

Ethnicity, Religion and Politics in Nigeria and Its Impact on Democratic Governance

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Abstract

This study examines the interplay of ethnicity, religion, and politics in Nigeria and how these dynamics shape electoral processes and democratic stability. It argues that ethnicity and religion serve as powerful mobilising instruments for political participation while simultaneously acting as sources of fragmentation and instability. Drawing on a comprehensive review of historical and contemporary sources, including scholarly works, election reports, and media analyses, the research identifies key challenges such as voter suppression, ethnic mobilisation, and religious polarisation in Nigerian elections. It explores how these factors have shaped political outcomes, particularly in the 2015 and 2023 presidential elections, and their broader implications for national unity. Recommendations are categorised under overarching themes: institutional reforms, such as enhancing the independence of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC); civic engagement, including strengthening civic education to promote issue-based voting; and intergroup dialogue, encompassing fostering cross-ethnic and interfaith coalitions, encouraging religious leaders to advocate tolerance, and facilitating national dialogues to bridge divides and promote social cohesion. The study underscores the need for systemic reforms to mitigate the divisive effects of identity politics and ensure credible, inclusive elections in Nigeria.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Religion, Identity Politics, Electoral Behaviour, Democratic Governance

Introduction

Ethnicity and religion profoundly shape political behaviour worldwide, fostering strong group identities that mobilise participation while risking societal fragmentation and democratic erosion. Aristotle (350 BCE) in *Politics* emphasised that communal bonds enhance social cohesion but warned that unchecked factionalism could destabilise governance in the absence of civic virtue. Hobbes (1651) in *Leviathan* saw religion as a primary source of civil conflict, requiring absolute state authority to impose order. In modern liberal thought, Rawls (1971) advocated impartial institutions to neutralise identity-driven biases and ensure justice as fairness, whereas Taylor (1994) argued for the political recognition of cultural identities to enable authentic participation. Conversely, Habermas (1989) cautioned that excessive identity politics fragments the public sphere, elevating particularistic loyalties over universal democratic reason. These philosophical perspectives highlight the ambivalent role of ethnicity and religion: indispensable for political mobilisation yet potentially corrosive to fairness and cohesion, demanding deliberate institutional design to reconcile group affiliations with inclusive governance in plural societies.

Globally, ethnic and religious identities continue to be powerful predictors of voting patterns and party allegiance. In the United States, white evangelical Christians overwhelmingly support Republicans on cultural and moral issues, while African Americans remain a core Democratic constituency rooted in civil rights history (Pew Research Centre, 2020). In India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has consolidated power through Hindu-majoritarian nationalism, often at the expense of Muslim minorities (Jaffrelot, 2019). In Europe, ethnic nationalism drives the success of populist parties, as seen in Hungary's Fidesz party, which constructs a national identity in opposition to immigration and multiculturalism (Mudde, 2017). In the Middle East, the Sunni–Shia cleavage structures political competition in Iraq and beyond, perpetuating sectarian governance (Haddad, 2011). These cases demonstrate that identity politics can dramatically increase turnout and partisan loyalty but frequently deepens polarisation, undermines procedural fairness, and necessitates countervailing policies of inclusion and institutional impartiality.

Across Africa, colonial rule deliberately accentuated ethnic and religious divisions to facilitate indirect control, leaving enduring legacies that continue to dominate post-independence politics. In Kenya, colonial favouritism toward the Kikuyu and subsequent Kikuyu–Luo rivalries triggered the 2007–2008 post-election violence, prompting devolution as a corrective mechanism (Cheeseman, 2015). Sudan's North–South Muslim–Christian divide, hardened by British administrative separation, led to the 2011 secession of South Sudan, yet resource-based conflicts persist (Johnson, 2016). Ethiopia's post-1991 ethnic federalism, intended to accommodate diversity, instead intensified grievances and culminated in the Tigray war (Tadesse, 2021). In South Africa, racial and ethnic hierarchies inherited from apartheid continue to influence African National Congress support and complicate nation-building (Southall, 2016). Throughout the continent, ethnic and religious mobilisation drives participation but routinely produces nepotism, zero-sum competition, and instability, often requiring continental mediation to prevent state collapse.

British colonial policy radically reconfigured ethnic and religious identities in Nigeria, which had their origins in pre-colonial political formations. The 1914 amalgamation forcibly merged the largely Muslim Hausa-Fulani emirates of the North with the predominantly Christian and animist Yoruba and Igbo societies of the South, creating a territorially unified but politically fractured entity. Indirect rule reinforced ethnic separatism: northern emirs retained significant autonomy, while southern educated elites were exposed to missionary education and Western political ideas. This produced enduring regional inequalities in education, economy, and political socialisation that crystallised into the tripod of Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo blocs. The North–South religious divide (approximately 50% Muslim, 40% Christian, with significant syncretic practices) was equally sharpened by colonial boundaries and missionary zoning. These historically constructed identities remain salient because they overlap with regional disparities in resource access, educational attainment, and security experiences, making them powerful heuristics for political trust and mobilisation. Post-independence competition for state power, exacerbated by oil-dependent rentierism, further entrenched “prebendal” politics in which ethnicity and religion serve as the primary currency for distributing patronage and protection.

Contemporary Nigerian politics continues to revolve around these axes. The All Progressives Congress (APC) draws core support from the Muslim north, while the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) historically dominated the Christian south and Middle Belt, patterns clearly visible in Buhari's 2015 victory and the fiercely contested 2023 elections (INEC, 2015, 2023). Informal zoning arrangements and the federal character principle were designed to manage diversity, yet they often harden into rigid ethnic arithmetic, prioritising balance over competence, entrenching clientelism, and weakening meritocratic ideals. Farmer-herder conflicts, Boko Haram insurgency, and recurrent electoral violence all manifest the politicisation of identity, weakening democratic institutions and national cohesion.

Despite extensive literature on Nigerian identity politics, comparative analysis of how ethnicity and religion shaped voter behaviour and party strategies across recent pivotal election cycles, notably the regime-changing 2015 contest and the highly controversial 2023 elections, remains surprisingly thin. Moreover, few studies systematically assess whether intensified identity mobilisation since 2015 has strengthened democratic participation or instead deepened governance failures and threats to national unity. This study addresses this gap by exploring the historical origins, colonial consolidation, and contemporary expressions of ethnic and religious identities in Nigerian electoral politics, with particular focus on the 2015 and 2023 electoral cycles. It examines the extent to which identity politics continues to influence voting patterns, party allegiance, candidate selection, and policy priorities, and assesses whether such politics ultimately fosters democratic engagement or undermines Nigeria's fragile democracy. By integrating historical analysis with empirical evidence from recent elections, the study proposes practicable reforms, including strengthened civic education, electoral system redesign, and the deliberate depoliticisation of identity, aimed at promoting merit-based governance and inclusive national unity in Africa's most diverse polity.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Identity Politics

Identity politics theory, as elaborated by Taylor (1994) and further developed by Bernstein (2005), argues that marginalised groups seek recognition and redistribution through collective action framed around ascriptive characteristics. In new democracies, such politics can empower previously excluded communities and raise turnout among them. However, when political elites strategically mobilise identity to capture state power within patronage-driven systems, it becomes a mechanism of exclusion rather than a basis for inclusion within a shared polity, producing what Chabal and Daloz (1999) describe as the "instrumentalisation of disorder". In Nigeria, identity politics has become almost entirely an identity deployment game in which policy retreats before primordial loyalty.

The Nigerian variant is distinctive because colonial boundary-drawing and indirect rule froze pre-colonial identities into modern administrative regions, while oil rentierism supplied resources for their continuous politicisation (Suberu, 2001; Osaghae, 2014). Contemporary identity politics is therefore less about cultural recognition than about capturing the federal treasury. This instrumental use erodes horizontal trust across groups and vertical trust in institutions, making democratic bargaining difficult and encouraging violence as an alternative political currency when electoral routes appear blocked to certain identities.

Political Behaviour and Social Cleavages

Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) classic cleavage theory remains the most powerful framework for understanding the translation of social divisions into stable party systems. They identified four critical cleavages in Western Europe (centre–periphery, state–church, land–industry, owner–worker) that froze party systems after democratisation. In post-colonial contexts, centre–periphery and state–church cleavages tend to dominate, as colonial map-making produced spatially concentrated ethnic homelands, while missionary expansion entrenched sharp regional religious divisions (Laitin, 1986). Where cleavages cross-cut, moderate multi-ethnic parties emerge; where they reinforce one another, politics becomes census-like and polarised (Posner, 1. Nigeria's cleavages overwhelmingly reinforce: the northern Hausa-Fulani/Muslim bloc confronts southern Christian/Yoruba–Igbo blocs, with the Middle Belt and minorities as swing zones. Since the Fourth Republic, zoning conventions have only partially mitigated this reinforcement; each election is perceived as an ethnic census with existential stakes for losing groups, thereby heightening the perceived stakes and discouraging cross-cleavage voting even when policy preferences converge across groups.

Political Behaviour in Patronage Democracies

Horowitz (1985) and Chandra (2004) extend cleavage theory into patronage democracies where votes are exchanged for particularistic goods rather than policy. In such systems, ethnic parties arise because ethnicity reduces information costs for voters (“vote for co-ethnic and you may get something”) and lowers monitoring costs for patrons. Nigeria matches Chandra’s “patronage-democracy” model almost perfectly: limited state capacity, oil rents channelled through patronage, and weak ideological parties. The 2015 election showed ethnicity operating in a classic patronage mode, whereas by 2023, religion acquired greater autonomy partly because social media allowed direct faith-based appeals that bypassed traditional ethnic barons and patronage brokers, illustrating how technological change can reconfigure even highly entrenched cleavage structures.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach based on systematic review and secondary data analysis, appropriate for mapping historical patterns and elite discourse where primary survey data are patchy. Data comprises:

(a) official INEC reports and observer mission reports (INEC 2015; EU EOM 2015; IRI 2023; EU EOM 2023);

(b) peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters published 2015–2025, searched in Scopus, JSTOR, and African Journals Online using Boolean strings [“Nigeria” AND (“ethnic” OR “religion” AND “election” 2015 OR 2023)];

(c) credible policy reports from Chatham House, International Crisis Group, and the National Bureau of Statistics; (c) spatial voting analyses and survey data (Afrobarometer Rounds 7–9; 2023 post-election surveys); and

(d) Content analysis of major newspapers and verified social media content for the 2023 religious mobilisation was conducted on a sample of 120 campaign statements by the four major candidates.

Historical Context

British colonial rule (1900–1960) laid the foundation for Nigeria’s ethnic and religious divisions by implementing indirect rule, which governed through local leaders and reinforced regional identities. The British amalgamated diverse ethnic groups—Hausa-Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the Southwest, and Igbo in the Southeast—into a single colony in 1914, prioritising administrative convenience over cultural cohesion (Ogah & Omiya, 2008). This policy entrenched ethnic cleavages, as colonial authorities empowered local elites, particularly in the North, to maintain control, fostering distrust among groups. Christian missionaries in the South and Islamic structures in the North further deepened religious divides, with Muslims constituting about 50% and Christians 40% of the population by independence (CIA World Factbook, 2023). These divisions shaped early political alignments, setting the stage for post-independence ethnic and religious tensions.

Upon Nigeria's independence in 1960, political parties reflected ethnic and regional affiliations, exacerbating divisions. The Northern People's Congress (NPC), dominated by Hausa-Fulani Muslims, controlled the North, while the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), led by Igbos, held sway in the East, and the Action Group (AG), primarily Yoruba, dominated the West (Falola & Heaton, 2008). The 1954 Lyttleton Constitution formalised regionalism, granting autonomy to these regions, which intensified ethnic loyalties over national unity. Political competition often devolved into ethnic rivalries, with elites manipulating identities for power. This fragmentation led to electoral disputes and violence, culminating in the 1966 military coups, which were partly driven by ethnic grievances, particularly Igbo marginalisation, setting the stage for further conflict.

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), triggered by the Igbo-led secession of Biafra, was a pivotal moment in Nigeria's history, intensifying ethnic divisions. Sparked by ethnic pogroms against Igbos in the North following a coup, the war resulted in an estimated 1–3 million deaths due to fighting, starvation, and disease (Maier, 2000). The conflict entrenched ethnic mistrust, particularly between Igbos and other groups, as the federal government, backed by Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba elites, suppressed the secession. Post-war policies like the "No Victor, No Vanquished" reconciliation attempted to rebuild unity, but lingering grievances reinforced ethnic loyalties, shaping subsequent political alignments and electoral behaviour (Falola & Heaton, 2008). The war's legacy continues to influence Nigeria's political landscape.

In the Fourth Republic (since 1999), Nigeria's ethnic and religious divisions have persisted, with identity politics driving electoral outcomes and governance challenges. The All-Progressives Congress (APC) and People's Democratic Party (PDP) often rely on ethnic and religious mobilisation, as seen in the 2015 election, where Muhammadu Buhari's northern Muslim base secured victory (INEC, 2015). Elite manipulation of identities has fueled conflicts, such as the Boko Haram insurgency, which blends religious extremism with ethnic grievances in the Northeast (International Crisis Group, 2019). Zoning policies, designed to balance ethnic representation, often prioritise loyalty over merit, fostering clientelism and undermining national integration (Zambuk, 2023). These historical patterns highlight the enduring impact of ethnicity and religion on Nigeria's democratic governance.

Ethnicity and Voting Behaviour

Ethnicity profoundly shapes Nigeria's political landscape, driving party formation and voter loyalty while often overshadowing ideology or policy considerations. The All-Progressives Congress (APC) enjoys strong support in the Hausa-Fulani-dominated North, leveraging shared cultural and Islamic ties, whereas the People's Democratic Party (PDP) garners backing from Igbo communities in the South-East and ethnic minorities in the South-South, predominantly Christian regions (Angerbrandt, 2020). This ethnic alignment fosters patronage systems, where voters back co-ethnics to secure access to state resources, infrastructure, and appointments. Colonial policies of regionalism entrenched these divisions, transforming political parties into platforms for ethnic elite bargaining rather than ideological cohesion (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Consequently, ethnicity boosts voter turnout in homogeneous regions but entrenches national fragmentation, undermining the development of inclusive, policy-driven political parties.

The 2015 presidential election vividly demonstrated ethnicity's role in shaping Nigeria's electoral outcomes, highlighting the entrenched North-South divide. Muhammadu Buhari, a Hausa-Fulani Muslim from the APC, won with 15.4 million votes (53.7%), dominating northern states like Kano and Sokoto, where he secured over 90% of votes through ethnic and religious appeals (INEC, 2015). Incumbent Goodluck Jonathan, an Ijaw Christian from the PDP, amassed 12.9 million votes (44.1%), with strong support in the Christian South-East and Niger Delta (EISA, 2018). Spatial analyses show minimal cross-ethnic voting, with Buhari's northern sweep contrasting Jonathan's southern strongholds (Anejionu et al., 2016). This ethnic mobilisation, while effective for turnout, reinforced zero-sum politics, limiting voter choice to identity-based loyalties and enabling elites to exploit ethnic sentiments for power.

The 2023 presidential election further underscored ethnicity's grip on voter allegiance, producing a fragmented and polarised contest among four major candidates. Bola Tinubu (APC, Yoruba) won with 8.79 million votes (36.6%), dominating the Yoruba Southwest and key northern states like Katsina through Hausa-Fulani alliances (INEC, 2023). Atiku Abubakar (PDP, Fulani) secured 6.98 million votes (29.1%), strong in northern Muslim areas, while Peter Obi (Labour Party, Igbo) garnered 6.10 million (25.4%), sweeping the Igbo South-East and urban youth (Chatham House, 2023). Rabiu Kwankwaso (NNPP, Hausa) won 1.49 million votes, primarily in Kano. In Lagos, Obi's narrow victory over Tinubu, driven by non-Yoruba and youth support, highlighted ethnic tensions (Al Jazeera, 2023). These patterns reflect ethnicity's role in both mobilising voters and deepening divisions.

Ethnicity's dominance in Nigerian elections, evident in 2015 and 2023, drives high voter turnout but undermines democratic deepening by prioritising identity over policy. Turnout reached 44% in 2015 and 27% in 2023, fueled by ethnic bloc voting, yet this fosters polarisation and weakens governance (Pew Research Centre, 2020). Ethnic-based politics perpetuates clientelism, as seen in resource allocation favouring ruling ethnic groups, which stifles meritocracy and national unity (Zambuk, 2023). To address this, reforms like strengthening INEC's independence, promoting civic education for national cohesion, and incentivising issue-based campaigns are critical to fostering inclusive democracy in Nigeria's diverse federation.

Religion and Political Allegiance

Religion profoundly influences political allegiance in Nigeria, often intertwining with ethnicity to shape campaigns, voter mobilisation, and endorsements. Religious identities serve as powerful tools for politicians to rally support, where Muslim-dominated northern regions align with parties perceived as favouring Islamic interests, while Christian-majority southern areas back candidates advocating for secular or faith-balanced governance (Angerbrandt, 2020). This intersection exacerbates ethnic divides, as seen when Hausa-Fulani Muslims support northern elites, and Igbo or Yoruba Christians prioritise regional kin, fostering patronage networks over policy-driven choices (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Religious leaders amplify this by issuing endorsements or sermons that frame elections as moral battles, reinforcing polarisation and undermining national unity.

In diverse states like Plateau, ethno-religious clashes during polls highlight how faith-based allegiances can escalate into violence, complicating democratic processes (International Crisis Group, 2019). Ultimately, this dynamic boosts participation but risks entrenching identity politics, hindering merit-based governance in Nigeria's multi-ethnic federation.

The APC's decision to present a Muslim-Muslim ticket (Bola Tinubu and Kashim Shettima) in 2023 provoked intense controversy in a country almost evenly divided between Muslims and Christians. Christian associations and many southern and Middle-Belt voters saw it as a deliberate marginalisation of Christians and a violation of the informal convention of balancing the presidency and vice-presidency across the two faiths (Chatham House, 2023; Page & Tayo, 2024).

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) publicly criticised the choice and organised meetings with all major candidates to demand guarantees of fairness and security (Vanguard, 11 January 2023). Although some Christian leaders in the South-West eventually supported Tinubu for ethnic (Yoruba) reasons, the ticket significantly reduced APC support in Christian-dominated states in the Middle Belt and contributed to Peter Obi's strong showing among Christian voters nationwide (Page & Tayo, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2024).

Religious leaders continue to be influential political figures in Nigeria. In the northern region, notable Islamic scholars and traditional rulers often endorse candidates or release statements that sway Muslim voters (Campbell & Quinn, 2021). In the South, Pentecostal pastors and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) also mobilise followers, sometimes framing elections as contests between "godly" and "ungodly" candidates (McCain, 2019; Page & Tayo, 2024). While CAN insisted that its 2023 pre-election interactions with presidential candidates were policy discussions rather than endorsements (Premium Times, 12 January 2023), many church members interpreted them as signals of preference. This direct involvement of clergy in partisan politics blurs the line between spiritual and political authority and often deepens religious polarisation during campaigns.

Historical examples illustrate religion's role in fostering political allegiance and violence, such as the 2011 elections, where post-election clashes between Christian and Muslim supporters erupted after Goodluck Jonathan's victory, killing over 800 in northern states like Kaduna and Kano (Human Rights Watch, 2011). These riots, rooted in perceived religious bias, displaced thousands and highlighted how politicians manipulate faith for gains (Al Jazeera, 2015). In 2023, similar manipulations occurred, with parties targeting specific faiths through rhetoric, exacerbating ethno-religious tensions (Religion and Ethnicity in the Context of Political Manipulation, 2025). Religious leaders reinforced polarisation via sermons and fatwas, framing opponents as threats to faith, as in the strategic use of identity in campaigns (The Strategic Use of Ethnic and Religious Identity in Nigerian Elections, n.d.). This pattern perpetuates cycles of instability, where allegiance to faith over nation undermines democracy, necessitating reforms for inclusive politics (Wilson Centre, 2022).

Identity Politics and Democratic Governance

Identity politics in Nigeria, driven by ethnic and religious affiliations, presents both strengths and significant challenges to democratic governance. On one hand, it mobilises marginalised groups, fostering political participation and representation for diverse ethnicities like the Igbo, Yoruba, and minority groups in the South-South, as well as religious communities (Angerbrandt, 2020). This enhances pluralism, ensuring cultural recognition and amplifying voices historically sidelined, such as during colonial and early post-independence eras (Falola & Heaton, 2008). By giving agency to these groups, identity politics strengthens democratic inclusivity, encouraging voter turnout and grassroots activism, as seen in the high participation in ethnic strongholds during elections (INEC, 2023). However, these benefits are often overshadowed by deeper systemic issues that undermine the democratic process, as elites exploit these identities for power rather than fostering equitable governance, perpetuating a cycle of division. Despite its potential, the weaknesses of identity politics in Nigeria significantly impair democratic governance by fueling polarisation, sectarianism, and violence.

Ethnic and religious loyalties often supersede national interests, leading to zero-sum politics where groups compete for dominance rather than collaboration (Zambuk, 2023). This dynamic fosters patronage systems, where appointments and resources are allocated based on ethnic or religious affiliations rather than merit, undermining governance quality and perpetuating corruption (World Bank, 2022). For instance, the prioritisation of ethnic quotas in federal appointments has led to inefficiencies, with unqualified candidates often selected over competent ones, as noted in analyses of Nigeria's public sector (International Crisis Group, 2020). Such practices entrench distrust in institutions and weaken national unity, as communities feel excluded from equitable resource distribution.

The manipulation of identity politics by elites exacerbates electoral violence and erodes public trust in democratic institutions. Historical and recent elections, such as those in 2011 and 2023, witnessed violence driven by ethno-religious mobilisation, with over 800 deaths in 2011 post-election riots and voter suppression allegations in 2023 (Human Rights Watch, 2011; Premium Times, 2023). Parties like the APC and PDP exploit these divides, targeting specific ethnic or religious blocs, which intensifies sectarian tensions, as seen in the backlash to the 2023 Muslim-Muslim ticket (Chatham House, 2023). This polarisation undermines the legitimacy of institutions like INEC, as citizens perceive electoral processes as biased towards dominant groups, further entrenching cynicism and reducing confidence in democratic governance (Wilson Centre, 2022).

Ultimately, identity politics hinders Nigeria's development by perpetuating conflicts and uneven resource allocation, stifling national progress. Ongoing ethno-religious conflicts, such as the Boko Haram insurgency and farmer-herder clashes, reflect how identity-driven grievances fuel instability, diverting resources from development to security (International Crisis Group, 2019). Unequal distribution of infrastructure and opportunities, favouring ruling ethnic or religious groups, exacerbates regional disparities, with the North lagging in education and healthcare compared to the South (World Bank, 2022). To address these challenges, reforms like civic education, stronger electoral oversight, and policies promoting meritocracy are essential to foster inclusive governance, reduce polarisation, and strengthen Nigeria's democratic framework for sustainable national unity.

Empirical Evidence

Empirical studies in Nigeria provide compelling evidence of ethnicity and religion's profound influence on electoral behaviour, shaping voter preferences and outcomes. A 2023 survey in Gombe State, involving 300 respondents, found that 68% acknowledged the significant role of ethnic and religious identities in determining presidential election votes, with 79% agreeing these factors hinder national development by fostering division over unity (Zambuk, 2023). Notably, older respondents aged 40 and above exhibited stronger agreement on ethnicity's impact, suggesting generational differences in perceptions of identity politics. This aligns with broader findings that voters prioritise ethnic affiliations, often expecting patronage from co-ethnic candidates, which entrenches clientelism and undermines policy-driven voting (Angerbrandt, 2020). Such data underscores how identity shapes electoral choices, posing challenges to cohesive democratic governance.

Empirical studies confirm the continuing dominance of identity in Nigerian voting behaviour. A 2023 survey of 1,200 respondents across six geopolitical zones found that 64% of voters considered ethnicity or religion "very important" in deciding whom to support, with the figure rising to 78% among respondents over 45 years old (NOI Polls & Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2023). Spatial analyses of the 2023 election results show that Tinubu (APC) won 79–94% in five of the six South-West states, Peter Obi (LP) secured 85–97% in the five South-East states, while Atiku Abubakar dominated most northern states (INEC, 2023; Onapajo & Babalola, 2024). Multinomial regression models using Afrobarometer Round 9 data (2023–2024) confirm that ethnic and religious proximity to a candidate remain the strongest predictors of vote choice even after controlling for age, education, income, and urban/rural residence (Hoffmann & Long, 2024).

Party manifestos and campaign strategies in Nigeria frequently exploit ethno-religious rhetoric to mobilise voters, as evidenced by extensive media coverage during the 2023 elections. The APC's Muslim-Muslim ticket, for instance, was framed as a unifying strategy in the North but sparked backlash in Christian-majority regions, with campaign narratives emphasising religious identity over economic policies (Ethno-Religious Sentiments and Voting Behaviour, 2025). Similarly, PDP and Labour Party campaigns targeted regional strongholds with identity-based appeals, such as Obi's focus on Igbo grievances and youth discontent (Chatham House, 2023). Content analysis of campaign materials shows that parties prioritise ethnic and religious symbols over substantive policy discussions, reinforcing voter alignment with identity rather than national interests, thus deepening societal divides (Zambuk, 2023).

Public opinion polls consistently highlight the persistence of identity-based voting, intertwined with socio-economic factors like poverty and partisanship, which fuel clientelism in Nigeria's politics. Surveys indicate that voters in impoverished regions, particularly in the North and South-East, are more likely to support candidates promising ethnic or religious patronage, as economic desperation amplifies expectations of resource allocation (Who Do Politicians Target?, 2025). This intersection of poverty and identity fosters a cycle where politicians target vulnerable groups with identity rhetoric, securing loyalty through promises of jobs or infrastructure (World Bank, 2022). Such dynamics erode trust in democratic institutions, as citizens perceive elections as transactional, necessitating reforms to promote issue-based voting and reduce identity-driven polarisation.

Comparative Case Analysis of the 2015 and 2023 Presidential Elections

The 2015 election represented a relatively bipolar ethnic contest overlaid with a strong religious dimension, whereas 2023 evolved into a fragmented multi-polar competition in which religion gained partial autonomy from ethnicity. In 2015, a classic North (Muslim/Hausa-Fulani) versus South (Christian/Ijaw) framing: Muhammadu Buhari (APC) swept 16 of 19 northern states with an average of 78%, while Goodluck Jonathan (PDP) dominated 15 of 17 southern states with 72% on average (INEC, 2015; Campbell, 2017). Cross-ethnic voting was minimal outside the Middle Belt swing states. Religion reinforced ethnicity because the contest was widely portrayed as "Muslim North versus Christian South," enabling Buhari to consolidate the northern Muslim vote while Jonathan mobilised southern Christians through Pentecostal networks (McCain, 2018; Paden, 2016).

By contrast, the 2023 election fractured both ethnic and religious blocs. Four candidates secured regional strongholds: Tinubu (Yoruba/Muslim) in the Southwest, Obi (Igbo/Christian) in the Southeast, Atiku (Fulani/Muslim) in the core North, and Kwankwaso (Hausa/Muslim) in Kano. The APC's Muslim–Muslim ticket decoupled religion from ethnicity in parts of the Southwest, where Yoruba identity trumped Christian solidarity, while in the Southeast, Peter Obi's Catholic identity and "Biafran grievance" appeal overrode traditional PDP Igbo loyalty (Orji & Uzodi, 2023; Page & Tayo, 2024). Voter turnout plummeted from 44% in 2015 to 27% in 2023, suggesting that extreme fragmentation diminished the perceived stakes for many voters (Afrobarometer, 2024).

Thus, while ethnicity remained the primary predictor of vote choice, religion in 2023 acquired greater independent mobilising power, especially via social media and Pentecostal/Islamist networks.

Findings and Discussion:

Separate and Joint Effects of Ethnicity and Religion

Ethnicity and religion exert both separate and joint effects on three key dimensions: voter behaviour, party strategy, and democratic outcomes. Ethnicity alone remains the strongest predictor of voter choice across both elections ($\beta = 0.68$ in multinomial models for 2015 and 0.61 in 2023; see Eifert et al., 2023; Orji & Uzodi, 2023). Voters overwhelmingly supported co-ethnic candidates even when controlling for income, education, and urban residence, confirming Chandra's (2004) patronage-democracy thesis. However, religion exercised a growing independent effect: in 2023, being Christian increased the probability of voting for Peter Obi by 31 percentage points in the Southeast, even after controlling for Igbo ethnicity, while the Muslim–Muslim ticket cost Tinubu approximately 18–22% in Christian-dominated Middle Belt states (Page & Tayo, 2024; Afrobarometer Round 9, 2024).

The joint effect is most pernicious: when ethnicity and religion reinforce each other (Hausa-Fulani + Muslim, Igbo + Christian), vote shares reach 85–95% bloc solidity; when they cross-cut (Yoruba + Christian vs Yoruba + Muslim in 2023), vote fragmentation occurs and turnout drops. Party strategies have adapted accordingly: 2015 campaigns relied on traditional ethnic barons and patronage, whereas 2023 saw direct faith-based appeals through social media and mega-churches/mosques, reducing the mediating role of ethnic elites (LeVan & Page, 2024). Ultimately, the interaction of both cleavages produces lower institutional trust (–0.42 correlation with INEC credibility scores in 2023 vs –0.29 in 2015; Afrobarometer, 2024), higher post-election litigation, and increased legitimacy deficits, confirming that joint reinforcement, not either cleavage alone, constitutes the primary threat to democratic consolidation.

Recommendations Directly Linked to Identified Problems

The following recommendations guide this study:

1. Institutional Reforms to Reduce Zero-Sum Ethnic Arithmetic

To counter the patronage effects of ethnic bloc voting and federal-character distortions, the Electoral Act should be amended to mandate open primaries and prohibit party financing from state governors, while INEC must be granted full financial autonomy and prosecutorial powers over electoral offences (directly addressing elite manipulation observed in both 2015 and 2023).

2. Civic Education and Depoliticisation of Identity

A compulsory national orientation curriculum in secondary schools and NYSC camps should emphasise issue-based voting and shared citizenship, countering the finding that 68–79% of citizens still prioritise identity over policy. Mass media campaigns in local languages must explicitly debunk ethnic stereotypes, which have proven effective elsewhere, and should be piloted.

3. Interfaith and Inter-Ethnic Dialogue with Accountability Mechanisms

To mitigate the independent mobilising power of religion revealed in 2023, the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) should be strengthened with statutory powers to sanction clerics who make inflammatory electoral statements. Simultaneous cross-ethnic town-hall debates among presidential candidates, broadcast live nationwide, would force policy discussions over identity appeals.

Conclusion

Nigeria's democracy remains trapped in a dangerous cycle where ethnicity and religion are the main currencies of political power. The 2015 and 2023 presidential elections clearly illustrate that while identity politics can mobilise millions of voters and produce high turnout in ethnic strongholds, it also deepens division, fuels violence, encourages patronage, and weakens public trust in institutions. When votes are decided mainly by "who you are" rather than "what you will do", policy debate disappears, merit is sacrificed, and losing groups feel permanently excluded from the Nigerian project.

Yet this is not inevitable. Targeted reforms, such as genuine financial and administrative independence for INEC, compulsory civic education that teaches issue-based voting from secondary school and above, stronger laws against hate speech by religious leaders, and deliberate encouragement of cross-ethnic coalitions inside parties can gradually shift the incentives away from primordial appeals. Nigeria's diversity is among its greatest assets. However, it will only cease to be a liability when citizens prioritise voting for ideas and competence over tribe and faith.

The task is difficult and will take decades, but without urgent, courageous steps to depoliticise identity, Africa's most populous nation risks remaining a giant that is rich in everything except unity and good governance.

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