

Identity Politics and Voting Behaviour in Nigeria's 2023 Presidential Election: A Disaster to Developmental Democracy

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Abstract

The contrivance of identity in the expression and pursuit of interests is a major element of Nigeria's political process. Identity is shaped around many principles and the increased manipulation of identities of ethnicity, religion, regionalism, race and gender among others in political contest by various competing forces undermines development that representative democracy envisaged. Democracy and voting behaviour command a central position in political analysis as voting provides one of the richest sources of information about the interaction between individuals, society and politics. This paper assessed Nigeria's convoluted practice with identity politics with particular reference to how the indicators influence voting behaviour and undermine developmental democracy, emphasizing how identity politics has overtaken national consciousness and stimulated a relationship characterized by domination, superiority and hegemony by various groups, thus threatening national integration. It is concluded that identity politics has become powerful manipulative instruments in the hands of the political elites used to divide the Nigerian populace. Recommendations that will promote justice, equity and fairness in governance to restore identity discord and identity-based conflicts are made.

Keywords: Politics, Identity Politics, Voting Behaviour, Rational Choice, Development, Democracy.

Introduction

Nigeria, right from its struggles for independence has been battling with forces of identity in its polity. It is over 60 years of gaining independence and there are no signs that the narrative will soon change. Since the beginning of the Fourth Republic in 1999, Nigeria has witnessed successful transition from one democratically elected government to another, yet democracy as practiced in Nigeria has not shown signs of what Prof. Richard L. Sklar refers to as 'developmental democracy' (Sklar, 1987). The extent at which identity politics is influencing development of democracy in Nigeria is scary, as it has shown features of a timed bomb waiting to shatter whatever gains or progress the country has attained democratically. Democracy is said to be akin to development, but the role of key player is confirming the opposite. The politics of identity has influenced voting behaviour in Nigeria significantly, especially in the 2023 presidential election where ethnicity, religion and regional appeals were heavily employed. These identity indicators were the leading shapers of voting behaviour in the 2023 election. In Nigeria, identity politics has been used to mobilize voters along ethnic, religious, and regional lines, often leading to polarization and exclusion of certain groups. The influence of identity politics in shaping voting behaviour is far reaching as it can direct to the abandonment of crucial concerns of economic development, in favour of identity-based concerns thereby impeding the formation of a national identity and weakening social cohesion. The paper seeks to examine identity politics and voting behaviour in Nigeria's 2023 presidential election with a view to analysing the origin of identity politics, key determinants of voting behaviour and the consequences of the challenges identity politics posed for the development of democracy in Nigeria. Eventually, the paper maintains that identity politics present temporary rewards to politicians, weakens the basic principles that bring about development to a thriving democracy.

Conceptual clarification

Identity politics

Identity politics is a concept and approach in political science. It concentrates on the advantages and point of view of certain groupings that reveal a common identity, for instance ethnicity, race, religion or gender. It is a kind of politics in which groups of people with a distinct attribute or identity, like ethnicity, race, religion or gender, form special political coalitions, deviate from typical political parties and form their own political institutions (Fukuyama, 2018). Lyotard (1984) holds that identity politics is often linked to the rise of postmodernism and the denunciation of universalism, which put forward that all individuals are equal and should be treated equally. Simply put, identity politics can be attributed to a type of political engagement that is embedded in a specific social identity or familiarity, like race, gender, sexuality, or nationality (Crenshaw, 1991). This approach according to Crenshaw (1991) is traced to the 1960s and 1970s United States. It came as a reaction to the exclusion of traditionally marginalized groups from typical political and social institutions. Identity politics

at its basic follows to empower these groupings by admitting and tackling the ways in which social identities influence people's experiences, opportunities, and life chances. Identity politics is a multifaceted concept that has engendered momentous debates in academic and political circles. Advocates contend that it presents an essential framework for understanding and addressing the experiences of traditionally marginalized groups, while critics squabble that it upholds a divisive form of tribalism that undermines the broader goals of liberal democracy.

Voting behaviour

Among the different indicators of political participation, people connect more in voting. This is because voting is generally a less expensive and more conservative form of political participation principally in western or developed democracies (Antunes, 2008). Antunes, (2008) describes voting behaviour as the scientific study of the voting patterns of the electorates in a constituency; it gives insight into the dynamics of the voters, factors that persuade their voting patterns and the direction of their votes. Voting is the simplest, cheapest and the most obvious among all the various indicators of political participation in a country (Onah, 1997). The study of voting patterns consistently concentrates on the determinants of why people vote the way they do and how they reach at the choices they make. What instigates voters to turn out for voting and issues they consider in making decisions on candidates or parties significantly differs. For example, in China voters' behaviour in local elections tends to be based on individuals with a desire to punish corrupt officials (Shi, 1999).

Voting behaviour is clearly shaped by short-term and long-term influences. Heywood (2007) asserted that "short-term influences are specific to a particular election and do not allow conclusions to be drawn about voting patterns". These short-term influences include but not limited to; state of the economy which reflects the link between a government's popularity and economic variables such as unemployment, inflation and disposable income; another short-term influence is the personality and public standing of party leaders. Major long-term influences are; ideological concerns and the mass media. Models have been developed in order to create frameworks for theorizing voting discourses. This scientific study of voting behaviour is marked by three major research schools:

First, the sociological model - the sociological model links voting behaviour to group membership, suggesting that electors tend to adopt a voting pattern that reflects the economic and social position of the group to which they belong.

The second major model is the psychological model of voting behaviour. The central concept of this model is partisanship, which is designed as a psychological affinity, stable and lasting relationship with a political party that does not necessarily translate into a concrete link, namely registration or consistently voting for this party.

Voting is therefore a manifestation of partisanship, not a product of calculation influenced by factors such as policies, personalities, campaigning and media coverage (Hyman & Singer, 1968).

The third model which is the rational choice model tries to be distinct from previous theories/models as it gives an economic explanation of voting behaviour (Antunes, 2008). In this view, voting is seen as a rational act, in the sense that individual electors are believed to decide their party preference on the basis of personal self-interest (Kimenyi & Romero, 2008).

Away from the theories discussed, factors that determine voters' preferences also depend on the depth, consolidation and development of democracy in such societies. Therefore, voting behaviour can be said to be explained by socio-structural, socio-psychological, or rational choice models, at least for industrialized societies (Erdmann, 2007), while for African societies, voting is explained predominantly by factors such as personality, ethnicity, personal ties, and clientelism (Hyden & Leys, 1972) (Mozaffar, Scaritt, & Galaich, 2003).

Developmental democracy

The idea "developmental democracy" is without a doubt a strange wording actually present in the dictionary of democracy. Incidentally, there is an expansive heap of insightful literary works which attempt at clarifying "developmental democracy". Regardless, most basic assertions about the serrated nature of developmental democracy have so far been to a great extent conflicting and a long way from been on point. Richard L. Sklar, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of California lived in Africa for many years and wrote broadly on African development and democracy. He also lectured at a few colleges in Africa, including the University of Ibadan in Nigeria and the University of Zambia. He organized a book titled 'Developmental Democracy' in which he supposed that developmental democracy is the best for African continent. Extracting from Professor Richard Sklar's thought on developmental democracy, he harangues that democracy is the best type of government with the most remarkable ability to ensure development for Africans (Van Dijk, 2012). Many researchers have for long hold reservations on the actual fundamental nature of democracy following many years of democratization process in many countries, especially underdeveloped countries in Africa. Many also have doubt on the kind of democracy that has informed democratization to date, and contend that the decrease in democracy in the world as observed today is because of the kind of democracy that has been championed and advanced. Among the preferences projected is the thought of developmental democracy, a kind of democracy that is deviated from the political democracy approach that has represented USA democratization undertakings to date. Developmental democracy holds that the assessment of democracy lies in its assurances to national and individual development. Many years after Richard Sklar articulated confidence on democracy leading to development in Africa, many questions are still begging for answers. One most important issue about democracy in Africa relates to its relationship with development. On the connection between democracy and development

in Africa, one essential question is being asked: is Africa undeveloped essentially in light of the fact that it is undemocratic? Or, on the other hand is Africa undemocratic essentially in light of the fact that it is undeveloped? Which is the source and which is the outcome?

Theoretical framework

This work is grounded on the Rational Choice Theory alternatively called economic theory of democracy (Dawns, 1957). The theory attempts to connect human's unlimited wants with the limited resources that is obtainable. It presupposes that man is rational in making choices that is of maximum benefit to him/her amid contending options. Thus, it can be employed to explicate voting decision by citizens. Dawns who is the foremost advocate discerned that citizen's vote for whatsoever party they consider will endow them with the highest utility from government action. This is so, because voting entails a cost/benefit analysis. A voter thus, will vote for a specific party where the gains derivable from the action outweigh its cost. Even though a category of other contrivances can be utilized to elucidate voting behaviour, this work is entrenched on the rational choice theory which embraces the notion that personal social identities, for instance, ethnic affinities and shared religious faiths among others influence voting options for an individual or social group. This is more applicable in Africa where these components have long been considered as playing a significant role in party politics and electoral democracies. Certainly, ethnic affinity has a persuasive direct influence on electoral behaviour in ethnically-carved society like Nigeria because basically, casting a vote becomes a representation of group identity. Correspondingly, religion by its character, also communicate on the individual a type of identity in the society. It is consequently part of the multifaceted pattern of other social identities that paint human relationships, struggles and competition. Accordingly, because of its penchant for painting relationships particularly in multi-cultural societies like Nigeria, it performs considerable functions in societal politics as well as the process of making critical resolutions such as elections. Contextually from the Nigerian perspective, what is often obtained during election is that voters are being influenced by the diverse identity factors like religion of the candidate, ethnic membership or other basis of acknowledgments. Interestingly, even though critics of this theory squabble that voting is not all just about rational choice but also entails some irrational choices that can destabilize the opponent's options; notwithstanding the criticism, the utility of the theory in establishing a link between decisions and identity remains a strong point.

Determinants of voting behaviour

Several key factors consistently emerged as influential in shaping voting decisions. These factors can be broadly categorized into individual level determinants, socio-cultural determinants, and political determinants.

1. Individual-Level Determinants

The relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and voting decisions is a complex and multifaceted topic that has been studied extensively by political scientists and sociologists. Although there is no single compromise on the precise nature of this relationship, research suggests that SES can have a significant influence on voting patterns. Here are a few key points to consider:

- i. **Income:** can be a significant factor influencing individuals' voting decisions. Income levels can shape political preferences and voting behaviour in various ways. There is a positive correlation between income levels and political participation, including voting. Higher-income individuals tend to be more politically engaged and more likely to vote compared to those with lower incomes.
- ii. **Education:** can have a significant impact on individuals' voting decisions. Individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to vote. Higher levels of education tend to be associated with more liberal political orientations and increased political engagement. Education equips individuals with critical thinking skills, access to information, and a broader understanding of social issues, which can shape their voting decisions and policy preferences.
- iii. **Gender:** can significantly influence individuals' voting decisions, with distinct patterns observed between men and women. It is important to note that the gender gap in voting behaviour is not uniform across countries and contexts, and variations exist within gender groups. Factors such as age, education, race, and socioeconomic status can intersect with gender to influence voting (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2012).
- iv. **Age:** can have a significant influence on individuals' voting decisions, with distinct voting patterns observed across different age groups. Age plays a significant role in shaping voting decisions, with younger voters tending to support more progressive parties or candidates, while older voters lean towards conservative parties. Differences in issue priorities, life experiences, and generational values contribute to the varying voting patterns across different age groups.
- v. **Political ideology:** refers to a set of beliefs, values, and principles that shape one's views on social, economic, and political issues. These ideologies often align with specific political parties or movements. Political leanings, whether tilting conservative or liberal, play a substantial role in guiding electoral choices. These leanings act as a bridge, linking voters to candidates that reflect their intrinsic values and policy inclinations. In conclusion, political ideology serves as a significant predictor of voting decisions. Understanding an individual's ideological stance provides insights into their policy preferences and the political parties or candidates they are likely to support.
- vi. **Personality traits:** can also play a significant role in shaping individuals' voting decisions. Personality traits can influence voting decisions by shaping individuals' political orientations and preferences.

Understanding the relationship between personalities and voting behaviour provides valuable insights into how people make their electoral choices.

- vii. Emotional Intelligence (EI): This concept, a turning point of psychological and social research, continues to shape our understanding of political science. EI refers to the competence to recognize, understand, control, and effectively use emotions. Emotions can offer shortcuts or heuristics that influence how individuals evaluate political stimuli. For instance, a voter might feel fear when considering certain policies, leading him/her to oppose those policies even if a logical evaluation might suggest otherwise. Simultaneously, cognitive processes can also influence how one interprets and responds to emotional experiences, shaping the direction and intensity of political attitudes.
- viii. Climate Change Concerns: As the evidence and impacts of climate change have grown clearer and more pervasive, so has its influence on voting behaviour. The urgency of addressing climate change has become increasingly salient among voters in recent years.
- ix. Healthcare Experiences: The significance of healthcare as an integral part of human welfare fundamentally impacts voters' decision-making processes. Voters' personal encounter with the healthcare system, whether satisfying or disappointing, and their perception of the system's overall performance hold considerable sway over their voting choices.

2. Socio-Cultural Determinants

These determinants encompass a range of social and cultural influences that can shape political orientations and preferences.

- x. Social identity: Social identity plays a significant role in shaping individuals' voting decisions. The social groups to which individuals belong, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and social class, can shape their political preferences and align their voting choices with the interests and perspectives associated with their social identities.
- xi. Ethnicity and race: Racial and ethnic identities significantly influence voting decisions. Members of minority racial and ethnic groups often align their voting choices with candidates or parties that address their concerns regarding racial or ethnic equality and social justice, leading to cohesive voting patterns within these communities.
- xii. Religion: Individuals often align their voting choices with candidates or parties that they perceive as compatible with their religious values and moral convictions, leading to variations in political preferences among different religious groups.
- xiii. Media influence: Media exposure can shape individuals' attitudes, knowledge, and perceptions of political candidates and issues, potentially influencing their voting preferences and evaluations of candidates.

- xiv. Social networks: The influence of social networks on voting decisions has been a topic of significant interest and research in recent years. Social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, have become platforms where individuals engage in political discussions, share political content, and interact with political candidates and campaigns. Overall, social networks have emerged as powerful tools that can shape individuals' voting decisions through information exposure, social influence, and targeted messaging.

3. Political Determinants

Voters take into account various political factors such as party identification, candidate characteristics, policy positions, campaign strategies, and economic conditions when determining their votes. These factors can significantly influence voter behaviour and ultimately impact election outcomes.

- xv. Party identification: Party identification is a significant factor that influences voting decisions. It refers to an individual's psychological attachment to a particular political party. Party identification can shape a voter's overall political attitudes, values, and policy preferences, serving as a guiding framework for their voting behaviour (Campbell, Philip, Warren, & Donald, 1960). Party identification provides voters with a sense of identity and belonging to a larger political community. It simplifies the decision-making process by providing a heuristic or mental shortcut for evaluating candidates and their positions (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002). Understanding the role of party identification in voting decisions provides insights into the dynamics of elections and political behaviour.
- xvi. Candidate characteristics: Voters often assess various personal attributes, qualifications, and characteristics of candidates when making their electoral choices. These factors can shape voters' perceptions, attitudes, and preferences, ultimately influencing their decision to support a particular candidate.
- xvii. Policy positions: Voters often consider the policy positions and stances of candidates when determining their support in elections. The alignment of a candidate's policy positions with the preferences and values of voters can significantly impact their decision to vote for a particular candidate. Voters evaluate candidates based on their stance on key issues, such as the economy, healthcare, education, environment, national security, social issues, and more.
- xviii. Campaign strategies: Political candidates and their campaigns employ various tactics and strategies to communicate their message, mobilize supporters, and persuade undecided voters. These strategies can influence voters' perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately their decision to support a particular candidate.
- xix. Economic conditions: Voters often consider the state of the economy and their personal financial situation when evaluating political candidates and making their electoral choices. The performance of

the economy and perceptions about its trajectory can shape voters' perceptions, attitudes, and preferences. Positive economic conditions, such as low unemployment rates, GDP growth, and rising incomes, can create a sense of optimism and satisfaction among voters.

A concise historical perspective of identity politics in Nigeria

The historical perspective of identity politics in Nigeria can be traced back to the colonial era when British colonial masters partitioned Nigeria into different regions on ethnic and religious leanings, by establishing a system of indirect rule through the utility of traditional rulers (Ekeh, 1975). The system of indirect rule laid the foundation of ethnic and religious identity in Nigeria and toughened a sense of division among diverse groups. The influence of the laid foundation became strong after Nigeria's independence in 1960 which witnessed tensed political instability and violence. The military incursions witnessed between the 1960s and 1970s were evidently driven by ethnic and regional sentiments (Ogundiya, 2014). The identity suspicions led also to the Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970 which resulted to the death of about a million people on the basis of the largely Christian Igbo ethnic group making an attempt to secede from the rest of the country to form an independent state of Biafra (Adebanwi, 2018). Since then, identity politics continue to raise its ugly in the political scene.

Consequences of identity politics on voting behaviour in Nigeria's 2023 presidential elections

An increased level of identity politics especially on ethnic and religious ranks was witnessed in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. Identity politics appeals were engaged by the three (3) major political parties in Nigeria - the All Progressives Congress (APC), the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Labour Party (LP) to get voters. The APC concentrated on its support base in the South West and North West geopolitical zones of the country, where its presidential candidate Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu and the out gone President Muhammadu Buhari hail from respectively with added strength in the North East where its Vice Presidential candidate hails from and on religious and regional appeal generally. The PDP focused on the North East and South - South where its Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates Atiku Abubakar and Ifeanyi Okowa respectively come from and in Northern region on regional and religious appeal, while the Labour Party congregated its support on South East geopolitical zone where its presidential candidate come from and southern region of the country on regional and religious appeals.

One of the consequences of identity politics on voting behaviour in the Nigerian's election was the division of the country along ethnic, regional and religious appeals. This polarization was specifically obvious in the presidential election, where President Tinubu won a majority of votes in the northern and southern states. A further consequence of identity politics on voting behaviour in the Nigeria's election was the utilization of ethno-religious emotions to influence voters. Political parties competed on the apprehensions and insecurities of voters

by laying emphasis on the significance of voting for a candidate who shared their ethnic or religious circumstances.

Additionally, identity politics in the 2023 general election resulted in voter apathy among some groups. Some voters, particularly those who did not identify strongly with any of the major political parties, felt alienated by the emphasis on identity politics and chose not to participate in the electoral process. Besides the above repercussions, identity politics in the 2023 general election also promoted a culture of political patronage and favouritism, where politicians satisfied followers of their ethnic or religious group with political contracts, appointments, and other settlements. This is one reason why merit and capability are repeatedly ignored in support of loyalty to a particular identity group, thus weakening the quality of governance and public service delivery in the country.

Moreover, identity politics in the 2023 general election also invigorated brutal clashes and anxieties in some sections of the country. This was particularly evident in states such as Lagos, Rivers, and Kano, where ethnic and religious tensions were already prominent, and politicians used identity politics to provoke bloodshed and deepen divisions for their political gains. The consequential discords led to a general breakdown of law and order in the concerned areas. This has destabilized the stability of the country and jeopardizes its long-standing projections for development.

Finally, the frequency of identity politics in the 2023 general election painted the need for more all-encompassing politics and a redesigned national identity for Nigeria. The supremacy of ethnic and religious identities in the electoral process highlighted the collapse of the country to construct a common national identity that go beyond these differences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Identity politics has significantly influenced the pattern Nigerians vote in elections and it is a very dangerous signal for the survival of democracy and development for the country. If Nigerians are desirous of development, identity politics must be ignored with passion. Merit should be the basis for determining choices. Policymakers must find ways to direct Nigerians with regard to a more inclusive and patriotic political dialogue, which emphasizes the importance of harmony and cooperation over rift.

Recommendations

There are numerous policy consequences based on the above analysis that should be addressing the influence of identity politics on the voting behaviour. These include:

- i. The need to push for a comprehensive political discourse that put emphasis on the significance of unity and teamwork over grouping and division by civil society organizations, political leaders and the media. This can be realized through measures like encouraging mutual understanding, advancing positive intergroup contact and respect, and resigning political discussion to spotlight on issues of common concern.
- ii. The need to reinforce government institutions at all levels, together with the law enforcement, judiciary, and public service, is significant for tackling the source of identity politics such as corruption, poverty, and underdevelopment. Officials can accomplish this through measures like for instance capacity building, anti-corruption measures and institutional reform.
- iii. The need to promote a common sense of national identity that goes above religious, ethnic and sectional differences in order to surmount the challenges created by identity politics. This can be attained through a variety of means like the promotion of national symbols and traditions, national education crusades and cultural exchange programs.
- iv. It is also strategic to concentrate on the concern of political party division, which frequently reproduces and buttresses identity politics. Stakeholders should promote the evolving of political parties that are all-encompassing and symbolic of diverse social groups, as well as dampen political parties that are rooted solely on identity-based mobilization. This can be accomplished through promotion of intra-party democracy, campaign finance reform and electoral reforms.
- v. It is essential to acknowledge that identity politics is frequently motivated by economic and social inequalities. Politicians should consequently concentration on advancing wide-ranging social welfare programs, economic growth, and the provision of basic services such as education and health, so as to decrease the sense of marginalization and segregation that often guides to identity-based mobilization.
- vi. It is also imperative to tackle the concern of electoral violence, which often times is energized by identity politics. Stakeholders should concentrate on upholding credible and peaceful electoral processes, which can be reached through actions such as the employment of neutral and experienced electoral officials, the use of technology to improve the transparency of the electoral process, and the sponsorship of voter education.
- vii. In conclusion, politicians should come together on empowering marginalized groups like youth, women, and ethnic and religious minorities, via trial such as access to education and training, affirmative action programs, and the encouragement of political participation and representation. This will attend to the logic of marginalization and exclusion that often guides to identity politics in the first place.

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