Winner-Takes-All Politics and Democratic Instability in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: A Critical Reappraisal

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ABSTRACT

This study interrogates the implications of winner-takes-all politics for democratic stability in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Relying on a qualitative analysis of political developments from 1999 to 2023, it contends that Nigeria's political system, structured around zero-sum electoral contests, fosters exclusion, heightens inter-group animosity, and undermines democratic consolidation. Drawing on elite theory and supported by documented cases of power centralization, executive-legislative friction, and electoral violence, the paper demonstrates that the current framework sustains political volatility and erodes citizen trust. The study advocates a shift toward inclusive governance through electoral and constitutional reforms that promote power-sharing and participatory democracy.

Keywords: Conflict, Democracy, Elections, Politics, Winner-takes-all

1. INTRODUCTION

It is commonly acknowledged that democracy is the most egalitarian form of government since it is predicated on popular participation, representation, and accountability. However, from a practical standpoint, many democracies, particularly those in post-colonial African states, struggle with distortions that undermine these objectives. The entrenchment of winner-take-all politics is one example of this type of distortion. Winner-takes-all politics is a system in which electoral victory grants unchecked control over political power and resources, frequently to the exclusion of opposition groups and minority interests.

In Nigeria, the transition to civil rule in 1999 marked a significant moment in the country's democratic evolution. Yet, over two decades into the Fourth Republic, the nation's democratic experience has been marred by political exclusion, ethnic tensions, and recurrent electoral violence. It is the zero-sum nature of Nigeria's electoral and governance system that is at the heart of these

challenges. This system institutionalises the monopolisation of power by winning/victorious parties or groups and sees electoral defeat as if it were political annihilation.

This paper aims to interrogate the impact the winner-takes-all system of politics has had on the democratic stability of Nigeria since 1999. This system, the paper argues, not only fosters political intolerance and elite dominance, but it also deepens systemic marginalisation and political apathy among populations that are previously barred from political participation. The framework of the paper is as follows: after stating the methodology, a conceptual discourse follows, after which is theoretical explication, followed by findings and discussion as well as the implications of winner-takes-all politics for Nigeria's democratic stability. The paper concludes with recommendations for institutional reform.

2.   METHODOLOGY

Given the nature of the inquiry, this study adopts a qualitative and conceptual approach. It relies on content analysis of relevant academic literature, media reports, and electoral outcomes spanning Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–2023). Secondary data from reputable sources are examined to trace patterns of winner-takes-all politics.

3.   CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

The concept of winner-takes-all politics has been subjected to varied, but not so divergent definitions and explanations. It is a term often used to refer to a political arrangement in which electoral victory confers full control over the executive, legislative, and often judicial arms of government. In such systems, opposition parties and losing candidates are effectively shut out from meaningful participation in governance, thereby reducing democracy to a contest for domination rather than representation (Ayamba *et al.*, 2024). In the Nigerian context, this often translates to one party or even a single ethno-regional faction controlling federal appointments, policy direction, and budgetary allocations. To Hacker and Pierson (2010):

> *winner-takes-all politics can be seen as a zero-sum game where one party's gain is perceived as another's loss, leading to fierce competition for power. In such a system, the winning political party excludes opposition parties from meaningful participation in governance.*

Ayelazuno (2011) sees it as a system whereby the political triumph results in the neglect or active discrimination against minority groups inside the nation, many of which at times contribute to the degradation of democratic values. According to Gyampo (2015), winner-takes-all politics is a situation in which one party regularly prevails, so depriving the political field of real competition and plurality. Usually, this results in two phenomena. One is "Judicial Capture," in which the victorious side uses excessive influence over the court therefore compromising the separation of powers and the rule of law. The other is "Media Manipulation," in which the victorious party uses too much and pointless influence of the media to forward its agenda and silence opposition voices.

Attafuah (2013) avers that winner-takes-all politics plays out when the victors in an election modify the constitution to entrench their authority and limit the opportunity for others to challenge them. In its extreme form, the ruling party seizes public institutions to further its agenda. In some circumstances, a winner-take-all political system also gives birth to "post-election retribution"- a

situation in which the victorious party punishes persons or communities that backed the opposition (Obi, 2007).

4.   THEORETICAL EXPLICATION: ELITE THEORY

This study draws on elite theory, which posits that a minority-composed of political, economic, or social elites—inevitably controls the key levers of power in any society. As articulated by Pareto (1935), Mosca (1939), and later Mills (1956), the theory emphasizes how elite cohesion and resource monopolization can undermine broader democratic participation. In Nigeria, elite theory provides a lens through which to understand how successive ruling parties (e.g., PDP, APC) have used political power to entrench themselves and marginalize dissenting or competing groups. This theoretical framing is supplemented by elements of consociational theory, particularly the emphasis on inclusive power-sharing as a stabilizing force in deeply divided societies.

5.   FINDINGS/DISCUSSION

WINNER-TAKES-ALL IN NIGERIA: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, TRENDS AND RECENT DEVELPMENTS

The Colonial Legacy

Nigeria's political landscape was shaped by British colonial rule, which established a centralized system of governance. The British employed a divide-and-rule strategy, exacerbating ethnic divisions and creating a political environment where local loyalties often superseded national identity (Crowder, 1968). The colonial legacy has significantly influenced the winner-takes-all phenomenon in Nigeria, which in turn affects democracy. During the colonial era, the British employed a system of indirect rule, governing through existing traditional leaders, particularly in the north. This system preserved some local customs but also entrenched divisions between different ethnic and religious groups, as the British often favored certain groups over others (Mamdani, 1996). The legacy of indirect rule and the centralization of power in the hands of a few have contributed to a culture of corruption and political exclusion, where those in power seek to maintain their dominance at all costs (Badru, 2010). This winner-takes-all mentality has undermined Nigeria's democracy, as elections often become a do-or-die affair, and the losers may refuse to accept the outcome. The colonial legacy of exploiting ethnic and regional divisions has also contributed to the politicization of identity, where politicians often mobilize support along ethnic or regional lines rather than on the basis of policy or ideology. This has led to a fragile and fragmented polity, where democracy is often reduced to a mere struggle for power and resources, rather than a means of promoting the common good.
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Post-Independence Political Developments

Post-independence political movements in Nigeria have significantly contributed to the winner-takes-all phenomenon, which has undermined the country's democracy (Ita *et al.*, 2024). After gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria's political landscape was characterized by regional and ethnic divisions, which were exploited by politicians to mobilize support. The legacy of colonialism, which created artificial boundaries and emphasized ethnic differences, continued to shape Nigeria's politics. The dominant parties, such as the Northern People's Congress (NPC) and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), often formed alliances and engaged in

adversarial politics, which reinforced the winner-takes-all mentality (Jega, 2015). The military's involvement in politics, particularly after the civil war, further entrenched the winner-takes-all phenomenon. The military's expansion from 10,000 soldiers before the war to 250,000 soldiers after the war created a powerful and dominant force in Nigerian politics (Jega, 2007). The military's influence and corruption contributed to the politicization of ethnicity and region, making elections a zero-sum game. This has led to a fragile democracy, where elections are often marred by violence and disputes over results. The winner-takes-all mentality has also undermined the country's ability to build strong institutions and promote inclusive governance.

After gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria experienced a series of political crises, coups, and civil wars that further entrenched winner-takes-all politics. The First Republic (1963-1966) was marked by intense competition among regional parties, leading to political instability and the eventual military coup in 1966. The Biafran War (1967-1970) not only deepened ethnic divisions but also laid the groundwork for a political culture where control over the state was seen as a zero-sum game (Nnoli, 1995).

Ethno-Regional Exclusion and Electoral Resentment

The control of power by dominant ethno-regional blocs in Nigeria-such as the Hausa-Fulani in the North or the Yoruba in the South-West has engendered deep-seated resentment among excluded groups, notably in the South-East and Niger Delta (Jacob, 2012). The concentration of federal appointments, infrastructure projects, and political leverage in specific regions fosters perceptions of deliberate exclusion, exacerbating ethno-political tensions and fueling agitations for restructuring or secession.

Party System and Internal Democracy Deficits

Political parties in Nigeria, despite their proliferation, lack ideological coherence and operate as instruments of elite negotiation (Aleyomi, 2014). Internal democracy is frequently sacrificed at the altar of elite consensus, with party primaries often manipulated to favor incumbents or powerful financiers (Badejo & Oba-Akpowoghaha). This further entrenches the winner-takes-all logic, as parties become vehicles for personal ambition rather than platforms for inclusive representation.

Executive Monopoly and Patronage Politics

From 1999 onwards, Nigerian presidents have wielded immense control over appointments, budgetary priorities, and resource allocation. The winner-takes-all approach has enabled the ruling party to dominate key government institutions, including security agencies and regulatory bodies, often blurring the lines between state and party (Adejumobi & Kehinde, 2012). The extensive use of executive patronage reinforces loyalty to the ruling elite while alienating opposition voices and minority groups.

Legislative Marginalization and Partisan Polarization

Although the Nigerian legislature is constitutionally independent, in practice, it often operates under the influence of the executive, particularly when the ruling party controls a majority (Abah, 2020). Legislative leadership contests typically reflect the internal dynamics of the ruling party, with little space for bipartisan collaboration. This undermines legislative oversight and

accountability, as legislators become more responsive to executive patronage than to public interest.

The Transition to Democracy in 1999

The return to civilian rule in 1999 marked a significant turning point in Nigeria's political history. The transition was facilitated by the death of military ruler Sani Abacha in 1998 and the subsequent political reforms initiated by his successor, General Abdulsalami Abubakar. The 1999 elections, which brought Chief Olusegun Obasanjo (a former military head of state) to power, were characterized by widespread irregularities and allegations of electoral fraud (Osiki, 2008). Despite these issues, the elections were a critical step towards establishing a democratic framework.

The Emergence of the PDP

The People's Democratic Party (PDP) emerged as the dominant political party in the post-1999 era. The PDP's control of the presidency and various state governments exemplified the winner-takes-all approach, where the ruling party sought to consolidate power by marginalizing opposition parties (Adamu, 2012). This political climate fostered a culture of patronage and clientelism, undermining the principles of democratic governance (Adeoye, 2009).

The 2007 Elections and Political Turmoil

The 2007 elections were pivotal in reinforcing winner-takes-all politics in Nigeria. The election, which saw Umaru Musa Yar'Adua succeed Obasanjo, was marred by allegations of widespread rigging and electoral malpractice. The failure of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to ensure free and fair elections further disillusioned the populace and deepened the perception that electoral victories were a means to monopolize power rather than represent the electorate's interests (Babatunde, 2009).

The Role of Ethnicity and Regionalism

Ethnicity played a significant role in shaping the political dynamics of the 2007 elections. The PDP's dominance was often attributed to its ability to appeal to various ethnic groups through a system of zoning, which aimed to balance power among Nigeria's diverse regions. However, this approach also reinforced winner-takes-all politics, as political control was perceived as the exclusive right of the ruling party (Buhari, 2005).

The 2015 Elections: A Shift in the Political Landscape

The 2015 elections marked a significant shift in Nigeria's political landscape. The emergence of the All Progressive Congress (APC) as a formidable opposition party culminated in the defeat of the PDP, which had ruled for 16 years. Muhammadu Buhari's victory was seen as a triumph for democratic change, yet it also highlighted the entrenched winner-takes-all mentality within the political system (Tella, 2021).

Electoral Violence and Political Discontent

Despite the electoral change, the 2015 elections were marred by violence and allegations of rigging, illustrating the persistent challenges of Nigeria's electoral process. The aftermath of the elections saw increased political polarization, with opposition parties often sidelined in governance, reinforcing the notion of winner-takes-all politics (Ojo, 2015).

The Buhari Administration and Governance Challenges

Muhammadu Buhari (2015-2023) practiced the no-power-sharing style of politics. Critics argue that his administration was marked by skewed appointments, nepotism, and excessive concentration of power and patronage politics that favoured his regional constituents, close associates, and party loyalists (Nwoko *et al*., 2022). The Buhari administration faced significant challenges, including economic recession, insecurity, and corruption. The perceived exclusion of opposition parties from governance exacerbated tensions and led to widespread discontent (Ayamba, 2024). The administration's focus on combating corruption and insecurity often sidelined vital issues of inclusivity and representation, further entrenching winner-takes-all politics.

Regional and Ethnic Tensions

Under Buhari, regional and ethnic tensions resurfaced, particularly in the context of resource control and allocation. The Niger Delta region, which has historically felt marginalized, became a focal point for agitation and unrest (Ayamba, 2024). The lack of inclusivity in governance fueled sentiments of disenfranchisement among various ethnic groups, reinforcing the winner-takes-all narrative (Omeje, 2018).

The 2019 Elections and Continuing Polarization

The 2019 elections were characterized by heightened political tension and allegations of electoral malpractice. Buhari was re-elected amidst claims of violence, voter suppression, and manipulation of electoral processes (Nwankwo, 2019). The opposition, led by Atiku Abubakar, challenged the results, further entrenching divisions and illustrating the adversarial nature of winner-takes-all politics in Nigeria.

The Impact of Social Media and Youth Activism

The role of social media in Nigeria's elections, particularly the 2019 and 2023 elections, marked a significant development in Nigeria's political landscape. Young Nigerians utilized social media platforms to mobilize for change, challenge the status quo, and advocate for more inclusive governance. However, the entrenched winner-takes-all mentality undermined these efforts, with established political actors relying on traditional methods of control (Chinua, 2023).

The Current Political Climate (2020 - Present)

Nigeria's current political climate remains complex and challenging. As of 2023, the country continued to grapple with the implications of winner-takes-all politics, which have been exacerbated by socio-economic challenges worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has highlighted the need for more inclusive governance and equitable resource distribution.

Furthermore, the political landscape remains polarized, with ethnic and regional tensions persisting (Ogunbadejo, 2022). The 2023 presidential election brought these issues to the forefront. Bola Tinubu, the All Progressive Congress (APC) candidate, emerged victorious, but not without controversy. Tinubu's campaign was marked by challenges, including criticism over his choice of a fellow Muslim as running mate (that is, vice presidential candidate) as well as his certificate submissions. Despite these obstacles, he managed to secure the presidency, winning 12 states and polling 8,794,726 votes (Kwen, 2023). Tinubu's victory was met with mixed reactions, with some opposition parties calling for the cancellation of the election due to alleged irregularities. However, Tinubu's inauguration marked a new era in Nigerian politics, with many watching to see how he will address the country's pressing socio-economic challenges and work to unify the polarized political landscape.

6.   IMPLICATIONS OF WINNER-TAKES-ALL POLITICS FOR NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC STABILITY

The exclusionary tendencies of winner-takes-all politics in Nigeria have serious consequences for democratic stability, namely:

i.   **Political Apathy and Voter Disengagement**: As elections are seen as rigged contests predetermined by elite bargains, citizens become disenchanted with the democratic process, leading to low voter turnout and civic withdrawal.
ii. **Heightened Electoral Violence**: In a system where losing equates to total exclusion, political actors resort to violence and vote manipulation to secure or retain power, undermining the credibility of elections.
iii. **Governance Inefficiency**: The domination of government by a narrow elite often results in poor policy outcomes, as dissenting perspectives are excluded from the decision-making process.
iv. **Entrenchment of Identity Politics**: When access to power is seen through the lens of ethnicity, religion, or region, political competition becomes a proxy for inter-group rivalry, threatening national cohesion.

7.   CONCLUSION AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Arguably, winner-takes-all politics has exacerbated conflicts, political tensions, and instability in Nigeria. Most psephologists and peacebuilders agree that inclusive governance, power-sharing agreements, and robust institutions are crucial for maintaining peace and security. Addressing Nigeria's winner-takes-all politics requires a holistic approach and innovative solutions aimed at promoting inclusivity, fairness, and representation. Below are seven key suggestions to address these challenges:

i.   Prospects for electoral reform: - Addressing the nexus between elections and winner-takes-all politics in Nigeria requires comprehensive electoral reforms (Jega & Ibeanu, 2007). Strengthening the independence of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and enhancing transparency in the electoral process are critical steps toward building public trust in democratic institutions (Abada *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, promoting inclusive political practices that go beyond ethnic affiliations can help mitigate tensions and foster a sense of national identity.

ii.   Building a culture of peace:- Fostering a culture of peace and dialogue among Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups is essential for reducing electoral violence. Encouraging political parties to engage in coalition-building and compromise can help shift the narrative from winner-takes-all to more inclusive governance (Lokko & Lokko, 2025). Grassroots initiatives that promote inter-ethnic dialogue and collaboration can also play a vital role in bridging divides and fostering understanding among different groups.

iii.   The role of the judiciary:- The judiciary in Nigeria has the potential to play a transformative role in addressing winner-takes-all politics by promoting fairness, inclusivity, and accountability (Action Aid, 2024). However, this requires judicial independence, public trust, and a commitment to upholding the rule of law. By leveraging its constitutional mandate, the judiciary can contribute to a more equitable and stable political system.

iv.   The role of technology in elections:- The integration of technology into the electoral process presents opportunities for improving transparency and reducing electoral violence. Electronic voting systems and biometric identification can help enhance the credibility of elections and reduce opportunities for fraud (Umar *et al.*, 2021). However, the implementation of technology must be accompanied by adequate infrastructure and training to ensure its effectiveness.

v.   Coalition building:- Coalition governments can reduce winner-takes-all politics by encouraging political parties to compromise and collaborate (Back *et al.*, 2011). Coalition governments create more inclusive decision-making and policy outcomes that reflect diverse opinions. Coalition governments often aim to foster inclusivity and shared governance, thereby mitigating winner-takes-all dynamics.

vi.   Minority representation:- Implementing measures to ensure the representation of minority groups in government can help mitigate winner-takes-all dynamics (Reynolds, 2006). For example, introducing quotas for underrepresented groups or providing support for minority candidates can lead to more diverse and inclusive political representation. The proportional representation system gives political parties parliamentarians depending on their vote share. By giving voice to other opinions, this method increases minority representation and mitigates WTA tendencies.

vii.   Decentralization of power:- Shah and Thompson (2004) aver that devolving power to local and regional levels of government can help reduce winner-takes-all dynamics by allowing for more diverse policy approaches and fostering greater community involvement in decision-making. Decentralization can lead to more tailored governance and increased representation of local interests. Decentralization can improve local development initiatives, increase inclusion in decision-making, and reduce the concentration of power at the center.

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