

The Influence of Identity Politics on Partisan Politics in the Nigerian Democratic Landscape

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Abstract

Identity politics continues to shape Nigeria's democratic trajectory by influencing electoral behaviour, party structure, and governance outcomes. Drawing on Elite Theory and Social Identity Theory, this paper examines how ethnic, religious, and regional identities intersect with partisan politics in ways that both enable representation and undermine democratic consolidation. The analysis shows that identity politics, while offering marginalized groups a platform for political participation, has largely been manipulated by political elites to entrench patronage networks, weaken intra-party democracy, erode ideological clarity, and fracture national cohesion. These dynamics have produced persistent ethnoreligious voting patterns, unstable party systems, and governance deficits that threaten the future of Nigeria's democracy. The paper concludes that Nigeria's democratic stability depends on transforming identity from a tool of political fragmentation into a mechanism for inclusion and equitable representation. It argues that constitutionalizing power rotation, strengthening intra-party democracy, enforcing national spread requirements, and promoting ideology-driven political competition are essential reforms for mitigating the divisive effects of identity politics. By advancing these institutional and normative changes, policymakers can curb elite manipulation, foster national integration, and set Nigeria on a path toward sustainable democratic consolidation.

Keywords: *Identity Politics, Democracy, Partisan Politics, Regionalism, Ethnicity, Political Party, Ideology, Election.*

Introduction

The resilience of democracy in Nigeria remains one of the most pressing questions in contemporary African politics. Since the country's return to civilian rule in 1999, democratic consolidation has faced recurring challenges rooted in the dynamics of identity, power and socio-economic issues (Edigheji, 2020). Eniemeh and Ibrahim (2021) note that "Without any form of prejudice, it is a fact that Nigeria is a multi-ethnic state with differences in its socio-political and economic development all of which have resulted into conflicts and counter conflicts". Indeed, these differences have not just caused conflicts but have made identity a powerful tool in political mobilization (Odogwu, 2023).

In Nigeria, elections often deepen divisions by focusing on ethnic, religious, and cultural differences, leading to exclusion in politics as rightly noted by Justice and Ekwi (2023) "In furthering this dominance and profiting from Nigeria's socio-cultural, ethnic and religious differences, elections in Nigeria have in their nature been highly divisive along these fault lines thereby promoting the politics of exclusion". Political parties, though formally registered as national institutions, frequently operate as vehicles of sectional interests right from the era of colonialism as noted by Nwozor (2014) "During the three-year period 1948–1951, tribalism and regional nationalism became not only the most legitimate but also the dominant challenges

of democratization in contemporary Nigeria." Campaign rhetoric, candidate selection, and voter alignment often reflect identity cleavages more than ideological commitments or policy platforms. This has produced a democratic order where partisan politics is inseparable from identity-based loyalties, thereby complicating efforts to foster national cohesion and issue-driven governance (Eniemeh & Ibrahim, 2021).

The entanglement of identity politics with partisan practices has yielded both opportunities and risks for Nigeria's democracy. On the one hand, identity-based mobilization provides marginalized groups with avenues for representation and recognition in a complex federation. On the other, it reinforces exclusionary politics, heightens polarization, and encourages elite manipulation of group sentiments at the expense of democratic accountability (Justice & Ekwi, 2023). Understanding how these twin forces interact is therefore central to assessing the future of democracy in Nigeria.

This paper situates Nigeria's contemporary democratic experience within this historical and socio-political context. It examines how colonial legacies, ethnic and religious pluralism, and cultural traditions continue to shape the nature of political participation, the structure of parties, and the broader governance process. In doing so, it interrogates the implications of identity politics on partisan politics and considers how this interplay affects the prospects for democratic consolidation, stability, and nation-building. By analyzing these dynamics, the study contributes to scholarly and policy debates on how Nigeria can navigate its pluralistic realities in order to sustain a viable and inclusive democratic future.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions, which are tailored to assess the influence of Identity politics on partisan politics. These questions address the evolution and dynamics of identity politics in Nigeria.

1. How has identity politics historically shaped the development of partisan politics in Nigeria from the colonial period to the Fourth Republic?
2. In what ways do ethnic, religious, and regional identities influence voting behaviour, party allegiance, and intra-party dynamics in contemporary Nigeria?
3. How do political elites utilize identity cleavages to maintain power, and what effects does this have on ideological development and democratic governance?
4. What institutional and policy reforms can mitigate the negative impact of identity politics on partisan politics and strengthen democratic consolidation in Nigeria?

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a descriptive and interpretive approach, to examine how identity politics shapes partisan politics in Nigeria. The researcher adopts the documentary research method, relying on secondary sources to analyze the historical, political, and social processes that underpin identity-driven partisan politics in Nigeria. This includes: peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, electoral reports, constitutional provisions, and party constitutions. For analysis, the use of thematic content analysis in the paper, allows for the identification, interpretation, and organization of patterns relating to identity politics, elite manipulation, electoral behavior, and democratic outcomes.

Scope of the Study

This study examines how ethnic, religious, and regional identity politics influence partisan politics in Nigeria, focusing on their effects on voting behaviour, party formation, elite political strategies, intra-party dynamics, and democratic consolidation. Geographically, the study covers Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, while temporally it spans from the introduction of the elective principle in 1922 to the Fourth Republic (1999–2025). Conceptually, the analysis is situated within Elite Theory and Social Identity Theory, which guide the interpretation of how identity is mobilized and manipulated across Nigeria's political history.

Conceptual Clarification

Democracy

Democracy is one of the most widespread and impactful systems of government in the contemporary world. Edigheji (2020) observes that there is a prevailing assumption that democracy fosters inclusive and sustainable social and economic development. Similarly, Ekuase et al. (2023) affirm that democracy is the best form of government, a belief that may explain its widespread adoption. According to Bozonelos et al. (2025), democracy is a political regime in which the supreme power of government is vested in the people. The United Nations (2025) further emphasizes that democracy provides an environment that respects human rights and fundamental freedoms, while ensuring that the freely expressed will of the people is exercised. The core idea of democracy lies in the principle that citizens have a say in decision-making; and in cases where they do not make decisions directly, they retain the right to hold decision-makers accountable. As Osabu-Kle (as cited in Saka, 2025) explains, the term democracy originates from two Greek words: "demos" (the common people) and "kratos" (rule), collectively denoting a system where power resides with the general populace—essentially translating to “rule by the people.”

In its most basic form, there are two major manifestations of democracy which are the ancient and modern manifestations. Bozonelos et al (2025) note that Ancient manifestations of democracy differ greatly from modern conceptualizations and applications. For clarity the two main types of democracy are:

- A. **Ancient/Direct Democracy:** In this system, citizens personally become involved in all aspects of politics; they are able to change constitutions, recommend referendums and make suggestions for laws, and mandate the activities and actions of government officials (Bozonelos et al, 2025).
- B. **Modern/Indirect Democracy:** Citizens elect representatives to make decisions for them. In this scenario, citizens are granted suffrage, which is the right to vote in representatives (Bozonelos et al, 2025). Nigeria practices indirect or representative democracy, which operates within a complex, multi-ethnic society where formal institutions exist but are often weakened by identity-driven political practices.

Identity Politics

Identity politics refers to group activity centered around shared experiences and based on certain Characteristics. Moyosore (2023) notes that these characteristics come in different dimensions such as ethnic, political, economic as well as religious dimension. According to Odogwu (2023) Identity Politics "describes how people and groups identify with one another according to traits like gender, sexual orientation, race, or religion, among other things".

Saka (2025) argues that Identity politics highlights the way personal experiences and group affiliations intersect with political structures, emphasizing how systemic activities affect specific communities.

Identity politics often takes shape when groups organize to influence electoral politics, supporting candidates or policies that align with their interests. Saka (2025) notes that this leads to the creation of new political parties or movements that emphasize group solidarity and differentiation from mainstream competitors. For instance, parties may adopt "solidaristic" strategies that foster internal unity around shared cultural or ethnic identities. Ethnic, religious, and regional divisions shape identity politics in Nigeria. These divisions strongly influence political mobilisation, voting patterns, and elite strategies.

Political Party

Scholars have approached the concept of a political party differently, but a central theme is that it represents an organized association of people who seek to secure political power. The quest to secure power as against merely influencing it is what distinguishes a political party from other organized associations such as cultural groups, pressure groups, or any other formal organisation in the society (Jinadu, 2011).

Babalola (2024) defined a political party as "an organisational entity that mobilises individuals with the aim of achieving electoral successes and exerting political influence, specifically by assuming governance of the state." Political parties in Nigeria most times function more as vehicles for ethnic and regional interests than as ideology-driven institutions, limiting effective democratic governance. This is discussed in detail as the paper progresses.

Partisan Politics and Party Politics

Partisan politics in the context of this paper refers to the practice in democratic systems where political activities and allegiances are heavily influenced by loyalty to a specific political party. It is important to note that the terms "partisan politics" and "party politics" are often used interchangeably and though closely related have minor differences in scope and connotation. Partisan politics often emerges within the framework of party politics, as parties rely on partisan loyalty to mobilize voters and maintain influence.

According to Ekuase et al. (2023), partisan politics refers to a situation where individuals or groups strongly, and often blindly, support a particular political party, defending its ideologies and actions irrespective of objectivity. They further note that partisan politics is characterised by unwavering loyalty to a party's interests, typically driven by the party's ambition to gain and retain political power to implement its agenda and shape state governance. By contrast, party politics, as explained by Obah-Akpowoghaha and Obang (2021), encompasses the broader activities of political parties aimed at capturing state power and exercising it through the formulation and implementation of public policy.

In essence, while party politics provides the institutional framework for political competition and governance, partisan politics underscores the intensity of individual and group loyalty that reinforces party strength and, at times, exacerbates political polarization. The key distinction lies in the emphasis on systemic processes in party politics, versus individual and collective behavior in partisan politics, although the two often overlap in practice. Recognizing this distinction is crucial for understanding how political parties shape governance and how excessive loyalty sometimes-hinder collaboration and compromise in democratic systems can.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Elite Theory and Social Identity Theory as its analytical lenses in examining the future of democracy in Nigeria, with a particular focus on the implications of identity politics on partisan politics. The combination of these theories offers a multidimensional understanding of how group dynamics and elite interests may affect the future of democracy in Nigeria.

Elite Theory

Elite theory revolves around "Elitism", a concept, Barnabas (2016) notes emerged as a part of political thought in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Marriot (2020) argues that Elite theory views society as being split between the general population and a small ruling class, with political power—meaning the authority to make and enforce decisions for the entire society—consistently concentrated in the hands of this elite minority. Barnabas (2016) identifies Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923), Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941) and Robert Michels (1876-1936) as leading contributors to the theory.

Elite Theory posits that political power is concentrated in the hands of a small group of elites who dominate decision-making processes regardless of the formal democratic structures in place (Anene & Ndubisi, 2024). The theory further posits that the average citizen is generally uninformed, lacks the necessary insight, and is incapable of skillfully shaping policies or ideologies needed for national development. In contrast, elites are seen as possessing the education, experience, and capacity to govern effectively. As such, democracy, according to this theory, should function as a mechanism that allows elites to determine who gains and maintains political power (Barnabas, 2016).

In the Nigerian context, political elites play a central role in shaping democratic outcomes, often leveraging identity politics particularly on religion and ethnicity to consolidate power and maintain dominance (Edigheji, 2020). Nwozor (2014) similarly observes, “as is customary with the Nigerian elite, they have hidden under the canopy of ethnicity and regional marginalization to mask and advance their interests”. The strategic mobilization of ethnic, religious, and regional identities has frequently been employed by these elites to secure electoral support and strengthen patronage networks. Consequently, democratic practice in Nigeria is often undermined, as elections tend to revolve less around ideological competition and more around identity-based loyalty to elite figures. Barnabas (2016) similarly contends that Nigerian elites “undermine democratic tenets in the pursuit of their personal ambitions for power, and they share a common identity for making bogus electoral promises with little or no roadmap for achieving them”.

This theory therefore provides a lens to understand how partisan politics in Nigeria is largely shaped by elite manipulation of identity cleavages, creating tensions that threaten democratic consolidation. In 2015, elite actors strategically mobilized religious and regional sentiments, framing the election around the Christian–Muslim and North–South divide, especially between Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari (Odogwu, 2023). Similarly, in the 2023 election, political elites once again reinforced identity narratives, ensuring that voting patterns largely mirrored ethnic and religious loyalties, thereby advancing elite political interests rather than ideological choices (Odogwu, 2023). This confirms Edigheji’s (2020) argument cited in the paper that elites exploit identity fragmentation to consolidate power, weakening democratic accountability in the process.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains how individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups, which fosters in-group loyalty and out-group bias. The theory emerged as a psychological framework developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s to understand how individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups (Saka, 2025). Raskovic (2020) indicates that the theory highlights how identities, such as gender or ethnicity, shape values, perceptions, and power dynamics in organizations and society.

In Nigeria, where ethnicity, religion, and regionalism constitute salient identity markers, social identity theory illuminates the ways in which political affiliations are often shaped more by identity considerations that favour their group than by ideological commitments as noted by Saka (2025) "SIT explains why individuals may strongly advocate for policies or political movements that prioritize their group's interests". Citizens tend to align with parties or candidates that reflect their group identities, thereby reinforcing partisan divides. This dynamic not only perpetuates polarization but also makes political compromise more difficult, as political competition becomes framed in terms of "us" versus "them." The salience of identity in shaping political behavior thus has profound implications for the sustainability of democracy in Nigeria, where unity and national cohesion remain fragile. SIT theoretical lens aligns with the voting behaviour observed in the 2015 and 2023 elections, where citizens overwhelmingly supported candidates who reflected their ethnic or religious identity. The paper highlights that identity "shapes values, perceptions, and power dynamics" in Nigeria (Raskovic, 2020) and that individuals often "advocate for policies or movements that prioritize their group's interests" (Saka, 2025). In 2023, this was clearly demonstrated when "each region of Nigeria continued to vote in large numbers for a candidate from that region who belongs to the same ethnic group and religion" (Odogwu, 2023). SIT thus explains why identity-based appeals from elites resonated strongly with the electorate, citizens aligned politically with groups they psychologically identify with, reinforcing polarization.

Relevance of Elite Theory and Social Identity Theory to Identity Politics in Nigeria

Other theories commonly applied in political analysis include Rational Choice Theory, Institutional Theory, Modernization Theory, and Structural Functionalism. While these theories offer useful insights, they do not capture the core dynamics driving Nigerian politics as effectively as Elite Theory and Social Identity Theory (SIT). Rational Choice Theory assumes that voters and politicians make decisions based on individual cost-benefit calculations. However, Nigerian elections, such as those in 2015 and 2023, show that voting behaviour is shaped more by ethnic and religious loyalty than by personal utility (as highlighted in the paper). Institutional Theory emphasizes the role of formal rules, constitutions, and political structures. In Nigeria, however, institutions are often weak, manipulated, or overridden by elite networks, making identity dynamics more influential than institutional arrangements. Modernization Theory focuses on economic development as a driver of democratic behaviour, but Nigeria's experience shows that identity divisions persist despite modernization and democratization, making identity-based theories more suitable. Structural Functionalism views society as a system of institutions working harmoniously, but Nigeria's political reality is marked by conflict, fragmentation, and elite competition, which this theory cannot adequately explain.

Taken together, Elite Theory and Social Identity Theory offer a comprehensive framework for interrogating the interplay between identity politics and partisan politics in Nigeria. While Elite Theory highlights how political elites manipulate identity cleavages to maintain dominance

and secure electoral advantage, Social Identity Theory reveals why such manipulation resonates with the masses by appealing to deeply embedded group loyalties. This dual lens underscores that the future of democracy in Nigeria depends not only on the reform of elite behavior but also on the cultivation of a political culture that transcends identity-based affiliations. Understanding this interplay is essential for predicting whether Nigeria's democracy will mature into a system of inclusive governance or remain trapped in cycles of elite manipulation and divisive identity politics.

Historical Antecedents of Identity Politics and Partisan Politics in Nigeria

The study of democracy in Nigeria cannot be meaningfully undertaken without a careful consideration of the historical antecedents that have shaped the country's political evolution. According to Okechukwu and Christian (2024), the roots of identity politics in Nigeria can be traced to colonial constitutional developments, beginning with the Clifford Constitution of 1922. This constitution not only laid the groundwork for the emergence of identity politics but also marked the inception of partisan politics in the country. One of its most significant milestones was the introduction of the elective principle. Although limited in scope, the principle represented the first attempt to grant Nigerians the opportunity to participate directly in the political process by electing representatives into the Legislative Council. While the number of elective seats was small and confined to urban centres such as Lagos and Calabar, the development nonetheless established a foundation for organized political activity and party formation in the colony (Olaiya, 2016).

The elective principle gave rise to the emergence of political parties—an essential component of Nigeria's democratic journey. As Justice and Ekwi (2023) observe, “democracy is practically unattainable without a well-established political party; thus, political parties form the nexus between the administration of the state, the aspirations of political elites on the one hand, and the expression of voters' choice through elections on the other.” Similarly, Barnabas (2016) notes that political parties remain central to the realization of individual political ambitions, as the Nigerian Constitution and Electoral Act do not provide for independent candidacy in elections.

Against this backdrop, Herbert Macaulay, widely regarded as the father of Nigerian nationalism, founded the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) in 1923. The NNDP became the first formal political party in Nigeria and sought to contest elections under the new dispensation created by the Clifford Constitution. Although limited in reach and influence, the party's formation marked the beginning of structured partisan politics in Nigeria. From this point, political parties became central to the development of democracy in Nigeria, democracy being widely regarded as the best form of governance (Ekuase et al., 2023). However, the trajectory of Nigerian party politics has been characterized less by ideological contestation and more by mobilization around ethnic, regional, and religious identities.

From the colonial period to the present, the emergence, structure, and operation of political parties in Nigeria have been profoundly influenced by ethnic cleavages. Olaiya (2016) observes that “from the colonial time, ethnicity has remained a major threat to Nigeria's social structure. Of particular note is the effect of deep ethnicity on political party practices and processes. Despite the practice of multi-party democracy from the colonial period till date, ethnicity continues to rob Nigeria of the institutional development embedded in such a liberal system.” During the late colonial and early independence periods, political parties such as the Action Group (AG), the Northern People's Congress (NPC), and the National Council of Nigerian

Citizens (NCNC)—dominant before and shortly after independence—became associated with specific ethnic and regional constituencies (Okechukwu & Christian, 2024; Nwozor, 2014).

The Second Republic, which began in 1979, saw the registration of five political parties in Nigeria. According to Olaiya (2016), these parties largely mirrored the ethno-religious sentiments that had characterized the First Republic. As he noted, “most of the 1978/83 parties once again took on the toga of ethno-regional appearances, reminiscent of the pre-1966 periods.”

In 1993, during the military-led transition toward the Third Republic under General Ibrahim Babangida, a remarkable shift occurred: political activities appeared to transcend ethnic and religious divisions. That year, the government introduced a two-party system designed to unify Nigeria’s historically fragmented political landscape, which had long been shaped by identity-based affiliations. The unexpected nationwide support for Chief M.K.O. Abiola—a Yoruba Muslim—during the presidential election demonstrated that Nigerians were willing to rally behind a candidate based on shared ideals rather than ethnic or religious identity. His broad appeal across regions and faiths revealed that ethnicity and religion, often used as tools for political mobilization, were not as deeply entrenched or decisive as previously believed, exposing their artificiality in shaping national political consensus (Nwozor, 2014). Unfortunately, the election was annulled on grounds of alleged irregularities, triggering widespread political unrest and ultimately derailing the transition to civilian rule.

The Fourth Republic, which began in 1999, has witnessed both continuity and transformation in the interplay between identity politics and partisan politics. One notable manifestation of this dynamic has been the practice of “zoning” and “power rotation,” an informal mechanism designed to manage regional identity cleavages. Following the annulment of the 1993 elections, which intensified ethnic tensions across Nigeria, Udentia and Udentia (2024) note that, during the 1994–1995 National Constitutional Conference, several influential figures proposed rotating the presidency among Nigeria’s six geopolitical zones. However, this proposal was later replaced with a simpler North–South rotation model, designed to reflect the religious divide between the predominantly Christian South and Muslim North.

Both the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which dominated Nigerian politics from 1999 to 2015, and the All Progressives Congress (APC), which has ruled from 2015 to the present (2025), have sought to promote inclusivity and stability through this informal power-sharing arrangements that alternate the presidency between the North and South (Nwozor, 2014; Udentia & Udentia, 2024). Although not constitutionally mandated, this arrangement acknowledges the enduring influence of regional identities in Nigerian politics and exemplifies efforts to leverage institutional design in mitigating potential conflicts. As Nwozor (2014) observes, the PDP constitution explicitly endorsed the imperative of zoning and rotation, stipulating that “in pursuance of the principle of zoning, justice, and fairness, the party shall adhere to the policy of rotation and zoning of party and public elective offices.” Similarly, Udentia and Udentia (2024) highlight that Article 20(vi) of the APC Constitution provides “Without prejudice to Article 20(ii) and (iii) of this Constitution, the National Working Committee shall, subject to the approval of the National Executive Committee, make rules and regulations for the nomination of candidates through primary elections. All such rules, regulations, and guidelines shall take into consideration and uphold the principles of Federal Character, gender balance, geo-political spread, and rotation of offices, to, as much as possible, ensure balance within the constituency covered”. Ultimately, the zoning formulas adopted by both parties were crafted to afford the North and South equal opportunities to produce the president.

The persistence and evolution of identity politics in contemporary Nigeria are most evident in the 2015 and 2023 presidential elections. The 2015 election marked a historic turning point as it produced the first democratic transfer of power from an incumbent to an opposition party in Nigeria's political history. Odogwu (2023) observes that electoral campaigns during this period were characterized by both subtle and overt appeals to religious and regional identities. Notable emphasis were on the religious differences between the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan, a Southern Christian, and his challenger Muhammadu Buhari, a Northern Muslim. This underscores the enduring influence of religion and ethnicity as decisive factors shaping electoral outcomes in Nigeria. In the 2023 presidential election, these patterns persisted. As Odogwu (2023) notes, "the politics of manipulating religion and ethnicity have gained ground in the country beyond redemption for many decades". He goes on to note that, identity politics did not take on a different dimension in the 2023 presidential election, as each region of Nigeria continued to vote in large numbers for a candidate from that region who belongs to the same ethnic group and religion". This continuity demonstrates the deep entrenchment of identity-based political mobilization across Nigeria's electoral landscape.

Implications of Identity Politics on Nigeria's Partisan Landscape

Identity politics has profoundly shaped not just Nigeria's partisan politics but party politics as a whole. From the time of independence, different forms of identity manifestations have created enduring patterns of political mobilization, competition, and governance that have significant implications for democratic consolidation and national development. The following are some of the areas in which the politics of identity intertwine with partisan politics:

- **Ethnoreligious Voting Patterns and Electoral Outcomes:** The most visible manifestation of identity politics in Nigeria's partisan landscape is the persistent pattern of ethno-religious voting. The politics of administration in Nigeria has been offensively punctuated by very disturbing ethnic politics, with the reconfiguration, formation of political parties, distribution of human and material resources and even crises (coups, civil war, and religious impasse) hinged on ethno-religious politics (Eniemeh & Ibrahim, 2021). This pattern has proven remarkably resilient across Nigeria's democratic dispensation. Eboigbe and Ajisebiyawo (2024) highlighted the continuing salience of these cleavages in the 2023 Presidential election when they noted that "The results of past presidential elections in Nigeria, including the recently concluded 2023 election, are good examples of how voters place more emphasis on ethnic, religious, and regional considerations than on performance". Identity politics has gradually metamorphosed and divided the country along its major religious and ethnic lines, taking a semblance of the ethno-religious structure of the country (Eboigbe & Ajisebiyawo, 2024). The electoral geography revealed stark divisions, with candidates performing disproportionately well in their regions of ethnic and religious origin.
- **Weakness in Political Ideology:** Identity politics has created serious ideological weaknesses in Nigeria's party system, hindering democratic consolidation. Babalola (2024) explains that since the return to democracy in 1999, party politics in Nigeria has shifted, with parties no longer driven by ideology. This dominance of identity politics weakens Nigeria's chances for political and economic progress because, as Babalola (2024) notes, political ideology "guides the direction of a nation's political and economic development". As a result, ideological absence fuels frequent political defections motivated by personal ambition and ethnic interests rather than policy differences. Azubike et al. (2025) point out that "unlike in more ideologically grounded democracies, Nigerian parties often serve as platforms for political ambition rather than

ideology,” leading politicians to switch parties for personal gain, like securing election tickets. This dilutes party identities and causes instability, blocking democratic growth. Without strong ideological foundations brought on by identity politics, political parties become opportunistic tools for elite power struggles, not principled groups with clear policy goals.

- **Weakened Intra-Party Democracy:** Identity Politics undermines intra-party democracy by enabling biased party leaders to institutionalize favouritism toward specific groups, thereby stifling competitive internal processes and merit-based leadership selection. Anene and Ndubusi (2024) argue that the abuse of the internal processes of political parties by elites in Nigeria is commonplace in the Nigerian political space across the different party lines as he notes that "Through their dominant interests, they manipulate the party machinery by imposition of candidates. This they do by manipulating the party primaries through bribery of delegates and intimidation of other party members to succumb to their whims and caprices. They sponsor their proteges or adopted godsons who they in turn dictate how they will govern when they eventually emerge victorious in the election into power". This occurs as leaders, often aligned with dominant ethnic or regional interests, prioritize these interests, overriding fair primaries and imposing candidates who represent identities rather than broader party consensus.
- **Disintegration of Political Parties:** The aggregated effects of identity politics on partisan politics in Nigeria ultimately lead to the disintegration and collapse of political parties. It is common for elites in Nigerian politics to manipulate party activities, especially primaries, to their advantage rather than reflecting the majority's wishes (Anene & Ndubisi, 2024). When such manipulation is driven by identity politics, particularly harming specific groups or individuals, it often triggers waves of defections from the party (Azubike et al., 2025). These defections weaken the party's foundation and strip it of influential figures who might have advanced its goals. Babalola (2024) emphasizes that political parties play a crucial role in democracy and that modern democracy cannot function without them. Therefore, the disintegration of political parties caused by internal identity politics directly undermines democratic practices in Nigeria.

The Future of Democracy in Nigeria amidst the Influence of Identity Politics on Partisan politics

Democracy is a journey and not a destination (Jibrin, 2016). The interplay between identity politics and partisan politics in Nigeria, as examined throughout this paper, casts a shadow over the nation's democratic journey in ways that hinder efforts toward national integration and democratic consolidation (Eniemeh & Ibrahim, 2021), yet it also presents pathways for renewal if navigated with deliberate intent. The future of Nigerian democracy hinges on whether political elites continue to exploit identity cleavages for personal gain (Edigheji, 2020) or pivot toward inclusive institutional reforms that transcend group loyalties. If left unchecked, the persistent ethnoreligious voting patterns, ideological voids, weakened intra-party democracy, and party disintegrations outlined in the preceding section risk entrenching a cycle of polarization and instability, potentially eroding the fragile gains of the Fourth Republic and reverting to authoritarian temptations amid socio-economic discontent.

Ultimately, the future of democracy in Nigeria will be defined by a deliberate shift from identity as a tool of fragmentation to a bridge for unity. As Edigheji (2020) posits, true democratic consolidation demands development that addresses the average Nigerian's deteriorating

conditions, integrating diverse identities into a shared national narrative. If elites embrace this reformist ethos—curbing patronage networks and promoting meritocratic leadership—the Fourth Republic could evolve into a model of pluralistic stability. Failure to do so, however, may perpetuate a democracy in name only, where partisan politics remains captive to identity's divisive grip, jeopardizing Nigeria's aspirations for inclusive growth and enduring peace (Olaiya, 2016; Ekuase et al., 2024). It is on the basis of these adverse effects of identity politics that this paper makes the following recommendations:

- Incorporation of Zoning into the constitution: The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria should be amended to incorporate zoning and power sharing across the six geopolitical zones of the country. The constitution must also mandate all political parties in the country to formalize rotation principles with enforceable quotas for underrepresented groups, ensuring that identity serves equity rather than exclusion.
- Mass Sensitization on Identity politics: wide campaigns should be carried out particularly by the Government to educate citizens, on the adverse effects of Identity based politics on the development of democracy in Nigeria. This will help curtail the way political activities are engaged in especially by the younger generation.
- Strict adherence to National spread of political parties: Law enforcement agencies and the electoral commission must commit to ensuring that political parties adhere to the requirements of having a national spread in membership and presence. This will help in ensuring a confluence of diverse ethnic groups in political parties, thereby preventing the prevalence of mono-ethnic or regional political parties.
- Strengthening the Federal Character Commission: The should be reorganized to include religious leaders and also to facilitate periodic reviews of identity-based conflicts, promoting dialogue that reframes "us versus them" narratives into shared national goals.
- Promoting Ideological Foundations in Party Manifestos: To mitigate the ideological weakness exacerbated by identity politics, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should require parties to submit verifiable policy roadmaps during registration, with public debates centered on these platforms rather than ethnic appeals. These ideologies must remain sacrosanct and binding on all party members. Among other things, this will discourage political defections only on substantive grounds.
- Strengthening Intra-Party Democracy through Regulatory Reforms: Political parties must institutionalize transparent and merit-based primaries to counteract elite-imposed candidates and ethnic biases. This includes enacting anti-godfatherism legislation that mandates delegate randomization and independent oversight of nominations, as well as enforcing penalties for manipulations via bribery or intimidation.

Conclusion

Identity politics permeates different spheres of Nigeria's political spectrum, profoundly influencing partisan politics from the colonial era to the contemporary Fourth Republic. The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that identity politics shapes electoral behavior, party practices, and ultimately, the prospects of democratic development. As a recurrent phenomenon since the Clifford Constitution of 1922 introduced the elective principle, which inadvertently sowed seeds of ethnic and regional mobilization (Okechukwu & Christian, 2024; Olaiya, 2016), identity politics has evolved as an indelible feature of the nation's democratic journey. The colonial administrative structures, particularly the regionalization introduced by successive constitutions, reinforced rather than bridged ethnic and regional divides, creating path dependencies that continue to influence contemporary political behavior.

It is crucial to recognize that identity politics, in itself, is not inherently problematic or antithetical to democratic principles. Indeed, in plural societies like Nigeria, identity-based mobilization can serve important democratic functions. It provides marginalized groups with a political voice and platform to articulate their specific grievances and aspirations. When different ethnic, regional, and religious communities organize politically to demand recognition, representation, and equitable resource allocation, they are exercising fundamental democratic rights of association and political participation. Identity politics can foster political consciousness among previously excluded groups, compelling the political system to acknowledge diversity and respond to varied interests (Udeagwu & Ugochukwu, 2024).

The historical antecedents, from the ethno-regional entrenchment of First Republic parties like the NPC and AG to the annulment of the 1993 elections and the identity-laden 2023 polls, demonstrate how elites, per Elite Theory, exploit these cleavages to orchestrate partisan maneuvers, prioritizing sectional loyalties over ideological coherence (Nwozor, 2014; Odogwu, 2023; Barnabas, 2016). This has manifested in, among others, ideological voids and ethnoreligious voting patterns that polarize electoral outcomes. Such dynamics not only erode institutional trust and perpetuate instability but also hinder the consolidation of a cohesive national identity, transforming democratic competition into zero-sum identity contests that exacerbate conflicts and socio-economic disparities (Edigheji, 2020). As the recommendations herein advocate, Nigeria stands at a pivotal juncture. The path forward demands a paradigm shift: reframing identity not as a fault line but as a means of shared aspirations, where partisan politics evolves into a platform for equitable development and accountability.

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