

THE SOCIOECONOMIC AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE DURING THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN LAGOS STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the socioeconomic and political dynamics of ethnic identity and electoral violence in Lagos State during the 2023 general elections. The elections exposed deep-seated ethnic tensions, voter suppression, and violence, driven by cultural heritage, socioeconomic disparities, and political representation. Grounded in Social Identity Theory, the study employed a mixed-methods approach, collecting survey data from 400 respondents across six Local Government Areas. Descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analyses revealed that group solidarity ($\beta = 0.265$, $p < 0.001$) was the strongest predictor of electoral violence, particularly in Alimosho (19.8%) and Ojo - Alaba (25%). Ethnic identity significantly influenced voting patterns, reinforcing political polarization and disputes over representation. While community engagement and security interventions were implemented, structural inequalities and ethnic-based mobilization remained key challenges. The study recommends inclusive governance, strengthened inter-ethnic dialogue, and electoral reforms to mitigate ethnic-driven electoral violence in Lagos State.

KEYWORDS: Ethnic Identity, Electoral Violence, Lagos State, Socio-economic Dynamics

JEL Classification Codes: Z13, D72, R58, D63

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethnic identity plays a significant role in shaping Nigeria's political setting, influencing electoral behaviour, governance structures, and social relations. In Lagos State, a multi-ethnic urban center, this influence became particularly evident during the 2023 general elections, where ethnic tensions, voter suppression, and violence showed the deep-rooted interplay between ethnicity and political competition. Electoral violence, broadly defined as any act of intimidation, coercion, or physical harm aimed at influencing electoral processes, has historically been fueled by ethnic mobilization in Nigeria (Ameh-Ogigo, 2024). Lagos State,

home to over 20 million people from diverse ethnic backgrounds (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023), saw heightened political contestation, where ethnic identity shaped voting patterns and electoral conflicts. Ethnic identity, referring to an individual's sense of belonging to a specific cultural or linguistic group, is a powerful force in Nigerian politics (Osaghae & Suberu, 2021). During elections, political actors often exploit ethnic affiliations to consolidate power, leading to strategic disenfranchisement, electoral violence, and political polarization (Adebani, 2020). The 2023 Lagos elections exemplified these dynamics, with reports of voter intimidation and ethnic-based mobilization in Alimosho, Ojo-Alaba, and other key electoral districts (Akinola, 2023). This study, therefore, seeks to analyze the socioeconomic and political factors that reinforced ethnic identity in Lagos State during the elections, examining their impact on electoral violence and governance.

This paper is structured to ensure a logical progression from conceptual analysis to empirical findings. The next section provides a review of existing literature on ethnic identity and electoral violence, situating the study within broader scholarly debates. The theoretical framework follows in the methodology section, where Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Ethnic Mobilization Theory (EMT) establish the foundation for understanding how ethnic consciousness influences political behaviour and violence. SIT explains how group identities shape political preferences and intergroup relations, while EMT highlights how ethnic elites manipulate identity for electoral advantage. Integrating these theories into the research design strengthens the empirical analysis by linking theoretical constructs with observed voting patterns and electoral tensions. After this, the study details its mixed-methods approach, justifying the selection of six key Local Government Areas and the analytical techniques employed. The findings section then presents statistical and qualitative evidence of ethnic-based electoral violence, voter behaviour, and political mobilization, leading to discussions on governance and policy implications. The paper concludes with recommendations for mitigating ethnic-driven electoral violence and fostering inter-ethnic political inclusion in Lagos State.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Electoral violence in Nigeria is deeply intertwined with ethnic identity, as political actors frequently mobilize support along ethnic lines to secure electoral advantages. Scholars such as Osaghae and Suberu (2021) argue that ethnic-based political mobilization has been a persistent feature of Nigerian elections, often escalating into violent confrontations. However, a critical examination of the existing literature reveals significant gaps that justify further investigation. Many studies tend to treat ethnic identity as a static phenomenon, failing to acknowledge how external forces such as economic inequality, migration patterns, and political realignments continuously reshape ethnic affiliations and electoral behaviour. Adebani (2020) highlights the historical dimensions of ethnic identity in Nigerian politics but does not fully explore its evolving nature in response to contemporary socio-political shifts. This study addresses this gap by analyzing how ethnic identity functioned as a dynamic and politically instrumental tool during the 2023 Lagos elections.

A major limitation in previous research is the tendency to rely heavily on historical electoral data without adequately integrating recent socio-political transformations. While Ibrahim and Ibeanu (2022) establish a link between ethnic-based political mobilization and electoral violence, their work does not sufficiently consider the role of digital media in amplifying ethnic tensions. The 2023 Lagos elections saw a surge in social media-driven ethnic rhetoric, with misinformation and propaganda reinforcing ethnic divisions. The failure of earlier studies to explore this emerging factor shows the need for a more nuanced examination of how digital platforms contribute to ethnic-based electoral violence. Similarly, Bekoe (2012) provides valuable insights into the relationship between ethnic heterogeneity and election-related

conflicts but does not differentiate between grassroots-driven ethnic mobilization and elite manipulation of ethnic identities for political gain. The Lagos elections revealed a strategic deployment of ethnic narratives by political elites, necessitating a more refined approach to understanding these power dynamics.

Another shortcoming of existing literature is the broad generalization of electoral violence across Nigeria without adequate consideration of state-specific contexts. Lagos, as Nigeria's most ethnically diverse and economically significant state, presents unique electoral dynamics that differ from those in more homogenous regions. While Suberu (2019) discusses electoral violence within a national framework, such an approach risks oversimplifying localized tensions and overlooking the role of urbanization, migration, and economic disparity in shaping voter behaviour. The high concentration of diverse ethnic groups in Lagos, coupled with its economic opportunities and political significance, creates an environment where ethnic identity is not just a cultural marker but also a determinant of access to resources and political power. This study, therefore, situates its analysis within the specific realities of Lagos State, ensuring a more precise understanding of the electoral tensions that unfolded in 2023. Moreover, there has been limited empirical analysis of the connection between socioeconomic inequalities and ethnic-driven electoral violence. While Osaghae and Suberu (2021) acknowledge economic disparities as a contributing factor to ethnic consciousness, their study does not offer robust statistical evidence linking unemployment, wealth distribution, and political representation to ethnic tensions. The 2023 elections in Lagos demonstrated that perceptions of economic exclusion played a crucial role in ethnic mobilization, yet few studies have empirically examined how structural inequalities reinforce ethnic divisions (Okechukwu, Osmond, & Ihuoma, 2024). However, their work remains largely theoretical, lacking concrete data on how these dynamics manifested in the electoral process. Okechukwu et al. (2024) argue that economic marginalization exacerbates political grievances, making disenfranchised groups more susceptible to ethnic-based political manipulation.

Furthermore, while existing studies advocate policy measures such as inter-ethnic dialogue, electoral reforms, and security interventions, they often fail to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies. Okonkwo and Salawu (2023) discuss the role of voter education initiatives in reducing ethnic-based political mobilization but do not provide empirical assessments of their impact. This study goes beyond theoretical recommendations by assessing how previous conflict mitigation measures have influenced voter behaviour and whether they successfully addressed underlying ethnic grievances. Akinola (2023) highlights how political actors leveraged ethnic identities to shape voter preferences, yet the study does not examine whether existing electoral policies were sufficient to curb such manipulations. Given the persistence of ethnic-driven electoral violence, it is crucial to assess not only the effectiveness of current interventions but also to propose alternative, evidence-based strategies for fostering inter-ethnic political inclusion.

These gaps in the literature show the necessity of this research, which moves beyond broad national analyses to focus on Lagos State as a distinct case study. By examining how ethnic identity evolved within the 2023 electoral context, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which ethnic narratives are mobilized, sustained, and contested in political competition. It also bridges the empirical gaps by incorporating statistical evidence that links socioeconomic disparities to ethnic-driven electoral violence. Additionally, it provides a critical evaluation of existing electoral reforms, offering practical policy recommendations grounded in empirical findings. Addressing these gaps is essential for

developing more effective strategies to mitigate electoral violence, promote inclusive governance, and ensure a more stable democratic process in Nigeria.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Ethnic Mobilization Theory (EMT), which provide a foundational understanding of how ethnic identity influences electoral violence. SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how individuals categorize themselves into social groups, fostering in-group loyalty and out-group distrust. In the context of Lagos State's 2023 elections, SIT helps interpret how ethnic affiliations shaped voter behaviour and fueled electoral tensions, particularly in multi-ethnic areas like Alimosho and Ojo-Alaba. Complementing this, EMT (Gurr, 1993) highlights how political elites strategically mobilize ethnic sentiments, often by emphasizing historical grievances and perceived marginalization, to consolidate electoral support. The 2023 elections saw instances where political actors leveraged ethnic narratives to suppress opposition, reinforcing divisions and, in some cases, inciting violence (Akinola, 2023). By integrating SIT and EMT, this study establishes a robust theoretical foundation for analyzing how ethnic identity, socioeconomic disparities, and political manipulation contribute to electoral violence in Lagos State.

3.2 Research Design and Data Collection

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The quantitative component involved structured surveys administered to 400 respondents across six Local Government Areas (LGAs): Alimosho, Ojo-Alaba, Eti-Osa, Mushin, Surulere, and Oshodi-Isolo. These LGAs were selected due to their high levels of ethnic diversity, historical instances of electoral violence, and strategic political significance in Lagos elections (INEC, 2023).

3.3 Stratified Sampling Process

To ensure adequate representation across ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes, a stratified random sampling technique was employed. The stratification process involved two key criteria:

i. **Ethnic Composition:**

Lagos is home to a heterogeneous population, with Yoruba (indigenous group), Igbo, Hausa, and other ethnic minorities playing significant roles in political contestations. Each LGA was stratified based on ethnic distribution data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2023) to ensure proportionate representation.

ii. **Socioeconomic Status:**

Recognizing that economic disparities influence political behaviour, respondents were also stratified by income levels, employment status, and educational attainment to capture varying perspectives on electoral violence and ethnic identity.

Within each LGA, participants were randomly selected from community associations, places of worship and local markets to prevent overrepresentation of politically active individuals. However, despite these efforts, selection biases may persist, as respondents with strong political affiliations might have been more willing to participate, potentially skewing perspectives toward more polarized views.

3.4 Potential Biases and Limitations of Self-Reported Data

One of the inherent challenges in this study is the reliance on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias, recall errors, or political sensitivities. Respondents might downplay or exaggerate their experiences with electoral violence due to fear of political repercussions or personal biases. To mitigate this, the study ensured anonymity and confidentiality of responses, emphasizing that participants' identities would remain protected.

Additionally, triangulation was employed by comparing survey data with interviews from community leaders, religious leaders, electoral officers, and security personnel to cross-validate findings. Despite these efforts, the subjective nature of self-reported experiences remains a limitation.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a strong correlation between ethnic identity and electoral violence ($r = 0.291$, $p < 0.001$). Statistical analysis indicates that group solidarity ($\beta = 0.265$, $p < 0.001$) was the strongest predictor of electoral violence, particularly in Alimosho (19.8%) and Ojo-Alaba (25%), two LGAs with historically high ethnic competition. These findings align with Social Identity Theory (SIT), which posits that individuals derive self-worth from group affiliations, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group hostility (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the Lagos elections, ethnic identity reinforced voter alignment along ethnic lines, intensifying political polarization and tensions between ethnic groups. Hence, Table 1 presents key drivers of ethnic identity in Lagos State, showing how cultural heritage, socioeconomic disparities, and political representation shaped voter behaviour.

Table 1: Key Drivers of Ethnic Identity in Lagos State

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	% Agreement (High)
Cultural Heritage	4.32	0.76	78.5%
Socioeconomic Disparities	4.10	0.82	72.1%
Political Representation	4.45	0.69	81.3%

Source: Author's Construct Based on Field Work, 202

The instrumentalization of ethnic narratives by political elites further validates Ethnic Mobilization Theory (EMT) (Gurr, 1993), which argues that ethnic identities become politically salient when groups perceive threats to their status or access to resources. Evidence from this study suggests that political actors deliberately exploited ethnic grievances, framing the elections as a contest for ethnic dominance rather than policy-based governance. This strategic mobilization of ethnic identity led to heightened voter suppression, intimidation, and, in some cases, physical violence, reinforcing existing ethnic divisions in Lagos.

• *Implications for Theories of Electoral Violence and Ethnic Conflict*

The findings provide empirical support for broader theories of electoral violence, particularly the grievance-based and opportunity-based explanations. According to Collier and Hoeffler (2004), grievance-based conflicts emerge when marginalized groups feel economically, politically, or socially excluded. In Lagos, survey data revealed that perceived economic exclusion among non-indigenous ethnic groups contributed to electoral tensions. The strong correlation between socioeconomic disparities ($\beta = 0.198$, $p < 0.01$) and ethnic-based voter behaviour suggests that political marginalization, coupled with economic inequalities, reinforced ethnic grievances, making electoral violence more likely (Adeniyi & Adeyemi, 2024). This supports findings that money supply volatility and exchange rate instability contribute to uncertainty in governance, influencing political competition and voter alignments.

Table 2: Correlation Between Ethnic Identity and Voter Behaviour

Variable	Voting Preference (r)	p-value
Cultural Heritage	0.241	<0.01
Socioeconomic Disparities	0.251	<0.01
Political Representation	0.275	<0.001
Group Solidarity	0.291	<0.001

Source: Correlation Analysis, 2025

Similarly, the findings support the opportunity-based model, which argues that electoral violence occurs when political actors exploit weak institutional enforcement to manipulate electoral outcomes (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Interviews with community leaders and security personnel revealed that state institutions were perceived as biased, with law enforcement agencies failing to prevent voter suppression in certain LGAs (Ojima & Ajudua, 2024). Monetary policy misalignments often correlate with periods of heightened political contestation and electoral instability, further exacerbating governance challenges. This institutional weakness provided an opportunity for political actors to use ethnic-based intimidation tactics to shape electoral outcomes. Further evidence of this political manipulation and voter suppression is reflected in Table 3, which highlights the distribution of electoral violence across the six sampled LGAs.

Table 4: Distribution of Electoral Violence across Key LGAs

LGA	% Reported Electoral Violence	LGA	% Reported Electoral Violence
Alimosho	19.8%	Mushin	10.7%
Ojo	25.0%	Eti-Osa	12.8%
Surulere	14.5%	Oshodi-Isolo	17.2%

Source: Author's Construct Based on Field Work, 2024

• **Broader Political and Policy Implications**

The findings suggest that ethnic-driven electoral violence is not merely a security concern but a governance issue. The persistence of ethnic-based political mobilization in Lagos indicates a structural failure in fostering inclusive political representation. The study highlights the need for constitutional reforms that address ethnic-based political exclusion, such as merit-based governance appointments and electoral transparency measures (Paul & Agada, 2024). Additionally, sustained investment in public health and education strengthens democratic institutions and fosters social cohesion, reducing incentives for electoral violence. Additionally, peacebuilding initiatives must go beyond inter-ethnic dialogue to tackle the underlying economic inequalities that fuel ethnic polarization. The study's results reinforce the argument that electoral violence cannot be resolved through security measures alone—broader socioeconomic reforms are necessary to reduce ethnic-based political competition. This aligns with Okechukwu et al. (2024), who emphasize the role of social inclusion and equitable economic policies in mitigating ethnic conflict. Further, this study assessed the effectiveness of conflict mitigation measures, with findings presented in Table 4.

Table 5: Perceived Effectiveness of Conflict Mitigation Measures

Conflict Management Strategy	Mean Effectiveness Score	Standard Deviation	% Positive Response
Community Engagement Programs	3.89	0.81	63.5%
Law Enforcement Interventions	4.12	0.75	70.2%
Voter Education Initiatives	3.57	0.88	58.3%

Source: Author's Construct Based on Field Work, 2024

These results suggest that law enforcement interventions were perceived as the most effective strategy, but concerns about security biases remain prevalent. Voter education initiatives had the lowest impact, indicating that ethnic political loyalties remain deeply entrenched despite civic awareness efforts.

5. CONCLUSION ON FINDINGS

This study has demonstrated that ethnic identity plays a central role in shaping electoral violence in Lagos State, particularly during the 2023 general elections. The findings reveal that ethnic-based political mobilization, group solidarity, and socioeconomic disparities significantly influenced voter behaviour, exacerbating tensions and fueling electoral conflicts. The strong correlation between ethnic identity and voter suppression, intimidation, and violence shows the urgent need for structural reforms in Nigeria's electoral and governance systems. Without decisive intervention, ethnic-driven electoral violence will continue to undermine democratic stability, erode public trust in the electoral process, and deepen socio-political divisions. If left unchecked, these issues could escalate beyond electoral violence into entrenched ethnic hostilities, prolonged political instability, mass disenfranchisement, and even violent civil unrest.

The implications of inaction are severe. Continued ethnic-based voter suppression and electoral violence could lead to a loss of confidence in democratic institutions, fostering widespread political apathy, radicalization, and electoral boycotts. Furthermore, the weaponization of ethnic identity in elections could institutionalize ethnic divisions, making peaceful political transitions increasingly difficult. If Nigeria fails to implement the necessary reforms, future elections could become even more volatile, with political actors exploiting ethnic grievances to an even greater extent, leading to deadlier conflicts and further weakening of national cohesion. Addressing these challenges requires urgent, comprehensive reforms at multiple levels. Electoral laws must be strengthened to criminalize ethnic-based voter suppression, political parties must be held accountable for divisive rhetoric, and governance structures must be more inclusive to reduce ethnic competition for power. Security agencies must operate with absolute neutrality, while civil society must play a greater role in countering ethnic propaganda and misinformation. Additionally, socioeconomic disparities that fuel ethnic resentment must be tackled through equitable resource allocation, inclusive economic policies, and fair political representation.

The 2023 Lagos elections serve as a crucial warning—a stark reminder that unless deliberate, systemic changes are made, Nigeria's democratic process will remain vulnerable to ethnic exploitation, political violence, and institutional decay. The urgency of these reforms cannot be overstated. Nigeria stands at a crossroads: either it takes decisive action to curb ethnic-driven electoral violence or risks sliding into deeper political instability and democratic regression. The time for reform is now.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study shows the urgent need for targeted policy interventions to address the root causes of ethnic-driven electoral violence in Lagos State. While existing efforts focus on security enforcement and voter education, a more structural and multi-stakeholder approach is required to enhance inclusive governance, strengthen electoral integrity, and mitigate ethnic-based political mobilization. The following recommendations provide specific, actionable steps for policymakers, civil society organizations, and electoral bodies.

6.1 Electoral Reforms for Preventing Ethnic-Based Violence

Electoral reforms should be institutionalized to curb voter suppression, ethnic intimidation, and political exclusion. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should:

- i. Enforce stricter penalties for electoral violence: A dedicated Electoral Offenses Tribunal should be established to prosecute political actors, party agents, and individuals involved in voter suppression, ethnic intimidation, and electoral violence. Quick and transparent judicial processes will serve as a deterrent.

- ii. Introduce real-time electronic voter verification: The expansion of electronic voting accreditation and real-time voter monitoring systems can reduce incidents of ethnic profiling and targeted disenfranchisement in ethnically diverse LGAs.
- iii. Strengthen the independence of INEC: Amend the Electoral Act to shield INEC from political interference, ensuring that election security planning is not dictated by political elites who may have vested interests in ethnic-based mobilization.
- iv. Ban ethnically divisive campaign rhetoric: Political parties should be held accountable for hate speech and inflammatory campaign messages that incite ethnic hostility. The National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) should monitor and penalize candidates who exploit ethnic sentiments in their campaign narratives.

6.2 Inclusive Governance to Address Political and Economic Marginalization

Political exclusion remains a major driver of ethnic tensions in Lagos. Addressing this requires

- i. Policy frameworks that promote representation and fair resource allocation: Implement a proportional representation system in governance: The Lagos State Government should adopt an ethnically balanced political appointment framework, ensuring fair representation for all groups, particularly in executive and legislative bodies (Dankumo et al., 2024). Increased government spending on social welfare programs mitigates the economic drivers of political disenfranchisement, fostering a more inclusive democratic process.
- ii. Introduce local governance reforms to empower marginalized communities: Expanding the autonomy of local councils will enhance grassroots representation, ensuring that non-indigenous groups are not systematically excluded from political decision-making processes.
- iii. Adopt an inter-ethnic quota system for political parties: Political parties should be mandated to nominate candidates from diverse ethnic backgrounds, particularly in multi-ethnic constituencies like Alimosho and Ojo-Alaba. This will help depolarize ethnic-based party politics.

6.3 Strengthening Community-Based Peacebuilding and Voter Education

Inter-ethnic hostilities in Lagos are often fueled by misinformation, fear, and political manipulation. To counter these narratives, civil society organizations (CSOs), religious institutions, and traditional rulers must play a proactive role in peacebuilding:

- i. Institutionalize inter-ethnic peace forums: The Lagos State Peace and Reconciliation Commission should be empowered to facilitate periodic inter-ethnic dialogue programs, particularly in ethnically polarized communities.
- ii. Launch voter education initiatives targeting youth and first-time voters: Many young voters are susceptible to ethnically motivated political propaganda. Civil society groups should collaborate with educational institutions to promote critical thinking and civic responsibility in electoral participation.
- iii. Develop conflict-sensitive media campaigns: The National Orientation Agency (NOA) should partner with traditional and digital media outlets to counter misinformation and de-escalate ethnic tensions during elections.

6.4 Enhancing Security Sector Reforms for Electoral Integrity

Security agencies play a critical role in mitigating electoral violence, but institutional weaknesses have undermined their effectiveness. The following reforms should be prioritized:

- i. Ensure impartial security deployment during elections: The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) and other security agencies should adopt a non-partisan operational framework, with independent observers ensuring unbiased law enforcement in all LGAs.

- ii. Improve security intelligence on ethnic-based election violence: Security agencies should work with community informants and civil society groups to identify early warning signs of ethnic political tensions and deploy preventive measures.
- iii. Establish a rapid-response electoral conflict mediation unit: This unit, under the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), should handle cases of electoral violence and ethnic intimidation, ensuring immediate intervention in volatile regions.

6.5 Economic Reforms to Reduce Ethnic Competition and Marginalization

Beyond political solutions, socioeconomic inequalities must be addressed to curb ethnic resentment and competition. The Lagos State Government should:

- i. Expand economic opportunities for non-indigenous groups: Equal access to employment, business funding, and government contracts should be ensured for all ethnic groups, preventing political exclusion from translating into economic deprivation.
- ii. Strengthen social protection programs for marginalized communities: Targeted policies should focus on job creation, skills acquisition, and poverty alleviation programs in LGAs with high ethnic tensions, particularly Ojo-Alaba and Alimosho.
- iii. Encourage cross-ethnic business collaborations: The Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) should promote economic partnerships between different ethnic business groups to foster interdependence and cooperation.

CONCLUSION ON RECOMMENDATIONS

The persistence of ethnic-driven electoral violence in Lagos State is a symptom of deeper political, economic, and social structural deficiencies. Addressing this issue requires a multi-faceted strategy, involving electoral, governance, security, and economic reforms. The recommendations outlined above move beyond general proposals by providing concrete, actionable steps for policymakers, electoral bodies, civil society, and security agencies. If implemented effectively, these measures will reduce ethnic polarization, enhance electoral integrity, and promote a more inclusive democratic process in Nigeria.

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