. Consequently, political authority increasingly derives not from party institutional legitimacy alone, but from the capacity of influential actors to control patronage flows, negotiate elite alliances, and maintain strategic relevance across shifting political coalitions.

A defining feature of transpartisan hegemony is the capacity of a dominant political actor to penetrate and simultaneously influence rival party structures without formally abandoning existing partisan affiliations. In the case of Nyesom Wike, this phenomenon manifests through the expansion of a political network that operates across both the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC). This reflects what this study conceptualises as cross-partisan penetration: the strategic extension of influence beyond formal party boundaries into multiple and sometimes competing centres of political authority [43].

This pattern is evident in three interconnected dynamics. The first involves sustained dominance over PDP organisational structures within Rivers State despite intensifying internal opposition. Even after leaving office as governor in 2023, Wike retained considerable influence over party executives, local political coordinators, state legislators, and local government power structures. The prolonged political confrontation between Wike and Governor Siminalayi Fubara illustrates the extent to which political authority in Rivers State remained tied not merely to constitutional office but also to entrenched informal networks of loyalty and patronage [44]. The crisis surrounding the attempted impeachment of Fubara by lawmakers widely perceived to be loyal to Wike further demonstrates how elite influence can persist through institutional proxies even after formal transition from office.

The second dimension involves strategic collaboration and bargaining with APC-led federal actors. Wike's appointment as Minister of the Federal Capital Territory under the administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu institutionalised his integration into the federal ruling structure despite his continued association with the PDP. Beyond symbolic inclusion, this appointment significantly expanded his national political leverage by granting access to federal administrative structures, state resources, and elite decision-making circles [45]. His participation in federal policy meetings, strategic political

consultations, and national governance processes further positioned him as a bridge figure capable of operating across partisan divides.

A third dimension of cross-partisan penetration is reflected in indirect influence over opposition party configurations through elite sponsorship, factional alliances, and political appointments. Political actors associated with Wike have reportedly occupied strategic positions within federal agencies and regional political institutions, including the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). Such appointments reinforce the logic of network expansion by embedding loyalists within multiple institutional arenas simultaneously. Appendix "A" of this study further documents over forty strategic appointments linked to Wike's political structure and distributed across competing political blocs, including appointments associated with the six-month State of Emergency in Rivers State. These developments indicate that influence is increasingly exercised through informal elite networks rather than through constitutionally defined partisan channels alone [46], [47].

This pattern reflects the growing permeability of party boundaries in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Rather than functioning as ideologically coherent organisations, political parties increasingly operate as flexible vehicles for elite negotiation, coalition-building, and access to state resources. Cross-party alliances, tactical defections, and informal cooperation have therefore become normalised features of the political system. Similar tendencies were observable in the coalition arrangements preceding the 2015 electoral transition, the emergence of intra-party pressure blocs during the 2023 elections, and the frequent movement of governors, legislators, and political financiers between major parties without significant ideological realignment.

The evidence consequently supports the argument that political authority in Nigeria is no longer exercised exclusively within rigid party hierarchies, but through overlapping networks of elite influence that transcend institutional divides. In this regard, the study aligns with the prebendal theory advanced by Richard Joseph, which conceptualises Nigerian politics as a system in which public office is appropriated for the distribution of material benefits to loyal networks and political clients [48]. Wike's cross-party engagements reinforce this logic by demonstrating that political survival, bargaining power, and elite relevance increasingly depend on access to multiple institutional arenas rather than exclusive loyalty to a single party structure.

More broadly, the Rivers State experience demonstrates how trans-partisan hegemony can weaken democratic accountability by blurring the distinction between ruling and opposition blocs. Where influential actors maintain simultaneous relevance across rival political formations, opposition politics becomes less ideological and more transactional, thereby reducing the capacity of party competition to serve as an effective mechanism of democratic accountability and institutional differentiation [49].

Perhaps the most direct empirical validation of trans-partisan logic is the explicit discursive devaluation of party ideology within Rivers State politics. This is captured in Wike's own statement: "In Rivers today, there is no party. What we have are people; we are doing a movement of Rainbow Coalition otherwise called the Renewed Hope

Family.” This articulation signals a fundamental shift from ideological party politics to personalised political aggregation centred on elite networks and loyal constituencies.

Within this configuration, party structures become secondary to individualised political authority. Although formally associated with the Peoples’ Democratic Party (PDP), Wike’s political practice reflects simultaneous engagement with the All Progressives Congress (APC), thereby destabilising conventional assumptions of partisan exclusivity. In effect, political alignment is increasingly determined by influence, access, and strategic utility rather than ideological coherence [50]. This development empirically reinforces the argument that Nigeria’s party system is increasingly hollowed out, consistent with prebendal interpretations of African politics, where state and party institutions function as instruments of elite accumulation and bargaining.

The 2023 general elections provide strong empirical grounding for understanding the “Wike phenomenon” as a form of electoral brokerage operating across formal party boundaries. As a leading figure within the PDP-aligned G5 Governors’ bloc, Nyesom Wike played a decisive role in reshaping both intra-party alignments and broader national electoral dynamics. Although he retained formal membership within the Peoples’ Democratic Party (PDP), his political engagements increasingly aligned with the electoral consolidation of the APC-led presidential coalition under the “Renewed Hope” platform. This dual positioning reflects a pattern of electoral brokerage in which influential political actors mediate across rival party formations to shape political outcomes beyond conventional partisan loyalty [51].

The Rivers State experience offers important empirical illustrations of this process. During the build-up to the 2023 elections, APC House of Assembly and National Assembly aspirants perceived to be politically loyal to Wike were reportedly cleared to participate in party primaries, while aspirants associated with his estranged political ally and successor, Siminalayi Fubara, were either disqualified or denied clearance. This pattern reportedly extended beyond intra-party rivalry to include sitting National Assembly members from both the PDP and APC whose political alignments were considered unfavourable to the dominant power structure.

Most significantly, Fubara himself was reportedly denied clearance to contest the APC gubernatorial primaries despite his emerging political relevance within the state. In contrast, an aspirant closely associated with Wike – Kingsley Chinda, who, as of March 30, still maintained affiliation with the PDP-successfully secured the APC gubernatorial ticket. The political logic underlying these disqualifications and selective clearances reflected an attempt to preserve hegemonic control over the state’s political architecture by restricting access to competing centres of influence [52]. In this sense, the primaries functioned less as open mechanisms of democratic selection and more as instruments for regulating elite succession, consolidating patronage networks, and sustaining trans-partisan dominance.

The broader implication is that electoral competition within such contexts becomes increasingly managed through elite coordination and strategic bargaining rather than ideological contestation or institutional neutrality. Candidate emergence,

coalition formation, and political mobilisation are consequently shaped by personalised networks of influence that transcend formal party boundaries. This development aligns with the argument advanced by Larry Diamond that hybrid political systems frequently sustain elections in which elite accommodation and informal bargaining exert greater influence than institutionalised democratic competition [53].

Institutional leverage beyond formal constitutional power is an important aspect of transpartisan hegemony. Civil society organisations in Rivers State have described Wike's continued influence as a 'unelected overlord' which speaks to the persistence of informal authority structures that intersect with formal governance institutions.

This influence can be measured in the empirical control of local government structures, legislative alignments and party executive organs. The crisis in the Rivers State House of Assembly involving factional splits and attempts at impeachment is an example of how legislative behaviour can be driven by allegiance to elite networks rather than institutional mandate. The long standoff between the executive and legislature under Governor Siminalayi Fubara also points to the extent to which the informal political authority determines governance outcomes. This is consistent with Migdal's 'state-in-society' framework that emphasizes the subordination of formal institutions to embedded political networks [54].

The trans-partisan hegemonic dynamics has its most visible outcome in the Rivers State political crisis (2023-2026). The tug-of-war between Wike and Governor Fubara for control of state political institutions led to legislative chaos, impeachment attempts and administrative paralysis. The crisis resulted in a governance collapse characterized by competing legislative claims, interruptions of budgetary processes, and prolonged institutional impasses, culminating in federal intervention and the declaration of a state of emergency. Politically, economically, this is an expression of neopatrimonial governance in which formal institutional boundaries are repeatedly transgressed by personalised networks of power.

Discussion

The evolving political realignments in Rivers State increasingly suggest that trans-partisan bargaining is not simply an electoral short-term arrangement, but a component of a larger strategy to consolidate the state for the All Progressives Congress (APC) in advance of the 2027 general elections [55]. Nyesom Wike is at the heart of this process and his political influence has gradually gone beyond formal party affiliation to assume the character of a hegemonic brokerage structure that is able to coordinate elite interests across rival party platforms. The acceptance of a ministerial appointment in the APC government, while still a PDP member, was not just a personal political accommodation, but the institutionalisation of trans-partisan elite cooperation. This arrangement blurred the distinction of opposition and ruling party structures in Rivers State, thus creating a hybrid political coalition that was oriented toward long-term electoral consolidation.

This interpretation is even reinforced by empirical developments in Rivers politics. The post-2023 elections restructuring of political loyalties was a systematic effort to undermine alternative centers of power that could challenge federal-aligned political

integration [56]. The face-off between Wike and Siminalayi Fubara increasingly seemed to be a manifestation of not just a personal disagreement but a contest for the future control of the political machinery in Rivers State ahead of 2027. Fubara's loyalists were frozen out of key party structures, with Wike's allies maintaining influence in both PDP and APC circles. These developments suggest a deliberate effort to build a cross-party political architecture to ensure that Rivers State is electorally available to the APC, irrespective of formal party labels.

This pattern is also evident in the recent party primaries in Rivers State, where it is apparent that the transpartisan hegemon, Wike, exercised considerable influence over candidate emergence across the All Progressives Congress (APC), Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and even Labour Party (LP). Reports on the primaries indicate ongoing public discourse on the extent to which the influence of the political network around Nyesom Wike and other elites, especially in terms of candidate selection across party lines, affected the process, even if the main actors publicly denied that they had anointed a candidate. Instead of the much-expected ethnic rotation and internal party contestation, which many party members and the voting public expected, the governorship candidates of the major parties were largely of Ikwerre ethnic extraction [57]. While this pattern does not itself constitute proof of coordinated control, it does demonstrate the remarkable ability of elite networks to mould political recruitment and circumscribe the set of viable alternatives.

When viewed in the context of Rivers State's larger electoral significance, the strategy's logic becomes more apparent. Rivers plays a crucial role in national electoral calculations as one of Nigeria's most politically and economically significant states. Any successful APC infiltration of Rivers, which has historically been seen as a PDP bastion, would significantly increase the ruling party's power inside the South-South geopolitical zone while concurrently undermining the ability of the opposition at the national level. As a result, elite players can negotiate the gradual transfer of political dominance through transpartisan bargaining without the need for official defections or sudden ideological conversion.

Preliminary evidence of this shift has already been presented by the 2023 elections. Even though he stayed in the PDP, Wike publicly disassociated himself from the party's presidential campaign apparatus and kept up a political connection that was generally seen as supporting Tinubu's candidacy. PDP unity was severely shattered by the G5 Governors' uprising, which also indirectly improved the APC's chances of winning federal elections. In Rivers State, party doctrine was less important in political mobilization than allegiance to elite networks [58]. This made it possible to strategically reroute support networks that had been established under the PDP in favor of APC interest.

Moreover, the incremental infiltration of APC influence into state-level political appointments, legislative alignments and local political structures suggests a gradual process of political absorption rather than outright partisan conquest. The aim is not apparently to dissolve the PDP straight away but to submerge it into a broader

hegemonic coalition built on elite patronage and negotiated loyalty. In such a context, formal party identity becomes a secondary matter, as access to state resources, federal protection, and political life itself depend increasingly on alignment with the dominant trans-partisan power bloc.

The pattern is suggestive of what scholars of hybrid political systems call the transition from democratic competition to elite-managed political coordination. Political actors do not operate through ideological contestation, but through informal governing arrangements that neutralise opposition structures while maintaining semblance of multiparty democracy [59]. The emerging convergence of Wike's political machinery with the Tinubu-led federal establishment in Rivers State, for instance, is a case in point of the role of trans-partisan hegemony as a rehearsal for electoral consolidation in the future.

In this regard, the emerging evidence strongly suggests that the current political bargaining in Rivers State is strategically oriented towards securing the state for Tinubu and the APC in 2027. The selective management of party structures, the containment of other political actors, the cross-party coordination of elites and the gradual incorporation of state political networks into the federal ruling coalition are indicative of a long-term hegemonic project for reorienting Rivers State elections within Nigeria's changing power configuration.

Besides institutional control and the distribution of resources, trans-partisan hegemony is also maintained by discursive dominance. In this sense, Wike's political significance is increased by his ability to control narratives, influence the public's perception of events and to sustain media presence. Through strategic communication and constant engagement, he is central to the production of political meaning in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

This implies a Gramscian aspect to hegemony, whereby rule is achieved through coercion and the manufacture of consent. The elite actors in the Rivers State crisis illustrated how political conflict is framed as party discipline, thereby shaping public perception. Narrative control is therefore a crucial mechanism for the normalisation and political stabilisation of trans-partisan arrangements in hybrid democratic contexts.

The Wike phenomenon is a manifestation of gradual but increasing disintegration of party ideology and organisational coherence in Nigerian partisan politics. The political field is less and less organised around the platform of the political parties or their ideological commitments; it is more and more organised around the persons and the elite groups that support them. Evidence from the 2023 Rivers State electoral cycle indicates that defections and alignments were more likely to occur within coordinated loyalty networks than along programmatic party lines. Wike said: "In Rivers today, there is no party, we are people", marking the substitution of ideological partisanship by personalised political aggregation.

In this setup, political parties are increasingly turned into tools for elite mobilisation and access to state power, rather than platforms for policy articulation or democratic representation. This points to a fluid and unstable partisan system where

party identity is less significant than elite affiliation, making political behaviour highly contingent on diffuse networks of influence.

Another implication is the entrenchment of elite brokerage as a dominant form of political organization. The Wike phenomenon illustrates how one political actor can exert influence simultaneously in rival party structures, shaping nominations, coalitions, and electoral outcomes. This subverts the traditional model of party competition as the main mechanism of democratic accountability, and substitutes it with a system where political power is mediated through elite negotiation and cross-party coordination. In this context parties are less autonomous political organisations and more nodes within broader elite networks. Political competition is thus displaced from institutional to informal bargaining spaces, weakening parties' ability to discipline elites or structure coherent policy alternatives [60].

Historically, Rivers State has been plagued by high levels of electoral violence and inter-party conflict. However, recent patterns suggest that overt political violence has relatively declined with the consolidation of trans-partisan hegemonic arrangements. This decline is mainly due to the internalisation of competition among elites in informal coordination structures, dominated by powerful actors mediating competition before it turns into public confrontation.

In this configuration, the hegemonic actor functions as a gatekeeper, regulating access to political opportunities and resources, and rewarding compliance while discouraging violent contestation by subordinate elites. This may provide short-term stability but also raises concerns about the suppression of real political competition and the concentration of coercive and distributive power in a small elite circle. Nor is this stability achieved by institutional strengthening, but by managed containment of elites.

The Wike phenomenon is a potent example of how electoral outcomes in Nigeria are now being increasingly mediated by elite brokerage, rather than simply by the autonomous preferences of voters. One indication of how elite realignments can profoundly change electoral trajectories, despite formal party affiliations, was the alignment of the G5 Governors in the 2023 Nigerian general elections [61]. The case of hegemonic transpartisan dominance and influence over candidate emergence across the All Progressives Congress (APC), the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), and even the Labour Party (LP), has equally been demonstrated. In the circumstance, influential political elites did not blindly follow party loyalty, but rather strategically coordinated their support, which influenced voting patterns and campaign dynamics in this circumstances. These trends illustrate the growing importance of informal elite networks in determining electoral outcomes. Such developments lend support the fact that party systems in Nigeria are still weakly institutionalised and highly personalised and hence susceptible to elite manipulation and strategic defections.

More generally, the emergence of cross-party elite configurations suggests a gradual convergence in candidate selection and electoral strategy that transcends formal partisan boundaries. This convergence reflects theories of elite circulation and cartelisation, where leading political actors cooperate to maintain their collective

influence and to reduce real political uncertainty. When electoral competition is mainly an arena of elite accommodation rather than popular contestation, elections risk being converted into managed political outcomes rather than competitive democratic exercises [62]. This results in a weakening of political pluralism, reduced internal party democracy and the erosion of the substantive meaning of electoral democracy where citizens are presented with multiple party labels but relatively limited alternatives in terms of political leadership and policy direction.

This has the central implications of a growth in the concentration of political influence in a small number of elite nodes which operate across institutional and partisan boundaries. Such a configuration produces a democratic deficit where formal institutions are in place but substantive political authority is exercised through informal elite hierarchies. This produces a procedurally democratic system but one that is substantively constrained by personalised networks of power, in line with scholarship on hybrid regimes. Elections and institutions are still there but accountability is eroded as decision-making is increasingly mediated by elite bargaining structures rather than institutional checks and balances.

The evidence also reveals that internal party democracy is seriously undermined in both major political parties. Party nominations and candidate selection processes are frequently controlled by elite endorsement rather than grassroots involvement or procedural fairness. This perpetuates a “godfatherism” framework where political progress depends on elite backing. This indicates a decrease in competition within parties, stifling the meritocratic rise of leadership and diminishing the capacity of parties to serve as democratic institutions of representation and accountability [63].

The trans-partisan hegemonic arrangements blur the boundary between ruling and opposition parties, thus eroding the structural clarity required for effective democratic opposition. Where elite actors remain effective across party lines, oversight mechanisms are undermined and the ability of opposition forces to scrutinise governance processes independently is diminished.

The Wike phenomenon also points to patterns of institutional capture, where formal governance structures are heavily influenced by dominant political actors. In Rivers State, entrenched elite networks have affected the legislative and administrative structures that have produced policy outcomes that reflect strategic political interests rather than general public welfare. Such an arrangement risks selective governance through patronage distribution, reduced transparency and uneven policy prioritisation. Some infrastructural projects may be sustained through continuity backed by elites but such continuity is often politically conditioned rather than institutionally guaranteed and contributes to uneven development outcomes and spatial inequality.

The Rivers State political crisis (2023-2026) is a case study of how personalised political authority can lead to systemic instability in governance. These include legislative gridlock, executive fragmentation and administrative delays which have all collectively compromised policy implementation and service delivery. In such a situation of strong personalisation of political authority, the functioning of institutions is vulnerable to elite

conflicts, leading to disruption of continuity of governance. This demonstrates the fragility of state institutions operating in a context of concentrated informal power [64].

The outcomes of governance are increasingly shaped by elite capture where access to state resources and decision making structures is determined by political loyalty rather than institutional rules or public need. This leads to uneven development outcomes, reinforces clientelistic patterns of distribution and shrinks the space for inclusive governance.

The Wike phenomenon is systemic and symptomatic of broader structural tendencies in Nigerian politics. Political parties are increasingly discredited as ideological institutions and instead serve as locations for elite coordination and access to state power. The consequence is a hybrid political system in which formal democratic institutions exist alongside informal networks that determine substantive political outcomes. Moreover, reliance on elite broking creates systemic volatility, where conflicts among dominant players can escalate into governance crises with national consequences. The political agency of citizens is eroded as electoral results and policy directions are determined by elite negotiations rather than voter preferences, thereby reducing democratic accountability.

Ultimately, clientelist and network-based governance exacerbates inequality and constrains inclusive development, as access to state resources is mediated through political affiliation and elite proximity, rather than the universal criteria of catering for the public good or the pursuit of the greatest happiness of the greatest number of the people.

The empirical evidence consistently shows that recent political power in Rivers State is not limited to formal party structures but exercised through cross-cutting elite networks that cut across partisan lines. Political actors work within fluid configurations of influence where elections, governance and institutional processes are propelled by strategic not ideological competition [65].

Five interrelated patterns emerge accordingly: (i) party boundaries are increasingly porous and strategically navigated by elite actors; (ii) political loyalty is largely personalised and sustained through patronage rather than ideological commitment; (iii) electoral outcomes are significantly shaped by elite broking, negotiation and cross-party alliances; (iv) state institutions are frequently influenced by informal networks of power and clientelist structures; and (v) political legitimacy is reinforced through discursive control and narrative construction.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that the formal structure of multiparty democracy often masks deeper informal mechanisms of elite coordination and negotiated power-sharing. Political actors thus operate less as ideological representatives of party platforms and more as strategic brokers embedded within expansive networks of influence. The empirical patterns of the Nyesom Wike phenomenon, confirm the central hypothesis of trans-partisan hegemony: that political dominance in weakly institutionalised democracies is increasingly exercised across, not within, party structures.

It makes a conceptual and analytical contribution to political science by proposing trans-partisan hegemony as a framework for analysing elite domination in hybrid political systems. It questions party-centric models of democratic analysis that assume ideological coherence and unambiguous institutional separation of ruling and opposition parties, showing that elite interests often override formal organisational boundaries [66].

Secondly, it extends Gramscian theories of hegemony beyond class-based analysis to show elite-led, cross-partisan dominance reproduced through patronage networks, institutional penetration, electoral broking and discursive control. Third, it contributes to hybrid regime and neopatrimonial scholarship by demonstrating the co-existence of formal democratic institutions and informal mechanisms of power concentration, with substantive authority concentrated in interconnected elite networks.

In sum, the study concludes that political legitimacy and competition in Nigeria are increasingly organised around networked elite coordination rather than party ideology. In this configuration, trans-partisan hegemony refers to the simultaneous occupation, influence and coordination of multiple party formations by elite actors, thereby reshaping governance, accountability and democratic competition in hybrid regimes.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: Nigeria's multiparty democracy—especially in Rivers State—is increasingly characterised not by ideological party competition but by elite networks operating across formal party boundaries. Political parties are still institutionally intact, but their substantive role is reduced as political loyalty is becoming personalised, patronage-based and negotiated strategically. The analysis identifies five mechanisms that underpin this system: cross-party elite broking, institutional penetration, patronage networks, electoral coordination and discursive control. Together these mechanisms allow dominant actors to shape both ruling and opposition configurations, moving party politics from competitive democracy to coordinated elite management. The “Wike phenomenon” thus speaks to a broader structural feature of Nigerian politics, the combination of formal democratic institutions with informal arrangements of concentrated elite power. This creates a political dualism where elections and institutions operate procedurally, but real political power is exercised through trans-partisan elite arrangements. It shows power is less about competition between parties and more about elite coordination across party lines to control access to the state, resources and political legitimacy. **Implication:** Ultimately, Nigeria's democratic experience exhibits a persistent duality where formal democratic procedures coexist with entrenched elite networks that undermine institutional autonomy, weaken opposition effectiveness and hinder democratic consolidation. First, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) needs to step up its oversight of party primaries by monitoring delegate selection processes in real time digitally and requiring the

publication of validated delegate lists prior to primaries. Second, political parties such as the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) and All Progressives Congress (APC) should institutionalise enforceable internal democratic rules, such as transparent primaries, independent arbitration mechanisms and limits on arbitrary candidate imposition. Third, anti-corruption agencies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) should methodically track and audit politically connected patronage flows, especially constituency projects and subnational allocations. Fourth, public officeholders should be subject to clearer ethical rules regarding cross-party political coordination, including mandatory disclosure of political alliances and prohibitions on competing dual roles. Fifth, civil society organisations and media institutions should be provided with legal protections and access-to-information guarantees to increase oversight of defections, appointments and patronage networks. Sixth, opposition parties must build their organisational capacity and ideologically coherent platforms by developing internal policies, training leaders, and mobilising grassroots. Lastly, civic and political education should be escalated to strengthen citizen awareness on accountability, ideology and electoral responsibility. A politically conscious electorate is the most resilient barrier to trans-partisan elite control and a primary engine of democratic consolidation. **Limitation:** The empirical anchor of this study is the "Wike phenomenon" and the concept of trans-partisan hegemony. **Future Research:** Reforms need to tackle institutional weaknesses, elite coordination networks and civic disengagement at the same time to deal with the issues of political dualism and trans-partisan hegemony in Rivers State and Nigeria in general. Finally, the study contributes trans-partisan hegemony as an analytical lens for the study of political dominance in hybrid democracies.

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