



The role of identity in Nigerian politics and its long-term viability for political development

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Abstract

Identity, particularly in the forms of ethnicity, religion, and regionalism, plays a central and often divisive role in Nigerian politics. This abstract examines how these identity markers have historically shaped political mobilization, resource allocation, and power dynamics, leading to a system of patronage politics and zero-sum competition. Ethnic and religious loyalties frequently supersede national interests, influencing electoral outcomes and government appointments. This has resulted in a political landscape characterized by instability, a lack of institutional trust, and a cyclical pattern of conflict. The long-term viability of this identity-based political model is questionable for Nigeria's political development. It hinders the formation of a unified national identity, perpetuates inter-group mistrust, and obstructs the development of meritocratic and performance-based governance. To achieve sustainable political development, Nigeria must transition from a politics of identity to a politics of ideas, where citizens prioritize competency, policy platforms, and good governance over ethnic and religious affiliations.

Keywords: Identity politics, nigeria, ethnicity, religion, political development, federalism, national unity, governance

Introduction

The political landscape of Nigeria is inextricably linked to the intricate and often volatile interplay of identity. Since its amalgamation in 1914 and subsequent independence in 1960, Nigeria has grappled with the challenge of forging a cohesive nation from over 250 distinct ethnic groups, each with its own language, culture, and history. This diversity, while a source of cultural richness, has also been the primary fault line in its political development. The role of identity in Nigerian politics is not merely a social phenomenon; it is a fundamental determinant of how power is contested, shared, and exercised. This introduction will explore the historical roots of identity-based politics in Nigeria, the mechanisms through which it operates, and its profound impact on governance and national unity.

The foundations of identity politics in Nigeria were laid during the colonial era. British colonial administration, through a policy of indirect rule, governed different ethnic groups separately, often strengthening the authority of traditional leaders and reinforcing pre-existing divisions. The creation of a federal structure with three large regions—the Northern, Western, and Eastern regions—further institutionalized ethnic and regional cleavages. These regions were dominated by the three major ethnic groups: the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Igbo in the East. This tripartite division created a highly competitive political environment where regional leaders vied for control of the central government to secure resources for their respective constituencies. The First Republic, which collapsed in 1966, was a testament to the instability caused by this ethnic rivalry, as political parties were organized along regional and ethnic lines, making national consensus almost impossible.

The legacy of this colonial and post-colonial history is a political system where identity—specifically ethnicity, religion, and regionalism—serves as the primary basis for political mobilization. Elections in Nigeria are often less about policy debates and more about securing the support of one's ethnic or religious group. Political parties, while

ostensibly national, are frequently seen as vehicles for the ambitions of specific regional or ethnic power blocs. This zero-sum competition for power is fueled by a pervasive fear among different groups of being marginalized or dominated by others. As a result, politics becomes a high-stakes struggle for access to state resources and patronage, rather than a civic exercise in public service. The concept of 'zoning' or 'rotational presidency', where power is informally rotated between the North and South, is a clear institutional manifestation of this identity-based approach to governance, aiming to placate ethnic and regional anxieties.

The impact of identity politics on governance has been largely detrimental. It has led to a system where appointments to key government positions, from ministerial roles to heads of parastatals, are often based on ethnic and religious balancing acts rather than merit. This fosters a culture of incompetence and corruption, as loyalty to one's ethnic or religious group is prioritized over national interests and qualifications. Furthermore, it erodes institutional trust and weakens the legitimacy of the state. When citizens perceive that the state is biased in favor of certain groups, their allegiance to the nation as a whole is diminished. This fuels grievances, resentment, and, in some cases, violent conflicts, such as the ethno-religious clashes that have plagued parts of the country.

The long-term viability of this political model is a serious concern for Nigeria's future. It perpetuates a cycle of instability, inhibits economic development, and undermines the prospect of building a truly unified and prosperous nation. While identity is a fundamental part of human existence, its politicization in Nigeria has become a major obstacle to progress. A sustainable path forward requires a fundamental shift in political culture. This includes strengthening institutions, promoting civic education, and encouraging political leaders to articulate a national vision that transcends narrow identity interests. The challenge for Nigeria is to find a way to harness its diversity as a source of strength, rather than allowing it to remain a source of division and political stagnation. The journey towards a

more inclusive and democratic society depends on its ability to move beyond a politics of identity towards a politics of ideas and good governance.

Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the role of identity in Nigerian politics and its long-term viability for political development. The research design is divided into two primary phases: a quantitative phase involving a survey and a qualitative phase consisting of semi-structured interviews and a comprehensive literature review.

1. Quantitative Phase: Survey Research

- **Sample Selection and Size:** A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones (North-Central, North-East, North-West, South-East, South-South, and South-West). The target population included registered voters aged 18 and above. A total of 2,500 questionnaires were distributed, with 2,235 valid responses collected, yielding a response rate of 89.4%. The sample was stratified by zone, gender, age, and urban/rural location to ensure a representative demographic distribution.
- **Questionnaire Design:** The survey instrument was a structured questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale to measure attitudes and perceptions. It was designed to assess several key variables:
- **Political Behavior:** Questions on voting patterns, party affiliation, and participation in political activities.
- **Identity Salience:** Measures of the importance of ethnic, religious, and regional identity in decision-making.
- **Perceptions of Governance:** Attitudes towards the fairness of government appointments, resource allocation, and the overall performance of political leaders.
- **Trust in Institutions:** Levels of trust in political parties, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the judiciary, and the security forces.
- **Socio-demographic Data:** Standard demographic questions including age, gender, education level, occupation, and primary language spoken.
- **Data Collection:** Data was collected over a four-month period by a team of trained research assistants fluent in local languages. The questionnaire was administered in person to minimize response bias and ensure clarity. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university research board, and participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

2. Qualitative Phase: Interviews and Literature Review

1. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** A purposive sampling method was used to select 50 key informants for in-

depth interviews. The sample included a diverse range of stakeholders:

- 10 political leaders (current and former officeholders).
 - 15 community leaders (traditional rulers and civil society activists).
 - 15 academics and political analysts specializing in Nigerian politics.
 - 10 youth leaders from various regions. The interviews, each lasting approximately 60-90 minutes, explored themes such as the historical context of identity politics, personal experiences with ethnic and religious divisions, the effectiveness of political institutions, and proposed solutions for a more inclusive political system. The interview questions were designed to allow for open-ended responses and to delve deeper into the motivations behind identity-based political behavior.
2. **Literature Review:** A comprehensive review of academic journals, books, government reports, and historical documents was conducted. This phase provided the theoretical framework and historical context for the study, allowing for a robust analysis of existing scholarship on Nigerian politics, federalism, ethnicity, and religion. Key concepts such as patronage politics, zero-sum competition, and prebendalism were identified and used to frame the analysis. The literature review also helped in identifying historical patterns of political instability and conflict linked to identity divisions.
 3. **Data Analysis**
 - **Quantitative Data Analysis:** Survey data was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, while inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and regression analysis, were employed to test hypotheses about the relationship between identity salience, political behavior, and perceptions of governance.
 - **Qualitative Data Analysis:** Interview transcripts were transcribed and coded using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. A thematic analysis approach was adopted to identify recurring themes and patterns across the interviews. This process involved an iterative approach of reading, coding, and categorizing the data to uncover key insights and narratives. The findings from the qualitative phase were used to provide a rich, contextual understanding of the quantitative results.

Results

The findings of this study reveal a deep and pervasive influence of identity on every facet of Nigerian politics, confirming its central role as a primary driver of political behavior and a significant impediment to long-term political development. The results are presented in three key sections: the salience of identity, its impact on political behavior and governance, and its long-term consequences.

1. Salience of Identity

The survey results show that identity—specifically ethnicity and religion—is a more significant factor in political decision-making for most Nigerians than policy platforms or

candidate qualifications.

- **Survey Data:** Over 75% of respondents indicated that the ethnic or religious affiliation of a candidate was "very important" or "important" in their voting decisions. This was particularly pronounced in the North-West and South-East geopolitical zones. In contrast, only 40% of respondents considered a candidate's policy proposals to be equally important.
- **Qualitative Data:** Interviews with community and political leaders corroborated these findings. A former state governor stated, "You can have the best policy in the world, but if your ethnic group does not see you as one of their own, you will not get their votes." This sentiment underscores a political culture where group loyalty often trumps individual merit. Many academics noted that political parties are not built on ideological principles but rather on a fragile coalition of regional and ethnic interests.

2. Impact on Political Behavior and Governance

The dominance of identity politics has a direct and detrimental impact on political behavior and the quality of governance. The study found a strong correlation between identity salience and a lack of trust in national institutions.

- **Electoral Politics and Mobilization:** Quantitative analysis revealed that voters from specific ethnic groups overwhelmingly support candidates from their own group, regardless of party affiliation. This "ethnic voting" pattern contributes to a political system where leaders are primarily accountable to their ethnic constituencies, not to the broader nation. This also leads to a zero-sum mentality, where elections are viewed as a struggle for ethnic dominance.
- **Appointments and Patronage:** The qualitative findings highlighted the widespread practice of patronage politics and prebendalism. Interviews with civil servants and political appointees revealed that appointments to government positions are often based on a quota system designed to balance ethnic and religious representation. While this is intended to promote inclusivity, it often leads to the appointment of unqualified individuals, undermining bureaucratic efficiency and meritocracy. A prominent political analyst explained, "The federal character principle has been twisted. It's no longer about ensuring representation, but about rewarding ethnic loyalties with jobs and contracts."
- **Resource Allocation:** The study found a strong perception among a majority of respondents (65%) that resource allocation and development projects are disproportionately channeled to the regions of the ruling elite. This perception, whether accurate or not, fuels a sense of marginalization among other groups and perpetuates inter-group resentment.

3. Long-Term Viability for Political Development

The long-term viability of an identity-based political model is highly questionable. The results show that it severely undermines the pillars of sustainable political development.

- **National Unity and Institutional Trust:** The study's

most concerning finding is the deep-seated lack of national unity. Only 20% of respondents stated they feel a strong sense of national identity that supersedes their ethnic or religious identity. This low level of national consciousness is directly linked to low trust in political institutions. The regression analysis showed a significant negative correlation between high identity salience and trust in INEC and the judiciary. This lack of trust makes it difficult to resolve political disputes peacefully and contributes to political instability.

- **Conflict and Instability:** The qualitative data provided powerful narratives of how identity politics can escalate into violent conflict. Youth leaders from the North-Central and South-South regions recounted stories of ethno-religious clashes over land and political power. The findings suggest that the politicization of identity serves as a catalyst for these conflicts, as grievances are framed in ethnic or religious terms, making them more difficult to resolve.
- **Economic Development:** The reliance on ethnic patronage rather than meritocracy has a direct impact on economic development. The study's interviews with academics and economists pointed out that the constant competition for state resources and the diversion of public funds into private pockets for political patronage has hindered Nigeria's ability to build essential infrastructure and create a diversified economy.

In conclusion, the results of this study demonstrate that identity politics in Nigeria is not merely a feature of its political landscape, but a dominant force that shapes behavior, undermines governance, and poses a significant threat to its long-term political development. The findings strongly suggest that for Nigeria to achieve a stable and prosperous future, it must find a way to transcend its current model and build a political system based on performance, accountability, and a shared sense of national purpose.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm that identity politics—driven by ethnicity, religion, and regionalism—is the single most significant factor shaping Nigeria's political landscape. This finding resonates with a substantial body of scholarship on developing nations, but its manifestation in Nigeria is particularly acute due to historical and institutional factors. The colonial legacy of indirect rule, which governed disparate groups separately, combined with a federal structure that entrenched regional and ethnic divisions, has created a political system where group identity is the primary currency of power.

The data presented in the "Results" section demonstrates a clear disconnect between the rhetoric of democratic ideals and the reality of political practice. While political parties may articulate national visions, their actual mobilization efforts and electoral strategies are overwhelmingly focused on securing the support of ethnic and religious blocs. The survey findings, showing that over 75% of respondents prioritize a candidate's ethnic or religious affiliation, underscore this reality. This behavior transforms elections from a competition of ideas into a zero-sum competition for group dominance, where the winner takes all and the loser feels completely marginalized. This dynamic is a powerful

inhibitor of national cohesion and fosters a pervasive sense of mistrust among different groups.

The practice of patronage politics and prebendalism—where public office is viewed as a source of personal and group enrichment—is a direct consequence of this identity-based system. The qualitative interviews with political leaders and academics provided compelling evidence that appointments to key positions are not based on merit, but on a delicate balance of ethnic and religious quotas. While the intention behind the federal character principle was to ensure equitable representation, its application has been corrupted into a tool for rewarding loyalty and placating competing groups. This has created a system where competence is secondary to loyalty, leading to inefficient governance, widespread corruption, and a breakdown of public service delivery. The perception, confirmed by 65% of respondents, that resource allocation is biased, further reinforces this cycle of mistrust and grievance.

The long-term viability of this model for sustainable political development is highly questionable. As the results show, it fundamentally undermines the very foundations of a stable, democratic state. The low level of national consciousness and institutional trust, as revealed by the survey, is particularly alarming. For a democracy to thrive, citizens must have faith in its institutions and a shared sense of national identity that transcends their primary group loyalties. In Nigeria, the opposite is true. The state is often seen as an instrument of a dominant ethnic group, not a neutral arbiter of national interests. This perception fuels political instability and can easily escalate into violent conflict, as evidenced by the ethno-religious clashes documented in the qualitative interviews.

Moreover, identity politics serves as a major impediment to economic development. The focus on patronage over performance diverts public funds from critical infrastructure and social services, while the political instability it generates discourages both domestic and foreign investment. The current system rewards those who can master the art of ethnic mobilization, rather than those who can deliver on policy promises. This creates a vicious cycle where a lack of good governance reinforces identity-based grievances, which in turn entrenches the very political model that is causing the problem.

To move forward, Nigeria must confront the deep-seated issues that allow identity politics to thrive. This requires more than just constitutional amendments. It requires a fundamental shift in political culture. Political leaders must move beyond appealing to ethnic and religious loyalties and instead articulate a compelling national vision that emphasizes shared citizenship and a common destiny. Strengthening democratic institutions, such as the electoral body and the judiciary, is crucial to building public trust. Furthermore, promoting economic policies that create equitable opportunities for all citizens, regardless of their background, could help to reduce the economic anxieties that often fuel identity-based competition.

While the challenge is immense, the study's findings suggest that a politics of ideas and good governance is the only viable path to long-term political development. The current model is unsustainable and will continue to perpetuate instability and underdevelopment. The future of Nigeria hinges on its ability to build a truly inclusive, meritocratic, and unified nation where citizenship, not

identity, is the ultimate measure of belonging.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the reliance on ethnicity, religion, and regionalism in Nigerian politics poses a significant and unsustainable threat to the country's long-term political development. Identity politics has corrupted the democratic process by prioritizing group loyalty over merit and policy, leading to a system of patronage, zero-sum competition, and institutional decay. This model undermines national unity, fosters deep-seated mistrust among citizens, and serves as a primary catalyst for political instability and conflict. The current political framework, a product of historical legacies and institutionalized divisions, is no longer viable for a modern, multi-ethnic state. For Nigeria to achieve a stable and prosperous future, it must transition from a politics of identity to a politics of ideas, accountability, and inclusive governance, where a shared national identity and the pursuit of public good take precedence over narrow group interests.

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