

Godfatherism and Democratic Governance in Nigeria: Institutional Dynamics of Political Clientelism and Elite Capture in Osun State

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Abstract

Political clientelism and elite capture constitute persistent challenges to democratic governance in developing democracies, yet existing studies on godfatherism in Nigeria have largely concentrated on electoral manipulation, with limited attention to its institutional dynamics and governance implications at the subnational level. This study examines godfatherism as a form of political clientelism that enables elite capture and shapes democratic governance in Osun State, Nigeria. It investigates the influence of patronage networks on political accountability, electoral processes, institutional autonomy, and governance outcomes. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, with data collected through structured questionnaires from 384 respondents across the three senatorial districts of Osun State. Data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques and complemented with insights from existing governance literature. Findings reveal that godfatherism significantly influences candidate selection, electoral outcomes, political appointments, and policy decisions, often prioritising elite interests over citizens' welfare. The study further finds that entrenched patronage networks weaken internal party democracy, undermine institutional independence, and constrain transparency and accountability in governance. The study concludes that godfatherism represents a broader institutional challenge that limits democratic consolidation and effective governance in Nigeria. It recommends strengthening political party democracy, improving electoral institutions, regulating campaign financing, promoting civic engagement, and fostering inclusive political systems to reduce dependence on patron-client relationships and enhance accountable governance.

Keywords: Godfatherism, Political party, Democracy, Clientelism, Governance, Political patronage.

1. Introduction

Democratic governance in emerging democracies is often shaped not only by formal institutions, constitutional arrangements, and electoral procedures but also by informal political structures that influence access to power and public resources. One of the most enduring informal mechanisms affecting democratic development in many African states is political clientelism, where political actors exchange resources, protection, and opportunities for political support and loyalty (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). While clientelistic relationships may serve as mechanisms of political mobilisation, they often generate unequal power relations that undermine institutional accountability, weaken democratic norms, and encourage the concentration of political authority among influential elites. In Nigeria, this phenomenon is commonly expressed through the practice of political godfatherism, where powerful individuals or networks sponsor political candidates and subsequently exercise significant influence over their political decisions and governance actions.

Godfatherism has become a prominent feature of Nigeria's political landscape, particularly since the emergence of the Fourth Republic in 1999. The phenomenon reflects a form of political patronage in which wealthy and influential actors use financial resources, social networks, and political connections to determine electoral outcomes and influence public administration (Joseph, 1991; Omobowale & Olutayo, 2007).

Although political sponsorship and elite networks are not unique to Nigeria, the Nigerian experience demonstrates how informal power structures can penetrate formal democratic institutions and alter the relationship between elected representatives and citizens. Instead of political authority being primarily derived from popular legitimacy, governance outcomes are often shaped by obligations to political patrons who facilitate access to power (Ayoade, 2006).

The persistence of godfatherism raises critical questions about democratic consolidation, institutional capacity, and governance effectiveness. Democratic systems depend on competitive elections, accountable leadership, institutional independence, and citizen-oriented policymaking. However, where political actors owe their positions primarily to elite sponsors rather than voters, accountability relationships become distorted. Elected officials may prioritise the interests of political patrons over public welfare, resulting in weakened representation, limited transparency, and reduced responsiveness to citizens' needs (Kura, 2011). Consequently, godfatherism represents more than an electoral practice; it reflects a broader institutional challenge involving elite capture, political exclusion, and the manipulation of democratic processes.

The concept of elite capture provides an important framework for understanding the governance implications of godfatherism. Elite capture occurs when powerful individuals or groups dominate decision-making processes and redirect public resources toward private interests rather than collective development objectives (World Bank, 2004). In Nigeria, political elites have historically influenced state institutions through patronage networks, creating systems where access to political opportunities, contracts, and appointments is frequently mediated by personal connections rather than institutional rules. Such dynamics weaken state capacity and limit the ability of democratic institutions to operate independently (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Thus, examining godfatherism through the lens of elite capture reveals how informal political arrangements can undermine the effectiveness of formal democratic structures.

At the subnational level, state politics in Nigeria provides an important context for analysing the influence of political clientelism because state governments control significant administrative, economic, and developmental resources. Osun State represents a critical case where political competition, elite networks, and struggles over political dominance have shaped governance trajectories. The influence of political godfathers in state-level politics demonstrates how informal authority structures interact with electoral institutions, political parties, and public administration. While previous studies have examined godfatherism primarily as a problem of electoral manipulation and political conflict, less attention has been given to how it affects institutional governance, administrative accountability, and the broader quality of democracy at the state level.

Existing literature has established that godfatherism contributes to electoral malpractice, weak party democracy, and political instability in Nigeria (Olarinmoye, 2008; Omobowale, 2008). Studies have also shown that patron-client relationships can encourage corruption by creating expectations of political repayment through access to state resources and public contracts (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). However, a significant gap remains in understanding the institutional mechanisms through which godfatherism shapes governance outcomes. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on describing the existence and negative consequences of political godfatherism, while limited empirical attention has been devoted to explaining how these networks influence institutional autonomy, policy processes, and accountability mechanisms within democratic governance systems.

This study addresses this gap by conceptualising godfatherism as an institutionalised form of political clientelism and examining its relationship with elite capture and democratic governance in Osun State. By moving beyond the conventional interpretation of godfatherism as merely an electoral phenomenon, the study investigates how informal political networks interact with formal democratic institutions to shape leadership selection, governance priorities, and accountability structures. This perspective contributes to broader debates on democratic consolidation in developing countries by highlighting the role of informal institutions in determining the effectiveness of formal democratic arrangements.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding why democratic institutions often struggle to produce accountable governance despite the existence of constitutional frameworks and electoral processes. In contexts where informal political networks dominate decision-making, strengthening democracy requires more than electoral reforms; it requires institutional reforms that promote transparency, internal party democracy, citizen participation, and accountability. Addressing the influence of political godfatherism therefore requires a multidimensional approach involving electoral bodies, political parties, civil society organisations, and citizens.

Against this background, the study examines the institutional dynamics of godfatherism and its implications for democratic governance in Osun State, Nigeria. Specifically, it seeks to assess how political

clientelism facilitates elite capture, evaluate its influence on democratic accountability and institutional performance, and identify policy measures capable of reducing the negative effects of patronage-based politics. By doing so, the study contributes to contemporary discussions on governance reform, democratic resilience, and institutional development in Nigeria and other emerging democracies.

Literature review

The concept of political godfatherism has attracted significant scholarly attention in studies of African politics, particularly in relation to electoral politics, democratic governance, and state institutional development. Although the term is widely used in Nigerian political discourse, its theoretical foundation is closely connected to the broader concept of political clientelism. Political clientelism refers to a relationship between politically influential actors (patrons) and dependent supporters (clients), where resources, protection, or opportunities are exchanged for political loyalty and electoral support (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). In this arrangement, political authority is often personalised, and access to state resources becomes mediated through informal networks rather than transparent institutional processes.

In the Nigerian context, godfatherism represents a specific form of clientelistic politics where influential individuals provide financial support, political mobilisation, and strategic backing to aspiring politicians in exchange for influence over political decisions after electoral victory (Ayoade, 2006). Unlike conventional political mentorship, which may involve guidance and leadership development, Nigerian godfatherism is frequently characterised by expectations of political control, economic benefits, and administrative influence. Joseph (1991) argues that Nigeria's political system has historically been shaped by prebendal tendencies, where public offices are treated as resources for distribution among networks of supporters and elites. This creates conditions where political loyalty often supersedes institutional accountability.

The concept of elite capture provides another important perspective for understanding godfatherism. Elite capture occurs when powerful individuals or groups dominate political and administrative processes to secure disproportionate control over public resources and decision-making structures (World Bank, 2004). In democratic systems, elite influence is not inherently negative; however, problems emerge when elites manipulate institutions, restrict political competition, and undermine mechanisms of accountability. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) emphasise that inclusive political institutions are essential for sustainable development, while extractive institutions enable narrow elites to maintain power and limit broader participation. From this perspective, godfatherism reflects a form of elite domination that weakens democratic institutions by allowing informal networks to override formal rules.

Democratic governance requires effective institutions that promote accountability, representation, participation, and the rule of law. However, scholars argue that the persistence of informal political practices such as godfatherism creates tensions between democratic ideals and political realities in Nigeria. Olarinmoye (2008) notes that godfatherism has become a major feature of Nigerian electoral politics, influencing candidate selection, party nominations, and electoral outcomes. Political godfathers often determine who receives party support, thereby limiting internal party democracy and reducing opportunities for competent but less-connected candidates. The influence of godfatherism extends beyond elections into the governance process. Once political candidates assume office, their obligations to political patrons may affect policy priorities, public appointments, and resource allocation. Kura (2011) argues that clientelistic politics weakens democratic accountability because elected officials become more responsive to their sponsors than to citizens. This creates a governance environment where public institutions are vulnerable to private interests, reducing their capacity to deliver effective and equitable public services. Furthermore, political clientelism often contributes to the personalisation of power. Instead of governance being guided by institutional procedures and policy objectives, decisions may reflect negotiations among powerful political actors. Bratton and van de Walle (1997) explain that neo-patrimonial systems in Africa combine formal democratic institutions with informal networks of personal rule. In such contexts, political leaders may use state resources to maintain loyalty networks, reinforcing cycles of dependency and weakening institutional development.

A major concern in the literature is the impact of godfatherism on electoral integrity and democratic consolidation. Elections are expected to provide citizens with the opportunity to choose leaders based on competence, accountability, and public trust. However, godfatherism often influences candidate nomination processes, giving politically connected individuals advantages over independent candidates. Ayoade (2006) argues that political godfathers frequently determine electoral outcomes by controlling party structures, campaign resources, and political mobilisation networks. This practice has implications for democratic consolidation because it limits political competition and reduces citizens' ability to influence leadership

selection. According to Lindberg (2006), democratic consolidation depends not only on holding elections but also on ensuring meaningful competition, institutional autonomy, and citizen participation. Where political parties become controlled by powerful individuals, democratic institutions remain fragile because political authority is concentrated among a small elite group.

The Nigerian experience demonstrates how weak institutions create opportunities for informal actors to influence formal political processes. Adebani and Obadare (2011) argue that Nigerian politics is characterised by complex relationships between formal democratic structures and informal networks of influence. These networks often operate through personal loyalty, financial dependence, and political exchange, making institutional reform difficult.

The governance consequences of godfatherism are reflected in issues such as corruption, weak accountability, and ineffective public administration. Political patrons may expect financial rewards, contracts, appointments, or policy influence from the officials they support. This creates incentives for public officeholders to prioritise private interests over developmental objectives. Transparency International (2022) identifies corruption and weak institutional accountability as persistent governance challenges in Nigeria, with political patronage networks contributing to difficulties in achieving transparent public administration. Additionally, godfatherism can undermine administrative professionalism by influencing appointments based on loyalty rather than competence. Public institutions may become politicised when employment opportunities and leadership positions are distributed through patronage networks. This affects state capacity and limits the effectiveness of government programmes. Grindle (2004) argues that institutional capacity is central to development outcomes because effective governance requires competent organisations capable of implementing public policies independently.

Although existing studies have examined godfatherism from political, electoral, and corruption perspectives, important gaps remain. Much of the literature focuses on godfatherism as an electoral practice, particularly its role in candidate selection, election manipulation, and political conflicts. Less attention has been given to its institutional consequences, particularly how political clientelism contributes to elite capture and affects democratic governance outcomes at the subnational level. Furthermore, previous studies have often treated godfatherism as a Nigerian political abnormality rather than examining it as part of a broader theoretical debate on informal institutions, clientelistic governance, and democratic resilience. This study contributes to the literature by analysing godfatherism through the combined frameworks of political clientelism and elite capture, using Osun State as a case to understand how informal political networks influence institutional performance, accountability, and democratic governance.

Theoretical foundation

This study is anchored on Political Clientelism Theory and Elite Capture Theory to explain the institutional dynamics of godfatherism and its implications for democratic governance in Nigeria, particularly in Osun State. The integration of these theories provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how informal political networks influence formal democratic institutions, shape political behaviour, and affect governance outcomes.

Political clientelism theory

Political Clientelism Theory provides the primary foundation for explaining the practice of godfatherism. The theory conceptualises politics as a relationship between patrons and clients, where powerful actors provide resources, protection, and political opportunities in exchange for loyalty, electoral support, and continued allegiance (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). Unlike institutionalised democratic competition based on policies and public interests, clientelistic politics is characterised by personal relationships, unequal exchanges, and dependency between political elites and their supporters.

In the Nigerian context, godfatherism reflects a form of political clientelism where influential individuals (political godfathers) finance political campaigns, influence party nominations, mobilise electoral support, and support candidates' emergence into public office. In return, political officeholders are often expected to protect the interests of their sponsors through policy decisions, appointments, and allocation of public resources (Ayoade, 2006). Therefore, the theory explains how political loyalty and personal obligations can override institutional accountability and democratic principles.

Relating this theory to the first objective of the study, which examines how godfatherism influences political accountability and democratic governance, Political Clientelism Theory suggests that elected officials operating within patron-client networks may become more accountable to political patrons than to citizens. The findings support this assumption, as a significant proportion of respondents indicated that godfatherism distorts representation because political officeholders often prioritise the interests of their sponsors over those of constituents. This demonstrates how clientelistic relationships weaken the democratic

link between citizens and elected representatives.

Furthermore, the theory explains the study's finding that godfatherism influences electoral processes through candidate selection and political nominations. In clientelistic systems, access to political positions is frequently determined by connections, loyalty, and resource capacity rather than competence or popular legitimacy. The finding that godfatherism affects candidate emergence and sidelines qualified individuals reflects the dominance of patronage networks within Nigeria's political parties.

Elite capture theory

While Political Clientelism Theory explains the relational aspect of godfatherism, Elite Capture Theory provides insight into how powerful individuals maintain control over political institutions and public resources. Elite capture occurs when a small group of influential actors dominate decision-making processes and uses institutional structures to advance private interests rather than collective societal goals (World Bank, 2004). The theory assumes that democratic institutions can be weakened when elites possess excessive influence over political, economic, and administrative processes.

Applied to Nigeria's political environment, Elite Capture Theory explains how political godfathers use wealth, social networks, and political influence to shape governance outcomes. Rather than merely supporting political candidates, godfathers often seek to control the direction of governance by influencing appointments, policy priorities, and resource allocation. This creates a situation where public institutions become vulnerable to elite interests, limiting transparency, accountability, and institutional autonomy.

The findings of this study align strongly with Elite Capture Theory. Respondents identified godfatherism as contributing to the concentration of political power among a few influential individuals, thereby limiting political diversity and weakening democratic institutions. This supports the argument that elite dominance restricts inclusive governance by reducing opportunities for broader political participation and leadership renewal.

The theory also explains the relationship between godfatherism and governance performance. When political elites capture decision-making processes, public resources may be redirected toward maintaining patronage networks rather than improving public welfare. The study's findings that godfatherism contributes to weak accountability, corruption risks, and reduced effectiveness of governance institutions demonstrate the relevance of elite capture as an analytical framework.

Application of the theories to the study

The first objective of the study, which examines the relationship between godfatherism and democratic governance, is explained through both theories. Political Clientelism Theory reveals how patron-client relationships undermine citizen-centred accountability, while Elite Capture Theory demonstrates how powerful political actors dominate institutional processes. The findings confirm that godfatherism weakens democratic representation by creating competing accountability structures between elected officials, political sponsors, and citizens. The second objective, which assesses the influence of godfatherism on electoral processes and political institutions, is strongly supported by Political Clientelism Theory. The theory explains why political competition is often shaped by financial capacity and elite connections rather than democratic participation. The findings that godfatherism influences candidate selection, party politics, and electoral outcomes reflect the operation of clientelistic networks within Nigeria's democracy. The third objective, which explores the governance implications of godfatherism, is explained through Elite Capture Theory. The theory demonstrates how political elites can transform democratic institutions into mechanisms for maintaining influence and controlling public resources. The findings that godfatherism weakens institutional independence, encourages patronage, and reduces accountability illustrate the governance consequences of elite capture.

In summary, the combined application of Political Clientelism Theory and Elite Capture Theory provides a strong explanation of godfatherism as both a relational and institutional phenomenon. Political Clientelism Theory explains the exchange relationship between godfathers and political actors, while Elite Capture Theory explains how these relationships translate into broader control over democratic institutions and governance outcomes. Together, the theories demonstrate that godfatherism is not merely an electoral practice but an institutional challenge that affects political accountability, democratic consolidation, and governance effectiveness. The framework therefore supports the argument that reducing the negative effects of godfatherism requires reforms that strengthen political party democracy, improve electoral independence, enhance institutional accountability, and promote citizen participation in governance processes.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design to examine the relationship between political

godfatherism, political clientelism, elite capture, and democratic governance in Osun State, Nigeria. The choice of this design was informed by the objective of obtaining empirical evidence on citizens' perceptions regarding the influence of godfatherism on electoral processes, institutional accountability, and governance outcomes. A survey approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to capture the experiences and opinions of individuals who actively interact with the political environment and democratic institutions within the state.

The study was conducted in Osun State, Nigeria, a state located in the southwestern region of the country. Osun State provides an important context for analysing political godfatherism because of the significance of elite political networks, party competition, and struggles over political influence within its democratic landscape. The target population comprised eligible voters and politically aware citizens across the three senatorial districts of the state: Osun Central, Osun East, and Osun West. According to available demographic and electoral records, Osun State has a large voting population, making it suitable for examining citizens' perceptions of political clientelism and governance. The study focused on registered voters because they represent key participants in democratic processes, including elections, political participation, and accountability relationships between citizens and political leaders.

A sample size of 384 respondents was selected for the study. This sample was considered adequate for generating reliable findings and capturing variations in citizens' experiences across different political zones of the state. The study employed a multistage sampling technique. First, the state was stratified into the three senatorial districts to ensure geographical representation. Subsequently, respondents were purposively selected based on their political awareness, voting eligibility, and involvement in community or political activities. The sampling strategy enabled the study to capture diverse perspectives on the influence of godfatherism across different social and political groups. It also reduced the possibility of concentrating responses within a particular locality or demographic category.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed in line with the study objectives and theoretical framework. The questionnaire consisted of two major sections. The first section captured respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, including gender, age, educational background, occupation, and other relevant variables. The second section focused on key dimensions of the study, including political clientelism, elite capture, democratic accountability, electoral influence, institutional autonomy, and governance implications of godfatherism. The questionnaire items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree (D), to Strongly Disagree (SD). This measurement approach enabled the study to assess the extent to which respondents agreed with statements concerning the influence of godfatherism on democratic governance.

To ensure validity, the research instrument was subjected to expert review by scholars in political science, public administration, and research methodology. Their assessments helped to ensure that the questionnaire items adequately reflected the concepts of political clientelism, elite capture, and democratic governance. A pilot test was conducted among a small group of respondents outside the main study sample to evaluate the clarity, consistency, and reliability of the instrument. Feedback from the pilot study was used to improve the structure and wording of questionnaire items before the final administration.

The questionnaires were administered directly to selected respondents across the three senatorial districts of Osun State. The researcher and trained assistants facilitated the distribution and retrieval process to improve response quality and minimise incomplete responses. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the research, and participation was based on voluntary consent. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequency distributions, percentages, and mean analysis. These techniques were employed to summarise respondents' views and identify patterns regarding the influence of godfatherism on democratic governance. The findings were presented through tables and interpreted in relation to the study objectives and the theoretical assumptions of Political Clientelism Theory and Elite Capture Theory.

Consequently, the study adhered to standard ethical principles of social research. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and confidentiality of responses was maintained. No identifying information was collected from participants, and the data obtained were used strictly for academic purposes. Generally, the methodology provided an empirical foundation for analysing how political godfatherism functions as a form of clientelistic politics and elite capture, and how it affects democratic governance, institutional accountability, and political development in Osun State, Nigeria.

Results

Objective One: Examine the Influence of Godfatherism on Democratic Representation and Accountability in Osun State

The first objective examined the extent to which political godfatherism affects democratic representation and accountability. The findings indicate that godfatherism has a substantial influence on the relationship between elected officials and citizens, suggesting that political authority is often shaped by patronage obligations rather than public accountability. The statistical results reveal that 80.5% of respondents agreed that godfatherism distorts democratic representation, with 43.5% strongly agreeing and 37.0% agreeing that political officeholders often prioritise the interests of their sponsors over those of their constituents. Only 14.1% of respondents disagreed, while 5.7% remained undecided. This high level of agreement implies that respondents perceive godfatherism as a mechanism that weakens the representative function of democracy by shifting loyalty from citizens to political patrons. Similarly, the findings show that 75.3% of respondents agreed that political godfathers significantly influence the decisions and actions of elected officials, with 32.3% strongly agreeing and 43.0% agreeing. This suggests that political leaders who emerge through patronage networks may experience limitations in exercising independent judgment because of obligations created during the electoral process. These findings imply that godfatherism creates a dual accountability structure in governance, where elected officials are formally accountable to citizens but informally accountable to political sponsors. This weakens democratic responsiveness and undermines the principle that elected leaders should primarily serve the interests of the electorate. The results, therefore, demonstrate that political clientelism remains a major constraint to effective democratic representation in Osun State.

Objective Two: Assess the Influence of Godfatherism on Electoral Processes and Political Institutions

The second objective examined the influence of godfatherism on electoral processes, political party democracy, and political competition. The findings demonstrate that godfatherism significantly shapes political recruitment and electoral outcomes by creating advantages for individuals connected to powerful political actors. The results indicate that 77.7% of respondents agreed that godfatherism influences the selection and nomination of political candidates, with 22.7% strongly agreeing and 55.0% agreeing. Only 22.3% of respondents disagreed or expressed uncertainty. The implication of this finding is that electoral competition is not solely determined by citizens' preferences, political competence, or policy credibility; rather, access to political sponsorship and elite networks plays a significant role in determining who participates successfully in politics. Furthermore, the findings show that 66.4% of respondents agreed that political godfatherism contributes to electoral malpractice and manipulation, comprising 32.3% who strongly agreed and 34.1% who agreed. This indicates that respondents associate godfatherism with practices that undermine electoral fairness, transparency, and the credibility of democratic processes. The study also found that 66.9% of respondents agreed that godfatherism promotes the concentration of political power among a few influential individuals. This implies that political power in Osun State is perceived as being controlled through elite networks, which restricts political pluralism and limits opportunities for emerging leaders without access to patronage structures. These findings imply that godfatherism affects democracy not only during elections but also through the institutional processes that determine political participation and leadership emergence. The persistence of such networks weakens internal party democracy, discourages merit-based competition, and reinforces elite dominance within the political system.

Objective Three: Examine the Governance Implications of Godfatherism on Institutional Performance and Public Accountability

The third objective assessed the implications of godfatherism for governance effectiveness, institutional autonomy, and public accountability. The findings demonstrate that godfatherism has significant consequences for the functioning of democratic institutions and the quality of governance. The results reveal that 87.2% of respondents agreed that godfatherism weakens democratic institutions by fostering dependency and patronage relationships, with 54.4% strongly agreeing and 32.8% agreeing. This represents the highest level of agreement among all study variables and indicates strong public perception that patronage networks pose a serious threat to institutional independence. This result implies that where political institutions are influenced by powerful individuals, formal rules and democratic procedures may become secondary to informal political arrangements. Such conditions reduce institutional capacity, weaken accountability mechanisms, and limit the ability of government institutions to operate effectively. The findings further reveal that 82.8% of respondents supported greater transparency in campaign financing as a means of reducing the influence of political godfathers. This suggests that financial resources remain a critical instrument through which political patrons maintain control over political processes. Therefore, improving campaign finance regulation could reduce excessive dependence on wealthy sponsors and promote a more competitive political environment. Similarly, 72.1% of respondents agreed that civic

education and public awareness can help reduce the negative effects of godfatherism. The implication is that citizen empowerment is essential in challenging patronage-based politics because informed citizens are more likely to demand accountability and participate actively in democratic processes. Overall, the statistical findings demonstrate that godfatherism represents a broader governance challenge rather than merely an electoral issue. It affects institutional performance, transparency, accountability, and the capacity of democratic institutions to deliver effective governance. The results collectively indicate that political godfatherism operates through two interconnected mechanisms: political clientelism, where loyalty and resources are exchanged between patrons and political actors, and elite capture, where powerful individuals influence institutions to preserve political dominance. The high agreement levels across the objectives demonstrate that respondents perceive godfatherism as a major factor affecting democratic accountability, electoral integrity, and governance effectiveness in Osun State. The findings therefore imply that addressing godfatherism requires institutional reforms that strengthen political party democracy, regulate political financing, enhance electoral independence, and promote citizen-centred governance. Without such reforms, democratic institutions may continue to operate alongside informal patronage structures that limit accountability and inclusive political participation.

Summary of Major Findings

The study's findings reveal that political godfatherism operates as a form of political clientelism and elite capture that influences democratic governance in Osun State. The evidence shows that:

1. Godfatherism weakens democratic accountability by shifting loyalty from citizens to political patrons.
2. Godfatherism distorts electoral processes by influencing candidate selection, party nominations, and electoral outcomes.
3. Godfatherism promotes elite capture by concentrating political power and resources among a few influential actors.
4. Godfatherism undermines governance effectiveness through patronage-based appointments, weak institutional autonomy, and reduced transparency.
5. Strengthening democratic institutions, regulating political finance, promoting internal party democracy, and increasing civic participation are essential measures for reducing its negative effects.

These findings align with the study's theoretical framework, demonstrating how political clientelism creates patron–client dependency while elite capture explains the broader institutional consequences of concentrated political power.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that political godfatherism remains a significant institutional challenge affecting democratic governance in Osun State, Nigeria. The results indicate that godfatherism operates beyond electoral competition by shaping political accountability, institutional behaviour, and governance outcomes. This finding supports the broader argument within the political clientelism literature that informal political networks can influence formal democratic institutions by creating relationships of dependency between political patrons and officeholders (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). In the Nigerian context, godfatherism represents a clientelist arrangement where political actors provide resources and electoral support to candidates, while expecting political loyalty and access to state resources in return (Ayoade, 2006). The study's findings confirm that these relationships often redefine accountability, shifting the loyalty of elected officials from citizens to political sponsors.

The finding that godfatherism undermines democratic representation aligns with Joseph's (1991) argument on prebendal politics in Nigeria, where political offices are frequently perceived as opportunities for resource distribution among elite networks rather than institutions for public service. The study revealed that most respondents perceived elected officials influenced by godfathers as prioritising patron interests over citizens' welfare. This suggests that political clientelism weakens the fundamental democratic principle of representative accountability because political leaders become embedded within patronage obligations. Similar observations were made by Kura (2011), who argues that clientelistic politics in Nigeria reduces the responsiveness of political institutions by encouraging personal loyalty rather than policy-based governance.

Furthermore, the finding that godfatherism influences candidate selection and electoral outcomes reinforces existing literature on the relationship between political patronage and electoral democracy. Olarinmoye (2008) observed that political godfathers often control party structures, financial resources, and nomination processes, thereby determining who participates effectively in electoral competition. The current study extends this argument by demonstrating that such influence is not limited to election periods but shapes the broader institutional environment in which governance occurs. When political nominations are determined by elite connections rather than competence and popular legitimacy, democratic competition

becomes restricted, and emerging political actors are disadvantaged.

The study also found that godfatherism contributes to the concentration of political power among a limited number of influential actors. This finding corresponds with Elite Capture Theory, which explains how powerful groups dominate decision-making processes and use institutional mechanisms to advance private interests (World Bank, 2004). Rather than promoting inclusive participation, elite-controlled political systems tend to reproduce existing power structures and limit opportunities for broader citizen engagement. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argue that societies with extractive political institutions allow narrow elites to maintain control over resources and decision-making, thereby constraining institutional development. The findings from Osun State reflect this pattern, as political influence remains concentrated among actors with financial capacity, political networks, and access to patronage systems.

The relationship between godfatherism and weak institutional performance identified in this study is consistent with the argument that informal institutions can undermine formal democratic arrangements. Bratton and van de Walle (1997) describe African political systems as often characterised by neopatrimonial practices, where formal democratic institutions exist alongside informal networks of personal influence. The study's findings suggest that godfatherism represents such a neopatrimonial structure, where political authority is shaped by personal relationships rather than institutional rules. This weakens the autonomy of political institutions, including political parties, legislative bodies, and administrative structures.

The findings further reveal that godfatherism negatively affects governance outcomes by encouraging patronage-based appointments, reducing transparency, and weakening accountability mechanisms. This supports the argument by Grindle (2004) that effective governance requires strong institutions capable of implementing policies independently of political interference. When appointments and resource allocations are influenced by political loyalty rather than merit, public institutions may experience reduced capacity and declining effectiveness.

The study therefore confirms that godfatherism has implications beyond political processes; it directly affects administrative performance and the ability of government institutions to deliver public value.

The finding that respondents support stronger institutions, improved electoral regulation, and greater transparency in political financing reflects existing scholarly arguments on democratic reform. Lindberg (2006) emphasises that democratic consolidation requires not only regular elections but also strong institutions capable of ensuring political competition, accountability, and citizen participation. Similarly, Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007) argue that reducing clientelistic politics requires strengthening programmatic political competition, where parties compete based on policies and public interests rather than patronage distribution.

The study's emphasis on civic education and citizen participation also aligns with democratic governance literature, which highlights the role of an informed citizenry in challenging elite domination. Political clientelism often survives because citizens depend on patrons for access to resources and opportunities in contexts where state institutions fail to provide adequate social protection (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). Therefore, reducing godfatherism requires not only institutional reforms but also broader socio-economic changes that reduce citizens' dependence on political patrons.

Overall, the findings contribute to the existing literature by demonstrating that godfatherism should be understood as an institutional phenomenon involving the interaction of political clientelism, elite capture, and governance structures. While previous studies have largely examined godfatherism as an electoral problem, this study highlights its broader implications for democratic accountability, institutional autonomy, and governance effectiveness at the subnational level. The evidence from Osun State suggests that addressing godfatherism requires a comprehensive governance reform strategy focused on strengthening political party democracy, enhancing electoral independence, regulating campaign financing, and promoting citizen-driven accountability mechanisms. Such reforms are essential for transforming democratic institutions from patronage-based systems into inclusive and accountable governance structures.

Conclusion

This study examined godfatherism and democratic governance in Nigeria through the lens of political clientelism and elite capture, with particular focus on Osun State. The findings demonstrate that godfatherism represents more than an electoral practice; it constitutes an institutional challenge that shapes political recruitment, accountability relationships, governance processes, and the effectiveness of democratic institutions. The study reveals that political patronage networks influence candidate selection, electoral outcomes, and policy decisions by creating dependency relationships between political officeholders and influential sponsors. Consequently, elected officials may become more responsive to elite interests than to citizens' demands, thereby weakening democratic representation and public accountability.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the literature by integrating Political Clientelism Theory and Elite Capture Theory to provide a broader explanation of godfatherism as both a relational and institutional phenomenon. While existing studies often interpret godfatherism primarily as an electoral problem, this study extends the debate by demonstrating how patron-client relationships translate into institutional consequences, including weakened party democracy, reduced political competition, compromised accountability, and elite domination of governance structures. The study therefore advances understanding of how informal political institutions interact with formal democratic arrangements in shaping governance outcomes in developing democracies.

Practically, the study highlights the need for governance reforms that address the structural conditions sustaining godfatherism. Strengthening internal party democracy, improving electoral institutional independence, enforcing transparent campaign financing regulations, promoting merit-based political appointments, and expanding civic education are critical measures for reducing the influence of patronage networks. The findings suggest that democratic consolidation in Nigeria requires not only electoral reforms but also institutional mechanisms that enhance accountability, citizen participation, and inclusive political representation.

However, the study has some limitations. First, the research relied primarily on survey responses, which capture citizens' perceptions but may not fully reveal the complex strategies employed by political elites and informal networks. Second, the study focused on Osun State, which limits the generalisation of findings to other Nigerian states with different political histories and institutional contexts. Additionally, the cross-sectional design does not fully capture changes in godfatherism and political relationships over time.

Future research should adopt comparative and longitudinal approaches to examine variations in godfatherism across Nigerian states and other African democracies. Further empirical studies using qualitative methods, such as elite interviews, political ethnography, and institutional analysis, would provide deeper insights into the mechanisms through which political patrons influence governance decisions. Future research may also explore how digital platforms, youth political participation, and emerging accountability movements are reshaping traditional patronage networks. Such investigations would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how democratic institutions can be strengthened against elite capture and clientelistic politics.

Policy Implication and Recommendations

The findings of this study have important implications for democratic governance reforms, political institutional development, and public sector accountability in Nigeria. Since godfatherism operates as a form of political clientelism that enables elite capture and weakens democratic institutions, addressing its negative consequences requires multidimensional reforms targeting political parties, electoral systems, governance institutions, and citizen participation.

First, political parties should strengthen internal democracy and transparency in candidate selection processes. The study revealed that godfatherism significantly influences political nominations and electoral competition, often favouring candidates with strong patronage connections rather than competence and public legitimacy. Therefore, political parties should adopt transparent and participatory primary election procedures that allow broader participation of party members and reduce excessive control by individual political sponsors. Regulatory oversight by relevant electoral institutions should be strengthened to ensure compliance with democratic standards within political parties.

Second, electoral institutions should be empowered to promote credible and independent electoral processes. Since political godfathers often influence electoral outcomes through financial resources and political networks, electoral reforms should focus on improving monitoring mechanisms, enforcing electoral regulations, and reducing opportunities for political manipulation. Strengthening the independence, capacity, and accountability of electoral management institutions is essential for protecting democratic competition and citizens' electoral choices.

Third, campaign finance regulations should be strengthened to reduce the financial foundations of political patronage. The study found that political financing remains a major mechanism through which godfathers influence political actors. Therefore, policies should promote greater transparency in campaign funding, establish effective monitoring systems, and enforce limits on political donations and expenditures. Reducing excessive dependence on wealthy political sponsors would encourage more inclusive political participation.

Fourth, public institutions should be protected from political interference through stronger accountability mechanisms. The influence of godfatherism on public appointments and policy decisions highlights the need for merit-based recruitment, professional public administration, and institutional

autonomy. Strengthening civil service professionalism and ensuring that government institutions operate according to established rules rather than informal political interests would improve governance effectiveness and service delivery.

Fifth, civic education and citizen empowerment programmes should be expanded. The persistence of political clientelism is partly sustained by citizens' dependence on political patrons for access to resources and opportunities. Government agencies, civil society organisations, and educational institutions should promote political awareness, democratic values, and citizens' understanding of accountability mechanisms. An informed and active electorate can challenge patronage-based politics and demand responsive leadership.

Sixth, youth and emerging political leaders should be supported through inclusive leadership development initiatives. Since godfatherism often limits political opportunities for individuals without elite connections, creating platforms for young leaders, women, and other underrepresented groups can promote leadership diversity and reduce dependence on established patronage networks. Political mentorship programmes should focus on competence development rather than personal loyalty.

Finally, anti-corruption institutions should adopt stronger measures against the misuse of public resources for political patronage. Agencies responsible for accountability and transparency should enhance investigations into cases where political influence compromises public institutions or diverts state resources toward private interests. Effective enforcement of anti-corruption regulations is necessary to discourage the use of government resources as instruments for maintaining political networks.

Overall, the study suggests that reducing the influence of godfatherism requires a shift from personality-driven politics toward institution-based democracy. Sustainable democratic governance in Nigeria depends on strengthening political institutions, promoting accountability, and creating conditions where political legitimacy is derived from citizens' support rather than elite sponsorship.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

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