

**THE ROLE OF ETHNICITY IN PARTY POLITICS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF
NIGERIA AND GHANA**

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and

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Abstract

Ethnicity remains an important dimension of political competition in many African democracies, but its political effects vary substantially across countries with comparable colonial and demographic histories. This article examines the role of ethnicity in party politics in Nigeria and Ghana, focusing on the historical foundations of ethnic political mobilisation, elite strategies, patronage, governance effectiveness, institutional trust and democratic stability. The study is derived from a comparative mixed-methods dissertation and combines primary survey evidence from 102 respondents across four Nigerian geopolitical zones with secondary evidence from the 2024 Afrobarometer Round 10 survey involving 2,400 Ghanaian respondents, complemented by a structured review of comparative scholarship. Nigerian data were analysed using descriptive statistics, simple linear regression and Pearson product-moment correlation, while the two cases were compared thematically through an integrated analytical framework drawing on instrumentalism, institutionalism, ethno-clientelism, constructivism and elite manipulation theory. The findings indicate that ethnicity remains deeply embedded in Nigerian party politics. The article argues that ethnicity itself is not inherently destabilising; rather, its political intensity is shaped by institutional incentives, elite strategies, patronage structures and the credibility of electoral institutions. The study concludes that strengthening internal party democracy, civic education, electoral management, anti-patronage enforcement and programmatic party competition can reduce the negative political effects of ethnic mobilisation while preserving legitimate plural representation.

Keywords: *ethnicity; party politics; ethnic mobilisation; elite manipulation; Nigeria; Ghana; patronage; democratic governance; institutionalism*

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1. Introduction

Ethnicity has remained one of the most persistent organising principles of political competition in Africa. It can provide citizens with a sense of belonging, representation and political security, yet it can also become a resource through which political elites structure competition, distribute patronage and construct electoral coalitions. The central analytical issue is therefore not simply whether ethnicity exists in politics, but why it becomes politically decisive in some settings and comparatively moderated in others. Nigeria and Ghana provide a particularly useful comparative setting because both are multi-ethnic West African states shaped by British colonial rule, competitive party politics and long periods of political instability, but they have developed markedly different patterns of ethnic incorporation into party competition.

In Nigeria, the historical development of party politics has repeatedly intersected with regional and ethnic identities. The First Republic parties were closely associated with the major regions, while subsequent democratic periods retained important forms of ethno-regional bargaining. Although the Fourth Republic has produced formally national political parties, electoral competition continues to involve ethnic and regional calculations, including candidate selection, zoning, federal character, coalition formation and the distribution of public resources. The dissertation evidence indicates that this pattern remains salient among politically engaged Nigerians, with a grand mean of 4.37 on ethnic identity and political

orientation. In particular, 98.0% of respondents agreed that ethnic background influences the evaluation of political candidates ($M = 4.57$).

Ghana, by contrast, demonstrates how ethnic diversity can coexist with a more nationally oriented party system. Ethnic and regional patterns remain visible, particularly in the electoral bases of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC), but the political system has generated incentives for cross-ethnic coalition building. Ghana's constitutional prohibition of ethnically based political parties, its relatively institutionalised two-party competition, electoral alternation and the importance of electorally competitive mixed regions have constrained overt ethnic exclusion. The Ghanaian evidence used in this study shows that 67.5% of respondents identify equally with their ethnic and national identities, while 51.5% report no close attachment to a political party.

The comparison is important because it challenges deterministic interpretations of ethnicity. If ethnic diversity alone were sufficient to produce ethnicised party politics, Nigeria and Ghana would be expected to exhibit broadly similar political outcomes. Instead, the cases suggest that political institutions and elite incentives mediate the translation of social identities into political behaviour. This observation is consistent with instrumentalist and institutionalist approaches, which treat ethnic identity as politically activated under particular incentive structures rather than as an automatic

determinant of political action (Brass, 1991; Horowitz, 1985; Posner, 2005).

The article therefore addresses a gap in comparative scholarship by bringing Nigeria and Ghana into a single analytical framework. It asks how ethnicity is mobilised in party politics, how elite manipulation and patronage mediate this process, how ethnicised party competition relates to governance and institutional trust, and why the political consequences of ethnic diversity differ between the two countries. The article retains the dissertation's focus on the democratic period, particularly Nigeria's Fourth Republic and Ghana's Fourth Republic, while drawing attention to recent electoral developments, including Nigeria's 2023 election and Ghana's 2024 electoral context.

The argument advanced is that ethnicity should be understood as a politically malleable resource. In Nigeria, institutional fragmentation, informal ethnic balancing, patronage and elite competition create strong incentives for political actors to activate ethnic identities. In Ghana, institutional constraints and the need to assemble broad electoral coalitions increase the costs of exclusionary ethnic mobilisation. Ethnic politics consequently becomes less a product of immutable social divisions than an outcome of the interaction between identity, institutions, elite agency and political economy.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Ethnicity and Party Politics

Ethnicity refers to a socially meaningful sense of common ancestry, culture, language and historical experience. It is not necessarily politically salient at all times. Barth (1969) emphasises the relational character of ethnic boundaries, while Chandra (2004) shows that ethnic identities can become politically consequential when they provide a basis for organising political claims. In plural societies, political parties may transform these identities into electoral resources by presenting themselves as vehicles for representation and access to state resources.

The literature on African party politics increasingly rejects the assumption that voters are simply primordial ethnic loyalists. Lindberg and Morrison (2008), for example, show that Ghanaian voters cannot be reduced to ethnic or clientelist motivations alone. Political performance, economic expectations, party organisation and candidate characteristics also matter. Similarly, recent work suggests that ethnic cleavages may decline when citizens increasingly evaluate institutions and governments through broader national or performance-based considerations (Asante, 2020; Brigeovich & Oritsejafor, 2022).

In Nigeria, however, ethnicity remains intertwined with party organisation and electoral mobilisation. The dissertation's review identifies zoning, federal character, candidate selection, patronage and regional coalition building as mechanisms through which ethnic considerations are reproduced. Demarest and Langer (2023) show that major parties can operate as integrated national organisations while still relying on informal

ethno-regional balancing. This distinction between formal integration and informal ethnic bargaining is central to understanding Nigerian party politics.

2.2 Instrumentalism, Institutionalism and Ethno-clientelism

Instrumentalism views ethnicity as a resource that political actors can activate strategically. Political elites may emphasise ethnic identity when doing so is expected to generate electoral support, legitimacy or access to resources (Bates, 1983; Brass, 1991). This approach is particularly relevant to the Nigerian case, where respondents overwhelmingly perceived political elites as using ethnicity to gain electoral support. The survey recorded a mean of 4.60 on this item, with 98.1% agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Institutionalism complements instrumentalism by asking why elites face different incentives across political systems. Institutions establish rules that shape competition, regulate parties, structure resource distribution and influence the credibility of electoral outcomes (Horowitz, 1985; Lijphart, 1999; Pierson, 2004). Nigeria's federal system creates multiple arenas of political competition over state and federal resources, while Ghana's more centralised structure and nationally competitive two-party system encourage parties to construct broader coalitions. Thus, similar ethnic diversity can produce different political incentives.

Ethno-clientelism adds the political economy dimension. Where political access is closely associated with patronage and control of state

resources, ethnic networks can provide an organisational channel for distributing benefits and maintaining political loyalty (Berman, 1998; Van de Walle, 2007). The dissertation's Nigerian findings strongly reflect this mechanism: 92.1% of respondents agreed that patronage politics encourages ethnic mobilisation, while 94.1% agreed that political elites use appointments and public offices to reward ethnic or regional supporters.

2.3 Constructivism and Elite Manipulation

Constructivism stresses that ethnic identities are constructed, negotiated and redefined rather than permanently fixed. Political actors can therefore reshape the meaning and relevance of identity according to changing circumstances (Chandra, 2004). This helps explain why new political coalitions can cut across established ethnic boundaries and why urbanisation, education, youth mobilisation and digital communication can weaken or reconfigure traditional ethnic alignments.

Elite manipulation theory directs attention to political entrepreneurship. Elites can invoke ethnic symbols, grievances and narratives to create political divisions or to assemble coalitions. The dissertation evidence suggests that this mechanism is more important than the simple presence of ethnic identity. The strongest inferential result was the association between elite ethnic manipulation and perceptions of democratic institutions ($r = .513$, $p < .001$), indicating that respondents who perceived stronger elite manipulation also reported stronger perceptions of institutional weakness.

2.4 Integrated Comparative Framework

The article retains the dissertation's Integrated Comparative Framework of Ethnic Party Politics. The framework treats the intensity of ethnic party politics as the outcome of interaction among institutional structures, elite instrumentalisation and the political economy of patronage. Institutional structures establish incentives; elites decide whether and how to activate identity; and patronage conditions determine the material returns to mobilisation. Constructivism and elite manipulation further explain how identities are activated and maintained. The framework is therefore useful because no single theoretical perspective adequately explains the divergent Nigerian and Ghanaian experiences.

The framework can be represented as follows: institutional structures → elite incentives and strategies → ethnic mobilisation → patronage and political bargaining → governance and institutional consequences. The strength of each link varies by national context. The Nigerian case represents a setting in which these mechanisms reinforce one another, while Ghana represents a setting in which institutional constraints and cross-ethnic electoral incentives weaken the conversion of ethnic identity into exclusionary party competition.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a comparative mixed-methods design. Nigeria constituted the primary field component, while Ghana was examined through secondary survey data and documentary evidence. This design was

adopted because it permitted detailed analysis of Nigerian perceptions while making use of a nationally representative Ghanaian dataset that could not be replicated through fieldwork within the practical scope of the dissertation. The comparative approach follows the logic of systematically identifying similarities and differences across cases (Gerring, 2007; Ragin, 2014).

For Nigeria, 102 respondents were selected from the North-West, South-West, South-East and South-South geopolitical zones. The respondents comprised 42 voters, 20 political party officials, 20 electoral officers and 20 academic experts. The sample included Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo, Ijaw and Edo respondents. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered electronically. Sections B–E used a five-point Likert scale covering ethnic identity and political orientation; ethnicity and governance effectiveness; elite manipulation, patronage and ethnic bargaining; and democratic institutions, governance, national cohesion and stability.

The reliability of the Nigerian instrument was assessed through Cronbach's alpha. The coefficients were .822 for ethnic identity and political orientation, .895 for ethnicity and governance effectiveness, .820 for elite manipulation, patronage and ethnic bargaining, and .954 for democratic institutions, governance, national cohesion and stability. The Ghanaian quantitative evidence was drawn from Afrobarometer Round 10, based on 2,400 adult respondents interviewed in August 2024. The Ghana analysis focused on variables thematically

comparable with the Nigerian instrument, including ethnic-national identity, party identification, perceptions of ethnic unfairness, corruption, government performance, institutional trust and democratic quality.

Quantitative analysis of the Nigerian data employed frequencies, percentages and means, followed by simple linear regression and Pearson product-moment correlation at $\alpha = .05$. Qualitative evidence from the literature was organised thematically. The comparative analysis then examined the two cases through the institutional, instrumentalist and ethno-clientelist dimensions of the integrated framework. Because the Ghanaian survey was not designed specifically around the dissertation's hypotheses, the Ghanaian evidence is used primarily for comparative interpretation rather than direct replication of the Nigerian inferential tests.

A methodological limitation should be stated clearly. The two countries were not measured with identical instruments. Some constructs, particularly elite manipulation and ethnic bargaining, were measured more directly in Nigeria than in the Afrobarometer data. The comparative findings should therefore be interpreted as structured cross-case evidence rather than as a perfectly equivalent statistical comparison. The Nigerian sample is also relatively small and purposively composed, while the Ghanaian dataset is nationally representative. These differences are acknowledged rather than concealed because transparency strengthens the article's methodological credibility.

4. Results and Discussion

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4.1 Ethnic Identity and Political Orientation in Nigeria

The Nigerian evidence demonstrates that ethnicity remains a strong organising principle of political interpretation. The overall grand mean for ethnic identity and political orientation was 4.37. The highest item mean, 4.57, concerned the influence of ethnic background on candidate evaluation, with 98.0% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. A further 93.1% agreed that Nigerians should vote mainly on competence and policy rather than ethnic identity ($M = 4.45$). This combination reveals an important normative-behavioural gap: respondents may endorse programmatic voting while simultaneously recognising that ethnic considerations remain influential in actual electoral competition.

The findings support the instrumentalist interpretation of ethnic politics. Ethnic identity does not operate automatically; it becomes politically salient when candidates and parties provide cues that make identity relevant to electoral choice. This interpretation also helps explain why ethnicity can coexist with a formal commitment to national political parties. APC and PDP may be national organisations, but their electoral strategies frequently involve regional balancing and identity-based coalition building. The result is not necessarily the existence of purely ethnic parties, but the persistence of ethnic bargaining inside formally national parties.

4.2 Elite Manipulation, Patronage and Ethnic Bargaining

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The evidence on elite mobilisation is particularly strong. The grand mean for elite manipulation, patronage and ethnic bargaining was 4.41. Nearly all respondents agreed that political elites use ethnicity to obtain electoral support (98.1%; $M = 4.60$). Similarly, 92.1% agreed that patronage encourages ethnic mobilisation ($M = 4.44$), while 94.1% agreed that political elites use appointments and public offices to reward ethnic or regional supporters ($M = 4.44$). These results indicate that the persistence of ethnic politics is not adequately explained by mass identity alone.

Instead, elite strategies appear to provide an important mechanism through which identity is translated into political competition. Ethnic narratives can be used to frame access to office as group representation, while patronage can transform political victory into material benefits for particular constituencies. This is consistent with the ethno-clientelist perspective, which treats the distribution of political resources as a central mechanism linking identity and political power (Berman, 1998; Van de Walle, 2007). It also supports recent Nigerian scholarship identifying elite clientelism and informal bargaining as important features of party and legislative politics (Demarest, 2022; Demarest & Langer, 2023).

4.3 Ethnicity and Governance Effectiveness

Respondents reported a high level of agreement that ethnic politics affects governance, with a grand mean of 4.30. More than 95% agreed that ethnic competition contributes to regional disparities in development ($M = 4.35$), while 94.1% agreed

that political leaders favour ethnic groups in the distribution of public resources ($M = 4.31$). Perceptions of ethnic bias were also associated with reduced public trust in government ($M = 4.36$). These findings suggest that the political costs of ethnicised competition extend beyond elections to the quality and legitimacy of governance.

The regression model further showed a statistically significant relationship between ethnic identity and perceptions of governance effectiveness, $F(1,100) = 15.729$, $p < .001$, with $R^2 = .136$ and $\beta = .369$. Ethnic identity therefore accounted for approximately 13.6% of the variance in the governance effectiveness measure. The relationship should, however, be interpreted as predictive association rather than proof of causal direction because the data are cross-sectional and perception-based. Within the measurement design, higher ethnic identity scores were associated with stronger perceptions that ethnicity affects governance.

4.4 Ethnic Politics, Democratic Institutions and Institutional Trust

The relationship between ethnic identity and democratic institutions was weaker. The regression produced $\beta = .194$, $R^2 = .038$ and $p = .051$. Since p is slightly above the conventional .05 threshold, the null hypothesis was not rejected. Nevertheless, the result is substantively interesting because it suggests that ethnic identity alone explains little of the variance in perceptions of democratic institutions and stability. The result is consistent with the proposition that institutional outcomes may depend more directly on the mechanisms through which

elites activate ethnicity than on the mere strength of ethnic identity.

This interpretation receives stronger support from the Pearson correlation between elite ethnic manipulation and democratic institutions. The correlation was moderate and statistically significant, $r(100) = .513$, $p < .001$, with $r^2 = .263$. Thus, approximately 26.3% of the variance shared between the two measures was associated with the relationship between perceived elite manipulation and perceptions of democratic institutions. The finding is important because it shifts the analytical emphasis from ethnic identity as a mass characteristic to elite strategy as a political mechanism.

The descriptive evidence reinforces this interpretation. The grand mean for democratic institutions, governance, national cohesion and stability was 4.37. About 94.1% of respondents agreed that ethnic politics makes voters doubt the neutrality of electoral institutions ($M = 4.35$). At the same time, 97.1% supported stronger internal party democracy as a means of reducing ethnic-based candidate selection, while 96.1% supported civic education as a means of encouraging voting beyond ethnic identity. These responses suggest that citizens do not necessarily seek to eliminate ethnic identities; rather, they favour institutional conditions that prevent identity from becoming the dominant basis of political competition.

4.5 Ghana: Ethnic Identity, Party Politics and Governance

The Ghanaian evidence provides a significant contrast. Afrobarometer Round 10 indicates

that 67.5% of respondents feel equally national and ethnic, while only 6.3% feel more ethnic than national and 3.5% feel exclusively ethnic. In addition, 51.5% report no close attachment to a political party. The data therefore suggest that ethnic identity remains part of social belonging without necessarily becoming the dominant political identity. This pattern supports the argument that national and ethnic identities can coexist when political institutions and party incentives encourage broader forms of mobilisation.

The Ghanaian evidence does not imply the disappearance of ethnic politics. Regional patterns remain visible in party support, and patronage continues to matter. However, ethnic appeals appear more likely to be incorporated into cross-ethnic electoral coalitions than transformed into exclusive party organisation. Gadjanova (2021) and Devasher and Gadjanova (2021) provide a useful explanation: candidates in diverse democracies have incentives to construct broad winning coalitions, particularly where swing constituencies are ethnically mixed.

The Ghana results also reveal an important distinction between governance dissatisfaction and ethnicised distrust. Perceptions of corruption were very high: 90.0% viewed the president and officials as involved in corruption to some degree, 91.3% expressed similar perceptions concerning Members of Parliament, and 94.3% did so for the police. Furthermore, 73.9% believed corruption had increased during the previous year. Government performance ratings were also negative, with 82.3% rating performance

in fighting corruption as bad and 88.0% rating efforts to narrow inequality as bad. Yet these criticisms were not principally framed as ethnic favouritism.

Institutional trust in Ghana nevertheless presents serious challenges. Negative trust responses reached 71.7% for the president, 74.5% for parliament, 69.5% for the Electoral Commission, 70.7% for the police and 61.9% for the courts. These figures demonstrate that Ghana should not be romanticised as an institutionally perfect democracy. Its comparative advantage lies not in the absence of institutional problems but in the different political logic through which those problems are interpreted and contested. Institutional distrust is more generalised, while the Nigerian evidence suggests a stronger connection between distrust and perceptions of ethnic preference.

4.6 Comparative Discussion

The comparison supports the central proposition of the article: ethnic diversity does not mechanically produce ethnicised party politics. Nigeria and Ghana share important historical and demographic characteristics, but their institutional structures and elite incentives differ. Nigeria's federal system, extensive resource distribution through the state, informal zoning practices and patronage networks provide numerous opportunities for political actors to mobilise ethnic identity. Ghana's party system, constitutional restrictions on ethnic parties, competitive alternation and nationally oriented coalition incentives create stronger pressures for moderation.

The comparison also highlights the importance of informal institutions. Formal Nigerian rules such as the Federal Character Principle are intended to promote inclusion, yet their implementation can coexist with informal ethnic bargaining. Likewise, formal national party organisation does not necessarily remove ethnic calculations from candidate selection. Ghana's formal constitutional framework, particularly the restriction on ethnically based parties, operates alongside electoral incentives that reward cross-ethnic appeals. Institutions therefore matter not only because of what they formally prescribe but also because of how they change the strategic payoffs facing political elites.

A further comparative insight concerns the role of patronage. Patronage exists in both countries, but the evidence suggests that its ethnic expression is more pronounced in Nigeria. In Ghana, patronage and corruption remain important sources of dissatisfaction, but party competition and civic pressures appear to channel more of the contest toward performance and coalition building. This distinction is consistent with the literature on Ghana's relatively institutionalised party competition (Gyimah-Boadi, 2009; Whitfield, 2009).

Finally, the findings suggest that the future of ethnic politics is not predetermined. Urbanisation, education, youth mobilisation and digital communication can create cross-cutting identities. The dissertation review points to the 2023 Nigerian youth-oriented political mobilisation as evidence of growing demand for issue-based competition, while

research on digital political communication cautions that social media can also reproduce existing party and elite hierarchies (Fisher et al., 2024; Iwilade, 2021). The political significance of these changes will depend on whether institutions and parties can convert them into durable programmatic competition.

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This article has examined why ethnicity remains more deeply embedded in Nigerian party politics than in Ghanaian party politics despite important similarities between the two countries. The evidence demonstrates that ethnicity continues to shape political interpretation and mobilisation in Nigeria, but it also shows that ethnicity alone is not sufficient to explain institutional outcomes. The strongest statistical relationship in the Nigerian analysis is between perceived elite manipulation and democratic institutions, while the direct relationship between ethnic identity and democratic institutional outcomes is comparatively weak and marginal. This distinction is theoretically important because it directs attention toward political agency and institutional incentives.

The Ghanaian case reinforces the argument. Ethnic identity remains socially meaningful, but the political system creates stronger incentives for parties to build cross-ethnic coalitions. Ghana's citizens are highly dissatisfied with corruption and government performance, yet their dissatisfaction is less clearly organised around ethnic favouritism. The comparison therefore suggests that the intensity of ethnic politics depends on how political institutions structure competition,

how elites calculate electoral returns and how patronage resources are distributed.

The first policy implication is the strengthening of internal party democracy. Candidate selection should become more transparent, competitive and membership-driven so that party nominations are less vulnerable to elite bargaining and ethnic gatekeeping. The second is stronger enforcement against ethnic hate speech and exclusionary electoral mobilisation. Existing constitutional and electoral restrictions should be translated into credible sanctions rather than remaining largely formal rules.

Third, Nigeria would benefit from a more transparent and accountable approach to the Federal Character Principle. The principle has legitimate inclusionary purposes, but its implementation should be based on transparent criteria that balance representativeness with competence. Fourth, civic and voter education should emphasise issue-based evaluation of candidates, democratic citizenship and the legitimacy of cross-ethnic political participation. Fifth, electoral management institutions require greater independence and public credibility. The Nigerian evidence that 94.1% of respondents doubt electoral neutrality because of ethnic politics indicates the importance of restoring confidence in electoral administration.

Sixth, political parties should be encouraged to develop programmatic identities. Party support should increasingly be linked to policy platforms, measurable performance and transparent manifestos rather than ethnic brokerage. The Ghanaian experience

demonstrates that national coalition-building can coexist with ethnic diversity. Finally, inter-ethnic dialogue and regional cooperation should be institutionalised as part of democratic conflict prevention. ECOWAS and the African Union can support peer learning on electoral management, party regulation and the peaceful management of identity-based competition.

The article acknowledges that the Ghanaian and Nigerian datasets are not perfectly equivalent and that the Nigerian survey is relatively small. Future research should therefore use harmonised cross-national survey instruments, larger samples and longitudinal data across multiple electoral cycles. Elite interviews would also help clarify the strategic calculations behind ethnic mobilisation. Comparative research involving Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia and Côte d'Ivoire would further test whether the integrated framework travels beyond the Nigeria-Ghana comparison.

Overall, the evidence supports a cautious conclusion: ethnicity is neither inherently democratic nor inherently destabilising. Its consequences depend on the institutions within which it is activated, the incentives confronting political elites, the availability of patronage and the credibility of democratic rules. Reducing the harmful effects of ethnic politics therefore requires institutional reform and programmatic party development rather than attempts to suppress legitimate identities.

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