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Managing Diversity in Nigeria's Fourth Republic National Assembly: Integrated Parties versus Ethno-Regional Balancing

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Since independence, Nigeria has adopted federalism to manage the country's deep ethno-regional divisions, but federalism has not averted instability and return to military rule in the past. This highlights the need for additional factors and mechanisms to secure and stabilize civilian rule in Nigeria. The country's ethnic party ban ensures that parties in power have a broad basis across the territory. Theoretically, these "integrated" parties are often argued to foster intergroup compromise and political stability. Yet in our case study of intergroup relations in Nigeria's National Assembly, we demonstrate that the country's broad-based parties do not play a strong role in organizing intergroup cooperation. Despite this, the Assembly has not experienced substantial policy gridlock. We argue that instead of integrated parties, ethno-regional balancing (i.e., a practice whereby key positions in parliament are allocated to different groupings) is a much more important stabilizing factor in Nigeria's federal parliament.

By providing different societal groups a degree of autonomy in a single state, federalism is recognized as an important tool for power-sharing and conflict prevention (e.g., Cederman, Hug, and Wucherpfennig 2022; Lijphart 1977). Nevertheless, calls for secession and violent conflict may (re-surface) (e.g., Erk and Anderson 2009; Keil and Alber 2020; Stepan 1999). Even in Western democracies, including Belgium and Canada, tensions between subnational units remain.

Scholars have hence argued that additional systemic features are necessary to promote stability in federal countries. For instance, broad-based parties that link regional and federal politicians' electoral prospects and foster compromise and stability (Filippov, Ordeshook, and Shvetsova 2004, 190–196; Stepan 1999, 19). These have been termed "federation-wide parties" (Okpanachi 2019, 621) or "integrated parties" in which "local and national parties and candidates rely on each other for their survival and success", cultivating national cooperation even when regional interests differ (Filippov, Ordeshook, and Shvetsova 2004, 191–192).

In this article, we contribute to the literature on integrated parties in federal regimes by focusing on the role of parties in managing ethno-regional divisions in Nigeria's National Assembly (NASS). This case offers an important new perspective to a line of scholarship that has so far focused mostly on established Western democracies. It also contributes to an emerging field of study concerning the organization of parliaments in sub-Saharan Africa and the factors that could improve their functioning in the face of executive dominance and weak accountability (Barkan 2009; Opalo 2018).

Within the latter field of study, broad-based parties have similarly been associated with political stability, in particular in case studies of Ghana and Kenya, two unitary countries with high levels of ethnic salience in politics. Osei and Malang (2018) find that Ghanaian MPs (Members of Parliament) most often interact on a regional basis, but within parties, MPs from the same ethnicity and region are not more likely to exchange, suggesting that parties are not internally divided across identity lines. Jensen and colleagues (2020) find that Kenyan MPs are more likely to vote with their party than their ethnic group. As many parties have a multi-ethnic character, this implies that parties may temper the salience of ethnicity in the parliamentary arena.

The case of Nigeria forms an important contribution to debates on the stabilizing role of broad-based parties because of its history of ethnic conflict and the extensive efforts undertaken by policymakers to manage ethnic diversity in the political arena, including the imposition of an ethnic party ban. As a result, Nigeria has been governed by broad-based, cross-ethnic parties since 1999. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) held the presidency until 2015, after which the presidency went to the All Progressives' Congress (APC). These parties remain the most dominant today, not only at the federal level, but also at the state and local level. The PDP and APC can thus be considered integrated, federation-wide parties (see Okpanachi 2019).

Furthermore, Nigeria's Fourth Republic parliament can be characterized as relatively assertive in policymaking. Many private bills are sponsored and passed, important constitutional and electoral changes have been made, and the executive has been challenged on important instances of corruption (Suberu 2018). In line with Suberu (2014), we also find that the NASS regularly showcases unity by being able to compromise on potentially divisive policies relating to resource allocation.

The combination of integrated parties and an active, unified parliament could lead to the expectation that ethnic tensions are managed through parties in Nigeria's National Assembly. Yet, in line with earlier research on the institutionalization of political parties in sub-Saharan Africa (Erdmann 2004; Riedl 2015, 41), we found that political parties had limited practical impact on the nature and content of policymaking. Instead, we suggest an alternative explanation

for the relative smooth functioning of Nigeria's parliament: the presence of ethno-regional balancing practices.

These practices entail that the Assembly leadership divides principal officer and committee positions in parliament across ethno-regional groups. This division builds on the constitutional principle of "federal character", which requires that government institutions recognize Nigeria's diversity. Yet, we argue that it is also strongly tied to interest politics as parliamentary positions provide access to budgetary resources and equal distribution across ethno-regional groups is perceived as the best way to retain power by the Assembly leadership. This system can stabilize parliamentary decision-making in the face of strong ethno-regional divisions by ensuring each group has a stake in the system.

Empirically, we rely on survey research, interviews, and archival research (e.g., legislative debates) from Nigeria's 8th NASS (2015–2019). We also conducted additional interviews with 9th NASS (2019–2023) Members of Parliament (MPs). We think that our results and findings go beyond a particular legislature and are relevant to explain and understand the practices and workings of Nigeria's Fourth Republic parliaments. In total, we surveyed 119 MPs, conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with MPs, several more interviews with legislative aides, clerks, and consultants, and inspected the debates on redistributive bills for both the 8th NASS House and Senate.¹

The article is structured as follows: In the next section, we describe the nature of ethno-regional divides in Nigeria and how Nigeria's National Assembly shows itself to be a place of mutual understanding and compromise. In subsequent sections, we focus on different possible explanations for this. We first investigate whether ethno-regional divisions are salient at the level of MPs. By finding evidence for these divisions, we argue that tensions are effectively managed within parliament. Next, we focus on the role of Nigeria's broad-based parties and find that they appear to play a limited role in steering policymaking and fostering compromises. We then turn to our alternative explanation focusing on ethno-regional balancing practices and how they foster collaborative relations among MPs. The final section reflects further on the findings.

Unity and Redistribution in Nigeria's National Assembly

Ethno-Regional Divisions on Resource Allocation

The origins of ethno-regional tensions in Nigeria have been discussed in detail elsewhere (e.g., Coleman 1963; Diamond 1982, 1983; Sklar 1963; Suberu 2001), so we restrict ourselves here to only a brief summary. At the federal level, tensions mainly revolve around the Hausa-Fulani,² the dominant group in the North, the Igbo in the South-East, and the Yoruba in the South-West. Minority groups tend

to feel suppressed vis-à-vis these three larger groups. Since the exploitation of oil, the minority groups in the South–South Niger Delta region have in particular agitated against marginalization. In our analysis, we primarily focus on geographical regions, but these regions are linked to specific ethnic identities, hence the choice for the term “ethno-regional” divisions. Furthermore, we recognize that these categories are to a certain extent reified, and that identity and interest formation are malleable processes, subject to shifts and internal divisions. We acknowledge this, but also show below that these categories shape political behavior in Nigeria.

Ethno-regional divides can overlap with religious differences that can lead to, for example, the inability of the NASS to protect girls from child marriage (Brimah 2014) or to controversy on themes such as population control (see Oyedele 2015). In this article, however, we focus in particular on ethno-regional divisions with regard to the thorny issues of fiscal federalism and redistribution.

Both horizontal allocation, or the allocation of resources across states, and vertical allocation, or the distribution of revenues across the federation tiers, are historically contested issues in Nigeria (Suberu 2001, 47–77). The North remains poorer than the South (see National Bureau of Statistics 2022) and hence would prefer more redistribution towards the Northern states in the federation. In addition, Northern politicians have often been in favor of a strong federal tier to reduce centrifugal tensions stemming from higher development levels in the South, and to allow for another mechanism of redistribution besides horizontal allocation (e.g., Suberu 2004 in Elemo 2018, 193–194). Richer states in the South would benefit from a horizontal allocation system in which the capacity to generate revenue internally is rewarded. States in the South–South argue for a higher share of oil revenues to be returned to them. In terms of vertical allocation, the Southern states generally prefer a weaker federal tier in favor of the states, stemming from historical suspicions that the federal state is an instrument of Northern domination.

With current revenue sharing formulas firmly in place, debates on resource allocation also revolve around how the federal level divides budgetary resources in practice. The constitutional principle of federal character commands the federal government to respect the diversity of the country in political and public service appointments (Demarest, Langer, and Ukiwo 2020). In addition, the government is required to distribute resources equitably across the states of the federation. Yet, across Nigeria, politicians and community leader commonly cry out against their (perceived) marginalization by the federal government and the lack of “federal presence” (institutions, projects etc.) (e.g., Agande 2017; Ebiri et al. 2017), often arguing that the president and his ministers skew resources to their own regions. Yet this contentious climate does not appear to be the rule in Nigeria’s federal parliament.

Redistribution and Compromise

"These arguments about marginalization in the media, they are to attract attention. I can go and make a speech in the media that my community is sidelined, politics is about making noise, it is for attention . . . Here we sit as colleagues, we tell each other the truth. Why do you say you are marginalized? You have three federal health centers, me too, so it is the same; we look at the numbers to assess" (MP1, APC/North, 9th NASS).³ Nigerian federal MPs generally agree that they demonstrate unity in parliament. They argue that they negotiate as colleagues to ensure equity in resource allocation, but also commonly cite examples of how they have overcome ethno-regional divides. This includes the well-known example of Senator George Sekibo from the South-South being the first to introduce a motion for the creation of a North-East Development Commission (NEDC) in the 8th NASS to help reconstruct the zone after the ravages of the Boko Haram insurgency.

This view is in line with earlier observations by [Suberu \(2014\)](#), who argued that the Assembly often shows itself to be a protector of national unity. According to him, this can be seen from the adaptations made to the president's initial proposal for the Niger Delta Development Commission or NDDC (2000). The Assembly changes were more favorable towards the Niger Delta by redistributing more resources towards the region. When the President refused to sign the bill into law, the NASS did so by approving it with a two-thirds majority. Other initiatives concern the repeal of the Nigerian Pilgrims Act (1989), which only catered to Muslims and its replacement by the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria Act (2006) and the Nigerian Christian Pilgrim Commission Act (2007).

The argument is also supported by our analysis of data on bill sponsorship in the eighth Assembly, drawn from the Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC) bill tracking website.⁴ In [table 1](#) we compare the passage rates of redistributive bills aimed at establishing new institutions (e.g., educational or health facilities) in a specific region of the country versus non-redistributive bills.

As [table 1](#) shows, redistributive bill sponsorship is relatively rare, which can indicate that MPs do limit themselves in attempts to attract resources to their regions through lawmaking. For instance, MPs also mention that many of these bills are "feel good bills, they are a campaign tool but will never see the light of day. It can be announced in the constituency and people will think of jobs and development" (MP2, APC/South-South, 9th NASS). Hence lawmakers do not always actively seek to get their bill passed. Still, in comparison, the passage rates of redistributive bills are higher than those of non-redistributive bills, suggesting they do not lead to blockage or gridlock ([Bowling and Ferguson 2001](#)). It must be said, however, that bill passage in parliament is not always followed by presidential assent, and many bills are carried over to new legislatures awaiting presidential approval (or a two-thirds parliamentary majority).

Table 1 Passage rates of non-redistributive and redistributive bills

	Senate	House
Non-redistributive bills sponsored	606	1367
Redistributive bills sponsored	87	118
Non-redistributive bills passed	152 (25.08%)	295 (21.58%)
Redistributive bills passed	47 (54.02%)	32 (27.12%)

The debates on these bills are also revealing. In line with [Suberu’s \(2014\)](#) findings on the NDDC, for instance, we find evidence for the NASS’ ability to compromise on redistribution in the framework of the NEDC. The NEDC bill proposed that part of the funding for the commission would come from federally accrued VAT revenues. This initiative was accompanied by arguments that “We had the NDDC . . . and I believe that Commission has done quite a lot to improve a lot of the people in the Niger-Delta and if that can happen in Niger-Delta, it will and must definitely happen in the North-East” (Lagos MP, HB158).⁵ Also when a Lagos Senator raised the following concern “I do not want to look at it from the angle of Lagos being the largest contributor to the VAT, but the fact remains that this three per cent is on the high side,” agreement was found after reassurance by the Senate President: “So, the VAT even if this year’s budget cannot be more than N800billion, when you now look at it as 3 per cent, the figures honestly are not up to that” (Kwara MP, SB31).

Another example of reciprocity similar to the Haij and Pilgrims Acts ([Suberu 2014](#)) is found in the debate on an Erosion Control and Prevention Commission: “The problem of erosion is more catastrophic in the Southern part of Nigeria while desertification is in the North but with the enactment of the Green Wall Act by the National Assembly, the issue of desertification was laid to rest” (Imo MP, SB32), followed by a Southern MP acknowledging that “communities in the South East, South-South and the South-West have for over the years been cut off . . . What we can do as a Parliament is to give a very strong support to this Bill” (Kaduna MP, SB32).

Besides reciprocity, MPs frequently make claims to the common good to avoid appearing parochial when proposing a new institution in their zone: “This University is a national university, it is not only made for the Ijaw people, it is not only made for Delta State, it is not only made for the riverine people. It is the hope of manpower development foundation for all Nigerians, so all Nigerians will be employed” (Bayelsa MP, SB295). And: “This institution is being attended by people across board both within each ethnic group that is in Enugu, not just for common people that are of Enugu state” (Enugu MP, HB1054).

As highlighted by the interview quote at the beginning of this subsection, there is also a need for good argumentation to obtain buy-in on bills for new federal institutions. A proposal for a new institution is often accompanied by some claim of inequality to appeal to other MPs' sense of fairness: "As we speak there is no Federal presence in terms of Polytechnic or Technical Education in Abia State while some States have two or more" (Abia MP, HB1257). Such appeals are also explicitly asked for. As the Senate President remarked: "It has become necessary that we really have to ask our Committee on Tertiary Institutions to guide us; because just this Session alone we have requests for either Polytechnics, Universities, Colleges of Education ... The way it is going, it will get to a stage where we will not have any resources to be able to fund these ... We need to be guided by either some kind of policy or some kind of equitable distribution" (Kwara MP, SB407). This distribution was subsequently set out by the Committee, which mapped the presence of federal educational institutes per state and senatorial district to find gaps.

Agreement is not always reached, however. Yet even in cases where no broad agreement can be found, informal mechanisms or practices may prevent escalation. For instance, MPs rarely vote against each other's bills or motions: "there are so many issues and scarce resources, there is difference between need and want. . . . We can keep a proposal in abeyance, but we do not deny it. [Interviewer question] Yes, there is no fuss like this, don't deny it but let it die down quietly. Don't disagree directly, be polite, you can say if resources come" (MP3, PDP/South-East, 9th NASS). If MPs disagree and abeyance fails, MPs can also encourage a colleague to withdraw their proposal for further consultation. A good example is the response to an attempt by a Kogi MP to set up a new maritime university in his state: "Now to begin to think of having another Maritime University is necessary and in order; but I want to add that my good friend and colleague did not make wide consultation before putting up this Bill. Already as we speak, we have a Federal University newly established at Lokoja" (Kano MP, SB725/389). It is only after the senator refused to withdraw that the bill was rejected.

The second example of a rejected bill indicates that tensions can resurface if the situation is not managed well. A bill for a South-East Development Commission (SEDC), sponsored by South-Eastern lawmakers, went for a second reading in the House but led to a highly tensious debate concerning different interpretations of the Biafra civil war (HB915). The bill was subsequently rejected by a majority of predominantly Northern lawmakers. A main lesson for the sponsors was that there was perhaps not enough prior consultation with other zones: "When you present a bill, you are expected to lobby; this just means convincing your colleagues. The bill failed and part of the criticism was that there was insufficient lobbying in advance" (MP4 PDP/South-East, 8/9th NASS, 2017). In the Senate, the debate came later. It was not contentious, Northern lawmakers spoke in favor of the initiative, and the

bill was passed (SB303). The SEDC bill was eventually also approved by the House in the 9th NASS. This demonstrates that the resurfacing of ethno-regional tensions forms the exception rather than the rule in parliament and that there is also a learning process in managing tensions. It also shows that ethno-regional divisions remain salient among Nigerian MPs. We delve further into this topic in the next section.

Contested Federalism at the Elite Level

Some scholars have suggested that ethno-regional divisions may not actually be strongly present at the elite level in Nigeria and that elites rather use and strengthen these divisions at the mass level for their own power-attainment and rent-seeking purposes (see [Sklar 1967](#)). In contrast, we argue that ethno-regional divisions appear very “real,” also at elite levels. We draw on survey and interview data from 8th NASS MPs to demonstrate this and provide further support for the claim that tensions do need to be managed. Survey and interview data have adequate variation across regions and parties (see [table A1, Appendix](#)).

We used four agree–disagree statements, measured on a five-point scale, to gauge MPs positions towards fiscal federalism. We investigate to what extent regional differences exist between MPs’ opinions, regrouping the three Northern geopolitical zones for this analysis as they did not show stark internal differences. Higher scores indicate higher agreement with the statement. [Table 2](#) presents the findings.

With regard to horizontal allocation, Northern MPs are more in favor of resources going towards poorer states, in line with our expectations. Similar dynamics apply to the South-East, perhaps because many politicians do not consider the region fully recovered from the damages of the Biafran civil war. The oil-producing areas in the South-South, as well as the richer South-West are on average more in opposition to redistribution. South-South MPs also continue to argue that the distribution of oil revenues is unfair in Nigeria. Regarding vertical allocation, we find that Northern MPs are more negative towards the state level, while the South is more positive, especially the South-South, and South-West.⁶ This is in line with historical positions on resource allocation (see above). If we disaggregate responses by party, we find that these differences appear similarly present within Nigeria’s broad-based political parties (see [table A2 Appendix](#)).

Divisions are even more salient when we take the spontaneous reactions to statements on resource allocation into account. For instance, a Northern lawmaker argued that “all states currently get the same, population is taken into account but the needs insufficiently. If Lagos gets 10 million for education, then [Northern state] also, but Lagos already has good infrastructure, while the needs are higher here” (MP5, APC/North, 8th NASS). A Southern representative adhering to the

Table 2 Average scores on resource allocation items by region

Statement	North (N = 67)	South-East (N = 13)	South-South (N = 15)	South-West (N = 23)
Rich states should contribute to the development of poorer states ^a	3.13 (0.19)	3.23 (0.46)	2.13 (0.31)	2.57 (0.32)
The current distribution of oil revenues in Nigeria is fair ^b	2.69 (0.18)	2.54 (0.39)	1.40 (0.27)	2.78 (0.31)
More funds should be allocated to state governments ^c	3.12 (0.18)	3.69 (0.36)	4.47 (0.17)	4.17 (0.23)
State governments are more effective in advancing development than the federal government ^d	2.58 (0.19)	3.54 (0.39)	4.47 (0.17)	4.22 (0.26)

Notes: Standard errors in brackets. Independent t-tests, results hold when assuming unequal variances (no correction for multiple testing).

^aNorth vs SS and SS vs SE significant at 90 percent level.

^bSS vs all other zones significant at 90 percent level.

^cNorth vs SS and SW, SS vs SE significant at 90 percent level.

^dNorth vs all other zones, SS vs SE significant at 90 percent level.

efficiency principle states: “There are no poor states, every state has something, but it should be cultivated. The current system of allocation via the federal government is the worst system because it does not create incentives for states to grow themselves” (MP6, PDP/South-South, 8th NASS).

In addition, the distribution of oil revenues remains highly sensitive. While oil-producing states receive 13 percent derivation from federally collected oil revenues, MPs from the region challenge this: “13 percent derivation means 87 percent deprivation! The wealth comes from you, it is taken from you, and then they give you 13 percent back as if you have been done a favour. That is exploitation.” (MP7, PDP/South-South, 8th NASS). “In the oil-producing states nothing is given back to the people. There is pollution, degradation, and nothing to show for oil money” (MP8, PDP/South-South, 8th NASS). Northerners would lament that “they get more even though the North has a higher population” (MP9, APC/North, 8th NASS) or “they get huge allocations but by getting so much money they got lazy, there is no real development” (MP10, APC/North, 8th NASS).

In some instances, the issue of redistribution also leads politicians to recount different historical perspectives: “Before oil, Nigerians were dependent on the North, its groundnut production, agriculture, and mineral resources. Now they want more for themselves” (MP11, APC/North, 8th NASS). Nonetheless, the North has never been the main economic region of the country, rather the South-West

with the production of cocoa (Helleiner 1964). The following Southern view on the other hand understates the low level of development in the North: “The balance of power is tilted against us since the British. They supported Northern leaders and skewed development to the North” (MP12, PDP/South-South, 8th NASS). These examples show that perceptions of unfairness and marginalization remain present across ethno-regional groups in parliament.

Political Parties and the Management of Ethno-Regional Tensions

Given the presence of broad, federation-wide parties in Nigeria, our first assumption was that parties play an important role in managing ethno-regional divisions in the NASS (Filippov, Ordeshook, and Shvetsova 2004). Yet in line with earlier research on party discipline in Nigeria (Egwu 2014, 235–236), including survey research in the framework of the African Legislatures Project (Lewis 2011), we find that parties play only a limited role in structuring policymaking.

Our survey included four agree–disagree statements on party discipline in the Assembly. The first two statements are positively formulated, meaning that higher agreement indicates more party discipline. The last two statements are negatively formulated. Analysis of responses first of all indicates that most MPs do not receive regular party instructions. This applies to both APC and PDP members but is somewhat higher for the PDP (see table 3). PDP members are also more likely to disagree with the need for party discipline. Only a slight majority of the respondents indicates that they do not vote against party lines. Note that voting behavior is difficult to verify as the assembly only uses “aye-nay” voting. Finally, most respondents indicate they would vote against party lines if a proposal clashes with their convictions. The question can be considered leading, and hence the response distribution is predictable, but note that we mainly included it to foresee the possibility of very strong party discipline.

Table 3 Percentage of respondents (strongly) disagreeing with party discipline statements, by party

Statement	APC (N = 71)	PDP (N = 46)
I regularly receive instructions from my party’s leadership on how to vote in the National Assembly	66.20	80.44
Members of the National Assembly who are of the same political party should vote along party lines	38.03	54.35
I regularly vote against party lines	54.28	58.69
I would vote against the party line if a proposal clashes with my personal or religious convictions	14.70	28.89

The survey statements also elicited spontaneous responses from MPs that further support the idea of weak party discipline. Indeed, many MPs indicated that it was difficult to answer statements 2–4, simply because instructions or the development of party lines were so rare, e.g., “I disagree with statement 3, but that is because there is no party line” (MP13, PDP/South-West, 8th NASS). The lack of a party line was emphasized by APC members as well: “There is no APC input, no sense of direction. We are elected because of the party, but inside the assembly there is no party” (MP14, APC/North, 8th NASS). “There are no instructions from party leaders” (MP10, APC/North, 8th NASS).

The findings suggest that once in the Assembly, MPs receive little input from their parties. This is not to say that party politics do not play a role in the Assembly. Yet such dynamics are primarily centered on obtaining/safeguarding positions or factional support. For example, the election of a new PDP chairman in 2017 led to numerous informal meetings among PDP members. Meetings to find policy agreement appear less frequent.

A final piece of evidence that supports the argument that parties play a limited role in managing ethno-regional divides in the NASS relates to bill and motion co-sponsorship. Table 4 shows the extent of bill co-sponsorship in the 8th NASS. Interestingly, co-sponsorship does not occur often: less than 4 percent of bills are co-sponsored. This contrasts to the US Congress, for example, where about 50 percent of bills are co-sponsored (Fowler 2006, 458).

Research on parliaments in Western settings has generally shown that MPs primarily cooperate on the basis of party, but also that MPs from the same region are more likely to cooperate (Fischer et al. 2019). Findings from Nigeria, however, suggest that party-based co-sponsorship is not the dominant mode of cooperation. Moreover, regardless of strong ethno-regional divisions, relatively few bills and motions are co-sponsored between members from the same zone. Interregional cooperation—defined here as co-sponsorship across the broad North-South cleavage—is more common.

Furthermore, when North–South cooperation happens, this also tends to happen across party lines. Only a minority of North–South co-sponsorships are restricted to a specific party. This supports the view that ethno-regional cooperation in the Assembly is only to a limited extent structured or organized by political parties.

Alternative Explanation: Internal Ethno-Regional Balancing

Nigeria's Fourth Republic parties do not appear to have a strong influence on parliamentary politics. Yet, we do not find Nigerian MPs re-organizing into antagonistic ethno-regional groups in the absence of party structuring. By contrast, the Assembly has mostly been characterized by legislative assertiveness and inter-

Table 4 Co-sponsorship of bills and motions in Nigeria’s 8th National Assembly

	Senate	House
Private bills, total ^a	693	1485
Bills, co-sponsored	23	56
Bills, co-sponsored, within-party ^b	10	23
Bills, co-sponsored, within-zone	5	6
Bills, North-South cooperation	14	29
Cross-party	11	24
Within-party	3	5
Motions, total	348	1303
Motions, co-sponsored	101	134
Motions, co-sponsored, within-party	23	57
Motions, co-sponsored, within-zone	13	59
Motions, North-South cooperation	83	45
Cross-party	72	39
Within-party	11	6

^a11 bills were re-introduced after the president’s decline of assent. Only 1 of these affects our co-sponsorship statistics. Not including this bill, there are 55 co-sponsored bills in the House, and 28 North-South collaborations, of which 23 are cross-party sponsorships. Co-sponsorship statistics are not influenced by specific teams of MPs which co-sponsor a lot.

^bThe within-party and within-zone categories are not mutually exclusive.

group agreement. In this section, we argue that ethno-regional balancing within parliament fosters such agreement. We first discuss the characteristics of this system, then focus on how it promotes cooperation. We did not foresee questions on ethno-regional balancing in our initial survey and research on the 8th NASS. Yet after theorizing this alternative mechanism based on our initial research findings, we collected additional interview data from 9th NASS MPs to examine it further.

Ethno-Regional Balancing within the Assembly

In line with established democracies, the Nigerian parliament formally organizes along party lines as seen in the positions of majority and minority leader, and chief and minority whip. Yet, the Assembly also organizes along ethno-regional lines in the selection of leadership and committee positions. This practice can be related to the constitutional principle of “federal character”: “Because of federal character, selection is not based on merit but on ethnicity to have a good mix.” (MP15, PDP/ South-West, 8th NASS). “After the inauguration of the Senate President, we zone the available positions of Principal Officers. After that, the zone caucuses will sit

down and look at suitability and experience of candidates, then a vote is taken on those who wish to contest. The key positions are the Senate President and the Deputy Senate President then the remaining zones are taken up under the Principal Officers" (MP16, APC/North, 8th NASS). Zoning is the widespread practice of rotating or dividing positions based on ethno-regional origin in Nigeria.⁷

Adherence to ethno-regional balancing is reflected in the Fourth Republic Assembly leadership compositions. When two positions are available, the practice is to ensure that one goes to the North and one to the South. The same principle applies to the selection of a presidential and vice-presidential candidate. As can be seen from [table 5](#), the positions of Senate President/Speaker and deputy always ensure a North–South balance.

Data from the 8th NASS also demonstrates the broader adherence to balancing in the selection of principal officers (see [table 6](#)). The leadership of each chamber forms the committee of selection, which distributes committee chairmanship positions. This leads to a trickle-down effect to committee chairmanships ([table 7](#)). Each individual committee also includes MPs from all six geopolitical zones.

It is also important to note that while MPs may sometimes choose not to follow the party leadership's wishes with regard to the zonal division of positions, ethno-regional balancing as such remains widely respected. In 2011, the position of Speaker was zoned by the PDP to the South-West, and Deputy Speaker to the North-East, but the position of Speaker was ultimately won by Aminu Tambuwal from the North-West, and the position of Deputy by Emeka Ihedioha from the South-East ([LeVan 2019](#), 61). Both were able to convince a majority of the members to vote for them, rather than follow the party's wishes. In 2015, Bukola Saraki (North-Central) became Senate President instead of the APC's candidate Ahmad Lawan (North-East), and Yakubu Dogara (North-East) became Speaker instead of Femi Gbajabiamila (South-West). Both Saraki and Dogara were elected together with Southern deputies. In the 9th NASS, Lawan and Gbajabiamila were eventually elected to the position of Senate president and Speaker, respectively.

Cross-Cutting Collaboration in the Committees

Ethno-regional balancing in the committees is highly relevant given that it is through the committee system that MPs can achieve the aims most valuable to them. Most MPs agree that the real work in parliament takes place in the committees: "the committee is the engine room, here we are experts of our domain" (MP17, APC/North, 9th NASS). It is in the committees that agreements on bills are made, but committees also have substantial value for MPs through their oversight function: "Each committee does oversight of ministries,

Table 5 Leadership positions and zones in the Fourth Republic National Assemblies

	Fourth (1999–2003)	Fifth (2003–2007)	Sixth (2007–2011)	Seventh (2011–2015)	Eight (2015–2019)
SENATE					
Senate President	SE (1999)	SE (2003–2005)	NC (2007–2011)	NC (2011–2015)	NC (2015–2019)
	SE (1999–2000)	SE (2005–2007)			
	SE (2000–2003)				
Deputy President	NC (1999–2000)	NC (2003–2007)	SE (2007–2011)	SE (2011–2015)	SE (2015–2019)
	NC (2000–2003)				
HOUSE					
Speaker	NC (1999)	NW (2003–2007)	SW (2007)	NW (2011–2015)	NE (2015–2019)
	NC (1999–2003)		SW (2007–2011)		
Deputy Speaker	SS (1999–2003)	SS (2003–2007)	NC (2007)	SE (2011–2015)	SW (2015–2019)
			NE (2007–2011)		

Source: Own data and data drawn from [Uganwa \(2014, 287–385\)](#).

Table 6 Zonal distribution of the 8th Assembly leadership

Leadership position	Senate	House
President/Speaker	NC	NE
Deputy President/Speaker	SE	SW
Majority Leader	NE (2015–2017), NE (2017–2019)	SW
Dep. Majority Leader	NW	NC (2015–2017), NC (2018–2019)
Minority Leader	SS	SS
Dep. Minority Leader	NE	SE
Chief Whip	SW	NW
Dep. Chief Whip	SS	SS
Minority Whip	NC	NW
Dep. Minority Whip	SW	NE

Source: own data.

Table 7 Zonal distribution of the 8th Assembly committee chairmanships

	Senate chairman- ships (<i>N</i> = 76)	Member population Senate (<i>N</i> = 109)	House chairman- ships (<i>N</i> = 98)	Member population House (<i>N</i> = 360)
North-Central	14.47%	17.43%	18.37%	14.17%
North-East	17.11%	16.51%	13.27%	13.33%
North-West	22.37%	19.27%	21.43%	25.56%
South-East	14.47%	13.76%	17.35%	11.94%
South-South	15.79%	16.51%	14.29%	15.28%
South-West	15.79%	16.51%	15.31%	19.72%

Sources: own data. Members are counted as chairmen if they have been in that position for at least some time during the Assembly’s term. The data presented here only take into account the lawmakers who were first elected to the seat, but differences with the full sample or last-on-seat (2019) sample are minimal.

departments, and agencies. The committees give you access to them, you can lobby them for your constituents” (MP4 PDP/South-East, 8/9th NASS, 2017).

The committees allow MPs to direct federal government budgetary allocations to their own constituencies by lobbying for new projects in the appropriation bill, a phenomenon often referred to as “budget padding.” Many MPs argue that these projects are needed to ensure their own re-election and please their constituents: “My re-election depends on my constituency service” (MP18, PDP/South-East, 8th

NASS). An alternative view, however, is that rather than serving their constituents, committee links allow for rent-seeking as MPs use these positions to gain access to poorly monitored public contracts for their private businesses and those of political allies (Suberu 2018; Demarest 2021). This links in with broader patterns of prebendalism identified among Nigerian elites, by which access to the state primarily serves the purpose of personal rent-seeking (Joseph 1987). Regardless of the end-goal—constituency service or rent-seeking—ethno-regional balancing in the committee system fosters collaboration and compromise among MPs from different zones as they need each other to achieve their goals.

First, it is important to confirm that in committee activities as well, parties play only a minor role: “When it comes to these issues, parties are subsumed” (MP17, APC/North, 9th NASS). “Within committee there are no majority-opposition dynamics” (MP19, APC/North, 9th NASS). “Party affiliations are not important when it comes to getting projects. Here, it is your capacity to lobby” (MP20, APC/South-West, 9th NASS). “There is no argument around party lines. Once we walked out of the chamber as opposition because of insecurity but those are national issues, it does not apply to day-to-day work” (MP21, PDP/South-South, 9th NASS).

As parties do not provide vehicles for collaboration, MPs have to seek it through personal relations: “In parliament, lobbying is the most important, for bills, motions, projects, you need support to get anything done. If I need a road in my constituency, I can only go to the chairman of works, then the chairman of appropriation, then the chairman of finance. I have to lobby all of them ... Most cases are give and take. The chairman of works may have a problem that I can help with through my committee ... You need to know people to get what you want ... You need to talk with colleagues, see if you can get their support ... When elected, we receive 1 to 2 weeks of training. When you come in, you meet people, you exchange numbers, visit houses, hotel rooms for this purpose” (MP20, APC/South-West, 9th NASS). Given that MPs need the cooperation of other members and chairmen, ethno-regional balancing fosters compromise as MPs need to maintain collaborative relations across regions. After all, the members and chairmen one needs to lobby may be from other geopolitical zones and ethnicities.

Furthermore, as both House and Senate need to approve the budget, parallel committees in both chambers need to agree on all allocations. The chairmen of the Senate and the House frequently meet to negotiate allocations and find a consensus. The allocation of chairman positions across different zones can differ between the House and the Senate. Hence, between chambers as well, lobbying often occurs across ethno-regional lines.

Within a single committee, ethno-regional balancing encourages MPs to search for fair distribution: “My chairman is from the North, I am the vice from the South, we need to sit down as a team in preparation of the budget. When the

budget comes, we can tinker with it for 5-10 percent more ... If 10 percent amounts to 500 million, for example, we call the committee members. Maybe we say 250 to North and 250 to South, then maybe 50 per zone" (MP20, APC/South-West, 9th NASS).

Though it is not possible to fulfil all members' wishes: "You have to convince colleagues why this here and not there now. Some issues are not resolved so quickly. Life is give and take, politics is negotiations, it is not as easy at times. In some cases, members may not be too happy" (MP22, APC/North, 9th NASS). Yet ensuring spread across zones alleviates tensions: "The chairman will listen to the demands of all members. It is not possible to implement all demands and please everyone, but you try to divide on a geopolitical basis to include everyone and have a fair distribution" (MP23, APC/South-West, 8th NASS).

In this process, it is notable that most MPs state that the committees decide with consensus: "We make consensus decisions in the committee. If there's unity, stability, fairness, we are happy with that" (MP1, APC/North, 9th NASS). Even if consensus is not reached, at least a majority of members need to agree before a decision can go through as per the standing orders.

Furthermore, when MPs do not fully achieve their aims, the incentive for compromise remains because the process repeats itself on a yearly basis: "If there is no allocation they are not happy, but you can promise next year in the budget. You need that capacity to carry people along, otherwise it's a problem for you, leadership can change a chair at any time. Changes can be due to complaints by members on chairs not behaving in parliamentary way, only allocating to their own zone, not being available, but this does not happen often" (MP20, APC/South-West, 9th NASS).

Given that a chair is a highly coveted position, committee chairs are incentivized to abide by the principle of fair allocation: "Being a chairman makes you a boss, brings political clout, you are a mini-speaker in your own right" (MP4 PDP/South-East, 8/9th NASS, 2017). Being a chairman determines your benefit. A chairman could get a larger share of the available budget envelope than other committee members (Senior Legislative Aide, PDP/South-South, 9th NASS).

Ethno-Regional Balancing and Parliamentary Leadership

Ethno-regional balancing in the committee system fosters collaboration and compromise as it is only by lobbying a diverse set of colleagues that members can achieve their own aims of attracting federal budgetary allocations. The same logic applies to the Assembly leadership responsible for implementing this system: "The head of parliament has good opportunities to talk to MDAs to get something done" (MP20, APC/South-West, 9th NASS). "The leadership decides who gets what (MP4 PDP/South-East, 8/9th NASS, 2022). As the NASS leadership is able to

attract more resources than other members, they are incentivized to maintain their position.

Ethno-regional balancing is a conscious strategy to achieve this aim: “It is a deliberate decision to have representation from different geopolitical zones. This stabilizes the Assembly for the leadership. The leadership decides which positions go to which zones, but this discretion must be exercised wisely. It is best to have balance” (MP4 PDP/South-East, 8/9th NASS, 2021). “Last year, there were excess funds and every member benefitted ... Yes, all members, not just selected members, because at the end of the day a Speaker needs to survive” (MP4 PDP/South-East, 8/9th NASS, 2022). Indeed, the principal officers owe their position to a cross-cutting coalition of members that elected them and it is not uncommon for MPs from different zones and parties to stress their alliance with the Speaker or Senate President.

The logic of building an ethno-regional majority is clearly not supported. While it would in principle appear possible for the leadership to rely on specific zones, MPs clearly do not deem this behavior rational. For instance, one of the flaws identified in the First Republic was that the North had a demographic majority at the federal level (e.g., [Diamond 1983](#)). This is numerically speaking still the case as the North has more states that send representatives to the Senate and more constituencies that send members to the House ([table 6](#), see also [Nolte 2002](#)). Yet, no Fourth Republic leadership has deemed it viable to disregard ethno-regional balancing. The practice has strong support, not just because of general respect for federal character, but also because it is widely viewed as the best method to retain power.

This power is habitually under threat as new coalitions may arise and try to impeach the leadership. Past assemblies often saw changes in leadership, yet while the NASS leadership has generally been able to retain its position since the 6th Assembly (2011–2015), the possibility of usurpation remains: “The Speaker was under threat two or three times from other lawmakers. There was talk he was selling new committee chairmanships. Plans were being made to depose him, but he cancelled parliament in the name of the rising covid threat so they could not come together to plan the coalition against him. This gave him time to calm the situation” (NASS consultant, 2022).

Precisely because of existing ethno-regional divisions and common interests between MPs from a specific zone, zonal mobilization against a NASS leadership can be likely and particularly dangerous. Specific zones have mobilized in the past against Senate Presidents and Speakers ([Uganwa 2014](#), 95–209). This happened, for example, when the South-West caucus accused Senate President Nnamani (South-East, 2005–2007) of lopsided committee appointments and grounded parliamentary activities to a halt. A more recent alleged plot against the 9th NASS Speaker (South-West) stemmed from the North and revolved around a controversial water

resources bill which was supported by many Northern lawmakers and was previously resisted by Southern MPs in the 8th NASS ([Sahara Reporters 2022](#)). At the same time, Assembly leaders are also wise not to rely too much on their own zones for support as rival contenders for the leadership may form coalitions with MPs from other zones to claim the position for themselves as new zonal representative ([Uganwa 2014](#), 131).

Elite Bargaining and Unity

Rather than integrated parties, ethno-regional balancing brings stability to a federal parliament characterized by strong underlying tensions. This balancing links in with an elite bargaining process to divide resources over specific geographical areas and ethnic groups. As such, it is a reflection of the broader bargain among Nigeria's political elite to share "the national cake" ([Kendhammer 2015](#)). It is also in line with a substantial literature on power-sharing in sub-Saharan Africa arguing that political leaders share political power, including the ability to influence resource allocation, to remove incentives for competitors to challenge their rule and to foster stability (e.g., [Langer 2005](#); [Meng 2020](#)). While such resources can in principle be used to support local development in constituencies, it is unfortunately most often linked to private gain by elites.

In our case study, we see these dynamics play out in the micro-cosmos of parliament. While it is possible that federal character as a norm receives wide support among lawmakers on the basis of principle, adherence also serves instrumental purposes. By providing MPs from across the federation access to public revenues, the parliamentary leadership can prevent them from re-organizing into ethno-regional blocs and undermine their position. By ensuring federal character in the committee system, collaboration and compromise among MPs from different zones are encouraged. Of course, some MPs have more lucrative positions than others, but as exclusion is never across ethno-regional lines, mobilization around these otherwise highly salient dividing lines is tempered.

Conclusion

Previous studies have suggested that parties with a broad presence across federations—and across heterogeneous countries in general—may temper intergroup divisions and foster compromise. Yet while Nigeria arguably has such integrated parties, we found that they do not play an active role in managing ethno-regional divisions within parliament. Nevertheless, parliament has remained active in law-making and appropriation, and does not appear to be severely hampered or stalemated by ethno-regional divisions. Moreover, some of the Assembly's decisions have been hailed as important compromises between ethno-regional groups ([Suberu 2014](#), [2018](#)).

We have argued in this article that the relative stability witnessed within the Assembly relies to a substantial extent on ethno-regional balancing practices, through which MPs from all regions are provided access to public revenues via the committee system. This lowers incentives to mobilize into opposing ethno-regional blocs, even in the face of fundamental disagreement on distributive politics in Nigeria.

Earlier research by [Okpanachi \(2019\)](#) on federal-state relations in Nigeria under PDP rule also challenged the view that federation-wide parties foster compromise between state and federal elites, as in practice relations between PDP state governors and the president were often fractious due to competition over party structures and resources. In our study, we found that federation-wide parties also have little impact in fostering collaboration between ethno-regional groups at the federal level.

Of course, Nigeria's ethnic party ban may still have fundamental positive effects by tempering divisive electoral rhetoric and requiring cross-country collaboration to win power. Yet once in power, other alternative mechanisms may be required to stabilize political relations. Ethno-regional balancing and the sharing of the "national cake" fulfils that function in parliament, and arguably Nigeria in general.

Notes

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Appendix

Table A1 Population and sample characteristics for the 8th National Assembly

	Population	Sample
Assembly Chamber		
House	360 (77%)	94 (79%)
Senate	109 (22%)	25 (21%)
Main political party		
APC	272 (58%)	71 (60%)
PDP	189 (40%)	46 (39%)
Other	8 (2%)	1 (1%)
Geopolitical zone		
North-Central	70 (15%)	23 (19%)
North-East	66 (14%)	20 (17%)
North-West	113 (24%)	23 (19%)
South-East	58 (12%)	14 (12%)
South-South	73 (16%)	15 (13%)
South-West	89 (19%)	23 (19%)
Gender		
Female	27 (6%)	4 (3%)

Notes: Percentages are rounded. Population data are based on the start of the legislature (2015). Party data concerns the party at time of election; while some later switches have occurred, the survey was implemented well before the most significant wave of party switching took place in the run-up to the 2018 primary elections.

Table A2 Party-specific average scores on resource allocation items by region

Statement	North	South-East	South-South	South-West
	APC (N = 55)/ PDP (N = 12)	APC (N = 0)/ PDP (N = 12)	APC (N = 2)/ PDP (N = 13)	APC (N = 14)/ PDP (N = 9)
Rich/poor states	3.23/2.66	no data/3.42	1.50/2.23	2.50/2.67
Oil revenues	2.75/2.42	no data/2.33	1.50/1.38	2.86/2.67
Funds to states	3.09/3.25	no data/3.83	4.50/4.46	4.29/4.00
State effectiveness	2.65/2.25	no data/3.42	4.50/4.46	4.36/4.00

1. The survey was conducted between May and June 2017. 118 lawmakers participated in the survey, 94 representatives and 25 senators, corresponding to an overall response rate of 25 percent. Ninety-nine surveys were conducted on iPad in the presence of the principal researcher, six surveys were conducted online, and thirteen surveys were filled in on hard-copies. It is possible that the hard-copy and online surveys are filled in by assistants rather than the legislators themselves. Interview quotes are based on extensive notes taken during the interviews. As a result, they are not completely ad verbatim. Audio recording was not used as it is likely to induce social desirability. Legislative debates are not freely available online but were collected from the local Hansard offices.
2. Before British colonization, substantial parts of Northern Nigeria were conquered by Fulani emirs. These Fulani rulers mingled with the local Hausa population, which explains why the group is often referred to collectively as “Hausa-Fulani.”
3. Each MP receives a unique numerical number. We also provide information on party and geopolitical zone (taken together for the North). In addition, we note whether the MP was interviewed while in the 8th or the 9th NASS. MP4 was interviewed more than once as a member of the 8th and the 9th NASS, we also indicate the year of the interview for this MP.
4. <https://placbillstrack.org/8th/index.php>. Bills establishing new institutions in the Federal Capital Territory are not counted. The categorization was based on bill titles and, where available, bill texts. While some bills aim to create entirely new institutions, others aim to upgrade existing ones (e.g., from a College of Education to a University), and still others aim to provide a legal backing for institutions working in a grey zone (and hence not entitled to certain allocations).
5. The debate text is copied directly from the official document. We leave any grammatical errors or awkward phrasing as is (i.e., “sic”). We indicate the topic of the debate with the bill number as found on the PLAC website. This website also indicates the date of the debate.
6. Findings for the South-East may be related to the fact that the zone only counts 5 states as opposed to 6/7 for other zones, a well-known point of contention.
7. Zoning practices were introduced in the Second Republic, primarily by the NPN (Graf 1988, 80–81). In parliament, leadership positions were divided between North and South.

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