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Identity Politics and Development: A Critical Reflection on Equity, Inclusion, and National Growth in Nigeria

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Abstract

Identity politics has emerged as a dominant force shaping governance and development in Nigeria, a multi-ethnic and religiously diverse nation. Rooted in ethnicity, religion, region, language, or gender, identity politics often reflects the struggle of marginalized groups for recognition, inclusion, and equitable access to power and resources. While it can foster political awareness and advocacy, it frequently fuels favoritism, exclusion, and competition that undermine national unity and sustainable development. This paper critically examines identity politics as both a tool for empowerment and a challenge to national integration and economic growth. Drawing from historical, political, and sociological perspectives, it analyzes how identity-based considerations influence electoral processes, public appointments, and resource distribution at the federal and state levels. Data were analyzed using content analysis and thematic categorization to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and policy implications. The findings reveal that the politicization of identity often overrides merit, weakens democratic institutions, and distorts policy priorities. However, the paper also acknowledges the constructive potential of identity politics when managed within a framework of equity, accountability, and inclusive governance. It advocates for a shift toward a merit-based, people-centred political culture supported by civic education, constitutional reform, equitable resource sharing, and digital innovation. The paper concludes that Nigeria's progress depends on balancing identity with national interest, fostering unity in diversity, and prioritizing competence and justice in the pursuit of inclusive development.

Keywords: Identity politics, development, equity, national unity, governance, innovation, digital inclusion

1. INTRODUCTION

In the global political landscape, identity politics has become a recurrent theme, particularly in nations characterized by ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity. Ikelegbe A. (2020), in Nigeria, identity politics has deep roots in the colonial and post-colonial era, where political power and resource control were often mediated through communal or regional

affiliations. The fusion of ethnic identity with politics has not only shaped electoral behaviors but also determined the structure of governance and distribution of public goods. Nigeria's complex social fabric, consisting of over 250 ethnic groups, multiple religious affiliations, and regional disparities, has made identity-based mobilization a convenient political strategy. Politicians frequently appeal to ethnic or religious sentiments to gain support, often at the expense of national unity and inclusive governance. This has led to fragmentation, distrust, and inefficient governance systems. The prioritization of identity over competence has limited the nation's capacity to implement developmental policies effectively.

Several scholars have explored the dynamics of identity politics in Nigeria. Osaghae (1991), examined how ethnic affiliations influence political participation, while Suberu (2001), focused on the structural imbalance created by identity-based federalism. According to Ayoade (2008), the patronage system enabled by identity politics undermines the spirit of nationalism. These existing works highlight persistent themes of exclusion, favoritism, and inefficiency. Building on these, this paper presents fresh insights into how identity politics intersects with equity, national inclusion, and Socio-development in an era influenced by artificial intelligence and innovation. The current reality calls for a rethinking of how identity is managed within political frameworks to ensure it promotes, rather than inhibits, national growth. This paper explores the dual nature of identity politics—its capacity for inclusion and the potential for division—and offers strategies for aligning identity-based governance with sustainable development objectives. Identity politics, understood as political stances rooted in the interests and perspectives of social groups with shared characteristics—such as ethnicity, religion, or region—has long shaped Nigeria's political evolution. The country's multi-ethnic composition, with over 250 ethnic groups, has made identity a central factor in power distribution and governance. While identity-based mobilization can foster inclusion and representation, it often leads to exclusion, marginalization, and political instability (Suberu, 2001; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Nigeria's developmental trajectory has been uneven, often reflecting the disproportionate influence of dominant identity blocs. This has resulted in skewed policy attention, uneven resource allocation, and the entrenchment of patronage systems. Understanding the interplay between identity politics and governance is thus crucial for advancing equity and national integration (Agbaje, 1999).

Despite decades of post-independence state-building efforts, Nigeria remains fragmented along ethno-religious and regional lines. Political appointments, government contracts, budgetary allocations, and infrastructural development are often influenced more by identity affiliation than national interest (Okpoh, 2022). Consequently, certain groups feel perpetually marginalized, leading to agitation, violence, and disaffection. For example, health facilities, educational institutions, and employment opportunities are unequally distributed, with minority regions often underrepresented (Braveman et al., 2022). The current pattern of development fails to accommodate the diversity of the Nigerian populace, thus raising the fundamental question: To what extent has identity politics contributed to the inequitable and exclusionary development paradigm in Nigeria? The primary aim of this paper is to examine the role of identity politics in shaping development outcomes in Nigeria, with particular focus on: evaluating the extent to which identity politics contributes to inequity and exclusion; analysing its effects on national cohesion and growth; Offering evidence-based recommendations for inclusive governance and national integration.

2. Literature Review

Identity politics is deeply intertwined with the politics of recognition and representation. It centres on how people's affiliations—whether ethnic, religious, gender-based, regional, or linguistic—shape their political expectations and mobilization strategies. In societies like Nigeria, where historical grievances and socio-economic disparities abound, identity politics becomes not only a mode of self-expression but also a survival strategy for marginalized communities seeking representation in power structures (Ekeh, 2019). However, this often leads to politicized identities that harden group boundaries and elevate group loyalty above national unity. The politicization of identity can serve both emancipatory and divisive roles. On the one hand, it empowers historically disadvantaged groups to contest exclusion and demand justice. On the other hand, it often degenerates into a zero-sum game, where political actors exploit identity sentiments to entrench their influence. This is particularly evident in Nigeria's elections, where voting patterns and political appointments often reflect ethnic and religious affiliations rather than competence or ideological alignment (Ibrahim & Salihu, 2022).

Moreover, identity politics in Nigeria is not merely a byproduct of culture or tradition—it is institutionally reinforced. From zoning arrangements in political parties to ethno-religious balancing in security and civil service appointments, the state has repeatedly formalized identity considerations. These practices, while sometimes justified as mechanisms for inclusion, often lead to the institutionalization of mediocrity and the marginalization of capable individuals who do not fit identity-based quotas (Mustapha, 2007). The legacy of colonialism and its strategy of "divide and rule" sowed the seeds of identity-based governance in Nigeria. By aligning administrative boundaries with ethnic and regional divisions, the British colonial administration inadvertently institutionalized a fragmented political culture. These divisions persisted into the post-independence period, where political parties were primarily regionally and ethnically based, intensifying competition among Nigeria's major ethnic blocs: Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo (Osaghae, 1998). Consequently, governance became less about national vision and more about group patronage and ethnic loyalty.

In contemporary Nigeria, identity politics has found expression in the manipulation of state institutions for ethno-religious ends. Appointments to key offices, distribution of federal projects, and security surveillance often reflect geopolitical affiliations rather than strategic national interests. The federal character principle, enshrined in the 1979 Constitution to ensure inclusive representation, has been co-opted by political elites as a tool for clientelism. Instead of fostering national cohesion, it has frequently entrenched mediocrity and widened distrust among groups that perceive themselves as unfairly treated (Ayoade, 2020; Suberu, 2021). This politicization of identity undermines governance effectiveness and service delivery. When loyalty to ethnic or religious identity supersedes commitment to national objectives, merit and accountability are sacrificed. Critical decisions—ranging from budget allocations to security responses—are influenced by identity considerations, often at the expense of rational planning and equitable development. As a result, regions that lack political clout or are excluded from dominant coalitions suffer systemic neglect, further fueling discontent and insecurity (Ibeanu & Orji, 2020). Today, the federal character principle, though aimed at promoting unity, is often criticized for institutionalizing identity over merit (Ayoade, 2020). This practice undermines professionalism in

public service, distorts developmental priorities, and perpetuates underdevelopment in certain regions.

Sustainable development in multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria requires the dismantling of institutional barriers that exclude marginalized communities from political and economic participation. When development policies ignore minority voices or privilege dominant groups, the result is a lopsided distribution of infrastructure, employment, and opportunities. Inclusive development demands more than token representation; it necessitates policies and institutions that actively promote social cohesion, equity, and justice across identity lines (Sen, 1999; UNDP, 2023). Furthermore, inclusive governance ensures that diverse experiences and needs are reflected in national policies. For instance, gender-sensitive budgeting, disability-inclusive education policies, and culturally competent healthcare systems are essential to meeting the needs of all citizens. However, identity politics in Nigeria often sidelines such approaches in favor of ethnically skewed patronage systems. This leads to the perpetuation of inequality and stifles innovation, as talented individuals from underrepresented backgrounds face systemic exclusion (Oluwole & Otubu, 2022).

Inclusion also fosters national integration by building trust among citizens and strengthening civic identity over ethno-religious affiliations. When people see themselves as stakeholders in a shared national project—irrespective of their ethnic, religious, or regional identity—they are more likely to contribute positively to nation-building. Thus, tackling the divisive aspects of identity politics is not just a moral imperative but a developmental necessity. It requires reforms in governance structures, civic education, and institutional practices to prioritize competence, transparency, and social justice (World Bank, 2023).

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the **Social Identity Theory** (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the **Capability Approach** (Sen, 1999). The former explains how group affiliations influence intergroup behaviour and policy preferences, while the latter emphasizes expanding people's capabilities as the essence of development. Social Identity Theory (SIT) is pivotal in explaining the psychological and sociopolitical foundations of identity politics in Nigeria. According to Tajfel and Turner, individuals derive a sense of pride, value, and self-concept from their membership in social groups—such as ethnic, religious, or regional affiliations. This process of social categorization often leads to *in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination*, where individuals elevate the status of their own group while marginalizing others. In the Nigerian context, this theory helps elucidate why political actors and citizens often prioritize group loyalty over national unity and meritocracy.

This theory is particularly relevant for understanding electoral behavior, public resources allocation, and appointment patterns in Nigerian governance. Politicians tend to mobilize support based on ethnic and religious lines, reinforcing the perception that state power must be used to serve the interests of the group rather than the broader citizenry. Consequently, national development becomes subordinated to identity-based patronage systems. SIT thus provides a theoretical framework for analyzing how identity-based group consciousness influences

governance outcomes, perpetuates exclusion, and challenges nation-building efforts. Furthermore, Social Identity Theory offers a lens for interpreting citizens' reactions to perceived marginalization or favoritism. When individuals or communities believe they are excluded from national resources or recognition due to their identity, it fosters grievances, distrust, and political instability. These sentiments often manifest in agitation for restructuring, regional autonomy, or secessionist movements. By highlighting the role of identity in shaping group-based perceptions of justice and fairness, SIT becomes indispensable in exploring the roots of political fragmentation and developmental disparities in Nigeria.

Amartya Sen's **Capability Approach** shifts the focus of development from economic growth or resource accumulation to what people are actually able to **be** and **do** – that is, their real freedoms and opportunities to lead the kind of life they value. In relation to the study, this theory underscores the developmental consequences of identity politics, particularly how exclusionary practices affect the actual capabilities of individuals and groups.

- **Equity and Inclusion:** When certain groups are systematically excluded from education, healthcare, infrastructure, or political participation due to identity politics, their capabilities are diminished. Sen's approach makes it clear that development is not just about providing resources but ensuring that *all individuals* have the freedom to convert those resources into valuable outcomes.
- **Institutional Design and Policy Fairness:** The Capability Approach advocates for institutions that promote justice and equity. In Nigeria, institutions often reflect group interests rather than universal values. Using this framework allows the study to critique such systems and propose reforms that support *inclusive development*.
- **Freedom and Human Dignity:** Identity politics often compromises the dignity of minority or marginalized groups by denying them full participation in society. The Capability Approach reaffirms that genuine development occurs only when **all** citizens, regardless of identity, enjoy equal freedoms and opportunities to thrive.

Thus, Sen's framework is central to evaluating how identity-based exclusion impairs development, and what equitable policy interventions are necessary to build a more inclusive and just society. Together, these theories are complementary. Social Identity Theory explains the "why" and "how" of exclusion and identity-driven behaviour, while the Capability Approach provides the "so what" – the developmental consequences of such exclusions and the moral imperative for inclusion. Applying both allows for a robust, multidimensional analysis of identity politics in Nigeria, linking social psychology, political behaviour, and developmental justice. These theories help the study not only to diagnose the problem but also to articulate a people-centred path forward for national development.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, focusing on secondary data from books, academic journals, government policy documents, and media reports. The researchers conducted a critical review of literature on identity politics and national development, particularly in the Nigerian context. The paper draws on historical events, constitutional provisions, and recent political developments to support its analysis. Furthermore, the study uses case-based reasoning

to examine how identity politics has played out in public office appointments, resource allocation, and electoral behavior. Data were analyzed through content analysis and thematic categorization to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and policy implications. No human subjects were involved, and all sources are appropriately cited to maintain academic integrity and originality.

5. Findings

✧ Identity Supersedes Merit in Governance

The dominance of ethnic and religious affiliations in public appointments has systematically sidelined competence in Nigeria's governance. Amundsen (1997) and CAPAM (2010) documented how nepotism ignores merit principles, degrading public service quality. Recent studies confirm political elites prioritize ethnic connections over qualifications, using state resources for loyalists (Omotola, 2020). While merit-based recruitment can enhance stability, Nigeria's elite recruitment remains influenced by patronage networks rather than meritocracy (Ekeh, 2019).

Research Gap: Limited empirical research quantifies the economic costs of non-meritocratic appointments on service delivery. This study examines specific mechanisms through which identity-based appointments create governance inefficiencies.

✧ Electoral Behavior Shaped by Identity Loyalty

Voting patterns consistently show citizens prioritize ethnic or religious allegiance over policy proposals. Recent research on the 2023 presidential election indicates ethnicity and religion significantly influenced voter behavior (Ibrahim & Salihu, 2022). Analysis of the 2015 election revealed 46% of votes for the winning candidate came from a single geo-political zone (Osaghae, 2017). Political parties are perceived as ethnic or religious representatives, with voting patterns mirroring North-South and Christian-Muslim cleavages (Suberu, 2021). Religious impact on presidential elections has strengthened over time, with faith having its highest effect in 2015 (Mustapha, 2019).

Research Gap: Few studies examine psychological mechanisms leading voters to prioritize identity over policy, or whether civic education can shift these behaviors. This study analyzes voter motivation beyond statistical patterns.

✧ Federal Character Principle Abused

While designed for balanced representation, the federal character principle's implementation is deeply flawed. Critics argue meritocratic criteria account for only 40% or less of placements, with the principle manipulated to serve vested interests (Ayoade, 2020). Ekeh (1989) argued federal character emphasizes distribution over productivity, disrupts national elite emergence, and damages development prospects by attacking excellence. Civil servants see the principle as valuable but express concerns about its effects on quality and effectiveness (Suberu, 2021).

Research Gap: Limited comparative analysis exists of alternative inclusive governance models balancing representation with merit. This study proposes evidence-based reform mechanisms maintaining equity while addressing meritocratic deficiencies.

✧ Policy Distortion and Unequal Development

Resource distribution along identity lines creates uneven development and marginalization. The Niger Delta demands resource control, minorities demand equal treatment, and some groups seek federation breakup—reflecting injustices threatening national unity (Ibeanu & Orji, 2020). Overreliance on ethnicity, religion, and regionalism for political identity accounts for electoral

violence and insecurity (Omotola, 2021). Ethnic and religious considerations in appointments have caused behavioral derailment in Nigeria's political culture (Mustapha, 2007).

Research Gap: Systematic longitudinal studies tracking identity-based resource allocation patterns across administrations remain scarce. This study provides temporal analysis correlating resource distribution with ethnic political dominance across electoral cycles.

✧ **Positive Potential When Moderated**

Identity politics channeled through inclusive governance structures can empower marginalized groups and foster participatory democracy. Community-based development examples demonstrate legitimate identity representation's potential.

Research Gap: Literature overwhelmingly focuses on negative consequences, with minimal attention to successful cases where identity mobilization produced positive outcomes. This study documents and analyzes cases where moderated identity politics enhanced governance and development.

✧ **Impact on Innovation and Socio-Economic Transformation**

Entrenched identity politics limits forward-thinking professionals' involvement and disrupts digital innovation integration, including AI in public policy. This slows progress and widens global developmental gaps.

Research Gap: Existing studies rarely connect identity politics to technological innovation capacity or digital transformation. The intersection between identity-based governance and fourth industrial revolution adaptation remains unexplored. This study pioneers this analytical connection, examining how identity politics impedes technological adoption and innovation ecosystems.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

Identity politics remains a critical force in Nigeria's political evolution. While it has served as a mechanism for marginalized groups to voice their concerns, it has also contributed to national fragmentation, inefficiency, and policy inconsistency. The preference for ethnic or religious affiliation over competence in public leadership has weakened institutional performance and democratic accountability. There is a need for strategic reformation of political structures to ensure that identity is managed constructively. Merit-based leadership, equitable resource allocation, and inclusive governance must be prioritized. The federal character principle should be implemented transparently and shielded from manipulation. Civic education, constitutional review, and strong institutions are necessary to counteract the negative impacts of identity politics. Furthermore, integrating innovative thinking and equitable digital access, particularly in a technology-driven world, will enable Nigeria to align national development goals with global progress. To move forward, Nigeria must reconcile the realities of its diverse identity with a collective national vision. Only then can the nation harness its full potential for equity, unity, and sustainable development.

6.2 Recommendations

To mitigate the adverse effects of identity politics on national development and promote equity and inclusion in Nigeria, several actionable reforms are recommended.

The Federal Character Principle should be reformed to strike a balance between representational equity and meritocracy: While the principle was originally designed to ensure

inclusiveness across Nigeria's diverse ethnic and regional landscape, its implementation has often compromised competence and efficiency in public service. A reformed framework should prioritize merit and professional competence in public appointments and recruitment, while still guaranteeing minimal and fair representation for historically disadvantaged groups. This dual emphasis would promote excellence in governance while preserving national cohesion.

Inclusive political institutions must be deliberately nurtured to transcend narrow identity-based affiliations: Political parties and platforms should be encouraged, both legislatively and through civic advocacy, to reflect Nigeria's multi-ethnic character. This can be achieved by incentivizing cross-ethnic alliances and penalizing ethnically exclusive political mobilizations. Electoral laws and party registration processes should be reviewed to discourage the emergence of parties that are regionally or ethnically inclined, and promote those with a clear national character and inclusive ideologies.

A revitalized civic education framework is necessary to build a strong sense of national identity among citizens, particularly the youth: This should involve a comprehensive overhaul of the civic and social studies curriculum in schools to emphasize shared national values, rights, and responsibilities above ethnic or religious affiliations. In addition to formal education, nationwide media campaigns should be launched to promote the ideals of unity in diversity, mutual respect, and the dangers of divisive identity politics. Community-based programs can also foster dialogue and shared understanding among different identity groups.

There should be a deliberate effort to ensure equitable allocation of national resources and infrastructure across all regions of the country: National and sub-national development plans must be guided by accurate data on regional disparities and local needs, rather than by political patronage or ethnic favoritism. Special attention should be given to historically under served or marginalized areas through targeted investments in education, healthcare, transportation, and economic empowerment initiatives. Equitable development not only enhances social justice but also builds public trust in national institutions.

Institutional accountability mechanisms must be strengthened to monitor and regulate public appointments, budgeting, and service delivery: Independent oversight bodies—comprising civil society, academia, and non-partisan stakeholders—should be established or empowered to audit public institutions and ensure transparency in decision-making processes. These bodies must be insulated from political interference and should have the legal authority to sanction breaches of equity principles or identity-based bias. By holding institutions accountable, Nigeria can begin to dismantle the structural incentives that sustain identity politics.

In sum, combating the negative impacts of identity politics on national development requires a holistic approach that combines **institutional reform, civic reorientation, and developmental equity**. With sustained political will and collective citizen engagement, Nigeria can move closer to realizing a nation where inclusion, justice, and progress are the norm rather than the exception.

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