

Leadership Selection in The Nigerian National Assembly: A Comparative Study of The 8th And 9th National Assemblies.

Atiku Ibrahim, PhD¹, Blessing Onyinyechi Eke, PhD²

¹Secretary of Finance and Accounts National Assembly, Abuja.

²Senior Legislative Aide to the Deputy Speaker House of Representative National Assembly, Abuja.

ABSTRACT

The selection of presiding officers in Nigeria's National Assembly is one of the clearest windows into how power is actually distributed within the country's fledgling democracy. This article compares the emergence of legislative leadership in the 8th National Assembly (2015–2019) and the 9th National Assembly (2019–2023), two consecutive dispensations under the same ruling party but with strikingly different outcomes. Where the 8th Assembly was inaugurated through a dramatic rebellion in which Bukola Saraki and Yakubu Dogara defied the All Progressives Congress (APC) to secure the Senate Presidency and Speakership with opposition support, the 9th Assembly was inaugurated through a carefully engineered consensus that installed Ahmad Lawan and Femi Gbajabiamila as the party's anointed candidates. Drawing on documentary and archival evidence, elite theory, and the theory of political institutionalisation, the article argues that this shift reflects a deeper transition from contested legislative autonomy to executive-driven party supremacy. It examines the constitutional framework governing leadership selection, reconstructs the events surrounding both emergences, and compares the two Assemblies along five dimensions: mode of emergence, party control versus legislative independence, executive–legislature relations, legislative productivity, and the role of godfatherism and elite bargaining. The findings suggest that while the 9th Assembly recorded higher quantitative legislative output and a more harmonious relationship with the executive, this came at the cost of the checks-and-balances function envisaged for the legislature under a presidential system, exposing it to persistent public perception as a 'rubber stamp' institution. The article concludes that sustainable legislative independence in Nigeria requires the insulation of leadership selection processes from executive interference and the strengthening of internal party democracy.

KEYWORDS: Nigerian National Assembly; legislative leadership; 8th National Assembly; 9th National Assembly; Senate Presidency; Speakership; party supremacy; executive–legislature relations

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INTRODUCTION

Legislatures in presidential systems derive much of their institutional character from how their internal leadership emerges. The presiding officers of a parliament are not simply administrators of procedure; they set the legislative agenda, control committee assignments, mediate between the legislature and the executive, and, in federations such as Nigeria, occupy a place in the constitutional order of succession. Section 50 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) provides that the Senate shall elect a President and Deputy President, and the House of Representatives shall elect a Speaker and Deputy Speaker, from among their own members (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, s. 50). On its face, this is a straightforward internal electoral matter reserved to each chamber. In practice, however, the selection of legislative leadership in Nigeria has consistently been one of the most fiercely contested moments in the country's political calendar, because whoever controls the leadership of the National Assembly effectively controls the pace, direction, and tenor of federal lawmaking for the following four years.

This article undertakes a comparative study of leadership selection in two consecutive dispensations of Nigeria's federal legislature: the 8th National Assembly, which sat from June 2015 to June 2019, and the 9th National Assembly, which sat from June 2019 to June 2023. The comparison is instructive precisely because both Assemblies were dominated numerically by the same party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), yet the processes by which their leaders emerged, and the character of governance that followed,

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differed markedly. In 2015, Bukola Saraki and Yakubu Dogara defied their party's preferred candidates, Ahmad Lawan and Femi Gbajabiamila respectively, to secure the Senate Presidency and Speakership with the backing of the minority Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) (allAfrica, 2015a; Vanguard News, 2015). The episode, widely described in the Nigerian press as a 'bloodless coup' against the ruling party's leadership (The News, 2019), triggered years of friction between the executive and the legislature. In 2019, the same party, chastened by that experience, moved decisively to prevent a repetition: President Muhammadu Buhari publicly endorsed Lawan and Gbajabiamila well before the inauguration of the 9th Assembly, rival aspirants were persuaded or pressured to step down, and the two emerged largely unopposed within the party's own ranks (PM News, 2019; allAfrica, 2015b).

These two episodes are not merely colourful footnotes in Nigeria's legislative history; they are windows into the deeper structural tension between party supremacy and legislative independence that runs through Nigeria's Fourth Republic. On one reading, the 8th Assembly's leadership emerged through a legitimate exercise of the constitutional right of members to elect their own leaders, consistent with the separation of powers envisaged by the framers of the 1999 Constitution (TheNigeriaLawyer, 2021). On another reading, the 9th Assembly's emergence represented a return to party discipline and the restoration of the ruling party's capacity to organise government coherently, but at the cost of the National Assembly's institutional independence and its willingness to check the executive (Sani, 2025). Both readings capture part of the truth, and it is precisely this tension that this article seeks to unpack.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond the personalities of Saraki, Dogara, Lawan, and Gbajabiamila. It speaks to broader questions in the comparative study of legislatures in new democracies: how do weakly institutionalised political parties manage internal succession contests; what happens to horizontal accountability when the legislature aligns itself closely with the executive; and what are the trade-offs between legislative productivity, measured in bills passed, and legislative independence, measured in the willingness to resist executive overreach? These questions have taken on renewed urgency in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, where the 9th Assembly's leadership was repeatedly accused by civil society actors and members of the public of operating as a 'rubber stamp' for the presidency (Premium Times, 2021; ThisDay, 2022a), even as its own leaders and the executive branch pointed to record numbers of bills passed and acts assented to as evidence of a more productive and harmonious era (Blueprint Newspapers, 2023a).

This article proceeds in several stages. Section two situates the study within elite theory and the theory of political institutionalisation, which together provide the conceptual scaffolding for understanding leadership succession in weakly institutionalised party systems. Section three reviews the relevant literature on Nigerian legislative politics, executive–legislature relations, and godfatherism. Section four outlines the methodology. Section five examines the constitutional and procedural framework governing the selection of presiding officers. Sections six and seven reconstruct, respectively, the emergence of leadership in the 8th and 9th Assemblies. Section eight offers a systematic comparative analysis across five dimensions, and section nine discusses the implications of the findings for democratic consolidation in Nigeria, before the article concludes with recommendations for reform.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on two complementary theoretical perspectives: elite theory and the theory of political institutionalisation. Elite theory, associated with the classical works of Mosca and Michels, holds that in every organised society, political power tends to concentrate in the hands of a small, cohesive minority, irrespective of the formal rules of democratic participation that govern the wider membership (Mosca, 1939; Michels, 1962). Michels's 'iron law of oligarchy' is particularly instructive for the Nigerian case: even within organisations formally committed to internal democracy, such as political parties, effective control gravitates toward a narrow leadership circle that uses its command of organisational resources, patronage, and information to determine outcomes that are then presented to the rank and file as collective decisions. Applied to the Nigerian National Assembly, elite theory helps to explain why the selection of the Senate President and Speaker, though constitutionally reserved to the vote of individual legislators, is in practice heavily shaped by a small circle of party leaders, financiers, and, especially since 2015, the presidency itself.

Elite theory also underlies the extensive Nigerian literature on 'godfatherism', the informal but pervasive practice whereby powerful political patrons determine, fund, and sometimes enforce the emergence of favoured candidates for elective and appointive office (Albert, 2005). Godfatherism does not operate only at the level of gubernatorial or legislative primaries; it operates equally within the National Assembly itself, where zonal power blocs, financial backers, and, in the period under review, the presidency, negotiate and, where necessary, pressure individual legislators to support particular candidates for presiding office. As subsequent sections will show, both the 2015 and 2019 leadership contests were shaped less by open debate on the floor of each chamber than by intense backroom bargaining among a comparatively small number of influential actors.

The second theoretical lens, political institutionalisation, derives from Huntington's classical formulation of the process by which organisations and procedures acquire value and stability over time (Huntington, 1968). An institutionalised legislature is one whose internal procedures for selecting leadership are predictable, insulated from ad hoc external pressure, and generally respected regardless of who occupies the executive branch at a given moment. A weakly institutionalised legislature, by contrast, is one whose leadership selection processes remain highly susceptible to capture by external actors, particularly a dominant party apparatus or an

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assertive presidency. Recent scholarship on Nigeria's party system has emphasised precisely this weakness: political parties in Nigeria are characterised by elite capture, deficient internal democracy, and limited grassroots engagement, all of which undermine their capacity to function as genuine intermediaries between citizens and the state (Madueke, 2026). When applied to legislative leadership selection, this weak institutionalisation manifests as a persistent tension between what the Constitution formally guarantees, namely the free right of members to elect their own leaders, and what political practice actually delivers, namely leadership outcomes substantially predetermined by extra-legislative bargaining.

Read together, these two frameworks generate the analytical expectation that guides this study: where a governing party's elite is fragmented or unable to coordinate around a single preferred outcome, as was arguably the case with the APC in 2015, legislative leadership selection is likely to produce contested, factional outcomes that draw on cross-party alliances. Where the governing party's elite, and particularly its dominant figure in the presidency, is able to coordinate effectively and deploy patronage resources decisively, as was the case with the APC and President Buhari in 2019, leadership selection is likely to produce a more orderly, consensual outcome that nonetheless represents the further erosion of the legislature's independent institutional identity. The empirical sections of this article test this expectation against the documentary record of both Assemblies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial body of scholarship has examined the character of executive–legislature relations in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Aiyede (2005) provides an early and influential account of how the country's emerging presidential democracy struggled to establish a stable equilibrium between the executive and legislative branches, noting that both institutions were still learning to operate within the boundaries set by the 1999 Constitution after more than a decade and a half of military rule. This foundational tension, between an executive accustomed to command and a legislature seeking to assert its constitutional co-equal status, recurs throughout the subsequent literature on Nigeria's National Assembly and provides essential context for understanding the two leadership contests examined in this article.

A second strand of literature focuses specifically on party control and legislative behaviour. Baba's (2015) comparative study of state legislatures in northwest Nigeria found that the pattern of party funding gives chief executives, at both federal and state levels, considerable leverage over party affairs, which in turn shapes the agenda control and voting behaviour of legislators through the instrumentality of the party structure. In a related contribution examining the national legislature specifically, Baba (2019) traces the historical evolution of executive–legislature relations across Nigeria's Fourth Republic, arguing that the pattern of conflict and accommodation between the two arms has been shaped less by constitutional design than by the personal disposition of successive Senate Presidents, Speakers, and Presidents. Building on this theme, Jombo and Fagbadebo (2023) interrogate the recurring conflicts, political rivalry, and mutual suspicion that have characterised executive–legislative relations since 1999, situating the Saraki-led 8th Senate's confrontations with the Buhari presidency within a longer historical pattern of institutional friction between the two arms of government.

Closely related is the literature on legislative productivity and party affiliation. Olaniyi's (2023) study of the 7th and 8th National Assemblies examines how party affiliation shaped law-making efficiency, arguing that an efficient executive–legislative relationship, when it develops, tends to enhance the passage of favourable public policy but can equally compromise the legislature's oversight function when that relationship becomes too accommodating. This concern anticipates one of the central puzzles addressed in the present article: whether the higher volume of legislation passed by the 9th Assembly, frequently cited by its leadership as evidence of productivity (Blueprint Newspapers, 2023a), should be read as a sign of institutional maturity or as evidence of an executive-dominated legislature more concerned with facilitation than scrutiny.

The literature on political parties and godfatherism offers a further, complementary perspective. Albert's (2005) foundational study of godfatherism in Nigerian politics documents how powerful patrons install and sometimes remove political office holders through control of party structures, financial resources, and, where necessary, coercion, a pattern that subsequent scholars have found to extend into legislative leadership contests at both state and federal levels. More recent work by Madueke (2026) situates this pattern within a broader account of weak party institutionalisation in Nigeria, arguing that Nigerian parties are plagued by elite capture and deficient internal democracy that leave party structures highly susceptible to domination by a small circle of financiers and incumbents, particularly the sitting president when his party controls the National Assembly. Sani (2025) extends this analysis directly to the period under review in this article, examining how the tension between party supremacy and party discipline played out within the APC between 2015 and 2019, and concluding that the party's failure to enforce internal discipline in 2015 contributed to the very policy inconsistency and legislative friction that undermined its capacity to govern effectively during the 8th Assembly. Scholars have also examined the consequences of legislative alignment with the executive for the National Assembly's oversight function. Demarest (2022) draws on interviews with lawmakers of the 8th National Assembly to argue that Nigerian legislators are structurally incentivised to direct public resources toward party elites and senior patrons rather than toward general constituency service, a dynamic she terms 'elite clientelism'. This finding is significant for the present study because it suggests that the internal politics of the National Assembly, including leadership selection, cannot be understood in isolation from the broader clientelist logic

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that governs relations between individual legislators and the party structures that sponsor their re-election. Odeyemi (2022), examining the legislature's response to the 2020 #EndSARS protests during the 9th Assembly, further illustrates how a legislature perceived as closely aligned with the executive can struggle to perform its representative and mediating functions credibly in moments of acute social crisis, a theme that resonates with the persistent 'rubber stamp' characterisation of the 9th Assembly in public discourse (Premium Times, 2021; ThisDay, 2022a; ThisDay, 2022b).

Taken together, this body of literature converges on a shared concern: that Nigeria's legislature, notwithstanding its formal constitutional independence, remains highly susceptible to capture by party elites and the executive, and that the mode by which its leadership emerges is one of the clearest indicators of the balance of power between these competing forces at any given moment. What the existing literature has not done systematically, however, is place the 8th and 9th Assemblies side by side as a controlled comparison, examining how the very same governing party could produce, within the space of a single electoral cycle, two such different modes of leadership emergence. This article addresses that gap.

Finally, the comparative literature on legislative leadership selection more broadly offers useful cross-national reference points that sharpen the analysis of the Nigerian case. In many parliamentary systems, the selection of a presiding officer is a largely ceremonial matter, insulated from partisan contest by convention and by the officer's expected impartiality once in post. In presidential systems such as Nigeria's, by contrast, the presiding officer of each chamber remains a partisan actor who continues to caucus with, and often actively campaign for, his or her party even while presiding, which raises the stakes of the selection contest considerably and helps to explain why Nigerian leadership contests have so often become high-intensity struggles rather than routine administrative matters. Comparative work on legislative institutionalisation in other African presidential and hybrid systems similarly points to the recurring pattern in which weakly institutionalised ruling parties struggle to manage internal succession without either open factional rupture, of the kind Nigeria experienced in 2015, or heavy-handed executive intervention, of the kind Nigeria experienced in 2019, suggesting that the Nigerian case, while distinctive in its particulars, is not *sui generis* within the broader family of new presidential democracies.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative-historical research design, appropriate for a within-case, cross-time comparison of two related but temporally distinct political episodes governed by the same underlying constitutional and party-political framework. The comparative-historical approach is well suited to research questions concerning institutional change over time, as it allows the researcher to hold constant many structural features, in this case the constitutional provisions governing leadership selection, the dominant party, and the broader political system, while isolating the variables that differed between the two cases, namely the internal cohesion of the ruling party, the disposition of the presidency, and the resulting mode of leadership emergence.

Data for this study were drawn exclusively from secondary and documentary sources. These include the text of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), contemporaneous newspaper and news-agency reportage of the leadership contests of June 2015 and June 2019 published by established Nigerian outlets including Vanguard, ThisDay, Premium Times, PM News, and allAfrica, official communications from the National Assembly itself, and the peer-reviewed and grey academic literature on Nigerian legislative politics, party institutionalisation, and executive-legislature relations reviewed in section three. Documentary sources were triangulated wherever possible, cross-referencing multiple independent accounts of the same events to minimise the risk of relying on a single, potentially partisan, narrative.

The comparative analysis in section eight was structured around five analytical dimensions derived from the theoretical framework outlined in section two: the mode of leadership emergence (contested versus consensual), the balance between party supremacy and legislative independence, the character of executive-legislature relations that followed each emergence, legislative productivity as reported by the Assemblies themselves and independent observers, and the role of godfatherism and elite bargaining in shaping outcomes. This framework allows for a structured, replicable comparison rather than an impressionistic narrative account, while remaining sensitive to the historically specific circumstances of each Assembly. It should be acknowledged that, as with any study relying on documentary and media sources for events that were themselves the subject of intense political spin, some claims made by political actors, particularly regarding the motivations behind leadership choices and the true extent of legislative independence, cannot be independently verified and are presented as contested claims rather than settled fact.

CONSTITUTIONAL AND PROCEDURAL FRAMEWORK FOR LEADERSHIP SELECTION

The starting point for any analysis of leadership selection in the National Assembly must be the constitutional text itself. Section 50(1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) provides that there shall be a President and a Deputy President of the Senate, who shall be elected by the members of that House from among themselves, and a Speaker and a Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, elected on the same basis by members of that House (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, s. 50(1)). The provision is notable for what it does not say: it makes no reference whatsoever to political parties,

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party endorsement, or any external actor's role in the process. The selection of presiding officers is, in strict constitutional terms, an internal matter for each chamber, to be resolved by the votes of its own members (LegalClarity, 2026).

This design reflects the broader separation-of-powers architecture that the framers of the 1999 Constitution borrowed, with modification, from the presidential model, itself indebted to the political philosophy of Montesquieu, in which each arm of government is expected to organise its own internal affairs without interference from the others (TheNigeriaLawyer, 2021). Section 50(2) further provides that a President or Deputy President of the Senate, or a Speaker or Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, may only be removed from office by a resolution of the relevant chamber, supported by not less than a two-thirds majority of its members, a deliberately high threshold intended to insulate presiding officers from removal by a narrow, transient majority (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, s. 50(2); LegalClarity, 2026). Beyond outright removal, presiding officers also vacate office if they cease to be members of their respective chambers, or upon the first sitting of a newly constituted House following a general election, which is precisely the moment at which the contests examined in this article took place.

In practice, the internal standing orders of each chamber add a further procedural layer. Under the Senate's standing orders, nominations for presiding officers are formally expected to follow the ranking of senators, prioritising returning members with the greatest number of terms served, followed by those with prior experience in the House of Representatives, and finally first-time senators (LegalClarity, 2026). This seniority convention, however, has repeatedly been overridden in practice by political party negotiations and zoning arrangements, which typically carry far greater weight in determining actual outcomes than formal seniority. It is precisely this gap between the constitutional and procedural text, on one hand, and the informal political practice that determines real outcomes, on the other, that generates the recurring controversy examined in this article.

The gap between text and practice raises a genuine constitutional question that surfaced explicitly during the 2015 leadership contest: to what extent, if any, can a political party lawfully direct its elected legislators on how to vote in the internal election of presiding officers? Commentary on this question has generally concluded that the Constitution recognises both a free legislative mandate for individually elected representatives and, separately, a degree of supremacy for political parties in the broader democratic process, but that it does not explicitly resolve the tension between the two when they come into direct conflict over the specific question of internal leadership elections (see discussion in Academia.edu commentary on APC constitutional practice, 2021). This unresolved tension is not a mere academic curiosity; it was the precise fault line along which the crisis of June 2015 opened, and it was the very same fault line that the APC's leadership moved deliberately to close before June 2019, as sections six and seven now demonstrate.

LEADERSHIP SELECTION IN THE 8TH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY (2015–2019)

The literature emerging around 2016 provides important evidence concerning the political circumstances surrounding the emergence of the 8th National Assembly leadership. Following the inauguration of the Assembly in 2015, Bukola Saraki emerged as Senate President, while Yakubu Dogara became Speaker of the House of Representatives, despite the preference of the ruling APC for Ahmad Lawan and Femi Gbajabiamila respectively (Okpe & Taya, 2018; Saleh, 2021). The outcome demonstrated that control of the executive branch and numerical dominance in the legislature did not automatically translate into control over the selection of legislative leaders.

The 2015 leadership outcome has consequently been interpreted as an important manifestation of intra-party conflict and legislative independence. Okpe and Taya (2018) argue that the inability of the APC leadership to impose its preferred candidates contributed to tensions between the executive and legislature during the early years of the Buhari administration. Similarly, Saleh (2021) found that although the formal process of leadership recruitment was governed by constitutional provisions and the Senate Standing Orders, the actual outcome was influenced by individual political ambition, party politics and the conduct of legislators during the election. These findings indicate that formal institutional rules alone cannot adequately explain legislative leadership selection.

The emergence of Saraki and Dogara also demonstrated the importance of cross-party coalition-building. Legislators who were dissatisfied with the APC's preferred candidates were able to mobilise support across party lines, thereby creating an alternative coalition capable of determining the outcome of the leadership election (Demarest, 2021). The role of the opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) was particularly significant because PDP legislators supported the emergence of leaders who were not the preferred candidates of the governing party (Saleh, 2021). Consequently, the 8th Assembly provides empirical evidence that legislative leadership selection may involve bargaining and coalition-building that transcend formal party boundaries.

However, the literature on the 2015 leadership contest has an important limitation. Much of the early evidence consisted of contemporary political analyses and institutional commentaries rather than systematic empirical investigations based on legislators' own accounts of their voting decisions. Consequently, although existing studies identify party conflict, individual ambition and cross-party alliances as important factors, they do not adequately establish the relative influence of each factor or explain how they interacted during the selection process (Saleh, 2021).

The Senate Presidency: Saraki's Emergence

The plan unravelled dramatically on the morning of 9 June 2015. Senator Bukola Saraki, a former governor of Kwara State and an aspirant who had lost the party's informal endorsement process, arrived at the National Assembly complex earlier than his rivals,

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together with a bloc of APC senators associated with the so-called 'Like Minds' group and the near-total complement of PDP senators, who had reportedly resolved the night before to back Saraki's candidacy (allAfrica, 2015a; Vanguard News, 2015). At the National Assembly's own account of the day's proceedings, Senator Ahmed Rufa'i Sani nominated Saraki for the Senate Presidency, the nomination was seconded, no further nomination was made on the floor, and Saraki was declared elected unopposed as the thirteenth President of the Nigerian Senate, succeeding David Mark (National Assembly of Nigeria, 2015). Senator Ike Ekweremadu of the PDP was subsequently re-elected Deputy Senate President for a third term, defeating APC's Ali Ndume by 54 votes to 20 among the 75 senators present for that particular contest (allAfrica, 2015a).

The manner of Saraki's emergence caused immediate and lasting controversy. Senior APC figures, including Bola Tinubu and the party's national leadership, publicly rejected the legitimacy of the process, with one prominent party spokesman describing it as 'a clear transgression of both the tenets of democracy and party politics' and insisting that the process could not confer legitimacy on the elected Senate President (allAfrica, 2015b). The presidency's own media aide characterised Saraki's methods as underhand (allAfrica, 2015b). Nigerian press coverage in the following days characterised the episode variously as a 'bloodless coup' against the APC leadership (The News, 2019) and as an instance in which Saraki and his allies 'outfoxed' the party's establishment through hard overnight negotiations and intrigue (Vanguard News, 2015). What is not in dispute is the basic sequence of events: an aspirant who lacked his party's formal endorsement secured the most powerful office in the Senate by assembling a cross-party coalition that bypassed his own party's internal preference entirely.

The Speakership: Dogara's Emergence

A parallel drama unfolded in the House of Representatives on the same day. Honourable Yakubu Dogara, representing Bauchi State, contested the Speakership against the APC's preferred candidate, Femi Gbajabiamila. After what was reported as roughly two hours of voting, Dogara emerged victorious, polling 182 votes against Gbajabiamila, a margin of only eight votes above the simple majority required under the Constitution. Honourable Yusuf Sulaiman Lasun of the APC subsequently emerged as Deputy Speaker, defeating the party's preferred candidate for that position, Honourable Tahir Monguno, by 203 votes to 153 (allAfrica, 2015a). As with the Senate Presidency, Dogara's victory depended on a coalition that cut across party lines, drawing support from PDP members of the House alongside a faction of APC members who were unwilling to accept the party's internally brokered outcome.

Consequences for Governance

The manner in which the 8th Assembly's leadership emerged set the tone for a tenure marked by persistent friction between the National Assembly and both the APC's national leadership and the Buhari presidency. Because Saraki and Dogara owed their positions substantially to a coalition that included the opposition PDP rather than to the ruling party's own structures, the APC's national leadership found itself with markedly reduced capacity to compel legislative cooperation on the presidency's agenda through party discipline alone (Jombo & Fagbadebo, 2023; Sani, 2025). This dynamic manifested in repeated and highly publicised episodes of confrontation, including protracted disputes over budget passage, allegations and counter-allegations concerning the authenticity of the Senate's own standing rules, and a prolonged criminal prosecution of Saraki on asset-declaration charges that many observers interpreted as an attempt by his political adversaries to remove him from office through the courts rather than through the ballot (allAfrica, 2015b; The News, 2019). By the end of its term, the 8th Assembly's relationship with the executive had come to be characterised, in much of the Nigerian press and in academic commentary, as one of the most fractious in the history of the Fourth Republic, a pattern that political scientists studying executive-legislative relations in Nigeria have long identified as a recurring feature of the country's presidential system when the two arms of government are not aligned around a common leadership bargain (Aiyede, 2005; Baba, 2019).

LEADERSHIP SELECTION IN THE 9TH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY (2019–2023)

The APC's national leadership entered the 2019 electoral cycle determined not to repeat the experience of 2015. From the earliest stages after the February 2019 general elections, the party made unusually explicit and public its preference for Ahmad Lawan as Senate President and Femi Gbajabiamila as Speaker, the very two candidates who had been denied these offices in 2015 (PM News, 2019). The 2019 transition to the 9th National Assembly provides a particularly important comparative case because the outcome differed substantially from that of 2015. Ahmad Lawan emerged as Senate President, while Femi Gbajabiamila became Speaker of the House of Representatives. Both candidates were strongly supported by the APC leadership and were consistent with the party's preferred leadership arrangement (Saleh, 2025).

The emergence of Lawan and Gbajabiamila indicates that the APC had become more effective at coordinating its legislative caucus by 2019. Unlike in 2015, when the party's preferred candidates were defeated, the party was able to mobilise sufficient legislative support to secure its preferred candidates in both chambers (Saleh, 2025). This suggests that party discipline and organisational coordination may have been stronger determinants of leadership selection in 2019 than they had been in 2015.

However, the 2019 election does not demonstrate the complete disappearance of legislative agency. Ali Ndume challenged Lawan for the Senate Presidency, while Umar Bago contested against Gbajabiamila for the Speakership. The existence of these alternative

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candidates demonstrates that individual ambition and intra-party competition remained important even under stronger party coordination (Saleh, 2025). The critical difference, therefore, appears to concern the relative capacity of the ruling party to coordinate legislators rather than the complete elimination of individual political ambition.

This distinction is important for the present study because it suggests that party influence should be conceptualised as variable rather than absolute. Party endorsement may be ineffective where legislators possess strong incentives and organisational capacity to resist it, but it may become effective where party leadership successfully coordinates caucuses, candidates and political incentives.

The Senate Presidency: Lawan's Consensus Victory

Despite this internal resistance, Ndume ultimately proceeded to a floor contest against Lawan on the day of inauguration, 11 June 2019, rather than withdrawing entirely. The outcome was decisive: Lawan secured 79 votes to Ndume's 28 (PM News, 2019). The APC's national publicity secretary characterised the result as a triumph of party politics and of internal democracy anchored on consensus-building, explicitly contrasting it with what he described as the lawlessness and impunity of the minority party's role in 2015 (PM News, 2019). Senator Ovie Omo-Agege of the APC was elected Deputy Senate President, marking a further departure from the 2015 pattern in which the Deputy Senate Presidency had gone to a PDP senator (allAfrica, 2015d). For the first time since the return to civilian rule, the ruling party controlled both the Senate Presidency and Deputy Senate Presidency simultaneously going into a new Assembly, a configuration made possible precisely because the party had learned to coordinate its internal succession process far more tightly than it had in 2015.

The Speakership: Gbajabiamila's Emergence

In the House of Representatives, Femi Gbajabiamila, the APC's preferred candidate and the very man defeated by Dogara in 2015, secured the Speakership at the same inauguration on 11 June 2019, together with Honourable Ahmed Idris Wase as Deputy Speaker (NASS, 2019). Nigerian press coverage of the contest noted that Gbajabiamila's path to the Speakership was smoothed in part by strategic accommodations reportedly reached with elements of the opposition, suggesting that even a largely consensual, party-endorsed emergence still required a degree of cross-party bargaining, though of a fundamentally different character and scale from the coalition that had propelled Dogara to victory four years earlier (PressReader, 2019). Unlike in 2015, however, the APC's own candidate ultimately prevailed with the party's institutional weight squarely behind him from the outset, rather than in spite of it.

Consequences for Governance

The 9th Assembly's leadership, having emerged through a process closely coordinated with, and substantially at the initiative of, the presidency, adopted an explicitly conciliatory posture toward the executive throughout its tenure. Senate President Lawan himself described the Assembly's approach as 'a friendly but professional approach to executive-legislature relations focused on a harmonious working relationship based on mutual respect, consultation, cooperation, collaboration and partnership' (TheCable, 2023). This posture yielded, by the leadership's own account, substantial gains in legislative throughput: Lawan reported that by November 2021 approximately 2,500 bills had been introduced across both chambers, with 769 in the Senate and 1,634 in the House of Representatives (Premium Times, 2021). Comparative figures cited by Assembly leadership indicated that 84 acts had been assented to by President Buhari during his tenure through the two Assemblies he presided over, compared with 82 for Olusegun Obasanjo across eight years, 38 for Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, and 40 for Goodluck Jonathan (Premium Times, 2021). By July 2022, further figures put the number of bills introduced in the Senate alone at 874, of which 162 had been passed and 104 assented to by the president, a total the Assembly's leadership described as significantly higher than that of the preceding five Assemblies combined on a chamber-by-chamber comparison (Blueprint Newspapers, 2023a).

Notwithstanding these figures, the 9th Assembly's close alignment with the executive attracted persistent public criticism. A former Senate deputy leader, Abdul Ningi, publicly described the 9th National Assembly under Lawan's leadership as a rubber stamp of the Buhari presidency, a characterisation the Senate's own leadership vigorously and repeatedly denied (ThisDay, 2022a; ThisDay, 2022b). At a public forum convened by the National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies, participants including the chairman of the Academic Staff Union of Universities at the University of Abuja cautioned the Assembly's leadership against what they termed its 'same page relationship' with the executive, arguing that the constitutional role of the legislature in a presidential system was precisely to check, and not merely to facilitate, the executive (Blueprint Newspapers, 2021). Both Lawan and Gbajabiamila responded to this criticism directly and on multiple occasions, insisting that the legislature had not been established to confront the executive but to complement it for the sake of good governance, and characterising the 'rubber stamp' label as a mischaracterisation of what they termed a legitimately harmonious, rather than subservient, relationship (Blueprint Newspapers, 2023a; Blueprint Newspapers, 2023b).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Having reconstructed the emergence of leadership in each Assembly separately, this section undertakes a systematic comparison across the five analytical dimensions introduced in section four: mode of emergence, party supremacy versus legislative autonomy, executive-legislature relations, and legislative productivity.

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LEADERSHIP RECRUITMENT AND LEGISLATIVE AUTONOMY IN THE 8TH AND 9TH SENATES

A particularly significant recent contribution is Saleh's comparative study of leadership recruitment and legislative autonomy in Nigeria's 8th and 9th Senates. The study examines the political processes surrounding the recruitment of Senate leaders and links the manner of leadership emergence to subsequent legislative autonomy (Saleh, 2025).

The study argues that leadership recruitment within the National Assembly remains vulnerable to political manipulation and that the circumstances surrounding the emergence of legislative leaders can influence the degree of autonomy subsequently exercised by the legislature (Saleh, 2025). The comparison between the Saraki-led 8th Senate and the Lawan-led 9th Senate is particularly important because the former emerged against the preference of the executive and governing party, while the latter was more closely aligned with the preferences of the ruling political establishment (Saleh, 2025).

This finding strengthens the argument that leadership selection is not merely an administrative or procedural exercise. The political origins of legislative leaders can shape their subsequent institutional orientation and relationship with the executive (Saleh, 2025). Nevertheless, the study focuses primarily on the Senate and on the consequences of leadership recruitment for legislative autonomy. It therefore leaves room for a broader study incorporating the House of Representatives and examining the determinants of leadership selection as the primary dependent variable.

Party Supremacy versus Legislative Autonomy

This difference in mode of emergence reflects a deeper and more consequential difference in the balance struck between party supremacy and the constitutional principle of legislative independence embodied in Section 50 of the Constitution. The 8th Assembly's leadership contest represented, on one reading, an assertion of the free legislative mandate of individual members against the disciplinary claims of the party apparatus, a reading consistent with commentary suggesting that the Constitution recognises both party supremacy in the general democratic process and a free mandate for individually elected representatives, without clearly subordinating the latter to the former in matters of internal legislative organisation (Academia.edu, 2021). The 9th Assembly's leadership contest represented the opposite tendency: a decisive reassertion of party supremacy, backed by the direct intervention of the sitting president, over any residual claim to an unconstrained individual mandate on the part of aspiring legislators. Sani's (2025) analysis of party supremacy and party discipline within the APC across this period supports this reading, arguing that the party's failure to enforce discipline in 2015 was a proximate cause of the governance difficulties that followed, difficulties which the party's leadership was determined to avoid repeating in 2019 even at the cost of visibly overriding the preferences of dissenting members such as Ndume.

Executive–Legislature Relations

The consequences of these differing modes of emergence for subsequent executive–legislature relations were substantial and well documented. Because the 8th Assembly's leadership owed its position to a coalition that included the opposition PDP rather than to the ruling APC's own structures, the Buhari presidency found itself dealing with a National Assembly leadership that could not simply be directed through ordinary party channels, a situation that scholars of Nigeria's executive–legislative relations have identified as characteristic of periods of institutional friction between the two arms of government (Aiyede, 2005; Baba, 2019; Jombo & Fagbadebo, 2023). The 9th Assembly, by contrast, having emerged through a process the presidency itself had shaped, adopted an explicitly cooperative posture from its inauguration onward, a posture its own leadership described in terms of harmony, mutual respect, and partnership (TheCable, 2023). Whether this cooperative posture represented a healthy restoration of functional government or an unhealthy erosion of the legislature's independent check on executive power is precisely the question that animated the recurring public debate over whether the 9th Assembly constituted a 'rubber stamp' institution (Premium Times, 2021; ThisDay, 2022a; Blueprint Newspapers, 2021).

Legislative Productivity and Institutional Performance

A purely quantitative comparison of legislative output favours the 9th Assembly by a considerable margin, at least according to figures cited by its own leadership and by the presidency. The 84 acts assented to during the Buhari presidency, spanning both the 8th and 9th Assemblies but concentrated heavily in the more cooperative later period, compares favourably with the 40 acts assented to under Jonathan and the 38 under Yar'Adua, though the comparison with Obasanjo's 82 acts across two full terms is closer than the Assembly leadership's own framing suggested (Premium Times, 2021). The 9th Assembly's leadership also pointed to the passage of major legislation that had eluded previous Assemblies for years, most notably the Petroleum Industry Act and the amended Electoral Act of 2022, which introduced electronic transmission of results and direct party primaries. However, this productivity narrative must be read alongside the countervailing scholarly concern, articulated by Olaniyi (2023) in relation to the 7th and 8th Assemblies but equally applicable here, that an executive–legislature relationship which becomes 'too accommodating' may enhance the passage of policy favoured by the executive while simultaneously compromising the legislature's oversight function. Indeed, the Petroleum Industry Act's passage in 2021 was itself subsequently clouded by credible allegations, reported in the Nigerian and international press, that some legislators had received payments in connection with its advancement, a controversy that illustrates precisely the kind of oversight failure that critics of the 'rubber stamp' characterisation warned against.

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It is also important to note that raw bill-passage counts are an imperfect measure of legislative institutional health, since they say nothing about the substantive quality of scrutiny applied to executive proposals before passage, nor about the volume and rigour of oversight activity directed at ministries, departments, and agencies independent of bill-making. The 8th Assembly, notwithstanding its lower headline output of assented acts, was more frequently associated in contemporaneous reporting with public, adversarial forms of oversight, including budget disputes and public confrontations with executive appointees, which, whatever their political motivations, are themselves a recognised function of a legislature operating a genuine check on executive power (allAfrica, 2015b; The News, 2019).

DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

The comparison developed in this article carries several implications for the broader study of democratic consolidation in Nigeria and in similarly structured presidential democracies elsewhere in Africa. First, it demonstrates that the formal constitutional guarantee of legislative independence in the selection of presiding officers, however clearly stated in Section 50 of the Constitution, offers only a limited constraint on the capacity of a determined and well-resourced executive to shape legislative leadership outcomes when it chooses to invest the necessary political capital in doing so. The 9th Assembly's experience shows that a sitting president, acting through the machinery of a dominant party, can substantially pre-empt the kind of open floor contest that characterised 2015, converting what the Constitution frames as an internal legislative election into what is, in practice, closer to an executive appointment ratified by a compliant legislative majority.

Second, the comparison suggests that the trade-off between legislative independence and legislative productivity, at least as productivity is conventionally measured through bill-passage counts, may be a real and not merely rhetorical trade-off in the Nigerian context. The 9th Assembly's higher reported legislative output coincided with, and was arguably enabled by, its leadership's closer alignment with the executive, while the 8th Assembly's more independent, and at times openly confrontational, posture coincided with a comparatively lower headline output of assented legislation. This is not to suggest that legislative independence necessarily produces poor legislative performance, nor that executive alignment necessarily produces good legislative performance; rather, it is to suggest that the two values, independence and productivity as popularly measured, do not automatically move together, and that a legislature's leadership faces genuine institutional pressure to choose between prioritising one or the other, at least under the current configuration of party and executive power in Nigeria.

Third, and most fundamentally, the comparison underscores the continuing weakness of internal party democracy as an institution in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, a weakness extensively documented in the broader literature on Nigerian political parties (Madueke, 2026; Albert, 2005). Neither the 2015 nor the 2019 leadership contest was resolved through a genuinely open, contestable internal party primary process whose outcome the party's elected members then simply ratified on the floor of the National Assembly. In 2015, the party's own informal endorsement process was simply overridden by a rival coalition; in 2019, the party's endorsement process, while nominally more successful, was itself heavily shaped by direct presidential intervention rather than by any bottom-up democratic mechanism internal to the party. In neither case did Nigeria's National Assembly leadership emerge through a process that scholars of party institutionalisation would recognise as robust internal democracy (Huntington, 1968; Madueke, 2026).

These findings also speak to a normative question that runs through the Nigerian public debate on the 9th Assembly specifically: is a harmonious executive–legislature relationship, of the kind Lawan and Gbajabiamila repeatedly defended, compatible with the checks-and-balances function that a presidential system assigns to the legislature (TheCable, 2023; Blueprint Newspapers, 2023a)? The evidence assembled in this article suggests that the answer depends substantially on how leadership emerged in the first instance. A legislature whose leadership was installed through, and remains beholden to, direct executive intervention faces a structural incentive to interpret 'harmony' in ways that minimise friction with the very executive that installed it, an incentive that a legislature whose leadership emerged independently of, or even in defiance of, executive preference does not face in the same way. This structural difference, rather than the personal dispositions of Lawan, Gbajabiamila, Saraki, or Dogara individually, offers the most parsimonious explanation for the sharply differing character of executive–legislature relations across the two Assemblies compared in this study.

A further implication concerns the position of ordinary backbench legislators, whose experience of leadership selection has received comparatively little attention in the public debate but who bear the practical consequences of both models examined here. Under the 8th Assembly's contested model, individual senators and representatives who backed the eventual winners found themselves rewarded with committee chairmanships and other positions of influence, while those who had backed the losing, party-endorsed candidates faced a more difficult four years of marginalisation within a chamber leadership they had actively opposed (Vanguard News, 2015; The News, 2019). Under the 9th Assembly's consensus model, this particular source of internal division was largely avoided, since almost all APC legislators, whatever their private preferences, could plausibly claim to have supported the party's endorsed candidates once the presidency's preference became clear. This suggests that one underappreciated benefit of the more centralised, executive-orchestrated mode of emergence may be a reduction in the kind of intra-chamber factionalism that

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complicated the 8th Assembly's internal management throughout its tenure, even as that same centralisation reduced the chamber's collective willingness to assert itself against the executive on matters of substantive policy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has compared the emergence of legislative leadership in Nigeria's 8th and 9th National Assemblies, arguing that the two episodes illustrate a fundamental and unresolved tension in Nigeria's Fourth Republic between the constitutional principle of legislative independence in the selection of presiding officers and the practical reality of party supremacy, particularly when a determined executive chooses to assert it. In 2015, that tension resolved in favour of a cross-party, legislature-centred coalition that produced an independent, but persistently confrontational, Senate Presidency and Speakership under Saraki and Dogara. In 2019, the same underlying tension resolved in the opposite direction, in favour of a party- and executive-centred consensus that produced a more cooperative, and by conventional measures more productive, but also more executive-aligned leadership under Lawan and Gbajabiamila. Both outcomes were shaped less by the formal constitutional text than by the informal mechanisms of elite bargaining and godfatherism that continue to characterise Nigerian party politics more broadly.

Several recommendations follow from this analysis. First, the National Assembly should consider codifying, within its own standing orders and possibly through further constitutional amendment, clearer and more transparent procedures for the nomination of presiding officers, reducing the scope for both cross-party ad hoc coalitions of the kind seen in 2015 and executive-orchestrated pre-emption of the kind seen in 2019. Second, political parties, and the APC in particular given its dominance of the period under review, should be encouraged, through both internal reform and external regulatory pressure from the Independent National Electoral Commission, to develop more genuinely democratic internal mechanisms for resolving leadership succession questions before they reach the floor of the National Assembly, so that whichever candidate ultimately prevails does so through a process that commands broad internal legitimacy rather than through either insurgency or presidential fiat. Third, civil society organisations, the media, and the academic community should continue to develop more rigorous, multidimensional metrics for assessing legislative performance that go beyond simple bill-passage counts to capture the quality and independence of legislative scrutiny, so that future debates over whether a given Assembly constitutes a 'rubber stamp' can be grounded in more systematic evidence than competing political narratives currently allow.

Finally, this comparative study points toward a broader research agenda. Future research could usefully extend this analysis to the 10th National Assembly, inaugurated in June 2023 under a different president and a reconfigured party landscape, to test whether the pattern of executive-orchestrated consensus that characterised the 9th Assembly's emergence has become an entrenched feature of Nigerian legislative politics or was instead a contingent response to the specific lessons the APC drew from 2015. Comparative research examining leadership selection processes in other African presidential systems with similarly weakly institutionalised party systems would also help to determine whether the dynamics identified in this Nigerian case are idiosyncratic or reflect a more general pattern in new democracies grappling with the unresolved tension between party supremacy and legislative independence.

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