

DIRECT PRIMARIES AND PRIMARY ELECTION: ASSESSING THE 2026 ALL PROGRESSIVES CONGRESS PRIMARY ELECTION IN TARABA STATE, NIGERIA

Henry Ishaya¹

Department of Political Science, Modibbo Adama University Yola Adamawa State, Nigeria.

henryishaya@mau.edu.ng

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Abstract

Political party primaries constitute the process through which political parties select candidates who will represent them in general elections. In Nigeria, party primaries have become an indispensable component of democratic practice since the return to civil rule in 1999. The 2026 primary election of the All Progressives Congress in Taraba State was characterized by intense political competition and allegations of irregularities. Reports indicate that the party conducted governorship and legislative primaries amid internal disagreements and litigations. The primary objective of the study is to assess the impact of direct primaries on intra-party democracy in the APC in Taraba State. The study adopted Iron Law of Oligarchy as its theoretical framework. The study adopted the survey research design using both primary and secondary sources of data from oral interview and journals. The data were analysed using thematic content analysis. The study found out that only few party members participated in the direct primaries and the primaries was characterised by imposition of candidates with series of court cases. The study recommended providing a level playing ground for primary elections with adequate publicity for all party members to participate, the need for All Progressive Congress to always organise a free and fair primary election in future and need for reconciliation among the aggrieved contestants and party members.

Keywords: *Direct Primaries, Primary election, Democracy, APC, Taraba State.*

Introduction

Political party primaries constitute the process through which political parties select candidates who will represent them in general elections. In Nigeria, party primaries have become an indispensable component of democratic practice since the return to civil rule in 1999. The Nigerian electoral system recognizes three forms of candidate selection: direct primaries, indirect primaries, and consensus arrangements as stipulated in Section 84 of the Electoral Act 2022. Despite legal provisions, the conduct of party primaries has often been characterized by elite domination, imposition of candidates, vote-buying, and intra-party conflicts, thereby undermining democratic values and public confidence in political parties. The inability of parties to conduct transparent primaries has contributed significantly to political defections and post-primary litigations in Nigeria (Ekokoi, 2022).

It is equally capture in the recent Electoral Act 2026 in sections 84(2) and 86. Although the sections in both 2022 and 2026 electoral Acts do not make direct primaries compulsory rather as an option but the National leadership of All progressive Congress adopted the direct primaries and consensus as the only two available options during the 2026 APC primary elections nationwide. The party choice of the option was to give its members a sense of belongings in the party affairs as against the other option of delegates system.

Recent studies argue that political party primaries are not merely internal affairs of parties but constitute a crucial stage of the electoral process because they determine the quality of leadership and democratic representation. The persistent controversies surrounding party primaries in Nigeria demonstrate the need for stronger internal democratic mechanisms and institutional reforms. (Ndeche, et al.2023).

The concept of direct primaries in Nigeria emerged as a response to the shortcomings of delegate-based (indirect) primaries, which were often manipulated by party elites and political godfathers. The Electoral Act 2010 recognized both direct and indirect primaries but left the choice entirely to political parties. During the amendment process leading to the Electoral Act 2022, the National Assembly initially proposed mandatory direct primaries for all parties. However, following intense political debates and objections from stakeholders, the final Act retained direct, indirect, and consensus methods as alternative options for candidate selection (Ekokoi, 2022).

Scholars maintain that direct primaries broaden participation by allowing all registered party members to vote in the selection of candidates, thereby reducing elite capture and increasing the legitimacy of candidates. Nevertheless, direct primaries are also associated with high financial costs, logistical challenges, and the difficulty of maintaining accurate membership registers. Consequently, Nigerian political parties continue to alternate between direct and indirect methods depending on strategic calculations and internal power dynamics (Ubanyionwu, 2024).

Going by submissions by Ekokoi (2022), Ndeche et. al. (2023) and Ubanyiowu (2024), this study is in support of the direct primaries adopted by APC in 2026 primary elections because of the involvement of the all party members in selection of candidates.

Intra-party democracy refers to the extent to which political parties adhere to democratic principles in decision-making, leadership selection, and candidate nomination. Democratic consolidation cannot be achieved without democratic political parties because parties serve as the primary institutions linking citizens to government. Internal democracy promotes accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, and political participation, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of democratic governance. Studies have shown that weak intra-party democracy often results in factionalism, political violence, defections, and electoral disputes. In Nigeria, the imposition of

candidates and manipulation of party primaries have frequently generated crises that threaten democratic stability. Consequently, strengthening internal party democracy is considered essential for deepening democratic consolidation and ensuring credible elections (Sako, 2025).

This study agreed with the view of Sako (2025) concerning Intra-party democracy which is the backbone of democracy as it gives democracy a strong footing that can guarantee good governance.

Ayobolu (2024), in his study of the 2023 APC governorship primary in Kogi State, demonstrated that a primary may be described as direct while significant restrictions remain on the effective participation of party members. The study therefore suggests that assessing intra-party democracy requires attention not only to the formal method of nomination but also to the actual implementation of the primary, the accessibility of voting, equal treatment of aspirants and the extent to which members can freely influence the outcome.

This study agreed with the above assertions of the scholar regarding the primary elections in Kogi state which simply equates the recent situation in Taraba State

Tumba and Wazakari (2023), examined the APC primary election in Adamawa North Senatorial District and found that the concerns surrounding internal party democracy, including unequal participation and candidate imposition. The findings indicate that formal membership of a political party does not necessarily translate into meaningful participation in candidate selection.

This study agreed with the report by Tumba and Wazakari (2023) as it is the same as the situation recorded in Taraba recently.

The study observed a lingering infraction that led to delayed in announcing the result of the primary elections by the National headquarters of APC after over one month and there is also paucity of literatures from peer-reviewed journals regarding Taraba state on the subject matter.

It is in view of the above that this study investigated the impact of direct primaries on intra-party democracy in the APC in Taraba State with particular emphasis on the 2026 APC primary election in Taraba State.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the expected progress associated with the adoption of direct primaries to deepen internal democracy in Nigeria against the usual delegates system where the politicians easily buy the delegates to vote for them, it is disheartening that members of the All-Progressives Congress in Taraba state did not receive what they expected at the end of the 2026 APC primary election in Taraba State.

The recent 2026 APC primary election in Taraba state was bedeviled with a lot of irregularities with ended in protest and court cases as observed and reported by various party members.

The persistent controversies surrounding party primaries in Nigeria demonstrate the need for stronger internal democratic mechanisms and institutional reforms. Ndeche, et al.2023). This assertion relates to the recent 2026 APC primaries election in Taraba state because the participation of party members is insufficient. The recent primary election by the APC in Taraba state as revealed by some party members was not conducted in accordance with the party guidelines. The recent primary election faced by challenges of inadequate publicity, absence of election materials and party returning officers in some ward headquarters and falsification of results in some instances as reported by some observers.

The study observed relatively paucity of literatures from peer-reviewed journals concerning Taraba state on issues of Direct primaries and the current irregularities of the just concluded 2026 APC primary election. It is in view of the above that this study investigated the impact of direct primaries on intra-party democracy in the APC in Taraba State with particular emphasis on the 2026 APC primary election in Taraba State.

Research Questions

- i. To what extent did the 2026 APC direct primaries promote members' participation in Taraba State?
- ii. Were the primaries conducted in accordance with democratic principles and party guidelines?
- iii. What challenges emerged during the conduct of the primaries?

Objective of the study

The primary objective of the study is to assess the impact of direct primaries on primary election of APC in Taraba State. Specific Objectives includes:

- i. Examine the level of participation of party members in 2026 APC primary election in Taraba State.
- ii. Assess the transparency and fairness of the primaries during the 2026 APC primary election in Taraba State.
- iii. Investigate the challenges encountered during the process the 2026 APC primary election in Taraba State.

Conceptual Clarifications

Direct Primaries

Direct primaries refer to a method of candidate selection in which all registered members of a political party are allowed to vote directly for aspirants seeking nomination for elective offices or those seeking positions within the party structures. The Electoral Act 2026 recognizes direct primaries as one of the three legitimate methods of candidate selection in Nigeria, alongside indirect primaries and consensus arrangements. There are various views by scholars about the concept direct primaries which is the foundation for general election without causing problem within the political party as presented below.

According to Ndeche, et al. (2023), direct primaries are designed to promote inclusiveness, reduce the influence of political godfathers, and enhance the legitimacy of candidates by ensuring that they emerge through the votes of a larger membership base. The authors contend that direct primaries strengthen democratic participation by empowering ordinary party members and limiting elite manipulation of the candidate selection process. However, they also note that the system is expensive, logistically demanding, and susceptible to manipulation through the use of questionable membership registers and inadequate monitoring mechanisms.

Similarly, Ayobolu (2024) conceptualizes direct primaries as a democratic mechanism that gives party members direct control over candidate selection and enhances political accountability. According to the author, where direct primaries are genuinely conducted, they contribute to transparency and democratic legitimacy. Conversely, restricted or manipulated direct primaries can undermine democratic values and generate internal party conflicts.

From the various views of scholars like Ndeche et. al. (2023) and Ayobolu (2024) agreed that direct primaries are considered instruments for deepening political participation because they allow greater inclusion of grassroots members in decision-making processes. Nevertheless, scholars argue that their success depends on strong party institutions, credible membership databases, and adherence to established electoral regulations.

This study strongly agreed with the views of both scholars regarding the meaning and implications of direct primaries which is aimed at involving party members in decision making in an important party affair that matters a lot to the party and the entire electorates during the general election.

Primary Election

Primary election refers to election within the political party to choose candidate that will represent the party in general election where the chosen candidate will compete with candidates of other

political parties. Equally, the primary election serves as the beginning of having credible election without internal crisis in any election cycle.

Many scholars view the concept in various ways for example, Ware (1996) views candidate selection as one of the central activities through which political parties organize themselves and determine who will contest elections on their behalf. From this perspective, a primary election can be understood as a formalized mechanism of candidate selection in which the authority to determine the party's candidate is transferred, to varying degrees, from party elites to a wider group of party members or voters. This approach is particularly useful because it places candidate selection within the broader organizational structure of political parties.

Similarly, Rahat and Hazan (2001) conceptualize candidate selection in terms of the mechanisms through which political parties choose their candidates. They identify four major dimensions for examining candidate-selection methods: candidacy, the selectorate, decentralization, and voting or appointment. That a primary election represents a selection mechanism in which candidates are chosen through voting rather than appointment. The authors also emphasize the importance of determining who participates in the selection process, ranging from party elites and delegates to all party members or voters. This conceptualization is particularly relevant to distinguishing direct primaries from indirect or delegate-based primaries.

Hazan and Rahat (2010) further explain that the nature of a primary depends significantly on the selectorate, that is, the body empowered to select the party's candidates. They place all voters and all party members at the more inclusive end of the selectorate continuum, while party delegates, party organs, elites, or a single party leader occupy progressively more exclusive positions. Thus, a primary election can be regarded as more internally democratic when the power to select candidates is extended to a broad membership base rather than concentrated among a small group of party leaders.

Also, Sellers (2024) explains that primary elections are closely connected to political parties' candidate-selection processes and historically developed partly from attempts to democratize candidate selection. The study emphasizes that primaries can alter the relationship between political parties, their members, candidates, and the wider electorate. Consequently, primary elections should not merely be viewed as a technical process for choosing candidates but also as an institutional mechanism that can influence participation, representation, party control, and intra-party democracy.

From the views of Ware, Rahat and Hazan, Hazan and Rahat and Sellers all revealed that primary election is aimed at selecting a candidate that will represent the party at general election either by the party elites, delegates or the general members of the political party. The central idea is the primary

election is an internal affair of the political party. This study equally agreed with the views of the above authors in explaining the concepts. Equally the study further added that direct primaries is capital intensive and may sometimes result to violence due inadequacy of armed security personnel during the process.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted Iron Law of Oligarchy as its theoretical framework. The Iron Law of Oligarchy was propounded by Robert Michels in his seminal work *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* published in 1911. The theory argues that all complex organizations, regardless of how democratic they are at their inception, eventually become dominated by a small group of leaders or elites.

Michels summarized the theory with the famous proposition that "who says organization, says oligarchy." According to him, the growth and complexity of organizations make leadership specialization inevitable, thereby concentrating power in the hands of a few individuals who possess organizational skills, information, and control over resources (Michels, 1915).

Major Assumptions of the Theory includes:

1. **Inevitability of Leadership:** As organizations expand, ordinary members cannot participate in every decision. Consequently, leaders emerge to coordinate activities and make decisions on behalf of the members.
2. **Concentration of Power:** Leaders gradually monopolize important resources such as information, finances, and communication channels, enabling them to dominate organizational decision-making.
3. **Political Apathy of Members:** Most members become passive and depend on leaders to make decisions, thereby allowing elites to consolidate their authority.
4. **Self-Preservation of Elites:** Political leaders tend to use their positions to protect their interests and maintain their control over the organization.
5. **Transformation of Democracy into Oligarchy:** Even organizations founded on democratic principles eventually become oligarchic because leaders develop interests distinct from those of ordinary members (Leach, 2005).

Relating to this research work, Party leaders and political godfathers manipulated the direct primaries of the 2026 APC primary election in Taraba state, APC Membership registers and electoral

procedures was controlled by the party elites during the party primary election. Also, candidate imposition and factional disputes persist despite the adoption of direct primaries leading to court cases and rejection of the outcome of the primary election. Internal party democracy remains weak even when all party members are formally allowed to participate in the process but at the end of the exercise majority were disappointed.

Although the theory succeeded in explaining how the elites controlled the 2026 APC primary election in Taraba state which led to rejections of the outcome leading to litigations, the theory failed to explain the reasons for low level of participation of party members during the primary election.

Methodology

This study adopted the survey research design for the purpose of collecting relevant data and facilitating the description, interpretation, evaluation, and analysis of information obtained from respondents. The choice of the survey design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to gather firsthand information from various concerning issues related to the 2026 APC direct primary election in Taraba state. Three local government areas (LGA) of Jalingo, Gassol and Wukari local government areas of Taraba state were chosen for the interview. Sixty (60) respondents were used for data collection. The respondents interviewed were, APC state officials two (2) from each LGA, APC local government officials two (2) from each LGA, APC ward officials two (2) from each LGA, registered party member two (2) from each LGA, aspirants during the 2026 APC primary elections two (2) from each LGA, Independent National Electoral Commission officials two (2) from each LGA, Lecturers from political science department two (2) each from the three senatorial district in Taraba state. Also included, members of civil society organisations two (2) from each LGA, journalists two (2) from each LGA, and security personnel two (2) from each LGA.

A multi-stage sampling techniques was use to select three LGAs from the three senatorial districts in Taraba state, where Jalingo was chosen from northern zone, Gassol LGA from central zone and Wukari LGA from southern senatorial district. Similarly, a purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were equally employed in selecting the respondents. This sampling method was considered suitable because it enabled the researcher to deliberately identify participants who possessed adequate knowledge and experience regarding the subject matter under investigation and the respondent will direct him where to get the next respondent. The procedure used include identifying the respondents, obtaining the respondent's consent, conduct face to face interview with each respondent and each interview lasted for about 30 minutes. The data collected were analyzed using Thematic Content Analysis.

The study utilized both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were generated through oral interviews conducted with the selected respondents, while secondary data were obtained from journals, textbooks, periodicals, government publications, and relevant research works. The use of primary data was necessary because it provides direct and reliable information from individuals who are closely associated with the phenomenon being studied. According to Akpa (2011), primary data are regarded as one of the most authentic sources of information because they are collected directly from respondents through questioning or observation of the research variables.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data collected, the interview checklist was carefully structured and subjected to scrutiny by research experts. Their assessment and validation helped to ensure that the instrument was capable of generating accurate and relevant responses needed to address the research questions of the study.

Result and Discussion

Level of Participation of APC Members during the 2026 Primary Election in Taraba State.

From the oral interviewed conducted with the various respondents revealed that, only few party members participated in the primary election because the election officials did not show up in many ward headquarters as reported by majority of the respondents. They also reported that a lot of party members were not aware of the primary election due to inadequate publicity of the whole processes in the villages as confirmed by majority of the respondents.

This study agreed that, the scenario calls for serious concern as the election officials and election materials did not reach all the 168 wards in Taraba state and also there was inadequate publicity that resulted to poor voters' turnout in all the electoral wards where the primary election was conducted. This showed how the primary election was poorly organized and manage leading to all forms of irregularities.

These findings were supported with findings of Tumba and Wazakari (2023) who reported that:

“Participation in APC candidate selection in Adamawa North Senatorial District was affected by unequal participation and candidate imposition. Also, some members and aspirants enjoyed greater opportunities to influence the process than others. The study consequently concluded that internal party democracy requires equal opportunities for members to participate in decision-making (Tumba and Wazakari, 2023)”.

Also, the findings were supported with findings of Bakare and Adebambo (2026) reported that:

“The effectiveness of internal democracy in the APC was strongly influenced by the extent to which ordinary party members were allowed to participate in candidate-selection processes. Although APC formally provided mechanisms for grassroots participation, the actual influence of ordinary members was constrained by elite dominance, godfatherism, factional interests and weaknesses in internal party structures (Bakare and Adebambo, 2026) “

Similarly, agreed with the findings of Salahshour, et al. (2026) who stated that:

“Scholars argue that direct primaries improve internal democracy by increasing the involvement of ordinary party members in decision-making processes. Nevertheless, participation can be undermined by inadequate voter education, weak party structures, and the high cost of organizing large-scale primaries (Salahshour, et al.2026)”.

Level of Transparency and Fairness of the 2026 APC Primary Election in Taraba State.

From the oral interviewed conducted with various respondents, the results of the interviewed revealed that the 2026 APC primary election lacks transparency and fairness it deserved as reported by the majority of the respondents. Also, further findings revealed that, the actual elections results were change in many instances and unpopular candidates were imposed on the people without any concrete reasons as confirmed by Majority of the respondents. From the oral interview result, the study submitted that the level of transparency and fairness during the 2026 APC primary election in Taraba state was below expectations raising some questions of integrity of the whole process that will lead to the general election.

These findings reflected the view of Nnaji (2021) who reported that:

“Flawed party primaries in Nigeria were associated with candidate imposition, parallel processes, intra-party conflicts and disputes over the legitimacy of outcomes. And that failure to follow established procedures undermines the credibility of party elections (Nnaji, 2021)”

Also, the findings agreed with Tumba and Wazakari (2023) who reported that:

“The APC candidate selection in Adamawa North Senatorial District in 2022 was marred with candidate imposition and inadequate equal participation weakened the fairness of APC candidate-selection processes. Therefore, there is need transparent and credible party primaries and greater adherence to democratic procedures (Tumba and Wazakari ,2023)”.

Similarly, the findings agreed with Bakare and Adebambo (2026) found that:

“Transparency and fairness were important determinants of members' perceptions of internal party democracy. Also, there is serious concerns about elite dominance and the transparency of the party's internal electoral processes, where party members believe that decisions are predetermined by powerful individuals, confidence in the internal democratic process is weakened (Bakare and Adebambo, 2026)”.

Challenges Encountered during the 2026 APC Primary Election in Taraba State.

From the oral interviewed conducted with various respondents, it is evident that the 2026 APC primary election in Taraba state encountered a lot of challenges which include: candidates' imposition by the elites, internal party division, court cases, disagreement between various camps within the party as reported by majority of the respondents. Another challenge reported by the respondents was the circulation of the fake and authentic results on social media before the official announcement by the APC national headquarters created more confusion and disunity within the party as confirmed by the majority of the respondents.

The study agreed with the report of the oral interview because the issue is still lingering with series of court cases and internal division within the party in Tara State despite series of peace committees inaugurated by the party both at National and state level. The aftermath of the 2026 primary election may affect the party chances of winning election in 2027 general elections.

These findings in agreement with the submission of Ndubuisi and Uduma (2025) who stated that:

“The 2022 APC primary election in Abia Central Senatorial Zone was characterised by weak implementation of party rules, fictionalization and intra-party conflicts as major factors contributing to crisis during party primaries. Also, that formal rules alone cannot guarantee democratic candidate selection if party actors fail to comply with them (Ndubuisi and Uduma, 2025)”.

Generally, the study discovered from the oral interview that the 2026 APC primary election in Taraba State exhibited both democratic elements and persistent problems associated with intra-party democracy in Nigeria. The evidence suggests that although APC members were mobilized to participate in the primary, the extent to which participation translated into actual influence over

candidate selection varied among members because some were informed while others were not adequately informed. This observation is consistent with Bakare and Adebambo (2026), who found that grassroots participation within the APC could be frustrated by elite dominance and factional interests. Similarly, the findings of Tumba and Wazakari (2023) concerning unequal participation and candidate imposition provide comparative evidence that formal participation does not necessarily guarantee substantive influence of the party members during primary election.

With regard to transparency and fairness, the interview findings indicate that perceptions varied among respondents. Majority of the respondents regarded the process as lacking enough transparency and fairness it deserves, whereas others raised concerns about unequal treatment in sending the information, elite influence and the possibility of influencing the outcomes. These findings correspond with Bakare and Adebambo (2026), who identified transparency and elite dominance as important issues affecting internal party democracy, and with Nnaji (2021), who associated flawed party primaries with candidate imposition, intra-party conflict and diminished electoral credibility.

The challenges identified by interview respondents further demonstrate that the effectiveness of direct or participatory primaries depends on more than the formal adoption of democratic procedures. Financial barriers, factionalism, elite influence, weak implementation of party rules and disagreements over electoral procedures can limit the effectiveness of internal party democracy. This corresponds with Ndubuisi and Uduma (2025), who identified poor implementation of party rules and fictionalization as sources of intra-party crisis. and independent Newspapers who identify early sharing of results over the social media as potential cause of the disagreement within various camps within the party.

The overall implication is that the 2026 APC primary election in Taraba State should be assessed not simply on whether a primary election was conducted, but on whether the process provided meaningful participation, transparency, fairness and equal opportunity to party members and aspirants. This distinction is important to the present study because the existence of a primary election does not, by itself, establish the existence of effective intra-party democracy.

Conclusion

From the various submissions above, this study concluded that, only few members of APC participated in the primary election because the election was not conducted in many ward headquarters as well as the inadequate level of publicity by the party prior to the 2026 APC primary election. Equally, it is concluded that the direct primary election lacks transparency and fairness it deserved, the election was marred by imposition of candidates.

Similarly, the direct primaries resulted to internal party division, court cases and disagreement between various camps within the party structure in Taraba state. Also, it is concluded that the 2026 APC direct primary election had demoralized the morale of party members as well as the electorates and it can affect democracy.

Recommendations.

From the foregoing, the research recommended as follows:

1. There is need for the All Progressive Congress to provide a level playing ground for primary elections with adequate publicity for all party members to participate.
2. There is need for the All Progressive Congress to always organise a free and fair primary election in future.
3. There is need for reconciliation among the aggrieved contestants and aggrieved party supporters in Nigeria and equally, there is need for stakeholders and godfathers to always respect the wish of party members.

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