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RULING WITHOUT GOVERNING: PARTY INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND POLICY DIRECTION IN ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Can a political party rule without governing? This article examines that question through APGA-led Anambra State, Nigeria, between 2014 and 2022. Party institutionalization scholarship often treats electoral continuity, organizational survival, and party dominance as signs of institutional strength. Yet these indicators may hide a deeper problem: a ruling party may control office without possessing the institutional capacity to shape policy direction. This article develops the concept of ruling without governing to describe that condition. Drawing on APGA's constitution and manifesto, Anambra State government documents, budget speeches, policy records, legislative materials, credible public sources, and thirty semi-structured interviews with anonymized respondents, the article asks whether APGA's prolonged dominance translated into agenda influence, policy coordination, and implementation oversight. The evidence suggests that it did not. APGA remained electorally important and symbolically powerful, but policy direction during the period was shaped mainly by the governor, executive council, ministries, advisers, and technocratic agencies. The article contributes to debates on party institutionalization, executive dominance, and democratic accountability by showing that electoral dominance is not a reliable proxy for governing capacity. Ruling-party strength should therefore be assessed not

only by control of office, but by whether party institutions demonstrably shape policy priorities, formulation, and oversight.

Keywords: party institutionalization; policy direction; ruling parties; executive dominance; APG

Introduction

Political parties are expected to connect electoral competition to public authority. They recruit leaders, aggregate interests, offer policy choices, and provide direction for government after electoral victory (Dalton et al., 2011; Webb & White, 2007). In the responsible party tradition, parties campaign on programmes, win mandates, and translate those mandates into public policy (American Political Science Association, 1950). That model assumes that parties have enough institutional capacity to discipline or coordinate elected officials. In weakly institutionalized democracies, however, that assumption is often fragile. Parties may win office repeatedly while policy direction remains concentrated in the executive centre (Kitschelt, 2000; Mainwaring & Torcal, 2006; Randall & Svasand, 2002).

This article examines that problem through the concept of ruling without governing. The concept refers to a condition in which a party controls elected office and provides electoral legitimacy to government, but lacks the institutional capacity to shape policy direction. The distinction matters because party rule and party-directed governance are not the same thing. A party may dominate elections, produce governors and legislators, and still fail to act as the institution through which policy priorities are initiated, coordinated, and monitored. In such cases, the party remains visible, but the executive governs.

The problem is especially sharp in presidential and presidential-type systems. Executives possess independent mandates, control administrative machinery, command public resources, and influence access to appointments and patronage (Samuels & Shugart, 2010; van de Walle, 2003). Where parties are weak, these advantages may allow presidents or governors to absorb, bypass, or subordinate party structures. The result is a reversal of responsible party logic: instead of parties directing elected officials, elected executives dominate the parties that brought them to office.

Nigeria's Fourth Republic provides a useful setting for examining this tension. Since 1999, Nigerian parties have remained central to elections, but their role as governing institutions remains contested. Existing studies associate them with weak ideological differentiation, poor internal democracy, elite capture, factional instability, monetized candidate selection, and dependence on incumbent office holders (Kura, 2011; Ojukwu & Olaifa, 2011; Omotola, 2010). According to Abba and Ojiako (2026), the quality of democracy is closely tied to the level of citizen participation, which in Nigeria continues to be undermined by electoral malpractice, institutional weaknesses, and elite dominance. Ugwuanyi, Nongo, and Emenike (2024) show how monetized candidate selection can turn party primaries into a bazaar-like process in which financial gifts weaken credibility and internal democracy. At the state level, the problem is often deeper because governors control appointments, budgets, patronage networks, and access to political opportunity. According to Obikeze, Abba and Ojiako (2024), there is the fear that if political corruption is not checked, the hard won and cherished democracy in Nigeria could be heading for the rocks.

Anambra State offers a demanding subnational case. The All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) has controlled the governorship continuously since 2006, an unusual record of party continuity in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. If prolonged control of government produces party governing capacity, APGA's rule in Anambra should show evidence of structured party influence over policy direction. Its long tenure should have produced routines of manifesto tracking, party-executive coordination, and implementation oversight. If such routines remain weak even here, then electoral dominance is a poor proxy for institutional governing capacity.

The article focuses on 2014 to 2022, covering the two-term administration of Governor Willie Obiano under APGA. It asks: does party institutionalization translate electoral dominance into policy direction? The argument is that APGA's prolonged rule did not produce strong party-directed governance. APGA supplied the electoral platform, political identity, and symbolic legitimacy for government, but policy priorities were shaped

mainly by the governor, executive council, ministries, advisers, and technocratic agencies. The party was not absent. Its role was more electoral, symbolic, facilitative, and retrospective than directive.

The article makes three contributions. First, it separates electoral dominance from governing capacity. Second, it shifts the analysis of party institutionalization beyond survival and formal organization toward policy direction. Third, it develops ruling without governing as a concept for explaining how dominant parties in weakly institutionalized democracies may control government without directing governance.

Party Institutionalization, Policy Direction, and Ruling Without Governing

Party institutionalization scholarship generally treats institutionalized parties as organizations that are stable, socially rooted, internally coherent, valued by political actors, and autonomous from individual leaders (Mainwaring & Torcal, 2006; Randall & Svasand, 2002). More recent measurement work has also sought to capture the scope and depth of party institutionalization across countries, including durable elite and mass linkages (Bizzarro et al., 2017). These insights are useful, but they do not fully answer the question at the centre of this article: what happens after a party wins office?

This article treats policy direction as a demanding test of party institutionalization. Policy direction refers to the capacity of a party institution to shape government priorities, participate in policy formulation, coordinate with elected officials, and monitor implementation. It is not enough for a party to possess a manifesto, a constitution, ward structures, or repeated electoral victories. To direct policy, the party must influence what government prioritizes, how policy is designed, and whether implementation remains connected to party commitments.

This distinction is especially relevant in African presidential and subnational settings. Multiparty elections have expanded competition, but many parties remain weakly programmatic, dependent on elite networks, and shaped by clientelist or personalistic linkages (Basedau, 2019; Kitschelt, 2000; van de Walle, 2003). Recent work on clientelism suggests that parties may remain electorally effective while relying on targeted, private, or elite-centred linkages rather than programmatic governance (Dawson et al.,

2023; Demarest, 2022). In such contexts, parties may mobilize voters, distribute opportunities, and provide electoral labels without becoming autonomous centres of policy authority.

Ruling without governing captures this form of weakness. It differs from ordinary party weakness because the party may not be electorally weak at all. It may win repeatedly, dominate a subnational political arena, and retain symbolic authority. Its weakness lies in what happens after victory. It controls access to office but does not control policy direction. The concept also differs from executive dominance, although the two are closely related. Executive dominance describes the concentration of authority in the governor or president. Ruling without governing describes the party-side consequence of that concentration: the ruling party remains electorally visible but loses its governing function.

The framework rests on a distinction between party control of office and party control of policy direction. Party control of office exists where a party wins elections, occupies executive or legislative positions, and forms government. Party control of policy direction exists where party institutions influence agenda-setting, policy formulation, executive coordination, and implementation oversight. The first is access to state power. The second is institutional influence over how that power is used. A party may possess the first without possessing the second.

To make the concept observable, the article uses three indicators of party-directed governance. Agenda influence refers to the party's capacity to shape the priorities that government adopts. Evidence may include manifesto commitments linked to specific government priorities, resolutions of party organs, caucus positions, State Executive Committee decisions, internal memoranda, or documented public demands by recognized party leaders before executive action. Agenda influence is weak where policies emerge mainly from executive speeches, executive council decisions, ministry proposals, donor initiatives, consultant reports, or technocratic planning without clear party input.

Coordination influence refers to the party's participation in policy formulation and party-government consultation. A party exercises coordination influence where its organs meet regularly with elected officials, participate in

policy committees, review government proposals, or create formal channels through which party commitments shape executive decisions. Coordination influence is weak where party consultation is irregular, informal, symbolic, or limited to post-decision endorsement.

Oversight influence refers to the party's capacity to monitor implementation and demand correction from officials elected on its platform. Evidence may include party review meetings, implementation reports submitted to party organs, party-led monitoring committees, caucus interventions, disciplinary action, or formal demands for policy correction. Oversight influence is weak where monitoring is handled mainly by ministries, executive-appointed committees, auditors, consultants, or bureaucratic agencies without party authority.

These indicators allow the article to distinguish party-directed governance from executive-led governance. Party-directed governance exists where party institutions shape agenda-setting, participate meaningfully in policy coordination, and exercise oversight influence. Executive-led governance exists where policy direction comes mainly from the governor, executive council, ministries, advisers, or technocratic agencies. Ruling without governing exists where the party remains electorally dominant and symbolically important, but sustained institutional influence over policy direction is weak, irregular, or retrospective.

Case Selection and Research Design

This article adopts a qualitative single-case research design to examine whether APGA's electoral dominance translated into party-directed policy in Anambra State between 2014 and 2022. The aim is analytical rather than statistical: to develop and test the concept of ruling without governing in a subnational setting where party dominance should, in principle, have produced visible institutional influence. Qualitative case analysis is appropriate because the article examines institutional processes, actor relationships, and within-case mechanisms that are not easily captured through large-N measurement (George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2018).

Anambra State was selected as a demanding case. Since 2006, APGA has maintained continuous control of the governorship. This

long period should have encouraged organizational learning, policy routines, and party-government coordination. The 2014 to 2022 period, corresponding to Governor Willie Obiano's two terms, provides a full eight-year governance cycle under one ruling party. It is long enough to observe whether party structures developed routinized channels of policy influence, but bounded enough to permit close analysis.

The five policy areas examined are airport construction, fiscal automation through AiRS and IFMIS, small business support through the Anambra Small Business Agency (ASBA), security operations through Operation Kpochapu, and the Choose-Your-Community Project. These were selected because they were major, non-routine initiatives associated with the Obiano administration in budget speeches, development plans, agency records, and public policy communication. Selecting publicly visible government priorities reduces the risk of choosing only cases that fit the argument, although it does not eliminate case-selection concerns.

The analysis relies on APGA's constitution and manifesto, publicly available party documents, Anambra State government policy documents, budget speeches, budgetary records where available, legislative materials, credible media reports, scholarly studies, and thirty semi-structured interviews. Respondents included party officials, government and administrative officials, legislative actors and staff, civil society actors, journalists, academics, policy analysts, and security/community-level informants. Respondents participated voluntarily and were anonymized using role-based codes because several interviews concerned politically sensitive party-government relationships.

Interview material was coded manually using the three indicators developed above: agenda influence, coordination influence, and oversight influence. Each interview was read for claims about who initiated policy priorities, who participated in formulation, and who monitored implementation. Interview claims were not treated as conclusive on their own. They were compared across respondent categories and checked against party documents, government records, budget speeches, agency information, public statements, and media reports. Where evidence was unavailable or ambiguous, the analysis uses cautious language and avoids

treating party visibility as proof of party direction.

The design has limitations. Internal party records, including minutes of APGA State Executive Committee meetings, internal policy memoranda, and correspondence between party organs and government officials, were not consistently available. Interview evidence may also reflect partisan loyalty, retrospective justification, or political bias. To reduce these risks, the article relies on triangulation across documents, interviews, public statements, and secondary sources. The absence of documented party influence is not treated casually; it is assessed alongside interview evidence and the visible institutional record.

Table 1
Interview Respondent Categories

Respondent category	Number	Relevance to the study
Party officials	6	Formal and informal operation of APGA structures, party organs, and internal linkage claims
Government and administrative officials	6	Policy initiation, formulation, implementation, and executive-centred decision processes
Legislative actors and staff	4	Legislative-party linkage, oversight, and evidence of party influence on lawmaking
Civil society actors and journalists	5	External observation of APGA-government relations and public accountability claims
Academics and policy analysts	5	Interpretive assessment of party institutionalization, executive dominance, and policy direction
Security/administrative and community-level informants	4	Security operations, local facilitation, and community development channels
Total	**30**	Semi-structured interviews used for triangulation with documentary evidence

Source: Author's fieldwork.

Findings: APGA and the Limits of Party Direction

The evidence points to a consistent pattern: electoral dominance did not translate into strong institutional policy direction. APGA controlled the governorship, possessed formal party structures, and provided the platform through which government was formed. Yet across documentary evidence and interview data, the party appeared more as an electoral, symbolic, and mobilizational institution than as a policy-directing organization. Its relevance was real, but it was concentrated around elections, political identity, and public legitimation, while policy direction remained largely executive-led.

APGA's dominance in Anambra created a strong expectation of party institutionalization. Since 2006, the party has held the governorship continuously, making it one of the most durable subnational ruling parties in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (Independent National Electoral Commission, 2013, 2017, 2021). In principle, this should have allowed APGA to build routines for policy consultation, manifesto implementation, executive-party coordination, and oversight of officials elected on its platform. The evidence does not support that expectation.

The party's formal documents provide the starting point. APGA's constitution establishes national, state, local government, and ward organs. At the state level, the State Executive Committee and State Caucus appear, on paper, to provide possible channels for party-government linkage. The constitution gives the State Executive Committee responsibility for supervising the implementation of party policies at the state level and liaising with elected officials (All Progressives Grand Alliance, n.d.-a). The manifesto also offers broad commitments that could guide governance priorities (All Progressives Grand Alliance, n.d.-b). However, the formal existence of these organs did not translate into effective policy authority. The documentary record available for this study did not show a clear mechanism through which APGA could hold the governor accountable to party policy commitments.

The budget speeches reviewed for the 2015 to 2021 period reinforce this pattern. They did not show APGA party organs initiating, reviewing, or monitoring major policy priorities. The party appeared mainly as a source of political support rather than as a policy-directing institution. For instance, the 2015 budget speech acknowledged APGA's

support, but the acknowledgement did not indicate party involvement in policy initiation, formulation, or oversight (Anambra State Government, 2015).

The clearest evidence of weak party policy function appeared in the operation of APGA's State Executive Committee, local government and ward structures, and State Caucus. Interview and documentary evidence indicate that the State Executive Committee met intermittently, with greater activity around elections. Respondents familiar with party operations described its agenda as dominated by electoral preparation, dispute management, candidate questions, and general briefings. Policy deliberation was described as rare or absent. Party Official 2 stated: "We never discussed a single budget line in SEC. It was always about who gets what ticket, or settling fights between factions." Government Official 3 similarly reported that policy did not come up in any substantive sense; the governor's office could brief the party, but the party did not deliberate as a policy authority.

This matters because the State Executive Committee should have been one of the main channels through which party institutionalization translated into policy direction. If APGA functioned as a governing party, the SEC would reasonably be expected to review policy priorities, deliberate on manifesto implementation, provide input into budgetary direction, or question executive deviation from party commitments. Respondents did not identify a clear case in which the SEC vetoed, modified, or substantially influenced a major government policy. Nor was there documentary evidence that the SEC reviewed budgets or legislation as part of a formal party-government accountability process.

Local government and ward structures showed a similar pattern. They were active mainly as electoral mobilization structures, not as governance institutions. Their primary work was voter mobilization during elections, while their between-election role was described as dormant, ad hoc, or weakly structured. They did not provide formal channels through which citizen demands were systematically escalated into state policy, nor did they perform routine project monitoring for party purposes. In the Choose-Your-Community Project, some ward-level party actors reportedly served as informal facilitators in identifying community needs, but this was not the same as institutional party

control over design, finance, implementation rules, or monitoring.

The State Caucus also did not function as a strong mechanism of policy direction. Interview evidence suggested that caucus meetings were often shaped by executive priorities, with agendas focused largely on candidate selection, election funding, elite bargaining, and factional management. Policy discussion occurred occasionally, but mostly as executive briefing rather than party-led deliberation. Caucus decisions were advisory rather than binding, and respondents did not identify a case in which the caucus compelled major policy redirection by the executive.

The evidence also shows weak party-executive linkage. A strong party-government relationship would require regular consultation, institutionalized coordination, and some mechanism of control or accountability. In APGA-led Anambra, the documentary record did not reveal a formal joint party-government policy committee, regular policy review meetings between the party secretariat and ministries, a manifesto implementation committee, formal party input into budget formulation, or a party liaison office embedded in the governor's office. Among the thirty respondents, most government officials, civil society actors, journalists, and academics attributed policy direction primarily to the governor or executive institutions. Only two respondents, both party officials, described the party as having meaningful influence, and their claims were not supported by documentary evidence.

The strongest evidence for ruling without governing lies in the attribution of major policy initiatives. Four of the five policy areas examined were coded as executive-led across initiation, design, and monitoring. The partial exception was the Choose-Your-Community Project, where party actors had informal presence at the ward level but no formal authority over design, finance, implementation rules, or monitoring.

Fiscal automation through AiRS and IFMIS illustrates the pattern. The reform was initiated through executive and technocratic channels, with the Ministry of Finance and related reform actors playing central roles. Design was led by technocrats, consultants, and executive officials, while monitoring was handled through ministry and audit structures rather than party organs. No formal party

input was identified at the initiation, design, or monitoring stages.

Small business support through ASBA followed a similar path. The agency was initiated through executive and ministry channels, especially actors linked to commerce, industry, and enterprise support. Monitoring was conducted through ministry and board structures appointed by the executive. Party officials did not provide evidence of a formal party design role, and some respondents suggested that party actors became aware of the agency mainly through public announcement and political communication after launch.

Security operations under Operation Kpochapu were driven by the State Security Council chaired by the governor, with input from security agencies and the governor's office. No party resolution, manifesto directive, or State Executive Committee decision was found to have preceded the initiative. Monitoring was conducted through security and executive channels, not party oversight.

Airport construction also reflected executive-led policy direction. The available evidence links initiation, project design, financing decisions, and monitoring primarily to the governor, executive council, technical advisers, and relevant state agencies. APGA's role was more visible in public legitimation and political claim-making than in documented policy initiation or technical design. No evidence was found that party organs initiated the airport project, determined its financing model, or exercised formal monitoring authority over implementation.

The Choose-Your-Community Project was the only case showing limited party presence. Some ward and community-level party actors participated informally in community mobilization and needs identification. However, this influence was facilitative rather than directive. The executive set the programme framework, funding structure, implementation rules, and monitoring process. Party actors helped connect community-level actors to the programme, but they did not formally control agenda-setting, policy design, or oversight.

Table 2
Policy Attribution Across Selected Policy Areas

Policy area	Agenda influence	Coordination influence	Oversight influence	Overall coding
Airport construction	Executive-led	Executive-led	Executive-led	Executive-led
Fiscal automation through AiRS and IFMIS	Executive-led	Executive/technocratic-led	Ministry/audit-led	Executive-led
Small business support through ASBA	Executive/ministry-led	Executive/ministry-led	Executive-appointed board/ministry-led	Executive-led
Security operations through Operation Kpochapu	Executive/security council-led	Executive/security agency-led	Security/executive-led	Executive-led
Choose-Your-Community Project	Limited informal party facilitation	Executive-led	Executive/programme-led	Weak/mixed party presence

Source: Author's fieldwork and documentary analysis.

Discussion: Why Ruling Without Governing Matters

The findings complicate a common assumption in party politics: that prolonged party rule signals institutional strength. APGA's continuous control of the Anambra governorship created an appearance of dominant-party stability, yet policy direction remained concentrated largely in the executive centre. This does not mean APGA was politically irrelevant. It means that its relevance was not primarily institutional policy direction.

The article therefore pushes party institutionalization scholarship beyond electoral continuity, survival, rootedness, and formal organization. Those indicators remain important, but the Anambra case shows that a party may survive electorally and retain political visibility while remaining weak in the actual policy process. Institutionalization should therefore be judged not only by whether a party continues to exist or win elections, but also by whether it can shape agenda-setting, policy formulation, and oversight after victory.

The findings also speak to debates on presidentialism and executive dominance.

Presidential and presidential-type systems give executives independent mandates and institutional resources that can weaken party control after elections (Samuels & Shugart, 2010). In African political systems, this tendency may be reinforced by patronage, control of appointments, access to public resources, and weak party autonomy (van de Walle, 2003). The Anambra evidence reflects this pattern at the subnational level. The governor and executive institutions became the main centres of policy direction, while party organs played mainly electoral, symbolic, or retrospective roles.

The accountability implications are serious. Democratic accountability depends partly on citizens' ability to identify who is responsible for policy decisions (Hobolt et al., 2013; Powell, 2000). When party labels obscure the actual location of policy authority, credit and blame may be misdirected. Citizens may reward a party for policies designed mainly by the executive, or punish a party for failures over which party organs had little real control. Civil society actors and journalists may also misread the accountability chain if they treat every government action under a party administration as proof of party policy.

Ruling without governing may appear in other Nigerian states where parties have dominated for long periods but governors remain the real policy centres. It may also appear in other emerging democracies where party brands are strong during elections but weak inside government. Future research should compare cases where dominant parties successfully institutionalize policy direction with cases where they remain executive-dependent. Such comparison would help identify when electoral dominance becomes governing capacity and when it produces only party-labelled executive rule.

Conclusion

This article began with a simple but underexamined question: can a political party rule without governing? The evidence from APGA-led Anambra State suggests that it can. APGA's prolonged control of the governorship created electoral continuity, political visibility, and symbolic authority, but it did not produce strong institutional influence over policy direction between 2014 and 2022. The party controlled the pathway to office, yet the governor, executive council, ministries, advisers, and technocratic agencies

remained the main centres of policy initiation, formulation, and oversight.

The article has argued that this pattern is best understood as ruling without governing. The concept describes a condition in which a party controls elected office and provides legitimacy to government, but lacks the institutional capacity to shape policy direction. This distinction matters because party control of office is often mistaken for party control of governance. In Anambra, APGA's formal structures existed and the party remained electorally important, but its organs did not operate as strong mechanisms of agenda-setting, policy coordination, or implementation oversight. The broader lesson is direct: winning elections is not the same as governing through party institutions. In weakly institutionalized democracies, the key question is not only who rules, but who actually governs.

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Appendix A: Interview Respondent Categories and Dates

Respondent Code	Category	Interview Date
Party Official 1	Party official	10 March 2025
Party Official 2	Party official	14 March 2025
Party Official 3	Party official	16 March 2025
Party Official 4	Party official	18 March 2025
Party Official 5	Party official	22 March 2025
Party Official 6	Party official	28 March 2025
Government Official 1	Government official	15 March 2025
Government Official 2	Government official	19 March 2025
Government Official 3	Government official	22 March 2025
Government Official 4	Government official	21 March 2025
Government Official 5	Government official	25 March 2025
Government Official 6	Government official	24 March 2025
Legislative Actor 1	Legislative actor/staff	5 April 2025
Legislative Actor 2	Legislative actor	6 April 2025
Legislative Actor 3	Legislative staff	8 April 2025
Legislative Actor 4	Legislative actor	9 April 2025
Civil Society Actor 1	Civil society actor	25 March 2025
Civil Society Actor 2	Civil society actor	27 March 2025
Civil Society Actor 3	Civil society actor	29 March 2025
Civil Society Actor 4	Journalist	12 April 2025
Civil Society Actor 5	Journalist	14 April 2025
Academic/Policy Analyst 1	Academic	1 April 2025
Academic/Policy Analyst 2	Academic	2 April 2025
Academic/Policy Analyst 3	Academic	7 April 2025
Academic/Policy Analyst 4	Policy analyst	9 April 2025
Academic/Policy Analyst 5	Academic	11 April 2025
Security Official 1	Security official	10 April 2025
Security Official 2	Security official	11 April 2025
Administrative Official 1	Administrative/community informant	12 April 2025
Community Informant 1	Community-level informant	13 April 2025