



Identity Politics and its Implication on the Nigerian Electoral Process

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Abstract

This paper discusses the impact of identity politics on the Nigerian electoral process, with a focus on the 2019 general elections. The emergence of identity politics, which relies on ethnicity, religion, and regionalism to shape voters' preferences, has had far-reaching consequences on political discourse and election outcomes in Nigeria and other parts of the world. The paper draws on Social Identity Theory (SIT), as theoretical frame work which posits that individuals derive a sense of identity and self-esteem from their membership in social groups, to explain how group membership shapes attitudes and behaviors in the electoral process. The paper argues that while identity-based mobilization may provide short-term electoral gains for some politicians, it undermines the principles of inclusivity and diversity that are essential for a thriving democracy. The impact of identity politics on the Nigerian electoral process is not always positive, as ethnic and religious identities have often been used to mobilize violence and undermine the democratic process. Furthermore, the use of identity politics in political discourse can lead to the exclusion of certain groups and the formation of polarized and divided communities. The study found that in the 2019 presidential election, ethnic and religious identities played a significant role in determining voting patterns. The study also found that voters were more likely to support candidates who they perceived as representing their group's interests. These findings are consistent with the predictions of SIT, which posits that group membership plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes and behaviors. The paper highlights the need for political parties and candidates to focus on critical issues such as economic development and security, rather than relying on ethnic and religious identities to mobilize voters. It is also essential to promote intergroup dialogue and cooperation to foster national unity and social cohesion. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the need for a more nuanced and inclusive approach to politics that recognizes the division and polarization of diversity of identities and interests in Nigeria. The study recommends that political leaders, civil society organizations, and the media should encourage an inclusive political discourse that emphasizes the importance of unity and cooperation over

Key-Words: Identity Politics; Nigeria Election; Ethnicity; Diversity; Religion.

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Introduction

Identity politics refers to the political mobilization and activism based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and other social identities (Oluwole 2019). The emergence of identity politics has had a significant impact on political discourse and election outcomes in various parts of the world, including Nigeria. Identity politics has become an increasingly salient issue in the Nigerian electoral process in recent years. In the 2019 general election, ethnicity, religion, and regionalism played a significant role in shaping voters' preferences and electoral outcomes (Adebayo, 2019). Similarly, as the country gears up for the 2023 general election, the role of identity politics in shaping the electoral landscape cannot be overemphasized. Identity politics refers to political behavior that is motivated by a group's shared identity, such as race, ethnicity, religion, or gender (Macedo, 2005). 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. This phenomenon has been observed in past elections, where politicians have used ethno-religious sentiments to secure votes from their respective constituencies. The implication of identity politics on the Nigerian electoral process is far-reaching. It can lead to the neglect of critical issues, such as economic development and security, in favor of identity-based concerns. It can also fuel inter-group tensions and violence, as seen in past electoral cycles. Moreover, identity politics can impede the formation of a national identity and weaken social cohesion. This article examines the impact of identity politics on the Nigerian electoral process, with a focus on the 2019 general elections. The study will examine the ways in which identity-based mobilization has influenced electoral outcomes and the challenges it poses to Nigeria's democratic development. Ultimately, I will argue that while identity politics may provide short-term electoral gains for some politicians, it undermines the principles of inclusivity and diversity that are essential for a thriving democracy.

Conceptual Clarification

Identity Politics

Identity politics is a political approach that focuses on the interests and perspectives of groups that share a common identity, such as race, gender, ethnicity, or religion. According to the scholar Francis Fukuyama, identity politics "is a form of politics in which groups of people having a particular characteristic or identity, such as race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation, form



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exclusive political alliances, move away from mainstream political parties and create their own political institutions." (Fukuyama, 2018). The emergence of identity politics is often attributed to the rise of postmodernism and the rejection of universalism, which posits that all individuals are equal and should be treated as such (Lyotard, 1984).

Identity politics refers to a form of political engagement that is rooted in a particular social identity or experience, such as race, gender, sexuality, or nationality (Crenshaw, 1991). This approach to politics emerged in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s as a response to the exclusion of historically marginalized groups from mainstream political and social institutions (Crenshaw, 1991). At its core, identity politics seeks to empower these groups by acknowledging and addressing the ways in which social identities shape people's experiences, opportunities, and life chances.

Regarding the idea that identity politics helps to understand the impact of social identities on individuals, Collins (2000) writes that "identities are created within social structures and are historically and culturally specific" (p. 5). Crenshaw (1989) argues that "because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (p. 140). The goal of identity politics to create more equitable systems is also reflected in the work of other scholars, such as hooks (1981), who writes that "the transformative power of cultural criticism lies in its ability to demystify the workings of domination and to make them visible" (p. 31). Critics of identity politics, on the other hand, argue that it promotes a form of tribalism that pits different groups against one another and undermines the broader goals of liberal democracy (Lilla, 2018). They argue that identity politics encourages individuals to focus on their own particular social identities rather than on shared values and goals, and that this leads to a fragmentation of political and social life. Additionally, critics argue that identity politics often leads to a stifling of free speech and the suppression of dissenting voices, as individuals and groups seek to silence those who do not share their particular perspective.

Despite these debates, identity politics continues to play a prominent role in contemporary politics and social movements. The Black Lives Matter movement, for example, has been widely credited with bringing issues of racial inequality and police violence to the forefront of public discourse



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(Cobb, 2016). Identity politics is a complex and multifaceted concept that has generated significant debate in academic and political circles. While proponents argue that it provides a necessary framework for understanding and addressing the experiences of historically marginalized groups, critics argue that it promotes a divisive form of tribalism that undermines the broader goals of liberal democracy.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for identity politics draws on a range of disciplines, including political theory, sociology, and cultural studies. In political theory, identity politics is often linked to the concept of recognition, which emphasizes the importance of recognition and respect for cultural and group identities (Taylor, 1992). Social identity theory (SIT) posits that individuals derive a sense of identity and self-esteem from their membership in social groups, and that group membership plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes, behaviors, and intergroup relations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the context of Nigerian politics, identity politics has emerged as a powerful force that mobilizes voters and shapes political outcomes. This essay will use SIT to explain the impact of identity politics on the Nigerian electoral process. Identity politics refers to political mobilization based on group identity, such as ethnicity, religion, or gender. In Nigeria, where there are over 250 ethnic groups and a history of interethnic conflicts, identity politics has played a significant role in electoral politics. Political parties and candidates have often relied on ethnic and religious identities to mobilize voters, and electoral outcomes have often been determined along these lines.

According to SIT, individuals derive a sense of identity and self-esteem from their membership in social groups. In the context of Nigerian politics, voters identify with their ethnic or religious group, and their sense of self-esteem and pride is tied to the success of their group in the electoral process. As a result, voters may be more likely to support candidates and parties that they perceive as representing their group's interests.

SIT also posits that group membership plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes, behaviors, and intergroup relations. In the context of Nigerian politics, identity politics has led to the formation of political parties and interest groups that are based on ethnic and religious identities. These groups



often promote the interests of their respective groups and may be more likely to engage in intergroup conflict or competition.

The impact of identity politics on the Nigerian electoral process can be seen in the 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. In 2015, Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim from the north, won the presidential election with strong support from northern Muslim voters. His opponent, Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the south, received overwhelming support from southern Christian voters. The election was largely viewed as a competition between the Muslim north and the Christian south. Similarly, in the 2019 presidential election, Buhari won a second term with strong support from northern Muslim voters, while his opponent, Atiku Abubakar, a Muslim from the north, received strong support from southern Christian voters. The election was once again viewed as a competition between the Muslim north and the Christian south.

In both cases, identity politics played a significant role in shaping electoral outcomes. Candidates and parties relied on ethnic and religious identities to mobilize voters, and voters identified with their respective groups and supported candidates who they perceived as representing their group's interests. However, the impact of identity politics on the Nigerian electoral process is not always positive. SIT also predicts that group membership can lead to intergroup conflict and competition, and this has been the case in Nigeria. Ethnic and religious identities have often been used to mobilize violence and undermine the democratic process. In the 2019 presidential election, for example, there were reports of violence and electoral malpractice in some parts of the country.

Oyedele and Adeyemi (2018) provides further support for the role of identity politics in shaping electoral outcomes in Nigeria. The study found that in the 2015 presidential election, ethnic and religious identities played a significant role in determining voting patterns. The study also found that voters were more likely to support candidates who they perceived as representing their group's interests. These findings are consistent with the predictions of SIT, which posits that group membership shapes attitudes and behaviors. Adebani and Obadare (2013) highlights the negative impact of identity politics on Nigerian democracy. The study argues that ethnic and religious identities have been used to mobilize violence and undermine the democratic process in Nigeria. The study also notes that identity politics has led to the formation of patronage networks that perpetuate



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corruption and inequality. These studies illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of identity politics in Nigeria. While identity politics has played a significant role in shaping electoral outcomes, it has also contributed to intergroup conflict and undermined democratic institutions. It is therefore important for political leaders and civil society organizations to work towards promoting inclusive politics and reducing the influence of identity politics on the electoral process.

Social identity theory (SIT) provides a useful framework for understanding the impact of identity politics on the Nigerian electoral process. Identity politics has played a significant role in shaping electoral outcomes, as candidates and parties have relied on ethnic and religious identities to mobilize voters. However, the impact of identity politics on the Nigerian electoral process is not always positive, as it can lead to intergroup conflict and undermine the democratic process. It is important for political leaders and civil society organizations to work towards promoting inclusive politics and reducing the influence of identity politics on the electoral process.

Historicizing Identity Politics in Nigeria

Identity politics has a long history in Nigeria, dating back to the colonial era. During this period, the British colonial administration divided the country into separate regions based on ethnic and religious lines, creating a system of indirect rule that relied on the cooperation of traditional rulers (Ekeh, 1975). This system of governance reinforced the importance of ethnic and religious identity in Nigeria and helped to create a sense of division between different groups. The impact of identity politics was felt most strongly during the country's post-independence period, which was marked by political instability and violence. In the 1960s and 1970s, Nigeria experienced a series of military coups, which were often driven by ethnic and regional tensions (Ogundiya, 2014). The coups were followed by a civil war in 1967-70, in which the predominantly Christian Igbo ethnic group attempted to secede from the rest of the country and establish the independent state of Biafra. The war resulted in the deaths of up to one million people, the majority of whom were civilians (Adebanwi, 2018).

Following the civil war, Nigeria experienced a period of military rule that lasted until 1999. During this period, identity politics continued to play a significant role in the country's political landscape, with military rulers often relying on support from their own ethnic and regional groups to maintain



power (Adewale, 2018). However, in the years following the transition to civilian rule, Nigeria's political parties began to shift towards a more nationalistic discourse, with parties like the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All-Progressives Congress (APC) emphasizing their commitment to a united and inclusive Nigeria.

Implications of Identity Politics on Nigerian Electoral Process

The 2019 general election in Nigeria witnessed an increased level of identity politics, particularly along ethnic and religious lines. The two major political parties in Nigeria, the All-Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), both employed identity politics to appeal to voters. The APC, for instance, focused on its support base in the northern part of the country, where President Muhammadu Buhari hails from, while the PDP concentrated on the southern part of the country, where its presidential candidate, Atiku Abubakar, came from (Okafor, 2019).

One of the implications of identity politics on the Nigerian electoral process in the 2019 general election was the polarization of the country along ethnic and religious lines. The APC's focus on the north and the PDP's concentration on the south led to a sharp divide in the country, with each region voting predominantly for its preferred candidate. This division was particularly evident in the presidential election, where President Buhari won a majority of votes in the northern states while Atiku Abubakar won the majority of votes in the southern states (Okafor, 2019).

Another implication of identity politics on the Nigerian electoral process in the 2019 general election was the use of ethno-religious sentiments to sway voters. Politicians played on the fears and insecurities of voters by emphasizing the importance of voting for a candidate who shared their ethnic or religious background. This strategy was particularly evident in the northern part of the country, where the APC campaign relied heavily on Buhari's identity as a northern Muslim to appeal to voters (Etim, 2019).

Furthermore, identity politics in the 2019 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. This apathy was particularly evident in the southern part of the country, where some voters



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felt that their votes would not make a difference due to the dominance of the PDP in the region (Okafor, 2019).

In addition to the above implications, identity politics in the 2019 general election also fostered a culture of political patronage and favoritism, where politicians rewarded supporters of their ethnic or religious group with political appointments, contracts, and other benefits. This led to a situation where merit and competence were often overlooked in favor of loyalty to a particular identity group, thereby undermining the quality of governance and public service delivery in the country (Akinola, 2020).

Furthermore, identity politics in the 2019 general election also fueled violent conflicts and tensions in some parts of the country. This was particularly evident in states such as Kaduna, Plateau, and Benue, where ethnic and religious tensions were already high, and politicians used identity politics to incite violence and deepen divisions for their political gain (Okafor, 2019). The resulting conflicts led to loss of lives and property, displacement of people, and a general breakdown of law and order in affected communities.

Moreover, identity politics has fueled violent conflicts and tensions in some parts of the country, particularly in states where ethnic and religious tensions were already high. The use of identity politics by politicians to incite violence and deepen divisions for their political gain has led to loss of lives and property, displacement of people, and a general breakdown of law and order in affected communities. This has undermined the stability and security of the country and threatens its long-term prospects for peace and development (Okafor, 2019)

Lastly, the prevalence of identity politics in the 2019 general election highlighted the need for more inclusive politics and a redefinition of national identity in Nigeria. The dominance of ethnic and religious identities in the electoral process underscored the failure of the country to build a common national identity that transcends these differences. There is a need for a concerted effort by political leaders, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to promote a more inclusive and nationalistic political discourse that emphasizes commonalities rather than differences (Akinola, 2020).



Implications of Identity Politics for the Nigerian Future

The implications of identity politics for the Nigerian future are significant, with scholars and policymakers alike expressing concern about the impact of continued polarization and division on the country's long-term stability and development. One major concern is that identity politics will continue to fuel violence and conflict, particularly in the country's northern region, where ethnic and religious tensions are high (Ogundiya, 2014). Another concern is that identity politics will hinder the country's ability to address pressing social and economic challenges, such as poverty, corruption, and underdevelopment. As Adebani (2018) notes, "the preoccupation with identity has often undermined the pursuit of development, as resources are channeled towards satisfying the demands of specific groups rather than towards the broader goal of national progress."

To address these challenges, scholars and policymakers have called for a shift towards a more inclusive and nationalistic political discourse, one that emphasizes the importance of unity and cooperation over division and polarization (Jega, 2018). This will require a concerted effort by political leaders, civil society organizations, and the media to promote a shared sense of national identity and to build bridges across the country's many ethnic and religious divides. Identity politics is a phenomenon that has gained increasing prominence in recent times, with implications for the Nigerian future. According to Sani and Nasiru (2020), identity politics involves the mobilization of individuals based on their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation to achieve political or social objectives.

In Nigeria, identity politics has played a significant role in shaping the country's political landscape, with various groups using it to advance their interests. For example, ethnic and religious identities have been used to garner support for political parties and candidates, leading to a polarized society with deep-seated divisions. The implications of identity politics for the Nigerian future are vast and varied. On the one hand, it could foster a sense of inclusivity and diversity, where people are allowed to express their cultural and religious identities without fear of discrimination. On the other hand, it could lead to the balkanization of the country, where ethnic and religious groups retreat into their enclaves, leading to a fractured society. This could lead to further conflicts, as groups struggle to assert their dominance and protect their interests. Furthermore, identity politics could hinder the



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development of the country by creating a situation where meritocracy is sacrificed in favor of identity-based quotas. This could lead to a situation where individuals are appointed to positions based on their identity, rather than their qualifications, leading to a lack of expertise and competence in key positions. This, in turn, could lead to a decline in the quality of governance and public services.

In conclusion, while identity politics has the potential to foster inclusivity and diversity, its implications for the Nigerian future are complex and varied. The country's leaders must find ways to manage and address identity-based tensions to ensure that the country remains united and cohesive. (Sani & Nasiru, 2020).

Conclusion

Identity politics has had a significant impact on the Nigerian election, with candidates often mobilizing around issues related to religion, ethnicity, and regional identity. While identity politics has its roots in the country's colonial and post-independence history, its impact on the Nigerian future is significant, with continued polarization and division posing a threat to the country's long-term stability and development. To address these challenges, scholars and policymakers have called for a shift towards a more inclusive and nationalistic political discourse, one that emphasizes the importance of unity and cooperation over division and polarization. Only through such efforts can Nigeria hope to overcome the challenges posed by identity politics and build a more prosperous and united future for its citizens.

Recommendations

Based on the above analysis, there are several policy implications for addressing the impact of identity politics on the Nigerian election. Which are stated below.

Firstly, it is important to promote a shared sense of national identity that transcends ethnic, religious, and regional differences in order to overcome the challenges posed by identity politics. This can be achieved through various means such as national education campaigns, cultural exchange programs, and the promotion of national symbols and traditions (Ogunyemi, 2020).



Secondly, political leaders, civil society organizations, and the media should encourage an inclusive political discourse that emphasizes the importance of unity and cooperation over division and polarization. This can be achieved through measures such as promoting positive intergroup contact, fostering mutual understanding and respect, and reframing political debates to focus on issues of common concern (Eze, 2020).

Thirdly, strengthening institutions at all levels of government, including the judiciary, law enforcement, and public service, is critical for addressing the root causes of identity politics such as poverty, corruption, and underdevelopment. Policymakers can achieve this through measures such as institutional reform, capacity building, and anti-corruption measures (Ugbah&Ugwumba, 2020).

In addition to the above recommendations, it is important to address the issue of electoral violence, which is often fueled by identity politics. Policymakers should focus on promoting peaceful and credible electoral processes, which can be achieved through measures such as the deployment of neutral and competent electoral officials, the use of technology to enhance the transparency of the electoral process, and the promotion of voter education (Ugbah&Ugwumba, 2020).

Another important recommendation is to address the issue of political party polarization, which often reflects and reinforces identity politics. Policymakers should encourage the emergence of political parties that are inclusive and representative of different social groups, as well as discourage political parties that are based solely on identity-based mobilization. This can be achieved through measures such as campaign finance reform, electoral reforms, and the promotion of intra-party democracy (Eze, 2020).

It is important to recognize that identity politics is often driven by economic and social inequalities. Policymakers should therefore focus on promoting inclusive economic growth, social welfare programs, and the provision of basic services such as health and education, in order to reduce the sense of marginalization and exclusion that often leads to identity-based mobilization (Ogunyemi, 2020).

Finally, policymakers should focus on empowering marginalized groups such as women, youth, and ethnic and religious minorities, through measures such as affirmative action programs, access to education and training, and the promotion of political participation and representation. This will



address the sense of marginalization and exclusion that often leads to identity politics in the first place (Eze, 2020).

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