

Investigating the Unspoken Ethics of Political Defections through Contextual Integrity

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Abstract

Political defections in Nigeria are often hastily dismissed as betrayals of party loyalty or as opportunistic bids for personal gain. Such interpretations, though widespread, risk oversimplifying what is in fact a more layered and context-driven phenomenon. This paper argues that defections should be approached as covert communicative acts, deeply embedded in sociopolitical expectations that extend beyond the surface of electoral manoeuvring. Using Delta State as a case study, particularly the wave of high-profile defections in 2025, the study applies Helen Nissenbaum's Theory of Contextual Integrity (TCI) to interrogate the implicit meanings encoded in these political shifts. The approach treats defections not simply as strategic calculations, but as symbolic performances that negotiate legitimacy, survival, and identity within Nigeria's fragile democratic framework. The methodology is qualitative, drawing on purposive sampling of six prominent defections, media narratives, and public statements. These are examined through a blend of thematic coding and pragmatic-discursive analysis to reveal how defections function as opaque speech acts—sometimes explicit, at other times silent—that reconfigure party norms and political alignments. The findings suggest that defections in Delta State reflect broader shifts in political culture, where allegiance is less anchored in ideology and more responsive to changing contextual realities. Importantly, defections emerge as adaptive strategies that balance personal survival with appeals to collective identity, while also testing the elasticity of democratic norms. By reframing defections through the lens of contextual integrity, this study contributes to scholarship on implicit political communication in transitional democracies. It moves the debate away from crude moralistic judgements of "loyalty" or "betrayal" and towards an appreciation of defections as complex, layered performances of meaning. The paper concludes that political defections in Delta State offer a valuable window into how actors navigate the unspoken ethical terrain of Nigerian democracy.

Keywords: Political Defections, Delta State Politics, Contextual Integrity, Pragmatic Communication, Democratic Norms, Political Philosophy

Introduction

Party defections have become a recurrent and almost predictable feature of Nigeria's political culture. Each election cycle is accompanied by a flurry of cross-carpeting, where politicians abandon one party for another in a manner that unsettles both party structures and public confidence in the democratic process. Popular commentary often frames these defections as shameless betrayals of party loyalty, or as opportunistic manoeuvres designed purely for personal gain (Ogundiya & Baba, 2007). Yet, such interpretations—while not entirely false—are too narrow. They strip away the deeper sociopolitical contexts and the communicative meanings embedded in these moves. In reality, defections are rarely random. They are carefully staged performances that both reflect and reshape the political terrain in which they occur (Olatunji, Salahu, & Alabi, 2024).

Delta State provides an especially telling case. The defections that erupted in early 2025—most notably those involving Senator Ned Nwoko, Governor Sheriff Oborevwori, and former Governor Ifeanyi Okowa—were not simply opportunistic calculations. They carried symbolic weight, signalling shifting allegiances and redefined loyalties in one of Nigeria's most ethnically diverse and politically strategic states (Ochei, 2025; Punch, 2025). For example, Nwoko's move from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) to the All Progressives Congress (APC) was justified by his frustration over PDP's resistance to the creation of Anioma State. This justification, on the surface, reads as a personal grievance. Yet, when situated in the broader Delta context of ethnic balancing and regional aspirations, it becomes a speech act—a coded performance of resistance against perceived marginalisation (Ogunyemi, 2025).

This paper approaches such moves through Helen Nissenbaum's Theory of Contextual Integrity (2010), which argues that flows of information are judged appropriate or inappropriate depending on the context in which they occur. Applied here, defections are not merely switches of political camp; they are communicative events that either uphold or disrupt normative expectations. They are opaque speech acts, signalling legitimacy, survival, or identity in ways that only make sense when interpreted within the norms of Nigeria's fragile democracy. In this sense, defections become less about betrayal and more about negotiation—negotiation of belonging, power, and survival (Audu, Adamu, & Gana, 2022).

The Nigerian political landscape has long been marked by weak ideological foundations. Parties rarely differentiate themselves on programmatic or philosophical grounds (Anifowose, 2012). Instead, affiliations tend to follow ethnic alignments, patronage networks, and shifting calculations of access to state resources (Demarest, 2022). In such a context, the act of defection is not an aberration but a predictable strategy for political survival. Aligning with the ruling party often guarantees access to federal patronage and ensures relevance in subsequent electoral contests (Ojo, 2005). At the same time, defections are never neutral. They carry symbolic weight and invite normative judgements, not only from citizens but from party actors themselves. When Governor Oborevwori and former Governor Okowa defected to the APC, their earlier criticisms of the same party resurfaced in public discourse, creating dissonance and a sense of communicative rupture (Vanguard, 2025). Such contradictions foreground the importance of examining defections not just as political calculations but as communicative disruptions that test the elasticity of democratic norms.

The Delta case is further complicated by the state's multi-ethnic composition, including the Anioma, Urhobo, Ijaw, and Itsekiri groups. Party alignments here are inseparable from ethnic calculations and the politics of zoning (Ogbuenyi, 2021).

Defections often serve as signals to ethnic constituencies, reassuring them of continued relevance or warning of possible exclusion. Thus, when Nwoko invoked Anioma marginalisation as a reason for leaving the PDP, his statement was more than personal justification—it was a communicative act directed at both his Anioma base and the broader state polity. Contextual Integrity allows us to read this not as opportunism alone but as a coded negotiation of legitimacy within ethnicised politics.

Media framing also plays a critical role in shaping the public interpretation of defections. Nigerian newspapers and online platforms frequently present defections as stories of personal ambition, corruption, or disloyalty (Olaniyan & Omoera, 2019). While such framings resonate with public cynicism, they often obscure the underlying contexts. For instance, the March 2025 mass defection of APC members to the PDP was justified by defectors on the grounds of the Oborevori administration's achievements in infrastructure and human capital development (New Media, 2025). Here, governance performance became the context that shaped the communicative legitimacy of defection. Without attention to such contexts, analyses risk flattening defections into acts of opportunism, missing the deeper communicative negotiations involved.

Defections are not new in Nigeria's democratic history. From the First Republic to the Fourth, political actors have frequently shifted allegiance, especially during transitions of power (Suberu, 2001; Ibeanu, 2008). However, the frequency and scale of defections in the Fourth Republic have raised questions about the health of Nigeria's democracy. Do defections weaken party systems by eroding discipline and ideological coherence? Or do they represent pragmatic adaptations in a democracy still searching for stable norms? Scholars remain divided. Some argue that defections undermine accountability and disillusion voters (Ogundiya & Baba, 2007; Audu et al., 2022), while others suggest they reflect the reality of politics in a context where ideology has little purchase and survival depends on adaptation (Olatunji et al., 2024).

By situating defections within the Theory of Contextual Integrity, this paper contributes to a growing body of work that seeks to move beyond simplistic moralism. Instead of dismissing defections as betrayals, the study treats them as communicative events shaped by context, norms, and expectations. This approach aligns with emerging scholarship that views political discourse in Nigeria as a site of coded meaning, where speech, silence, and even contradiction operate as tools of political negotiation (Akindele & Adegbite, 2005; Olaniyan & Omoera, 2019). In transitional democracies like Nigeria, where norms are still fluid and contested, defections become key windows into how political actors negotiate legitimacy and belonging.

In summary, the introduction sets out the central puzzle: political defections in Nigeria, and particularly in Delta State, are more than opportunistic switches. They are covert communicative acts that reveal how political actors navigate fragile contexts, renegotiate loyalties, and signal legitimacy. Applying Contextual Integrity as a framework allows for a deeper reading of these acts as embedded in socio-political norms, thereby reframing defections as speech events rather than simple betrayals. The study therefore speaks to both political science and linguistic pragmatics, offering an interdisciplinary analysis of one of the most persistent features of Nigeria's democratic life.

Theoretical Framework

Every political act is not only strategic but also communicative, carrying with it implicit meanings that resonate within its immediate social and political environment.

This is the point of entry for the Theory of Contextual Integrity (TCI). Developed by Helen Nissenbaum, TCI was initially applied to privacy and information ethics, arguing that the appropriateness of an information flow depends on the norms of the context in which it occurs (Nissenbaum, 2010). In other words, information is never evaluated in isolation; it is judged against expectations shaped by the actors involved, the type of information, and the principles governing its transmission. When an action violates these expectations, integrity is said to be breached.

Transposed into political discourse, TCI offers a compelling lens through which to interpret party defections. Defections are not just tactical moves to secure advantage. They are communicative acts—opaque speech events—that are evaluated against normative expectations of loyalty, ideology, and legitimacy. A senator's decision to leave one party for another, for instance, is read not only for its immediate political consequences but for what it communicates about trust, identity, and political survival. In Nigeria's Delta State, where ethnic balancing, patronage, and zoning arrangements dominate, defections become performances of meaning. They test the boundaries of what is normatively acceptable and reshape communicative flows within the political system.

Yet, to appreciate the explanatory power of TCI, it is necessary to compare it with other theories that have long been used to explain political defections. These include Rational Choice Theory (RCT), Patron-Clientelism, and Political Opportunity Structure (POS) Theory. Each provides valuable insights but also reveals certain limitations when isolated from the contextual nuances that TCI foregrounds.

Rational Choice Theory (RCT)

At its core, Rational Choice Theory assumes that political actors are utility maximisers: they calculate costs and benefits and act in ways that enhance their personal advantage (Downs, 1957). Within this framework, defections are predictable outcomes of rational calculations. Politicians cross from one party to another when the expected benefits—such as access to resources, security of re-election, or proximity to power—outweigh the costs of remaining loyal. Studies in Nigeria have frequently highlighted this dimension. Olatunji, Salahu, and Alabi (2024) argue that defections in Nigeria are rarely ideological; they are more often about strategic repositioning in anticipation of electoral gains.

Indeed, RCT helps explain why politicians in Delta State, facing the dominance of one party or sensing the collapse of internal party structures, might move to the ruling camp. Senator Ned Nwoko's departure from the PDP to the APC in 2025 can be read in this light: remaining in a fractured PDP carried high costs, while switching to the APC promised access to federal power and protection for his political ambitions (Ochei, 2025).

Yet, the limitations of RCT quickly surface. It explains the "why" of defections in narrow cost-benefit terms but often ignores the symbolic and normative dimensions. A move that appears rational in material terms may be judged illegitimate in public discourse. For instance, when Nwoko condemned Governor Oborevori as "lacking capacity" shortly after his own defection (Guardian, 2025), the contradiction raised questions not about his rationality but about the communicative integrity of his actions. Here, RCT falls short; it misses the ways defections function as contested speech acts embedded in norms.

Patron-Clientelism

Another useful lens is patron-clientelism, a theory that foregrounds the informal networks of exchange between political elites (patrons) and their followers (clients). In this model, patrons dispense resources, protection, and access, while clients reciprocate with loyalty and mobilisation (Lemarchand & Legg, 1972). Nigeria's politics has long been described as deeply clientelistic, with godfathers playing decisive roles in candidate selection and electoral outcomes (Demarest, 2022).

Within this frame, defections are less about ideology and more about shifting alliances within patronage networks. A politician defects when their patron loses influence, or when a stronger patron offers better guarantees of survival. The mass defection of ten Delta PDP lawmakers to the APC in 2025 (Ogunyemi, 2025) exemplifies this logic: these lawmakers aligned themselves with emerging patrons in the APC to secure their relevance ahead of the 2027 elections.

Patron-clientelism provides an important corrective to purely rationalist accounts by drawing attention to the relational dynamics of power. However, it too has its blind spots. By reducing defections to transactions within networks, it neglects the communicative work defections perform in the public sphere. When a defection is justified in terms of ethnic marginalisation or governance performance, for example, it is not merely a client seeking a new patron but a political actor negotiating legitimacy before multiple audiences. Contextual Integrity allows us to see these justifications not as afterthoughts but as crucial speech acts that either restore or disrupt normative expectations.

Political Opportunity Structure (POS) Theory

A third framework, Political Opportunity Structure (POS) Theory, shifts attention to macro-level dynamics. POS suggests that political behaviour is shaped by the openness or closure of political institutions, the stability of elite alignments, and shifts in public opinion (Tarrow, 1998). In this view, defections are triggered by changes in the broader political environment—say, the weakening of a dominant party, the emergence of new coalitions, or the shifting policies of central government.

Applied to Nigeria, POS helps explain why defections often cluster around election cycles or moments of political realignment. For instance, the mass movements between PDP and APC in Delta State in early 2025 can be read as responses to changing opportunity structures, especially as the 2027 elections loom and the ruling APC consolidates national power (Punch, 2025; Vanguard, 2025).

POS theory is useful in highlighting structural enablers and constraints, but it too risks overlooking the normative dimension. A defection may align perfectly with new political opportunities but still violate contextual expectations of loyalty or ideological consistency, thereby sparking public disapproval. Contextual Integrity bridges this gap by situating the act within both the structural shifts and the normative frameworks that define its legitimacy.

Why Contextual Integrity Matters

By juxtaposing TCI with RCT, patron-clientelism, and POS theory, we see that while each provides valuable insights, none adequately captures the communicative and normative dimensions of defections. TCI combines micro-level motivations with macro-level constraints, interpreting defections as communicative events judged

against contextual norms. It asks: what implicit expectations governed this move? Was the action consistent with prevailing norms of party loyalty, ethnic balancing, or public accountability? And if not, what does the violation communicate about the evolving nature of Nigerian democracy?

For instance, when Governor Oborevworì and former Governor Okowa defected to the APC, their public justifications – “renewed sense of direction,” “stability for Delta State” (Punch, 2025) – were not mere rhetoric. They were attempts to repair normative breaches, to present their defections as consistent with contextual values of service and stability. Whether or not the public accepted these justifications, the speech acts reveal the communicative work required to render defections legitimate. This is the essence of TCI: understanding political acts as embedded in – and evaluated against – normative contexts.

Taken together, Rational Choice Theory explains the strategic calculations behind defections, patron-clientelism highlights the role of elite networks, and POS theory situates defections within structural opportunities. But the Theory of Contextual Integrity provides a more holistic and nuanced account. It allows us to see defections not simply as strategies or transactions but as communicative acts, opaque and contested, through which political actors negotiate legitimacy, survival, and identity in Nigeria’s fragile democracy. In Delta State, these dynamics are amplified by ethnic diversity, patronage politics, and shifting alignments, making defections not only political strategies but also acts of meaning.

Review of Related Literature

Political defections, often described as *cross-carpeting* in Nigeria, have been studied extensively from political science, legal, and ethical perspectives. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, defections have become recurrent features of Nigeria’s democratic culture, raising questions about party loyalty, institutional stability, and democratic consolidation. Scholars such as Ogundiya and Baba (2007) argue that defections reflect weak institutionalisation of political parties, where platforms function less as vehicles for ideology and more as instruments for access to power. Ojo (2005) similarly laments that Nigerian parties lack coherent ideological visions, making defections inevitable whenever political advantage shifts. In this sense, defections appear symptomatic of broader structural weaknesses in Nigeria’s democracy. Yet, while these interpretations highlight important institutional dynamics, they often overlook the symbolic and communicative dimensions – how defections are justified, resisted, or reframed in public discourse.

The absence of strong party ideology has been consistently emphasised as a root cause of defections. Anifowose (2012) notes that Nigerian parties rarely differentiate themselves on philosophical grounds, instead relying on personalities, patronage, and regional alignments. This environment creates fertile ground for opportunistic switches. Politicians frequently move toward ruling parties, where access to federal patronage is greater, or away from fractured organisations, where factional battles threaten survival. Olatunji, Salahu, and Alabi (2024) reinforce this, observing that defections are often strategic repositionings ahead of elections, particularly where incumbents or dominant oppositions reshape political opportunities. Thus, defections are not anomalies but expected adaptations in a political system lacking firm ideological anchors. However, such accounts still leave unexplored the performative dimension of defections: the language, silence, and rhetoric through which these moves are presented to the public.

Scholars also stress the destabilising consequences of defections. Audu, Adamu, and Gana (2022) contend that frequent defections erode party discipline, disillusion voters, and complicate accountability. When party platforms are perceived as interchangeable, voters cannot reliably use party labels as cues for policy or ideology. Ogundiya and Baba (2007) warn that defections, even when legally permissible, weaken institutional trust and risk portraying politics as nothing more than a marketplace of personal ambition. From this perspective, defections endanger democratic consolidation by eroding the normative foundations of competitive politics. Yet, despite these critiques, defections persist, suggesting that they may carry meanings and functions not captured by institutionalist frameworks. This is where pragmatic and communicative approaches can add nuance—by examining how defections are narrated, framed, and evaluated in context.

In recent years, discourse-analytic approaches have shed new light on defections as communicative events. Olaniyan and Omoera (2019), for instance, argue that Nigerian political discourse is often carefully framed to disguise self-interest while appealing to group loyalty. Euphemisms, presuppositions, and metaphors are commonly deployed to reframe controversial moves as morally justifiable or socially necessary. Similarly, Akindele and Adegbite (2005) analyse the strategic use of language in Nigerian politics, noting how politicians employ rhetoric not merely to describe but to perform legitimacy. Within this scholarship, defections emerge not as naked self-interest but as speech acts—performances that communicate belonging, grievance, or legitimacy, depending on the audience. This perspective aligns strongly with the Theory of Contextual Integrity, which treats communicative appropriateness as context-dependent.

Beyond Nigeria, global literature on party-switching also reveals the importance of context. In established democracies, defections are relatively rare and often carry severe electoral costs (Heller & Mershon, 2009). Voters in party-institutionalised systems typically punish defectors, perceiving them as betraying ideological commitments. In contrast, in weakly institutionalised democracies such as many African states, defections are more frequent and less electorally costly (Ichino & Nathan, 2013). Instead of being judged against ideology, defections are often evaluated in light of shifting patronage networks, ethnic representation, and survival strategies. Nigeria, therefore, represents an extreme case of this broader phenomenon. The Delta State context, with its complex mix of ethnicity, zoning, and resource politics, provides a particularly rich setting for understanding how defections operate as communicative acts.

The role of ethnicity in shaping defections has received sustained scholarly attention. Suberu (2001) highlights how Nigeria's federal arrangement, designed to manage ethnic diversity, often fuels rather than reduces competition, as groups struggle for representation within state structures. Ibeanu (2008) further observes that resource politics in the Niger Delta heightens these tensions, with defections sometimes serving as signals to ethnic constituencies. In Delta State, where Anioma, Urhobo, Itsekiri, and Ijaw groups compete for visibility, defections are not merely individual choices but ethnicised performances of inclusion or exclusion. Nwoko's 2025 defection, justified on grounds of Anioma marginalisation, illustrates how ethnic narratives can be mobilised as communicative strategies. Without attention to such contexts, analyses risk flattening defections into simple opportunism.

Another dimension is patron-clientelism. Scholars such as Demarest (2022) argue that Nigerian politics operates through entrenched patronage networks, where godfathers wield significant power over candidates and party structures. Defections, in this view,

are less about ideology and more about shifting alliances within these networks. When a patron loses influence, clients defect to align with stronger protectors. In Delta, defections of lawmakers to the APC in 2025 can be read through this lens: aligning with patrons who could guarantee access to federal resources and political security. Yet, even here, the communicative dimension remains crucial. Politicians rarely frame defections as patronage; instead, they justify them in normative terms – public service, stability, or justice – performing legitimacy before broader audiences.

Scholarly debates also examine the legal and constitutional dimensions of defections. Nigeria's constitution attempts to regulate party-switching, requiring officeholders to vacate their seats if they defect without evidence of internal party division (Sagay, 2010). In practice, however, defections often occur without sanction, as courts interpret "division" broadly. This legal ambiguity creates room for defections to thrive. While legal scholars debate reforms to curb abuse, what often goes unnoticed is how defectors frame their actions precisely in ways that satisfy or exploit these constitutional loopholes. The justificatory narratives thus become not only political but also legal performances, aimed at aligning with judicially acceptable grounds.

Despite the breadth of scholarship, important gaps remain. First, most studies focus on national-level defections or on broad institutional patterns, paying less attention to state-specific dynamics. Delta State, despite its political significance, has received limited scholarly focus. Where it is mentioned, it is often in relation to electoral violence (Omodia, 2011), ethnic politics (Ogbuenyi, 2021), or resource struggles (Ibeanu, 2008). Defections are treated in passing rather than as central objects of study. Second, even where defections are examined in detail, the focus tends to be on their causes and consequences, not on the implicit norms and communicative acts that underpin them. This leaves a gap for studies that treat defections as covert communication – embedded in context and evaluated against normative expectations.

The Theory of Contextual Integrity offers a framework to address these gaps. Originally developed for privacy studies, TCI has been increasingly applied to digital communication and ethical decision-making (Nissenbaum, 2010). Its relevance to political defections lies in its insistence that communicative appropriateness is judged contextually, not universally. A defection justified on grounds of ethnic marginalisation may be deemed appropriate in one context but opportunistic in another. Similarly, silence, as in the case of Ibori-Suenu, may be evaluated as dignified restraint by some and as evasive opportunism by others. By focusing on these contextual evaluations, TCI enables a more nuanced reading of defections as speech acts embedded in fragile democratic norms.

In pragmatic linguistics, scholars have long stressed that meaning is not located only in words but in their contexts of use (Levinson, 1983). Nigerian defections vividly illustrate this. The same statement – "I left because my people were excluded" – can function as a justification, an accusation, or an appeal to collective identity, depending on context. Such multiplicity of meaning cannot be captured by institutionalist or rationalist theories alone. The pragmatic lens, particularly when combined with TCI, allows for analysis of how defections operate as layered communicative acts, simultaneously addressing patrons, ethnic constituencies, party structures, and the broader public.

From 1999 to date, defections have been central to Nigeria's democratic evolution. They expose the weaknesses of party institutionalisation, the resilience of ethnic and patronage politics, and the ambiguities of constitutional regulation. But they also highlight the symbolic work politicians must perform to render defections legitimate.

Media narratives frame them, opponents contest them, and defectors justify them, all within shifting contexts of expectation. It is this communicative dimension that has received less scholarly attention and which this study foregrounds. By applying Contextual Integrity to defections in Delta State, the research fills an important gap: showing how defections are not just opportunistic acts but communicative performances evaluated against normative expectations of loyalty, identity, and legitimacy.

Methodology

The methodological design of this study is qualitative, chosen deliberately because of the subtle and context-dependent nature of political defections. Quantitative approaches, while powerful in testing correlations and electoral outcomes, often miss the implicit meanings, symbolic acts, and communicative strategies that lie beneath defections. As Creswell (2013) reminds us, qualitative research aims not simply to measure but to interpret—to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences in specific contexts. This orientation is especially critical in transitional democracies like Nigeria, where political acts are often layered with unspoken meanings, embedded in history, culture, and shifting norms.

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative content analysis framework, enriched by pragmatic-discursive analysis. Content analysis, in its interpretive mode, allows the researcher to move beyond surface-level descriptions of defections to uncover the implicit categories, themes, and values encoded in political statements and behaviours (Schreier, 2012). Pragmatic-discursive analysis, on the other hand, makes it possible to interpret defections as speech acts—illocutionary moves that not only describe but perform actions (Searle, 1969). For example, when a politician declares that “our people have been sidelined,” this is not simply descriptive. It is a performative act of justification, invoking collective identity while legitimising a controversial move.

By combining these approaches, the study is able to trace both the explicit framing of defections in media narratives and the implicit communicative functions embedded in politicians’ statements. This hybrid design is particularly suited to applying the Theory of Contextual Integrity (TCI), which demands careful attention to the normative contexts—actors, transmission principles, and expectations—that shape the meaning of political acts (Nissenbaum, 2010).

Data Sources

Data were drawn from three main sources, deliberately triangulated to increase credibility and depth.

- i. Media Reports and Editorials: News articles, opinion pieces, and editorials were collected from leading Nigerian newspapers and online platforms—*The Guardian*, *Punch*, *Vanguard*, *Sahara Reporters*, and *Premium Times*. The period covered was January to May 2025, the peak window of defections in Delta State. Media sources were important because they not only reported defections but also framed them for public interpretation.
- ii. Official Communications: Public statements, press releases, social media posts, and resignation letters issued by defecting politicians and party officials were sampled. These documents offered insight into the justificatory rhetoric

employed by politicians, often couched in terms of marginalisation, survival, or service.

- iii. Scholarly Literature: Academic works on party defections, Nigerian democracy, and political communication were also analysed. These provided comparative grounding, ensuring that the Delta case was situated within broader debates on defections in Nigeria and other transitional democracies (Ogundiya & Baba, 2007; Olaniyan & Omoera, 2019; Audu, Adamu, & Gana, 2022).

This triangulation—drawing from media, official discourse, and scholarship—ensured that findings were not overly dependent on a single type of source. It also allowed the study to capture both the immediate framing of defections in public discourse and their deeper normative dimensions.

Sampling Strategy

The sampling was purposive, selecting six prominent defections that occurred in Delta State in 2025. These were chosen based on three criteria:

- i. Visibility in the media (ensuring that the defection was widely reported and discussed);
- ii. Relevance to intra- and inter-party dynamics (focusing on defections that shifted alignments or triggered responses);
- iii. Representation of diversity (capturing defections across different ethnic and geopolitical zones within Delta).

This strategy produced a data set that included both high-profile defections—such as those of Senator Ned Nwoko, Governor Sheriff Oborevwori, and former Governor Ifeanyi Okowa—and less publicly discussed cases, like those of Hon. Erhiatake Ibori-Suenu and Hon. Nicholas Ossai. The inclusion of both visible and relatively silent defections allowed the study to compare different communicative strategies, from loud justification to meaningful silence.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection proceeded in two phases. First, media reports and official communications were compiled into a textual corpus. Each text was then subjected to open coding—a process of identifying recurring themes such as marginalisation, betrayal, survival, zoning, and ideological realignment. These themes were gradually grouped into broader categories aligned with the four elements of Contextual Integrity: context, actors, transmission principles, and normative expectations (Nissenbaum, 2010).

Second, the texts were analysed through the lens of speech act theory. Following Searle (1969), statements were examined for their illocutionary force: what action the statement performed (e.g., justification, denial, legitimisation, accusation). For example, Oborevwori's declaration that his defection was "in the interest of Delta State's continuity and stability" (Punch, 2025) was coded not merely as explanation but as an illocutionary act of repair, attempting to align his move with normative expectations of service and stability.

The analysis also paid attention to silence as a communicative act. The near absence of justification from figures like Ibori-Suenu was treated not as absence of meaning but as a strategic act—possibly signalling resignation to inevitability or calculated avoidance of scrutiny. This interpretive sensitivity reflects the pragmatic insight that silence, too, communicates within political discourse.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Qualitative studies must demonstrate credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve this, the study employed several strategies:

- i. Triangulation: As already noted, data were drawn from multiple sources (media, official discourse, scholarship) to cross-verify interpretations.
- ii. Peer debriefing: Initial codes and interpretations were discussed with two independent colleagues to ensure intercoder reliability and minimise bias.
- iii. Thick description: Direct quotations from media reports and politicians' statements were retained in the analysis to allow readers to assess the evidence themselves.
- iv. Reflexivity: The researchers acknowledged their positionality, noting that interpretations were shaped by their disciplinary backgrounds in philosophy and communication.

No methodology is without limitations. First, the focus on a single state—Delta—limits the generalisability of findings to Nigeria as a whole. Political cultures vary across regions, and defections may take on different meanings elsewhere. Second, reliance on publicly available sources may obscure behind-the-scenes negotiations and private calculations that never enter the public domain. Third, interpretive analysis is by nature subjective, though the steps taken to ensure reliability mitigate this concern.

Nevertheless, these limitations are balanced by the study's strengths. By adopting a context-sensitive approach, the research foregrounds the symbolic and communicative dimensions of defections often ignored in broader surveys. It thus lays the groundwork for future comparative studies, both within Nigeria and in other transitional democracies where defections play a significant role in shaping political discourse.

Because the study relied exclusively on publicly available documents and media reports, the ethical risks were minimal. No human participants were directly involved, and no sensitive or private data were collected. Nonetheless, the researchers exercised caution in interpretation, ensuring that political actors were fairly represented. Speculative or defamatory readings were avoided, and emphasis was placed on contextualising statements rather than imputing unverified motives.

The methodology, in sum, is designed to capture the communicative essence of defections. By combining qualitative content analysis, pragmatic-discursive interpretation, and the framework of Contextual Integrity, the study was able to uncover how defections function as opaque speech acts—negotiating survival, legitimacy, and identity within Nigeria's fragile democracy. This approach, while limited in scope, offers a richly contextualised account that advances both political science and linguistic pragmatics.

Data Presentation, Analysis, and Discussion

The first quarter of 2025 witnessed one of the most dramatic waves of political defections in Delta State since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999. While defections have long been part of Nigeria's political grammar, the sheer scale, the calibre of actors involved, and the timing—barely two years to the 2027 general elections—amplified their significance. In popular discourse, these movements were quickly framed as acts of betrayal, opportunism, or desperation. Yet, such framings obscure

the layered communicative work these defections perform. Applying the Theory of Contextual Integrity (TCI), this section analyses how defections in Delta State function as opaque speech acts, evaluated against context-specific norms of loyalty, legitimacy, and identity. Each case examined here demonstrates how defections reconfigure political communication, not merely as tactical manoeuvres but as communicative disruptions and repairs.

The Defection of Senator Ned Nwoko

The first major defection of 2025 was that of Senator Ned Nwoko, who left the People's Democratic Party (PDP) for the All Progressives Congress (APC) on 30 January. Nwoko's move attracted immediate attention, not only because of his prominence but also because of his justification. In his resignation letter, he lamented that "leaders of the party physically fight amongst themselves due to irreconcilable factions... I cannot continue to be part of this dishonour" (*Sahara Reporters*, 2025). At surface level, the statement reads as a critique of institutional decay. But within the framework of TCI, it performs an illocutionary act of withdrawal and accusation. By framing the PDP as fractured and dishonourable, Nwoko sought to re-establish his own legitimacy, positioning the defection not as opportunism but as resistance to disorder.

The PDP's counter-response was immediate and dismissive. Clement Chiazor, his ward chairman, branded Nwoko "a serial defector" whose exit carried "zero consequence" for the party (*Sahara Reporters*, 2025). This reply functions as a normative counter-speech act, aimed at delegitimising Nwoko's move by re-inscribing him as selfish and inconsequential. From the perspective of Contextual Integrity, this contest reveals how defections are evaluated in real time: each actor appeals to competing norms, one emphasising institutional decay as justification, the other reasserting loyalty and continuity as the valid standard.

Rumours and Pre-emptive Speech Acts: The Case of Oborevori

Shortly after Nwoko's defection, rumours swirled about the possible defection of Governor Sheriff Oborevori. Interestingly, the most biting resistance came not from PDP loyalists but from Nwoko himself, now in the APC. In April 2025, he warned that "Oborevori lacks capacity" and "has no political ideology," urging that the APC should not accept him (*Guardian Nigeria*, 2025). This statement is striking. It illustrates the paradox of defections: a recent defector, still in the process of negotiating his legitimacy in a new party, sought to close the door on others.

Within TCI, this is a case of boundary-drawing. Nwoko's warning was not only about Oborevori's perceived weakness but about the norms of legitimacy within the APC. He attempted to redefine the communicative standard of acceptable defection—drawing a distinction between "pragmatic" and "opportunistic" entrants. His speech act implicitly claimed that not all defections are normatively equal. This kind of discursive policing illustrates how defectors themselves participate in renegotiating contextual expectations, even as they struggle to legitimate their own moves.

Senator Ovie Omo-Agege and Party Gatekeeping

Reinforcing Nwoko's boundary-setting, Senator Ovie Omo-Agege, a major APC figure, declared that "Delta APC will not welcome Okowa and Oborevori," accusing them of undermining PDP structures and seeking asylum in the APC to escape scrutiny (*Vanguard News*, 2025). Here, Omo-Agege performs the role of gatekeeper, deploying

speech to protect party identity. The framing of the APC as a refuge from scrutiny was a discursive move to present defection as illegitimate, even parasitic.

From a pragmatic perspective, this reveals how defections trigger meta-communicative debates: what counts as a “legitimate” defection? Who gets to decide? Contextual Integrity is particularly valuable here because it recognises that legitimacy is not inherent in the act but emerges from evaluations against prevailing norms. Omo-Agege’s statement attempted to anchor legitimacy in ideological consistency and moral accountability, even if in practice Nigerian parties remain weakly ideological (Anifowose, 2012).

The Defections of Okowa and Oborevori

Despite the warnings, both Governor Sheriff Oborevori and former Governor Ifeanyi Okowa formally defected to the APC on 28 April 2025. Their justificatory statements were carefully crafted. Okowa declared that “The APC offers us a renewed sense of direction and unity,” while Oborevori described his move as “in the interest of Delta State’s continuity and stability” (*Punch*, 2025). At one level, these are standard rhetorical devices: appeals to unity, stability, and continuity. But within TCI, they function as normative repair work.

By framing defections as service to the public good, both actors attempted to re-align their actions with contextual values. Their rhetoric highlights a central feature of defections in Nigeria: they are rarely left unexplained. Politicians understand that defections violate expectations of loyalty; thus, they seek to repair the breach through appeals to higher norms—public service, ethnic justice, or stability. Whether accepted or not, these speech acts demonstrate that defections are as much about managing meaning as they are about shifting power.

Opponents, however, quickly contested these justifications. Disgruntled PDP members accused Okowa of being “the architect of PDP’s internal decay” and of “selling out to the very people he had campaigned against” (*Punch*, 2025). This counter-discourse reflects the conflict of contextual evaluations. What Okowa framed as continuity, his critics framed as betrayal. The communicative integrity of his act thus remained contested, highlighting TCI’s core insight: legitimacy is always contextually negotiated, never absolute.

Low-Key Defections and the Role of Silence

Not all defections were accompanied by elaborate justifications. The cases of Hon. Erhiatake Ibori-Suenu and Hon. Nicholas Ossai, who quietly joined the APC earlier in the year, reveal the communicative power of silence. While their defections were reported, neither politician issued detailed public statements. Within a rational-choice perspective, silence may seem irrelevant. But pragmatically, silence functions as a communicative act in itself.

In TCI terms, silence may signal resignation to inevitability or strategic avoidance of scrutiny. By not justifying their moves, these defectors allowed others—media, parties, and the public—to interpret their actions within existing normative frames. This illustrates a key insight: communication is not only about what is said but also about what is withheld. Silence can be a way of negotiating legitimacy by refusing to enter into discursive battles. It reveals how defections are multi-modal communicative events, performed through speech, rhetoric, and silence alike.

Patterns Across Cases

When viewed collectively, the defections of Nwoko, Okowa, Oborevwor, Ibori-Suenu, and Ossai illustrate several communicative patterns.

Defections as Accusation: Defectors often frame their moves as responses to institutional decay, marginalisation, or betrayal. These accusations reposition them as defenders of integrity rather than opportunists.

- i. **Defections as Repair:** Justificatory rhetoric—unity, continuity, service—functions to repair breaches of loyalty by appealing to higher norms.
- ii. **Defections as Boundary-Making:** Existing party elites and even recent defectors engage in discursive gatekeeping, defining who counts as legitimate or illegitimate entrants.
- iii. **Defections as Silence:** Some actors avoid justification altogether, allowing silence to function as a communicative strategy.

Each of these patterns reflects how defections are evaluated within contextual norms. They are not transparent acts but opaque speech events that carry meanings far beyond the literal shift of party allegiance.

Defections as Opaque Speech Acts

The Delta defections demonstrate that defections cannot be understood purely as acts of survival or opportunism. They are communicative events that unfold within contested normative frameworks. In the language of TCI, defections disrupt information flows but also attempt to realign them. Their legitimacy depends not only on material outcomes but on whether they conform to or violate contextual expectations of loyalty, service, and justice.

Moreover, defections reveal the fragility of Nigeria's democratic norms. In systems with strong ideological foundations, defections are rare and costly (Heller & Mershon, 2009). In Nigeria, however, defections are frequent, reflecting the weakness of ideological commitments (Olatunji et al., 2024). Yet, their very frequency does not make them meaningless. On the contrary, their communicative framing shows that loyalty, stability, and service remain valued norms—even if repeatedly violated. Each defection thus becomes a performance in the ongoing negotiation of democratic ethics.

The communicative contradictions are especially revealing. Actors like Okowa and Oborevwor, who once condemned the APC, later justified joining it as service to the state. These contradictions may appear as hypocrisy, but within TCI they illustrate the fluidity of contextual norms. What is considered legitimate in one moment may be reframed in another. Far from being random, these shifts indicate an ongoing renegotiation of what integrity means in Nigeria's political culture.

In sum, the defections in Delta State in 2025 highlight the communicative complexity of Nigerian politics. Through accusations, repairs, gatekeeping, and silence, defections emerge as opaque speech acts that negotiate survival, legitimacy, and identity within fragile democratic contexts. Contextual Integrity provides the conceptual tools to interpret these moves not as aberrations but as context-dependent performances of meaning. By attending to both speech and silence, this analysis deepens our understanding of defections as communicative acts embedded in evolving democratic norms.

Conclusion

Political defections have become an almost routine feature of Nigeria's democratic experience, yet their very frequency often masks their deeper significance. Too often, defections are dismissed as mere opportunism, symptomatic of the absence of party ideology and the dominance of patronage politics. This study, however, has argued that defections are not only tactical manoeuvres but communicative performances – opaque speech acts whose legitimacy or illegitimacy is judged against contextual norms. By applying the Theory of Contextual Integrity (TCI), the paper has reframed defections in Delta State as layered acts of meaning, situated at the intersection of loyalty, legitimacy, identity, and survival.

The analysis of the 2025 defections in Delta State underscores several key patterns. First, defections often function as accusations: defectors present their moves as responses to institutional decay, factionalism, or marginalisation. Nwoko's portrayal of the PDP as dishonourable exemplifies this pattern (*Sahara Reporters*, 2025). Second, defections frequently operate as repair strategies, with actors like Okowa and Oborevwori framing their exits in terms of continuity and stability (*Punch*, 2025). Third, defections invite boundary-making, where party elites and even recent defectors seek to police the legitimacy of newcomers, as seen in Omo-Agege's and Nwoko's warnings (*Vanguard News*, 2025). Finally, defections may be marked by silence, with figures like Ibori-Suenu allowing absence of explanation to function as communicative strategy. These patterns highlight defections not as chaotic or meaningless, but as patterned speech acts embedded in evolving political norms.

The contribution of this study lies in shifting the analytical lens. Institutional accounts – whether rooted in Rational Choice Theory, patron-clientelism, or Political Opportunity Structure (POS) – explain why defections occur, but often miss the normative and symbolic dimensions. Rational Choice explains the logic of survival and utility maximisation (Olatunji et al., 2024), patron-clientelism reveals the role of networks and godfathers (Demarest, 2022), and POS highlights structural enablers of realignment (Tarrow, 1998). Yet, none fully captures how defections are evaluated as legitimate or illegitimate in context. The Theory of Contextual Integrity bridges this gap by situating defections within the communicative norms of Nigerian democracy. It demonstrates that defections are not judged in absolute terms but through evolving expectations of loyalty, service, and justice.

This contextual reading also illuminates the fragility of Nigeria's democratic norms. Even in a system where ideology is weak and defections are frequent, the justificatory rhetoric of defectors reveals that loyalty still matters. Politicians feel compelled to appeal to values of stability, ethnic representation, or public service when crossing the floor. The frequency of defections, then, does not mean Nigerians no longer care about integrity; rather, it suggests that integrity is continually renegotiated. Defections expose the elasticity of democratic norms, stretching them but not eliminating them. In this sense, defections are paradoxical: they simultaneously erode and reaffirm democracy. They erode it by destabilising party structures, yet reaffirm it by compelling politicians to appeal – however imperfectly – to the language of public service and legitimacy.

The Delta case also foregrounds the role of ethnicity and zoning in shaping defections. Nwoko's appeal to Anioma marginalisation demonstrates how defections can be framed as ethnic performances, signalling belonging to a constituency. In multi-ethnic states like Delta, defections become communicative acts not just to party elites but to ethnic publics, who interpret them as signals of inclusion or exclusion (Suberu, 2001;

Ibeanu, 2008). This finding underscores the need for future research to explore the intersection of ethnicity, defections, and political communication more systematically.

Another insight is the communicative power of silence. In contexts where defections are commonplace, not every actor chooses elaborate justification. Silence, as seen in Ibori-Suenu's case, can itself be strategic—signalling inevitability, avoiding scrutiny, or conceding to dominant narratives. Pragmatically, silence is not absence but presence. It shapes interpretation by forcing audiences to fill gaps with their own assumptions. In fragile democracies, silence thus becomes as powerful as speech in negotiating legitimacy.

For scholarship, the study contributes to both political science and linguistics. Politically, it enriches our understanding of defections by reframing them as communicative acts embedded in norms. Linguistically, it advances the emerging field of political pragmatics, showing how speech acts and contextual integrity can illuminate implicit political behaviour. Theoretically, it demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary approaches: only by combining institutional analysis with communicative interpretation can the full significance of defections be grasped.

For democratic practice, the findings carry sobering implications. Frequent defections weaken parties, erode ideological coherence, and risk disillusioning voters (Audu et al., 2022). At the same time, defections reveal that norms of loyalty, service, and legitimacy remain contested but alive. Strengthening Nigerian democracy therefore requires not only legal reforms to regulate defections but also cultural shifts that reinforce ideological commitment and public accountability. Unless parties evolve beyond patronage vehicles, defections will remain endemic. Yet, as this study shows, defections are not only symptoms of weakness—they are also sites where democratic norms are negotiated and contested.

Finally, the study acknowledges its limitations. Focusing on Delta State, it cannot generalise across Nigeria's diverse regions. Future research should compare patterns across states and situate defections within continental debates on party-switching in Africa. Comparative analysis with other transitional democracies could further test the utility of Contextual Integrity as a framework for political behaviour. Equally, ethnographic approaches—interviews with defectors, party officials, and voters—would provide deeper insights into the hidden negotiations that media narratives cannot capture.

In conclusion, the 2025 defections in Delta State remind us that defections are never simply acts of betrayal or opportunism. They are communicative performances, judged against shifting contexts of loyalty, legitimacy, and identity. Through accusations, repairs, gatekeeping, and silence, defectors and their critics continually renegotiate the meaning of political integrity in Nigeria's fragile democracy. By applying Contextual Integrity, this study has shown that defections are opaque speech acts that matter—not only for who gains or loses power, but for how democratic norms are stretched, contested, and reshaped in practice.

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