

**THE ROLES OF POLITICAL PARTIES  
IN A DEMOCRATIC PROCESS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Africa has constantly continued to grapple with the problem of national unity associated with under – provided biased politics thereby indicating dangers for its young democracy. While political party conflicts are commonly inevitable in democratic setup with different party formations, the nature of such relationships that exist between or among them, play crucial role in democratic sustenance. In light of the above, democracy and party politics are not only connected but are also inseparable as there can be no democracy in the contemporary period that can be exalted without a viable political party. Thus, functioning of democratic system whether in advanced or developing democracies largely depends to some extent on the nature, composition, organisation, ideas and institutionalization of political parties which in turn begets democratic consolidation. This paper seeks to examine the roles of political parties in a democratic process.

**Key concepts:** Political party, democracy and democratic process.

## INTRODUCTION

In a democratic system, citizens elect their political leaders. In Nigeria, this happens every four years. The candidates are members of political parties. Citizens vote for the party of their choice, in this way, influence government policy. A political party brings together people with the same political ideas. By taking part in an election, parties hope to get as many of their members as possible into a representative body like parliament or executive position. At the same time, they try to hold as many posts as possible in the government.

Political parties have various functions; one is promoting the interest of their voters, they also draw up party programmes, citizens can join political parties, enabling them to help shape the party programme. Political parties organize politics in every modern democracy, and some observers claim that parties are what induce democracies to be responsive. Yet, according to others, parties give voice to extremists and reduce the responsiveness of governments to the citizenry. The debate about the roles of political parties in the democratic process takes on renewed importance as new democracies around the globe struggle with issues of representation and governability.

As an American Political Scientist, Schattschneider (1942) States; political parties created democracy. Modern democracy is unthinkable without parties. Among positive theorists and empirical students of democracy, regard for political parties is higher. Scholars of political studies yearned for a strengthening of parties that would allow "Party government"; their aspirations are echoed today by observers of new democracies in Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America who blame the shortfalls of these democracies on the absence or weakness of political parties.

## **CONCEPTUALIZATION OF POLITICAL PARTY, DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIC PROCESS.**

As Sorgwe (2018) states; political party is defined as a group of persons who believe in the same political ideology and who make group efforts to win and control the government of their country for the furtherance of that ideology.

A. Appadorai (1982) in his master piece, "The Substance of Politics", maintain that a political party is more or less organized group of citizens who acts together as a political unit, having distinctive aims and opinions on the leading political questions or controversies in the state and who by acting together as a political unit, seek to obtain control of government.

To Ball, (1981) political parties may be principally defined by their common aims. They seek political power either singly or in cooperation with other political parties.

A political party is usually well ordered. It has its constitution which shows how its affairs are to be conducted. It has a president, chairman, a general secretary, a treasurer and other officers that control it. A political party is defined as an organised group of people with at least roughly similar political aims and opinions, that seeks to influence public policy by getting its candidates elected to public office. Parties tend to be deeply and durably entrenched in specific substructures of society in a sustainable and well functioning democracy.

On the other hand, democracy is a form of government in which people chose leaders by voting. Democracy embodies responsive and responsible governance, rule of law, human rights, civil participation and peaceful transfers of power through electoral processes.

Okoro (2004) posits that; democracy is a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections.

While democratic process is the transition to a more democratic political regime, including substantive political changes moving in democratic directions. It may be the transition from an authoritarian regime to a full democracy, a transition from an authoritarian political system to a semi - democracy or transition form a semi authoritarian political system to a democratic political system (Johnson, 1964).

There is a general tendency to assume that democracy refers to a fairly static concept and by corollary, that "democratic process" represents the process of approaching this "democracy". If we accept Okoro (2014) or similar definition of democracy, then the goal of "democratic elections and "democratic process" can be considered the process by which the civil liberties and political rights necessary to achieve this goal are realized and maintained.

## **EMERGENCE OF POLITICAL PARTIES.**

The earliest political association in Africa started like a protest movement. In Nigeria, the first was the People's Union which was organized in 1908 by two leading African doctors in Lagos aimed at protecting indigenous rights and opposing the change of land tenure system in Southern Nigeria (Ikunga, 2012).

Another political association that fits into protest movement was the National Council of British West Africa by Caseley Hayfold of Ghana who moved educated elites from Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Gambia to a conference in Accra in 1920 (Michael, 2019).

To A. Appadorai (1982), number of factors lead to the formation of political parties; protest movement, religious groups, sheer community loyalty, clubs and associations and leadership qualities.

Political parties are endemic to democracy. However, they are not part of the formal definition of democracy, nor do the constitutions of most democracies dictate a role for parties. Indeed, in most countries, parties operate in a realm little regulated by statutory law.

Many contemporary students of democracy give a more upbeat answer to the question, "why political parties"? A leading answer is that legislative politics is unstable without parties, hence, legislators who want to get something done and who want their preferred policies to prevail will form parties. Far from an unfortunate consequence of human nature plus liberal freedoms, parties introduce effectiveness into democratic institutions.

Parties operate within party systems and the type of systems will have profound effects on party behaviour. In some countries, the constitution provide the existence of only one political party. Such countries are said to have one - party system; they are also referred to as a one - party state. When the constitutions provides for only two parties, we talk of a two party system or a two - party state.

If several parties are allowed, like Nigeria, we have multi party system.

## **ROLES OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN A DEMOCRATIC PROCESS**

Political party is very important to a democratic process in that, it is the main base from which the candidates are fielded.

Sorgwe (2018) posits; the party does not only field the candidates, but also advertises them. In other words, the party influences the electorate. It is also important to note that the party is the custodian of the ideology with which the candidates vie for the posts.

Sorgwe (2018) further stated that the candidates are flag bearers of the party and the ideology it projects. The political party provides opportunity for people everywhere to exercise freedom of choice in government. It also provides the opportunity for the exercise of fundamental rights in the process of governance.

Ukpabi (2004) identified a number of roles political parties perform in a democratic society, as noted below;

- a.** Soliciting and articulating public policy priorities and civic needs and problems as identified by members and supporters.
- b.** Socialising and educating voters and citizens in the functioning of the political and electoral system and the generation of general political values.
- c.** Balancing opposing demands and converting them into general policies.
- d.** Activating and mobilising citizens into participating in political decisions and transforming their opinions into viable policy options.
- e.** Channelling public opinion from citizens to government. Even though parties fulfil many vital roles and perform several functions in a democratic society, the nomination and presentation of candidates in the electoral campaign is the most visible function to the electorate.

Sorgwe (2018) further articulated some roles or functions of political parties in most countries. Some of these functions are;

- a.** Parties help to present candidates to the electorate, seek and mobilize the support of the electorate through organised activities.
- b.** Parties make conscious effort to seek and obtain political powers, by correctly advising their members in positions of authority to satisfy the needs of the people.
- c.** Parties help to enhance political stability; political parties help to harmonize interest, aggregating the views of many to achieve peace, law and order necessary for the achievement of progress.
- d.** Political parties have helped to reconcile the organs of government mainly legislative and the executive, and individuals in government.
- e.** When the party is out of power, it maintains a constant check on and a probing criticism of the actions and policies of incumbent officer holders.

To perform the above mentioned roles and functions, political parties and citizens need some rights and obligations guaranteed or ruled by constitution or law. These include; Freedom of organisation, freedom to

stand for election, freedom of speech and assembly, provision of a fair and peaceful competition among parties and candidates, media access and fair reporting guarantees and transparent and accountable political finance.

The internal functioning of individual political parties is to some extent determined by forces that are external to political parties, such as the electoral system, political culture, and legal regulations. However, internal processes of political parties such as the personality of leaders and staff, the ideological foundations, party history, and internal political culture are considered to be even more influential on the internal functioning.

If a political party would like the democratic principles of electoral politics to be applied within the party, they may consider practices like internal information and consultation processes, internal (formal or informal) rules and structures for the organisation and decision making within the party, and transparency in the party's functioning at all levels.

Party members may also take on more formal roles in decision making like participating in internal elections for leadership positions or in selecting the party's candidate(s) in the upcoming elections. Many parties also work actively to enhance the roles of traditionally under represented groups in their parties.

### **EFFECTS OF THE ABSENCE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY.**

Without the presence of a political party, a democracy cannot survive.

This evident from the roles played by political parties. If no political parties exist, then;

- a.** Every election candidate would be an independent candidate. Any candidate does not have the ability to offer the public any big policy changes. No one will be held accountable in such a circumstance.
- b.** Only a direct democracy has a chance of surviving in the long run. Political parties are organisations that collect and convey various points of view on various matters to the government.

## **CONCLUSION**

Today, more of the world's population lives under democracy than ever before. Hence, it is more urgent than ever before to understand how democracy works and assess how well it performs the functions imputed to it, such as responsiveness, representation, accountability, and realization of the public good.

Observers of the myriad new democracies around the globe complain of the ineffectiveness of democracy in achieving these functions. They are not infrequently cast the blame on weak political parties. Conversely, when observers defect a strengthening of parties in new democracies, they expect representation and responsiveness to be similarly strengthened.

Political parties are essential institutions of democracy. By competing in elections, parties offer citizens a choice in governance and while in opposition, they can hold government accountable. When citizens join political parties, volunteer their time, donate money and vote for their leaders, they are exercising their basic democratic rights.

The writer supports the development of vibrant, accountable and inclusive multi – party systems that offer citizens meaningful choices and opportunities for political participation.



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