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Beyond the Ballot: The Hidden Role of Informal Networks in Nigeria's Elections and Party Politics, 1999-2026.

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Abstract

Nigeria's electoral politics is often examined through the formal institutions of elections, political parties, electoral commissions, and voting behaviour, yet these structures do not fully explain how political influence is organised and sustained. This study, titled *Beyond the Ballot: The Hidden Role of Informal Networks in Nigeria's Elections and Party Politics*, examines the influence of informal networks—including political godfathers, community leaders, religious actors, business interests, social associations, family connections, and patron-client relationships- on electoral mobilisation, candidate selection, party organisation, and political decision-making. The statement of the problem arises from the persistent gap between Nigeria's formal democratic institutions and the informal practices through which political actors often negotiate access, loyalty, resources, and influence. The study asks: How do informal networks shape electoral mobilisation and party politics in Nigeria? What roles do these networks play in candidate selection and intra-party decision-making? How do informal relationships influence political participation, accountability, and electoral outcomes? The objectives are to examine the structures and functions of informal political networks, analyse their influence on elections and party politics, and assess their implications for democratic governance. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and explanatory research design. It relies primarily on documentary and contextual analysis of scholarly literature, electoral reports, policy documents, party constitutions, media reports, and relevant secondary sources. The theoretical framework draws on clientelism theory and social network theory to explain how relationships, reciprocity, resources, and social connections shape political behaviour beyond formal institutions. The study finds that informal networks constitute an important parallel structure of political organisation in Nigeria. While they facilitate mobilisation, political inclusion, information exchange, and community representation, they may also reinforce patronage, elite dominance, transactional politics, and weak institutional accountability. The study recommends stronger internal party democracy, transparent candidate-selection processes, civic education, institutional accountability, and mechanisms for regulating undue informal influence. It concludes that understanding Nigerian elections requires attention not only to the ballot but also to the social relationships and networks that shape political choices before, during, and after elections.

Keywords: Informal networks, Elections, Party Politics, Fourth Republic & Ballot

1.0 Introduction

The history of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, which began with the restoration of civilian rule in May 1999, is often narrated through the language of elections, political parties, constitutions, electoral commissions, and periodic transfers of political power. Such a narrative is important, but it tells only part of the story. Beneath the visible architecture of constitutional democracy lies another political world—less formal, less transparent, and often more difficult to observe, where relationships, loyalties, patronage, personal influence, kinship, religious affiliations, community associations, business connections, and networks of political intermediary's shape who gets nominated, who mobilises voters, who receives political resources, and, in some circumstances, who ultimately exercises power. It is this less visible dimension of Nigerian politics that this study captures through the idea of "Beyond the Ballot."

The central argument of this study is that Nigerian elections cannot be adequately understood by examining what happens inside the polling booth alone. The ballot is the most visible instrument of electoral democracy, but the political relationships surrounding the ballot frequently begin much earlier and continue long after votes have been counted. Political parties may formally nominate candidates through primaries, voters may constitutionally exercise their franchise, and electoral institutions may establish rules for political competition. Yet, alongside these formal procedures, informal networks can determine access to party structures, facilitate political mobilisation, distribute material inducements, negotiate alliances, resolve conflicts, and establish expectations of reciprocity between political patrons and their clients. Recent research is particularly revealing on this point: social networks can provide political parties with information about voters, influence voting preferences, and increase the perceived capacity of political actors to monitor electoral behaviour (Zovighian, 2026).

The significance of informal networks becomes clearer when Nigerian party politics is situated within the broader problem of weak party institutionalisation. Since 1999, political parties have remained indispensable to democratic competition, yet their internal structures have frequently been shaped by powerful individuals and informal political settlements. Dan-Azumi (2024), in examining political parties between 1999 and 2019, demonstrates the importance of understanding Nigerian parties as evolving organisations within a wider political system rather than simply as vehicles for electoral competition. This distinction matters because a political party can possess a formal constitution, executive committees, congresses, membership registers, and nomination procedures while simultaneously operating through informal channels of influence. Consequently, the formal organisation of a party may tell us who has official authority, while its informal networks may reveal who actually has the capacity to influence decisions.

This tension between formal rules and informal practices is particularly evident in candidate selection. In a democratic party, candidate nomination is theoretically expected to be determined by transparent and competitive procedures. In practice, however, the process can be mediated by political patrons, financiers, party leaders, local brokers, and influential networks. Ikeanyibe (2014) argues that weaknesses in internal party democracy have affected candidate nomination in Nigeria's Fourth Republic and, consequently, party institutionalisation and democratic consolidation. The implication is profound: the quality of an election may be constrained before the general electorate even has an opportunity to vote. If informal negotiations substantially determine which candidates receive party tickets, then the decisive political contest may begin at the level of party nomination rather than at the polling station.

The phenomenon commonly described as "godfatherism" provides one particularly visible expression of these informal political networks. It describes relationships in which politically influential individuals support and mobilise resources for aspiring politicians, often creating expectations of loyalty and reciprocity. Adegoke (2023) situates godfatherism within the wider structures of patrimonialism and clientelism in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, highlighting the ways in which informal relationships can intersect with party politics, electoral competition, political finance, and access to state resources. Similarly, Animasawun (2013) documents the role of patron-client relationships and political godfatherism in shaping political participation and electoral competition, particularly through the mobilisation of resources and political followership.

However, it would be analytically insufficient to reduce every informal network to godfatherism. Informality is broader and more socially embedded than the relationship between a political “godfather” and a political “godson.” Informal networks can include party brokers, local community leaders, religious figures, traditional authorities, youth organisations, professional associations, family networks, business actors, former office holders, campaign coordinators, and politically connected intermediaries. These actors can perform functions that formal party institutions either cannot or do not perform effectively. They may communicate political messages, identify influential voters, negotiate local alliances, mobilise attendance at rallies, mediate disputes, distribute campaign resources, and transmit information between political elites and communities.

This broader understanding is important because informal politics should not automatically be interpreted as an abnormality existing outside the democratic system. Rather, formal and informal institutions frequently operate simultaneously. The edited volume by Ibeanu, Okoye, Alumona, and Aniche (2022), for example, explicitly examines the relationship between formal and non-formal processes of political decision-making in Nigeria and argues that informal influences—including patronage, clientelism, factionalism, and ethno-political relationships—interact with formal political institutions. The analytical challenge, therefore, is not simply to identify informal practices but to understand the institutional relationship between them and the formal structures of the Nigerian state and political parties.

This perspective also provides a more nuanced interpretation of clientelism. Clientelism is commonly understood as a reciprocal political exchange in which resources, opportunities, or assistance are exchanged for political support. Yet, such exchanges do not occur in an institutional vacuum. They depend on networks capable of identifying clients, communicating expectations, distributing benefits, monitoring behaviour, and enforcing social or political obligations. Demarest (2022) shows that Nigerian legislators seeking political advancement may have incentives to direct resources towards party members and political elites rather than towards constituents collectively. Her study, which combines interviews with members of the Eighth National Assembly and quantitative evidence concerning legislative and electoral behaviour, demonstrates how elite clientelism can reshape the relationship between legislators, parties, and citizens.

The concept of informal networks consequently helps explain an apparent paradox in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic. On the one hand, elections have become an established and recurring feature of political life since 1999. On the other hand, electoral competition frequently remains deeply personalised and dependent on relationships that are difficult to regulate through formal institutional rules. Political actors may therefore participate simultaneously in two systems: a formal democratic system governed by constitutions, electoral laws, party rules, and electoral commissions, and an informal system governed by trust, loyalty, reciprocity, patronage, personal influence, social identity, and negotiated obligations. These systems are not necessarily separate. They overlap, reinforce one another, and sometimes come into conflict.

The importance of this overlap is especially apparent in the financing of political competition. Campaigns require substantial financial and organisational resources, while access to these resources is often embedded in networks of political and economic influence. Recent scholarship on Nigerian political party financing continues to identify clientelism, patronage, and influential political actors as important dimensions of the Fourth Republic’s political-financial environment. Thus, following the money is only part of the task; researchers must also follow the relationships through which money, information, influence, protection, political appointments, and electoral mobilisation circulate.

Against this background, *Beyond the Ballot* seeks to shift analytical attention from elections as isolated events to elections as processes embedded in social and political relationships. The study is particularly interested in the networks that connect political elites with party structures and grassroots communities, and in how those networks influence candidate selection, campaign mobilisation, voter behaviour, party organisation, political financing, and post-election relationships. Such an approach moves beyond the assumption that the Nigerian voter is an isolated individual making a purely programmatic choice at the polling station. Voters are also members of families, communities, religious organisations, occupational groups, neighbourhood associations, ethnic networks, and political constituencies. Their political choices can therefore be shaped by conversations, obligations, expectations, advice, incentives, and relationships extending far beyond the formal campaign message.

The study consequently asks a fundamental question: what happens to Nigerian electoral democracy when the most consequential political relationships are not always visible within formal institutions? Answering this question requires moving beyond a narrow institutional analysis of elections and towards a political sociology of networks. It requires attention to the everyday practices through which political power is accumulated, exchanged, negotiated, reproduced, and contested.

The Fourth Republic should therefore not be understood merely as a succession of elections from 1999 onwards. It is also a history of changing relationships between parties, politicians, voters, brokers, financiers, communities, and political patrons. Informal networks constitute one of the mechanisms through which these relationships are organised. They can facilitate political participation and mobilisation, but they can also reproduce unequal access to political opportunities and weaken formal institutional procedures. Their effects are therefore neither inherently uniform nor reducible to a single category such as corruption or godfatherism.

Ultimately, examining these networks offers a deeper understanding of the character of Nigerian democracy. The question is not simply whether Nigerians vote, but how political preferences are formed, who structures access to political competition, which relationships make mobilisation possible, and what obligations emerge between political actors and citizens before and after Election Day. By placing these questions at the centre of analysis, *Beyond the Ballot* seeks to illuminate the hidden political infrastructure that connects Nigeria's formal democratic institutions to the informal social relationships through which political power is actually negotiated.

2.0 Literature Review

Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999 marked the beginning of the Fourth Republic and renewed expectations that elections would become the principal mechanism for political participation, leadership recruitment, and peaceful transfer of power. Yet, more than two decades later, Nigerian electoral politics continues to be shaped not only by formal institutions such as political parties, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and electoral laws, but also by informal relationships operating behind and alongside these institutions. These relationships include political godfatherism, patron-client networks, ethnic and religious associations, community leaders, political brokers, financiers, party factions, and interpersonal networks. The literature therefore increasingly suggests that understanding Nigerian elections requires looking beyond the ballot itself to the networks through which political influence, resources, information, loyalty, and electoral support are mobilised.

The theoretical foundation for understanding these networks can be linked to the concepts of clientelism, patronage, prebendalism, and informal institutions. Joseph's conception of prebendal politics remains particularly useful because it explains political competition in Nigeria as being strongly connected to struggles over access to state resources. Within such an environment, political office may become a resource through which networks of supporters are rewarded and maintained. Contemporary scholarship extends this argument by showing that informal political exchanges have not disappeared with democratic institutionalisation but have adapted to electoral competition. Rasak et al. (2017), for instance, describe godfatherism and political patronage as enduring features of Nigerian politics, emphasising the relationship between political elites and networks of beneficiaries.

Albert (2005) provides one of the most influential Nigerian analyses of political godfatherism. He conceptualises the political godfather as an individual who possesses substantial resources, connections, and influence and can use these assets to shape political recruitment and electoral outcomes. The significance of Albert's contribution lies in his demonstration that godfatherism is not simply an individual relationship between a powerful politician and a candidate. Rather, it involves networks of loyalists through which political influence is extended into communities and party structures. This is particularly relevant to the present study because it suggests that electoral power is often exercised indirectly through intermediaries rather than solely through formal party institutions.

The literature on the Fourth Republic also demonstrates how these informal networks intersect with formal political parties. Omotola (2010) argues that the weakness of political parties and electoral institutions contributed significantly to the problematic character of early Fourth Republic elections. His analysis of the 1999, 2003, and 2007 elections shows that weaknesses in electoral administration were accompanied by deficiencies in party institutionalisation.

This creates an important analytical opening: when formal party structures are weak, political actors may rely more heavily on informal networks to mobilise voters, secure nominations, distribute resources, and resolve political disputes.

Dan-Azumi (2024) reaches a similar conclusion in his examination of Nigerian political parties from 1999 to 2019. He describes the major parties as loose combinations of powerful interest groups seeking access to and control of political power. The persistence of weak internal party democracy, political defections, factionalism, and elite dominance demonstrates that formal party membership does not necessarily correspond to the actual distribution of political influence.

This distinction is central to the argument of *Beyond the Ballot*: the officially recognised structures of parties may tell only part of the story, while informal networks explain how decisions are actually negotiated and implemented.

Another important dimension of the literature concerns votes buying and electoral exchange. Danjibo and Oladeji (2007) identify vote buying as a significant feature of Nigeria's electoral process, linking it to poverty, political exclusion, and the highly competitive nature of electoral politics. Their study of the 2007 elections demonstrates that electoral exchange cannot be reduced to the simple handing over of money to individual voters. Rather, it can operate through intermediaries who connect candidates and political organisations to groups of voters.

This perspective has been developed further by Nichter (2014), whose conceptual analysis warns against treating every electoral transfer simply as "vote buying." His work emphasises the importance of distinguishing different forms of electoral exchange and understanding the organisational mechanisms through which political support is mobilised. This distinction is particularly important for Nigeria, where community leaders, party agents, youth organisations, religious figures, traditional authorities, and local political brokers may mediate exchanges between candidates and citizens.

Recent evidence makes the network dimension even more explicit. Zovighian (2026), in *World Development*, finds that clientelist politics in Nigeria is strongly associated with voters' social-network embeddedness. Core supporters are particularly valuable to political parties because their networks provide information about preferences and electoral behaviour, facilitate political communication, and can make electoral compliance more predictable.

This finding is especially significant for the present research because it moves the discussion beyond the traditional "godfather" model. It suggests that informal networks can operate horizontally among ordinary citizens as well as vertically between powerful patrons and their clients.

The role of money and party financing provides another pathway through which informal networks influence Nigerian elections. Sule (2023) argues that party financing in the Fourth Republic has been deeply connected to money politics, political elites, godfathers, and private financiers. The high financial costs associated with political competition can therefore encourage politicians to cultivate wealthy patrons and informal financial networks.

The more recent study by Sule, Sambo, and Thomas (2026) further examines the persistence of clientelism despite changes in Nigeria's political-finance laws, suggesting that changes in formal regulations do not automatically eliminate informal practices.

Godfatherism also has implications for political conflict and electoral violence. Animasawun (2013), examining Ibadan politics, illustrates how patron-client relationships can create political insecurity when political beneficiaries fail to satisfy the expectations of their patrons. Similarly, Ashindorbe (2018) argues that electoral competition in Nigeria is often influenced by factional elite struggles and ethno-regional interests. These studies reveal that informal networks can perform contradictory functions: they may facilitate political mobilisation and social organisation, but they may also generate exclusion, coercion, factional conflict, and violence.

The literature also indicates that informal networks are not necessarily restricted to traditional political actors. Mustapha's (2017) study of the 2015 elections considers the political economy of voting and the growing role of new media. His analysis demonstrates that technological modernisation does not automatically displace established political networks; rather, formal and informal forms of political communication can coexist. This observation is

important for understanding contemporary Nigerian politics, where WhatsApp groups, social media networks, religious networks, professional associations, community organisations, and traditional political structures may interact during electoral campaigns.

More recent literature consequently encourages a broader interpretation of Nigerian party politics. Ibeanu et al. (2022) emphasise the gap between the formal design of political decision-making and the informal processes through which decisions are actually shaped. Their work demonstrates that patronage, factionalism, religious sentiments, and clientelism interact with formal institutions rather than existing completely outside them.

Similarly, Emmanuel and Udoikah (2024) argue that godfatherism remains embedded in party leadership, candidate selection, electoral financing, and political competition in the Fourth Republic.

Overall, the literature reveals a significant analytical gap. Existing studies have extensively examined godfatherism, vote buying, patronage, party financing, electoral violence, and weak institutions, but they often treat these subjects as separate phenomena. Less attention has been given to how they are connected through informal networks that operate continuously before, during, and after elections. The proposed study therefore shifts the analytical focus from individual acts of vote buying or individual political godfathers to the broader networks through which information, resources, loyalty, influence, and political opportunities circulate.

Thus, *Beyond the Ballot* contributes to the literature by asking not merely who wins elections or how votes are cast, but who organises political support, who connects politicians to voters, how these relationships are maintained, and how informal networks influence party decisions and electoral outcomes in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Such an approach can provide a more grounded understanding of Nigerian democracy by recognising that political behaviour is shaped simultaneously by formal institutions and the informal relationships embedded within society.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

The study, *Beyond the Ballot: The Hidden Role of Informal Networks in Nigeria's Elections and Party Politics in the Fourth Republic*, is anchored on two complementary theoretical perspectives: Clientelism Theory and Social Network Theory. The choice of these theories is informed by the argument that electoral politics cannot be fully understood by focusing only on formal institutions such as political parties, electoral commissions, campaigns, voting procedures, and election results. Beneath these visible structures exists a less formal political world involving godfathers, community leaders, religious and traditional authorities, family networks, friends, party intermediaries, local brokers, business associates, and other influential actors. These networks can shape political mobilisation, access to resources, voter preferences, party loyalty, and electoral behaviour.

Nigeria's Fourth Republic, which commenced in 1999, provides a particularly useful context for examining these processes. While elections have become an established feature of democratic politics, political relationships often extend beyond formal party structures. Recent research on Nigeria, for example, indicates that voters' embeddedness in social networks can influence how political parties identify, target, monitor, and mobilise core supporters (Zovighian, 2026). The theoretical framework therefore treats elections not simply as periodic acts of voting but as outcomes of continuing social and political relationships.

Clientelism provides the first major foundation for this study. The classical understanding of clientelism revolves around a relationship between a patron, who controls access to valued resources, and a client, who provides political or social support in return. Scott (1972) conceptualises patron-client relations as personal and reciprocal relationships in which individuals of unequal status exchange resources and services. Although originally applied extensively to non-Western political systems, the framework remains relevant to contemporary electoral politics, including African democracies.

Hicken (2011) provides a more contemporary formulation by defining clientelism around two central characteristics: particularistic targeting and contingent exchange. In other words, benefits are directed toward particular individuals or groups, while the continuation or delivery of those benefits is connected to political support. This distinction is important for the present study because it allows informal political exchanges to be examined beyond the narrow idea of vote buying. Clientelism may involve employment opportunities, contracts, political appointments, financial

assistance, access to public programmes, protection, personal favours, or assistance in dealing with government institutions.

Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984) further demonstrate that patron-client relationships are deeply connected to interpersonal relations, trust, reciprocity, and social obligations. Such relationships are therefore not necessarily created immediately before an election. They can develop gradually through repeated interaction and become politically useful during electoral periods. This perspective is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where longstanding relationships between politicians and community actors may become important channels for electoral mobilisation.

The clientelist perspective also helps explain the role of political intermediaries. Political elites may not interact directly with every voter. Instead, they depend on brokers who possess local knowledge and social connections. These intermediaries can communicate political messages, distribute resources, mobilise supporters, identify loyal voters, and sometimes monitor political behaviour. Hicken (2011) notes that continuing relationships and social networks can make it easier for political actors to obtain information about whether clients are likely to fulfil their side of an exchange.

The relevance of this argument to Nigeria is supported by Bratton's (2008) study of Nigerian election campaigns, which found that vote buying could strengthen partisan loyalty, although voters did not necessarily comply with politicians' expectations in every case. This suggests that clientelism should not be understood as an automatic or mechanical process. Voters retain agency and may negotiate, accept benefits without complying, or respond to competing political networks.

While clientelism explains what is exchanged and why, Social Network Theory helps explain how political exchanges move through society. Social network theory focuses on relationships among individuals, groups, and institutions and examines how patterns of connection influence access to information, resources, influence, trust, and opportunities.

Granovetter's (1973) influential theory of the strength of weak ties is particularly useful. He argues that weak connections can serve as important bridges between otherwise disconnected groups, allowing information and influence to travel across social boundaries. Applied to Nigerian elections, this means that an individual does not have to be a formal party official to perform an important political function. A respected community member, youth leader, religious figure, businessperson, traditional ruler, or local association leader may connect politicians to groups of voters who would otherwise be difficult to reach.

Burt's (1992) concept of structural holes further strengthens this framework. Individuals occupying positions between otherwise disconnected social groups can exercise influence because they control access to information and relationships across those groups. In the Nigerian political context, such actors may operate as informal brokers. Their importance derives not necessarily from holding formal political office but from their ability to connect political candidates or parties with communities, associations, occupational groups, or influential local actors.

Social networks can also facilitate political monitoring. Stokes (2005), examining machine politics, argues that political organisations may use their embeddedness in voters' social networks to infer electoral behaviour and strengthen compliance with political exchanges. This is theoretically significant for the present research because Nigeria's secret ballot makes direct observation of individual voting difficult. Informal networks may nevertheless provide political actors with information about political loyalties, preferences, and participation.

The central theoretical proposition of this study is that clientelism and informal networks are mutually reinforcing. Clientelism explains the exchange relationship, whereas social network theory explains the social infrastructure through which the exchange is organised and sustained.

The relationship can therefore be conceptualised as follows:

Political elites/parties → brokers and informal networks → communities and voters → political support, while resources, favours, information, and access move in the opposite direction.

Within this framework, informal networks perform at least four functions. First, they facilitate political mobilisation by connecting candidates with potential supporters. Second, they facilitate information transmission, allowing politicians

to understand local preferences and allowing voters to receive political information through trusted intermediaries. Third, they facilitate monitoring and accountability within clientelist exchanges. Finally, they generate trust and reciprocity, making political relationships more durable than one-off electoral transactions.

Recent Nigerian evidence provides particularly strong support for linking these theories. Zovighian (2026) finds that core voters are more deeply embedded in social networks, rely more heavily on those networks for political information and advice, and are more likely to perceive that parties can monitor their voting behaviour. Similarly, research on poverty and clientelism shows that the position of individuals within informal family networks can influence their likelihood of being targeted by electoral inducements (World Development, 2023).

The combined theoretical framework enables this study to move beyond the visible dimensions of Nigerian elections. Rather than asking only how citizens vote, it asks who connects politicians to voters, how those relationships are maintained, what resources circulate through them, and how informal relationships affect party organisation and electoral mobilisation.

The framework also recognises that Nigerian political parties do not operate exclusively through formal party structures. Party organisations may coexist with networks based on kinship, friendship, ethnicity, religion, locality, business relationships, traditional authority, and personal loyalty. These networks may complement formal party structures, but they may also compete with or circumvent them.

Consequently, the study conceptualises informal networks as an important intermediary between political elites, parties, candidates, brokers, communities, and voters. Clientelism explains the exchange of political support and selective benefits, while Social Network Theory explains the relational channels through which those exchanges are communicated, negotiated, monitored, and reproduced.

The study therefore proposes that the effectiveness of electoral clientelism in Nigeria's Fourth Republic is partly conditioned by the density, reach, trust, and strategic position of informal social networks. Where political actors have access to well-connected brokers and trusted community networks, they may be better positioned to mobilise voters, disseminate political information, identify supporters, and sustain reciprocal relationships. Conversely, where voters possess competing or diverse networks, their dependence on any single political patron may be reduced.

This integrated framework provides the study with a basis for examining Nigerian elections as both institutional and relational processes. It shifts analytical attention from the ballot box alone to the social relationships that shape what happens before, around, and after voting. In this sense, the "hidden" politics of elections is not necessarily hidden because it is secret; rather, it is hidden because conventional electoral analysis often gives greater attention to formal institutions than to the informal relationships through which political influence actually travels.

4.0 Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive and explanatory research methodology to examine the hidden role of informal networks in Nigeria's elections and party politics during the Fourth Republic, beginning in 1999. The choice of this methodology is informed by the nature of the research problem. Informal political networks are often difficult to capture through numerical indicators alone because they operate through personal relationships, patronage, loyalty, social obligations, political brokerage, financial support and elite connections that may exist alongside, but sometimes outside, formal party and electoral structures. Helmke and Levitsky (2004) argue that informal institutions can substantially shape political behaviour and outcomes even where formal institutions appear to be firmly established.

The qualitative approach is therefore appropriate because it allows the study to investigate how political actors construct, maintain and utilise informal relationships within Nigeria's electoral environment. Rather than treating elections simply as periodic contests between candidates and political parties, the study examines the networks of influence surrounding party nominations, campaign financing, political mobilisation, grassroots organisation, elite bargaining, vote mobilisation and access to state resources. This approach is particularly relevant to Nigeria's Fourth Republic, where political parties have frequently been characterised by fluid membership, weak ideological differentiation, powerful individuals and interest-based coalitions. Dan-Azumi (2024), for example, describes Nigerian

parties as loose amalgams of powerful interest groups competing for political power, while also identifying weak internal democracy and unstable party membership as persistent features of the party system.

The study is also descriptive because it seeks to document the nature, forms and manifestations of informal networks within Nigeria's political system. The descriptive dimension will identify the major actors and relationships involved, including political godfathers, party financiers, former officeholders, traditional and community leaders, local political brokers, party intermediaries, business interests and grassroots mobilisers. Particular attention will be given to how these actors interact with formal institutions such as political parties, electoral bodies, legislatures and executive offices. Existing research demonstrates that patronage and godfatherism have remained important features of political organisation in the Fourth Republic, particularly in relation to candidate selection, political financing and electoral mobilisation (Animasawun, 2013; Adegoke, 2023).

The explanatory dimension goes beyond describing informal networks to examine how and why they influence elections and party politics. The central analytical concern is the mechanism through which personal relationships are converted into political influence. For example, political sponsorship may generate expectations of loyalty; financial investment in campaigns may create obligations after elections; and grassroots networks may provide candidates with mobilisation structures that formal party organisations are unable to provide. Consequently, the research will examine the interaction between formal institutions and informal practices rather than treating the two as separate political worlds. This is consistent with Helmke and Levitsky's (2004) argument that formal and informal institutions may coexist in complementary, accommodating, competing or substitutive relationships.

Methodologically, the study employs a contextual model to interpret informal political networks within Nigeria's broader historical, institutional, socio-economic and cultural environment. The Fourth Republic cannot be adequately understood without considering the political legacies inherited from military rule, the centralisation of state power, the economic value attached to political office, weak internal party democracy and the importance of interpersonal political relationships. Ikeanyibe (2014), for instance, links weaknesses in internal party democracy and candidate nomination processes to broader problems of party institutionalisation and democratic consolidation. The contextual model therefore enables the study to ask not only what informal networks do, but also why they remain politically relevant within Nigeria's particular institutional environment.

The second analytical component is the documentary model. Documentary research will provide the principal basis for collecting and interpreting evidence. Documents to be examined will include the Nigerian Constitution, Electoral Acts, regulations and reports of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), political party constitutions and manifestos, election reports, court judgments, legislative documents, official government publications, credible newspapers, policy reports and relevant scholarly literature. Documentary analysis is suitable because political relationships and electoral practices are often preserved indirectly in official records, investigative reports, court proceedings, party documents and historical accounts. Bowen (2009) identifies document analysis as a systematic qualitative procedure capable of generating meaningful evidence through the examination, interpretation and triangulation of documentary materials.

Data will be analysed through thematic and contextual content analysis. Relevant materials will first be organised according to recurring themes such as patronage, clientelism, political godfatherism, party financing, candidate selection, elite bargaining, grassroots mobilisation, political loyalty, informal brokerage and electoral influence. The analysis will subsequently compare these themes across different electoral periods within the Fourth Republic. Where appropriate, selected electoral episodes will be examined as illustrative cases to trace how informal relationships develop and how they affect political processes. George and Bennett (2005) emphasise the value of within-case analysis and process tracing for explaining political mechanisms and relationships.

To strengthen credibility and analytical validity, the study will employ triangulation by comparing evidence from different documentary sources rather than relying on a single account. Claims made by political actors, for instance, will be compared with electoral records, court decisions, academic studies and independent reports. This is particularly important because accounts of political patronage and informal influence may be politically contested. Recent Nigerian scholarship similarly demonstrates the usefulness of qualitative documentary approaches for investigating patronage, party financing and godfatherism (Jombo, 2025; Sule et al., 2026).

Overall, this methodology allows the study to move beyond the visible activities of voting, campaigning and party competition to uncover the less visible relationships that connect political elites, parties, financiers and grassroots actors. The combination of qualitative inquiry, descriptive analysis, explanatory interpretation, contextual analysis and documentary evidence is therefore designed to provide a nuanced understanding of how informal networks coexist with formal democratic institutions and shape the conduct of elections and party politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

4.1 Summary of Findings

The study finds that the character and outcomes of Nigerian elections cannot be adequately explained by looking only at formal electoral institutions, political parties, election laws and voting behaviour. Beneath these visible structures lies a less obvious but highly consequential system of informal relationships through which political actors exchange resources, information, loyalty, influence and access. Since the return to democratic government in 1999, these informal networks have continued to shape the recruitment of political candidates, party organisation, electoral mobilisation, campaign financing and post-election governance. The findings consequently demonstrate that Nigerian democracy operates through an interaction between formal institutional arrangements and informal political practices.

One of the central findings is that informal networks constitute an important parallel dimension of political organisation. Political parties have constitutions, leadership structures, membership rules and procedures for selecting candidates. Similarly, elections are governed by constitutional provisions, electoral legislation and institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission. However, the existence of these formal arrangements does not eliminate informal practices. Political actors frequently depend on personal relationships, trusted associates, political patrons, financiers, community leaders and local intermediaries to obtain information, resources and political support. Informal institutions can coexist with formal institutions and may either complement, compete with or substitute for formal rules (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). The Nigerian case illustrates this interaction particularly clearly.

The findings reveal that political godfatherism is one of the most prominent manifestations of informal political networking in the Fourth Republic. Political godfathers may provide aspiring politicians with financial assistance, political contacts, campaign structures and access to influential networks. In return, relationships may generate expectations of political loyalty and continued access to government resources. The significance of godfatherism therefore extends beyond personal relationships between influential politicians and their protégés. It creates broader networks connecting political elites, party officials, business interests, local political brokers and grassroots supporters. Research on Nigeria's Fourth Republic has similarly associated godfatherism with candidate sponsorship, political control and struggles over access to political power.

A related finding concerns candidate selection and party nominations. Although political parties have formal procedures for selecting candidates, these procedures can be influenced by informal negotiations among powerful party actors. Political aspirants with access to influential networks may possess advantages in securing party nominations because such networks can provide financial resources, political endorsements, information and organisational support. The study therefore finds that the formal process of political recruitment does not always tell the complete story of how candidates emerge. Informal bargaining and elite relationships may operate alongside party rules and, in some circumstances, substantially influence their practical application. This finding is consistent with scholarship identifying weaknesses in internal party democracy and candidate nomination as continuing challenges to party institutionalisation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (Ikeanyibe, 2014).

The study further establishes that political finance is an important foundation of informal networks. Elections require substantial resources for campaigning, transportation, publicity, mobilisation and maintaining political structures. Consequently, individuals and groups with financial capacity can acquire significant political influence by supporting candidates and party organisations. However, the importance of political finance extends beyond the provision of money. Financial relationships can create obligations and expectations that continue after elections. A candidate who receives substantial assistance from a political financier may subsequently face expectations concerning appointments, contracts, policy decisions or access to public resources. The finding therefore suggests that the informal politics of finance can influence both electoral competition and post-election governance.

Another important finding is the significant role of grassroots intermediaries. Informal political networks are not confined to national political elites. They extend into states, local government areas, wards and communities through local politicians, party agents, community leaders, youth organisers and other political intermediaries. These actors often possess detailed knowledge of local political conditions and can connect candidates with voters. They may organise meetings, communicate political messages, identify supporters and mobilise people during campaigns and elections. In this sense, informal networks function as a form of political infrastructure, particularly where formal party organisations lack sufficient organisational capacity.

The findings also indicate that informal networks are important sources of political information. Political actors frequently rely on trusted personal contacts to understand local political preferences, identify potential supporters, assess opponents and negotiate alliances. Information transmitted through informal networks can sometimes move faster than information travelling through official party channels. This makes personal relationships valuable political assets. At the same time, dependence on informal information can create problems because information may be selective, partisan or deliberately manipulated to advance particular interests.

The study further finds that informal networks can strengthen political mobilisation while simultaneously weakening institutional accountability. On one hand, networks of personal trust can make it easier for candidates to reach communities and mobilise voters. On the other hand, when political loyalty becomes primarily personal rather than institutional, accountability may shift from citizens and formal party structures towards patrons and influential individuals. Political officeholders may consequently become more responsive to the expectations of powerful networks than to broader institutional principles. This creates tension between personal political obligations and the requirements of democratic accountability.

Another significant finding is that informal political relationships are not always stable. Patron-client relationships can produce cooperation when the interests of participants coincide, but they can also generate conflict when expectations change. Disagreements over appointments, access to resources, succession, party leadership or control of political structures can lead former allies to become political opponents. Thus, informal networks should not be understood simply as mechanisms of political stability. They can also generate factionalism, political realignment and conflict within parties and governments.

Importantly, the research finds that informal networks do not completely replace formal democratic institutions. Rather, the Nigerian political system represents an interaction between formal and informal structures. Elections still provide the constitutional mechanism through which citizens select representatives, political parties remain central to electoral competition, and electoral institutions continue to regulate the formal process. The influence of informal networks is therefore better understood as operating around, through and sometimes within these institutions.

Overall, the study concludes that the politics of Nigeria's Fourth Republic extends considerably beyond the ballot box. The visible act of voting represents only one stage in a much broader political process. Behind candidate selection, campaign organisation, political mobilisation and post-election decision-making are networks of patronage, finance, loyalty, information and personal relationships. Understanding these networks provides a more complete explanation of how political power is acquired, maintained and contested in Nigeria. The study consequently argues that meaningful institutional reform requires attention not only to formal electoral rules but also to the informal relationships and incentives that shape how those rules function in everyday political practice.

4.2 Analysis of Findings

The findings of the study, reveal that electoral politics in Nigeria is shaped by a complex interaction between formal democratic institutions and informal political relationships. The ballot remains the formal instrument through which citizens confer electoral legitimacy, but the processes leading to the ballot—and, importantly, those following it—are frequently influenced by networks of patronage, personal loyalty, political finance, elite bargaining, community relationships and informal brokerage. The significance of this finding is that Nigerian electoral politics cannot be adequately understood through constitutional provisions and electoral procedures alone. It requires attention to the social relationships and informal practices through which political actors actually negotiate access to power.

A major analytical finding is that informal networks have become embedded within the operation of formal political institutions. Rather than existing completely outside the state, informal relationships often operate through political parties, legislative institutions, executive offices and electoral processes. This supports the argument that informal institutions can interact with formal institutions in ways that either reinforce or undermine their intended functions. In Nigeria, personal networks frequently determine who has access to party leaders, financial resources, political information and influential decision-makers. The finding therefore challenges an institutional interpretation of democracy that assumes formal rules automatically determine political outcomes. The evidence suggests instead that the effectiveness of formal institutions depends partly on the relationships and incentives surrounding them.

The study's findings concerning political parties are particularly important. Political parties are expected to recruit political leaders, aggregate interests, formulate programmes and provide a structured route to political office. However, the research indicates that Nigerian parties have often struggled to perform these functions independently of powerful individuals and informal networks. Katsina (2016) observes that political parties in the Fourth Republic have frequently demonstrated weak ideological cohesion, limited institutional autonomy and a dependence on the personal influence of party leaders. This helps explain why political loyalty may be directed toward individuals rather than enduring party programmes. The result is a political environment in which party structures can become vehicles through which influential actors organise and reproduce their networks of power.

This problem is particularly visible in candidate selection. The findings show that formal party primaries do not necessarily eliminate informal bargaining. Candidates may need more than popularity among ordinary party members; they may also require the support of party financiers, influential leaders and political intermediaries. Ikeanyibe (2014) found that weaknesses in internal party democracy and candidate nomination have affected party unity, institutionalisation and democratic consolidation in the Fourth Republic. Similarly, Adebisi's (2019) examination of the 2018 All Progressives Congress primaries identified conflicts and intrigues associated with perceived departures from established rules. The analytical implication is that candidate emergence is simultaneously a formal and informal process: party rules provide the institutional framework, while relationships and negotiations can influence how those rules are interpreted and implemented.

The findings also reveal that godfatherism should be understood as part of a broader network of political exchange rather than simply as a relationship between two individuals. A political patron may provide money, political contacts, organisational assistance or access to party structures, while a protégé may provide loyalty, political influence or future access to public resources. Emmanuel and Udoikah (2024) similarly identify godfatherism as a continuing feature of Fourth Republic politics, particularly in relation to party leadership, candidate nomination and electoral competition. This relationship becomes politically significant because the resources exchanged are not purely personal. They can influence who obtains political office and, subsequently, whose interests receive attention within government.

However, the analysis suggests that patronage networks are not necessarily permanent or harmonious. They are often sustained by reciprocal expectations. When those expectations are violated, relationships that initially facilitated political success can become sources of conflict. Nigerian political history contains several examples of disputes between political patrons and their protégés. The important analytical point is that informal networks can simultaneously facilitate political mobilisation and generate political instability. A network that helps an aspirant secure office may later become a mechanism through which competing claims over appointments, resources and political succession are expressed.

Another major finding concerns political finance. Money does not simply provide candidates with campaign resources; it can establish and strengthen relationships between political financiers, candidates, party organisations and grassroots intermediaries. The recent study by Sule, Sambo, and Thomas (2026) is particularly relevant, finding that despite changes in party-financing laws during the Fourth Republic, problems of compliance, clientelism and patronage have persisted. This suggests that changing formal rules does not necessarily transform the informal environment within which political finance operates. Where political competition is expensive and access to public resources is highly valuable, financial networks can continue to exercise considerable influence.

The findings further demonstrate the importance of grassroots and social networks. Informal politics does not occur exclusively among national elites in Abuja or state capitals. It extends into local communities through party agents,

community leaders, local politicians, youth organisers and other intermediaries. These actors provide political parties with information about voters and assist in mobilising support. Recent research on clientelist politics in Nigeria provides particularly useful evidence: social-network embeddedness can make certain voters more attractive targets for clientelist mobilisation because networks provide information about preferences and electoral behaviour and can facilitate the transmission of political advice. The finding adds an important dimension to the study because it demonstrates that informal networks are not merely elite instruments; they also operate horizontally and vertically throughout society.

At the same time, the findings indicate that informal networks have consequences for internal party democracy. When access to political office depends heavily on personal connections, ordinary party members may have limited influence over candidate selection and party decision-making. Alfa, Yusoff, and Eikojonwa (2020) argue that inadequate internal party democracy has impeded the institutionalisation of political parties in the Fourth Republic. The analytical significance is that weak internal democracy and informal networking can reinforce one another. Where party institutions are weak, influential individuals have greater opportunities to dominate decision-making; and where powerful individuals dominate party structures, institutional development becomes more difficult.

The study also finds that informal networks contribute to political mobility and party switching. Nigerian politicians frequently move between parties when political circumstances change. Such movement should not automatically be interpreted as ideological inconsistency, because the available evidence suggests that party organisation in Nigeria is often shaped by personal alliances and calculations surrounding access to political opportunities. Nwoko and Nweke (2023), for example, connect weaknesses in internal democracy with the continuing phenomenon of political defection in the Fourth Republic. This reinforces the argument that political relationships can sometimes be more durable than formal party attachments.

An important qualification emerging from the analysis is that informal networks should not be treated as inherently destructive. They can perform practical functions where formal institutions are weak. Personal relationships may facilitate communication, connect political candidates with communities and provide organisational resources that formal party structures cannot easily deliver. The problem arises when informal relationships become substitutes for transparent procedures, institutional accountability and equal political participation. The central analytical issue, therefore, is not simply the existence of informal networks but the manner in which they interact with formal democratic institutions.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Nigeria's Fourth Republic represents a hybrid political environment, in which formal democratic rules and informal political practices coexist. Elections are formally regulated, yet the pathways to nomination, campaign financing, mobilisation and political influence are frequently mediated through personal networks. Political parties remain essential democratic institutions, but their capacity to perform their functions is affected by elite influence, patronage and weak internal institutionalisation. The study consequently reveals that the "hidden" dimension of Nigerian electoral politics is not peripheral to the democratic process; it is part of the mechanism through which the formal political system operates.

The broader implication is that efforts to strengthen Nigerian democracy cannot focus exclusively on electoral laws, voting procedures and election-day administration. Institutional reform must also address the informal incentives and relationships that shape political behaviour. Strengthening internal party democracy, improving transparency in political financing, increasing the accountability of political elites and creating stronger institutional channels for grassroots participation would help reduce the dependence of political competition on opaque personal networks. The study therefore contributes to the understanding of Nigeria's Fourth Republic by demonstrating that what happens beyond the ballot is often as significant for political outcomes as the act of voting itself.

5.0 Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that strengthening Nigerian democracy requires attention not only to formal electoral institutions but also to the informal relationships through which political influence, resources and opportunities are distributed. Informal networks cannot simply be wished away because they are deeply embedded in

the social and political environment. Rather, reforms should seek to reduce their capacity to undermine accountability while recognising that some forms of networking can facilitate political communication and mobilisation. On this basis, the following recommendations are proposed.

5.1 Strengthening Internal Party Democracy

Political parties should strengthen their internal democratic structures so that important decisions, particularly candidate selection, leadership elections and policy formulation, are governed by transparent and predictable procedures. Party constitutions should not merely exist as formal documents; their provisions should be consistently implemented.

Party primaries should provide meaningful opportunities for ordinary members to participate rather than allowing powerful individuals or informal political networks to determine outcomes in advance. Clear procedures for membership verification, delegate selection, nomination fees and dispute resolution should be established and publicly communicated. Strengthening internal democracy would reduce excessive dependence on political patrons and increase the legitimacy of candidates within their parties.

5.2 Improving Transparency in Political Party Financing

The study recommends stronger transparency in political financing. Money is one of the most important resources through which informal political relationships are created and maintained. Political parties and candidates should therefore be required to provide accurate and accessible information concerning campaign contributions, major donors and campaign expenditure, in accordance with applicable electoral laws.

Electoral authorities should strengthen mechanisms for monitoring political finance, while sanctions for serious violations should be applied consistently. Greater transparency would make it more difficult for undisclosed financial relationships to translate into hidden political obligations. At the same time, regulation should be accompanied by realistic campaign-finance rules so that compliance is practically achievable for political parties and candidates.

5.3 Reducing Excessive Political Patronage

The persistence of political patronage suggests the need for stronger institutional safeguards around public appointments and access to government resources. Political office should not become a mechanism for rewarding personal loyalty at the expense of competence, institutional responsibility and public interest.

Appointments to public institutions should therefore follow clearly defined criteria, while legislative and administrative oversight should be strengthened. Transparent procedures would help separate legitimate political leadership from informal patron-client arrangements. This does not imply eliminating political relationships from democratic politics; rather, it seeks to ensure that such relationships do not determine access to public opportunities in ways that undermine fairness and accountability.

5.4 Strengthening Electoral Institutions

The independence, professionalism and capacity of electoral institutions should continue to be strengthened. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), in particular, requires adequate human, financial and technological resources to perform its responsibilities effectively.

Electoral institutions should also maintain clear and consistent procedures for candidate registration, party primaries, campaign activities, voting and dispute resolution. Where electoral rules are predictable and effectively enforced, political actors have fewer opportunities to rely on informal arrangements to circumvent formal procedures. Institutional credibility is consequently essential to reducing the space within which hidden political networks can manipulate electoral processes.

5.5 Enhancing Grassroots Political Participation

The study recommends greater attention to political participation at the grassroots level. Informal networks remain influential partly because political parties often become active in communities primarily during election periods. Parties should develop permanent structures through which citizens can participate in policy discussions, leadership selection and community-level political engagement.

Community forums, ward meetings, youth participation programmes and regular consultations could help create stronger institutional connections between citizens and political parties. When citizens have reliable formal channels for communicating their concerns, dependence on informal political brokers may gradually decline.

5.6 Promoting Political and Civic Education

Civic education should be expanded beyond explaining how to vote. Citizens should also understand how political parties operate, how candidates are selected, how campaign financing works and how citizens can demand accountability from elected officials.

Civil society organisations, educational institutions, electoral authorities and the media have important roles to play in this regard. Civic education should particularly target young people because Nigeria has a large and politically significant youth population. Better-informed citizens are more capable of recognising the difference between legitimate political mobilisation and relationships that involve coercion, inducement or undue political influence.

5.7 Strengthening Regulation of Political Parties

The regulatory framework governing political parties should be implemented consistently. Parties should be encouraged to develop stronger institutional identities, policy programmes and mechanisms for resolving internal disputes.

Frequent dependence on personalities can weaken party institutionalisation because political structures may become closely associated with individual leaders. Parties should therefore develop mechanisms that allow leadership changes to occur without destroying organisational continuity. Stronger institutions would make political parties less vulnerable to capture by individual patrons and temporary political alliances.

5.8 Improving Access to Electoral Justice

Accessible and timely mechanisms for resolving electoral and intra-party disputes are necessary. When candidates and party members lack confidence in formal dispute-resolution mechanisms, they may turn to informal negotiations or powerful political intermediaries.

Electoral tribunals and relevant judicial institutions should therefore be adequately resourced to handle electoral disputes efficiently and transparently. Clear timelines for resolving disputes would also reduce uncertainty and discourage political actors from using informal influence as an alternative route to obtaining political outcomes.

5.9 Encouraging Responsible Media and Investigative Journalism

The media has an important role in exposing relationships between political actors, financiers, parties and government institutions. Investigative journalism can bring otherwise hidden political practices into public discussion and encourage accountability.

However, media organisations should maintain professional standards when reporting allegations involving political networks. Claims should be properly verified and distinguished from political accusations. Responsible journalism can help citizens understand the networks influencing political decisions without turning political reporting into partisan mobilisation.

5.10 Developing a Long-Term Culture of Institutional Accountability

Ultimately, the study recommends a gradual shift from personalised politics towards institutionalised politics. Informal relationships are part of every political system, and it would be unrealistic to expect them to disappear entirely. The more practical objective is to ensure that personal relationships do not override constitutional rules, electoral procedures and principles of public accountability.

This requires commitment from political parties, elected officials, electoral institutions, civil society, the media and citizens themselves. Democratic consolidation is not achieved solely through successful elections; it also depends on the development of political institutions capable of operating independently of individual patrons and informal interests.

The central recommendation of this study is therefore that Nigeria should pursue institutional reform alongside greater transparency in informal political relationships. Informal networks should not automatically be regarded as inherently harmful because they can facilitate communication, political mobilisation and social organisation. The concern arises when they become substitutes for formal institutions or mechanisms through which political power, public resources and electoral opportunities are distributed without accountability.

For Nigeria's Fourth Republic to develop stronger democratic institutions, reforms must consequently move beyond the ballot box. Improving internal party democracy, regulating political finance, strengthening electoral institutions, expanding civic participation, improving electoral justice and promoting institutional accountability would reduce the ability of opaque networks to dominate political processes. The broader objective should not be to eliminate political relationships, but to create a political environment in which relationships support democratic institutions rather than replace them. This distinction is crucial to building a more transparent, participatory and institutionally resilient democratic system in Nigeria.

6.0 Conclusion

This study examined an important but often less visible dimension of Nigeria's democratic experience since the return to civilian rule in 1999. The central argument emerging from the study is that elections and party politics cannot be adequately understood by focusing exclusively on formal institutions, electoral laws, political parties and voting behaviour. Beneath these visible structures exists a complex web of informal relationships involving political patrons, party financiers, influential elites, community leaders, local intermediaries, business interests and grassroots actors. These relationships influence how political power is accessed, distributed, negotiated and sustained.

The study demonstrates that informal networks have become deeply intertwined with Nigeria's formal democratic institutions. Rather than existing completely outside the constitutional and electoral framework, informal practices frequently operate within and around formal institutions. Political parties may have established constitutions and procedures, yet personal relationships and elite negotiations can influence candidate selection, leadership contests and party decision-making. Similarly, elections may be regulated by laws and administered through formal electoral institutions, while mobilisation, campaign financing and political negotiations are often facilitated through informal networks. This interaction between formal and informal structures explains why institutional rules do not always produce the outcomes that their designers anticipate.

One of the most significant conclusions is that political godfatherism and patronage remain important mechanisms through which informal political influence is exercised. Political patrons can provide financial resources, organisational support, political connections and access to influential networks. In return, expectations of loyalty and reciprocal benefits may develop. Such relationships can influence the emergence of candidates and the behaviour of political officeholders after elections. However, the study also establishes that these relationships are neither permanent nor necessarily harmonious. When political interests diverge, relationships between patrons and protégés can produce factional struggles, party realignments and conflicts over access to public resources.

The research further concludes that political finance is central to the operation of informal networks. The high cost of political competition creates opportunities for financially powerful individuals and groups to establish relationships

with candidates and parties. Financial support can provide candidates with access to campaign structures and grassroots mobilisation, but it can also create expectations that extend beyond the electoral period. Consequently, political finance should be understood not merely as a question of campaign expenditure but as part of the wider network of relationships through which political influence is constructed.

Another important conclusion is that informal networks operate at both elite and grassroots levels. They are not confined to influential politicians in national or state capitals. They extend into local government areas, wards and communities through local politicians, party organisers, traditional and community leaders, youth groups and other intermediaries. These actors often connect political elites with ordinary citizens by transmitting information, organising meetings and facilitating mobilisation. In this sense, informal networks can perform practical functions that formal party structures sometimes struggle to provide. The challenge arises when these networks become the primary means through which political opportunities and resources are accessed.

The study also concludes that the persistence of informal political practices is partly related to weak party institutionalisation and limited internal party democracy. Where political parties lack strong ideological foundations, effective internal procedures and independent organisational structures, individual political actors are more likely to exercise considerable influence. Consequently, strengthening democracy in Nigeria requires more than improving election-day administration. It requires developing political parties that are internally democratic, organisationally stable, financially transparent and capable of functioning independently of individual patrons.

Importantly, the study does not conclude that informal networks are inherently incompatible with democracy. Political relationships are a normal feature of political life, and informal connections can promote communication, cooperation and mobilisation. The central concern is whether these relationships operate within the boundaries of democratic accountability or whether they undermine formal institutions. Informal networks become particularly problematic when they determine access to political office through opaque arrangements, distort party procedures, facilitate the misuse of public resources or weaken citizens' capacity to hold elected officials accountable.

Ultimately, the study concludes that Nigeria's Fourth Republic is best understood as a political system in which formal and informal institutions coexist and continuously interact. The ballot remains essential because it provides the formal mechanism through which citizens confer electoral legitimacy. Yet what happens before and after voting is equally important. Candidate selection, campaign financing, political mobilisation, coalition-building, appointments and policy influence are frequently shaped by relationships that are not immediately visible within the formal electoral process.

The broader lesson is therefore that strengthening Nigerian democracy requires going beyond the ballot. Electoral reform must be accompanied by stronger internal party democracy, transparent political financing, effective institutional oversight, accessible electoral justice, meaningful grassroots participation and greater accountability among political elites. The objective should not be to eliminate informal relationships—which would be neither realistic nor necessarily desirable—but to ensure that they complement rather than circumvent democratic institutions.

The hidden role of informal networks provides an important explanation for both the resilience and the challenges of Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Understanding these networks makes it possible to see Nigerian politics not simply as a contest conducted through elections, but as an ongoing process of negotiation involving institutions, individuals, resources and relationships. A more sustainable democratic future will therefore depend on building institutions strong enough to accommodate legitimate political relationships while preventing informal influence from overwhelming transparency, equality, accountability and the rule of law.

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