

Ethnicisation of Democratic Dividends in Nigeria and Its Implications for Good Governance and Nation-Building

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Abstract

Since the return to democratic rule in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, the allocation of democratic dividends has often mirrored ethnic affiliations. This development has sparked widespread concern about fairness, good governance, and the integrative promise of democracy. This study interrogates the ethnicisation of democratic gains, where policies and public resources—including projects and appointments—are disproportionately channelled towards ethnic groups with close ties to those in political power. Rather than being shaped

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by merit or national interest, state decisions increasingly reflect ethnically driven strategies designed to build local support and secure electoral advantage. Consequently, democracy becomes entangled in narrow loyalties, eroding national unity and weakening public trust. Anchored in a qualitative research approach and supported by multiple case studies, this paper examines the consequences of ethnic-based resource distribution on good governance and sustainable nation-building. It raises key questions: How does this pattern affect public service delivery? What meanings does democracy assume when filtered through ethnicity? And how might such practices alter the foundations of collective national identity? The study provides theoretical reflection and practical insight, recommending reforms to recentre democracy as a unifying enterprise for all Nigerians.

Keywords: Ethnic Politics, Good Governance, Nation-Building, Democratic Dividends, Nigeria, Public Policy

Introduction

Nigeria's return to civilian governance in 1999 was met with widespread hope that democracy would restore national unity and equitable development. It was believed that a government chosen by the people would ensure fairness, social justice, and a transparent distribution of public goods. However, this aspiration has been consistently challenged by a growing trend in the politicisation of ethnicity in governance. What should serve as a vehicle for national progress has too often reinforced the dominance of certain ethnic groups over others in the sharing of democratic benefits.

Across many administrations in the Fourth Republic, the allocation of resources —be it roads, schools, health facilities, or political appointments —has been heavily coloured by the ethnic and regional origins of those in power. In place of a merit-based system, appointments and project distributions frequently reflect a desire to consolidate influence within one's ethnic base. This practice, noted by scholars such as Akinola and Eze (2023) and substantiated in multiple development policy reviews (NBS, 2022; Omodia, 2021), has led to the emergence of a political culture where national

progress is seen through the narrow lens of ethnic satisfaction (Oladipo & Offor, 2021).

The implications are profound. First, such a trend weakens the social contract between the state and citizens, especially those from marginalised groups. When people begin to perceive democracy not as a shared national project but as an ethnic lottery, the legitimacy of the state becomes contested. Second, regional disparities are widened, as some areas receive preferential development while others are neglected, not due to population size or need, but due to lack of political proximity.

This ethnicisation of democratic dividends calls for deep scholarly reflection. Why has democratic governance, meant to promote inclusivity, become a platform for exclusion? How does ethnicity shape the very process and substance of governance? And most crucially, what does this mean for the long-term goals of nation-building in a multi-ethnic state like Nigeria?

This study sets out to interrogate these questions by exploring the ways in which ethnicity has been embedded into public policy and political decision-making. It aims to assess the implications of these patterns on good governance, civic trust, and national integration. Drawing from both theory and lived realities across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, the paper offers a multidimensional analysis of how ethno-political alliances influence governance outcomes.

The objective of this research is twofold: first, to expose the extent to which ethnic considerations affect the distribution of public benefits; and second, to propose a more inclusive framework that aligns democratic dividends with principles of fairness and national interest. The study is justified by the urgency of Nigeria's socio-political situation, where unresolved ethnic tensions continue to threaten cohesion and development.

In scope, the paper focuses on the post-1999 era, with selected illustrations from key national policies and political episodes. Emphasis is placed on federal appointments, budgetary allocations, and infrastructure projects, especially during transition periods and after national elections. The study draws upon relevant theories in political science and governance and incorporates both archival documents and contemporary scholarly debates to provide a rich, balanced perspective.

Theoretical and Conceptual Clarification

To properly understand the ethnicisation of democratic dividends, it is crucial to unpack the core concepts and frameworks underpinning this discourse. At the heart of this inquiry lies the idea of *democratic dividends*—the tangible and intangible benefits that citizens expect from democratic governance. These include equitable access to infrastructure, education, healthcare, employment, freedom of expression, and transparent political representation. As Uwugiaran (2024) rightly affirms, the health of any democracy can be gauged by how equitably these benefits are distributed across social and ethnic lines.

Yet, in Nigeria, these dividends often reflect more of political strategy than national equity. The concept of *ethnicisation* captures a process where ethnicity becomes the principal lens through which public policies are crafted, appointments made, and projects distributed. It manifests not only in elite rhetoric but also in concrete policy actions—site selection for federal universities, ministerial nominations, and security appointments, all too often reflect ethnic allegiance more than merit or national need. As argued by Osmond and Anaukwu (2024), such patterns are not accidental; they form part of elite strategies to reinforce support within their ethnic bases.

The very notion of *good governance*, as defined by principles of transparency, inclusiveness, responsiveness, and accountability, finds little room within such ethnically skewed practices. Governance that is driven by primordial affiliations becomes exclusionary. As Onuoha and Ufomba (2017) caution, this erodes civic trust, fosters alienation, and undermines the democratic pact that should bind citizens across regions.

Meanwhile, *nation-building*, the gradual process of constructing a shared sense of identity and loyalty beyond ethnic lines, is endangered. The legitimacy of the Nigerian state is frequently contested when ethnic identities are privileged over national belonging (Oladipo & Offor, 2021). This is a deep wound that continues to fester, especially when citizens perceive the federal government as a dispenser of sectional rather than national favour (Njoku, 2025).

This study adopts two powerful theoretical lenses. The first is *elite theory*, which asserts that a small clique of political elites manipulates state resources and institutions to serve their interests, often by leveraging ethnic

identities for political consolidation (Oladipo & Olojede, 2026). As Azeez and Muhammed (2005) observed in their study of good governance and rural empowerment, elite capture often limits the scope of national benefit in policy design. The second lens is the *instrumentalist theory of ethnicity*, which posits that ethnicity is not a fixed identity but a flexible political tool used strategically by elites to secure electoral and material advantage (Ukwu, 2024; Azeez, 2018).

In this context, ethnicisation is not simply the result of Nigeria's plural society, it is a deliberate political strategy. By invoking identity loyalties, political actors negotiate access to power and legitimacy. Over time, this has normalised a governance style that privileges "our own" over the collective interest.

Historical and Political Context

The ethnic roots of Nigeria's politics were embedded long before independence. British colonialism, through indirect rule, institutionalised ethnic identities as units of governance. Political structures aligned closely with ethnic divisions, and post-independence parties—the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the Action Group (AG), and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC)—reflected these primordial bases (Suberu, 2001; Osaghae, 1998; Oladipo, 2016).

Subsequent attempts to manage diversity, such as the federal character principle and the zoning of political offices, were intended to create inclusion. However, these policies often inadvertently reinforced the very divisions they were meant to heal (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2022). Instead of promoting integration, they sometimes legitimised ethnic entitlement. Azeez and Oshewolo (2023), in their reflection on flawed elections and distributive politics, note that ethnic calculations often shape who gets what from government, particularly during post-election periods.

Empirical studies have further confirmed this pattern. The allocation of infrastructure, employment, and federal appointments has consistently favoured those regions or ethnic groups that enjoy proximity to power. Adebawale and Obadare (2011) describe this as a "distributional logic" anchored on patron-client networks. Ezeani (2023) and Okonkwo and Bello

(2024) likewise emphasise how these ethnopolitical considerations shape developmental planning and access to state benefits.

What emerges is a governance tradition where loyalty to the nation is often subordinated to ethnic affiliations. The dividends of democracy become tools of reward and punishment, deepening distrust among groups and undermining the promise of national unity. Azeez (2009) aptly described this as a contest over legitimacy, where good governance is sacrificed on the altar of ethnic bargaining.

Ethnicisation and the Distribution of Democratic Dividends

In every democratic setting, the expectation is clear: that all citizens, irrespective of origin, ethnicity, or religion, should benefit equitably from the provisions and protections of the state. This ideal forms the moral foundation upon which democracy rests. However, Nigeria's democratic journey has taken a path where access to democratic dividends is increasingly shaped not by merit or need, but by ethnic loyalty, electoral support, and proximity to power.

Political actors often channel developmental projects to their ethnic homelands, or to regions that offered them overwhelming support during elections. This is not an isolated trend but a discernible political strategy. It is a system where roads, boreholes, schools, and healthcare centres are constructed not on the basis of socio-economic demand, but as political reward. As Azeez and Oshewolo (2023) insightfully observe, development has become a form of ethnic gift-giving—a reward to loyal groups, and a snub to dissenting regions.

Appointments into strategic federal offices follow a similar trajectory. While the Constitution enshrines the Federal Character Principle as a safeguard for inclusiveness, it is often reduced to a symbolic gesture, manipulated by elites to justify ethnic patronage. Merit is camouflaged beneath loyalty, and the bureaucracy becomes a battleground for ethnic ascendancy. Onuoha and Ufomba (2017) warn that this trend not only robs the civil service of competence but sows seeds of resentment among neglected regions.

This phenomenon becomes more alarming when viewed through budgetary patterns. Analyses of budget allocations over the past two decades consistently show that capital projects are disproportionately concentrated

in areas with ethnic ties to the presidency or ruling elite (Osmond & Anaukwu, 2024). Empowerment programmes, youth initiatives, and intervention funds are similarly packaged with a partisan or ethnic face, while others are rendered invisible on the national radar.

More than just what the government gives, ethnicisation also shapes what the government demands. Electoral loyalty is expected, almost as an ethnic obligation. Leaders return to their ethnic homelands with the boast: “I have brought development.” The people, in turn, are reminded: “You must support your own.” In this way, political legitimacy is constructed not on national consensus but on ethnic reciprocation.

As Azeez (2014) argued in his work on elections and democratic governance, this transactional politics not only erodes merit but distorts the very essence of democratic accountability. It is no longer about holding leaders to national standards, but about how much “our own” can bring back home.

Implications for Good Governance and Nation-Building

The consequences of this ethnically motivated governance model are deep, structural, and enduring. First, it undermines *public trust*. Citizens across marginalised regions begin to view the state not as a neutral provider but as a biased broker of favour. This breeds alienation and political apathy, weakening the democratic spirit and legitimacy of state institutions (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2011).

Second, it *distorts planning and policy-making*. Development becomes sentimental rather than strategic. Roads are constructed not where traffic congestion is worst, but where political debts are owed. Hospitals are sited not based on health statistics but to honour tribal leaders. The logic of nation-building is turned upside down.

Third, it *deepens national disunity*. As each group fights for its share of the “national cake”, mutual suspicion festers. Ethnicity becomes weaponised, not as a cultural identity, but as a political currency. This competition fuels division, threatens peace, and weakens the collective commitment to the Nigerian project (Azeez & Muhammed, 2005; Olu-Adeyemi, 2023).

Lastly, it *hampers the emergence of patriotic leadership*. When politics is ethnicised, competent leaders from minority backgrounds are often

bypassed. The system discourages excellence and elevates mediocrity. The nation bleeds potentials while clinging to parochialism.

Case Illustrations and Empirical Observations

The ethnicisation of democratic dividends in Nigeria has not merely been theoretical, it has played out vividly across successive administrations. A close look at post-1999 governance, from President Obasanjo to the current administration, reveals a persistent pattern: the strategic use of state resources and appointments to reward ethnic homelands and consolidate power bases.

Olusegun Obasanjo Administration (1999–2007)

President Obasanjo, though often praised for his pan-Nigerian rhetoric, faced heavy scrutiny over his appointments and project allocations. His cabinet composition was frequently criticised for favouring the South West, particularly his Ogun State roots. Projects such as the reconstruction of the Lagos-Abeokuta expressway and the siting of the Ota Farm settlement development fund were interpreted as ethnic gestures. While Obasanjo sought to balance his appointments through zoning arrangements and a semblance of federal character, it was clear that the South West enjoyed disproportionate political leverage during his tenure (Azeez, 2004; Suberu, 2001).

Umaru Musa Yar’Adua Administration (2007-2010)

Coming from Katsina State in the North West, Yar’Adua quickly prioritised infrastructure development in the North. The dredging of the River Niger and projects targeting agricultural revival in the North Central and North West geopolitical zones were symbolic of his regional leanings. Moreover, the placement of Northern technocrats in key sectors such as defence, education, and the economy, though perhaps based on capacity, also fed perceptions of ethnic prioritisation (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2022).

Nonetheless, Yar’Adua is remembered for his *Seven-Point Agenda*, which—though nationally framed—faced implementation challenges due to entrenched ethno-political interests. His brief presidency hinted at a struggle between national vision and local pressure.

Goodluck Jonathan Administration (2010–2015)

Jonathan's presidency was historic: a minority Ijaw man from the Niger Delta ascending to the highest office. Understandably, there was enormous pressure on him to "remember home." His tenure saw increased allocations to the Niger Delta, expansion of the Amnesty Programme, and the establishment of universities in Bayelsa and Delta States. The East-West Road rehabilitation and other region-specific investments raised national eyebrows.

These moves, while addressing long-standing regional neglect, were perceived in some quarters as pandering to ethnic sentiments. The irony of Jonathan's government was that, despite these gestures, he faced intense political opposition from the North, which felt alienated—culminating in the 2015 electoral backlash (Azeez & Ayodeji, 2015).

Muhammadu Buhari Administration (2015–2023)

Buhari's government is perhaps the most contested in terms of perceived ethnic bias. Appointments into the military, intelligence, and economic sectors heavily favoured the North, especially his native Katsina State. Analysts such as Ezeani (2023) and Okonkwo and Bello (2024) have documented the regional disparities in infrastructure siting and fund allocations during his tenure. The Lagos-Ibadan rail and Kaduna-Kano projects moved swiftly, while projects in the South East and South South dragged or were delayed.

Buhari's infamous 2015 statement that constituencies that gave him "97% of the vote" could not be treated the same as those that gave "5%" reinforced perceptions that ethnic loyalty determined federal attention. This undermined his administration's commitment to unity and good governance and exposed the fragility of Nigeria's national fabric.

Bola Ahmed Tinubu Administration (2023–Present)

Though relatively new, Tinubu's presidency is already under scrutiny. His appointments have triggered debates on Yoruba dominance in strategic portfolios. Key ministries such as finance, interior, works, and justice are occupied by individuals with strong ties to the South West. The relocation of the Federal Airport Authority and Central Bank departments to Lagos has stirred national conversation on economic ethnicisation.

While Tinubu insists on national inclusiveness, early signals suggest the continuation of a political culture where ethnic proximity to power enhances access to governance benefits. This raises urgent questions about how democratic dividends are framed, allocated, and rationalised in Nigeria.

Reflection

These case illustrations show that across regimes, from PDP to APC, from North to South, ethnicity has remained a formidable factor in determining “who gets what, when, and how” in Nigeria. The ideal of national cohesion is often sacrificed on the altar of regional loyalty. While this may secure short-term political mileage, it weakens the long-term project of nation-building.

This ethnic arithmetic has also shaped voting patterns. Regions vote not necessarily for manifestos, but for the candidate perceived to be “ours.” In return, leaders feel obliged to reward their base—completing the ethnic circle of give-and-take politics. As Azeez (2009; 2023) rightly pointed out in his works on elite circulation and flawed elections, such politics sustains division and undercuts governance performance.

Policy Implications

The ethnicisation of democratic dividends, as observed across Nigeria’s Fourth Republic, presents a critical distortion of the ideals of federal democracy. At its core, democracy promises equity, justice, and inclusion; yet, Nigeria’s political landscape tells a different story—one where power is often ethnically monopolised, and state resources distributed through the lens of identity politics. This deeply entrenched system has grave consequences for governance and national integration. Some of these include:

The Undermining of National Unity and Shared Citizenship

When citizens perceive that access to state power and developmental projects is predicated on ethnicity, their allegiance to the Nigerian state is weakened. Ethnic groups excluded from the corridors of power feel marginalised, leading to political apathy, withdrawal from national civic duty, and in extreme cases, calls for secession. Azeez (2015) rightly warned that

a fragmented polity cannot build a durable democratic culture, as nation-building requires a common sense of ownership and belonging.

Diminishing Policy Effectiveness

Policy design and implementation suffer when driven by ethnic considerations rather than empirical need. Projects are not sited based on social indices or developmental deficits, but on political debts owed to specific regions. This results in suboptimal allocation of resources, redundant projects in politically favoured zones, and the neglect of genuinely underdeveloped areas. As Azeez and Muhammed (2005) argue, governance that ignores national developmental logic breeds inefficiency and stunts national progress.

Encouragement of Mediocrity and Clientelism

Merit becomes the casualty in a system driven by ethnic loyalty. Positions of authority are filled, not based on capacity, but on ethnic representation. This erodes institutional professionalism, discourages innovation, and empowers political cronies over visionary leaders. Over time, this normalises mediocrity and clientelism, reinforcing a cycle of poor governance.

Recommendations for Reversing the Trend

Reinvigorate the Federal Character Principle with Transparency and Merit

The principle of federal character should not be a passive constitutional clause—it must be actively monitored, audited, and enforced with transparency. Yet, beyond mere quota, it must be balanced with competence. Institutions such as the Federal Character Commission should publish annual reports, detailing how appointments and resource allocations align with national equity, and not ethnic sentiment alone.

Strengthen Political Institutions and Party Ideology

A major reason for ethnicised politics is the weakness of political parties as ideological platforms. Most Nigerian parties are election machines, not issue-based institutions. Reforms must be undertaken to encourage internal democracy, value-based platforms, and policy-driven manifestos. When parties elevate national interest over ethnic calculations, candidates will campaign based on ideas, not ethnic mobilisation.

Institutionalise Needs-Based Development Planning

Resource distribution should follow a transparent, data-driven process. Independent institutions, like the National Planning Commission, must anchor national development on measurable indices—poverty rates, population density, health indices, education access, and infrastructural deficits. Projects should be proposed and implemented based on verified need, not where the president or governor hails from.

Promote Inclusive Civic Education and National Orientation

Education remains a long-term weapon against ethnic bias. Through curriculum reform, civic education must teach national values, inter-ethnic harmony, and the cost of division. National Orientation Agencies must intensify campaigns that build a shared identity around Nigeria's destiny. Azeez and Oshewolo (2023) have noted that national transformation cannot happen when citizens are more loyal to tribe than state.

Constitutional Review for Devolution and Balance

The current structure overburdens the federal government, creating excessive competition for the centre. A constitutional review that empowers subnational units, strengthens local governance, and decentralises key functions would reduce the ethnic pressure on federal institutions. When development is driven from the grassroots, the obsession with ethnic access to Abuja's power centre may be diffused.

In summary, for Nigeria to enjoy good governance and build a cohesive nation, it must move beyond the narrow politics of ethnic dividend distribution. The state must be reimagined as a platform for shared prosperity, not a battlefield for sectional claims. Leadership must be anchored on capacity and patriotism, and the people must demand accountability not as Igbos, Hausas, or Yorubas—but as Nigerians.

As Azeez (2018) posits, nation-building is not an abstract dream, it is the deliberate weaving of justice, equity, and unity into the political fabric of society.

Conclusion

The ethnicisation of democratic dividends in Nigeria is neither a myth nor a passing trend, it is a persistent political reality that has undermined the very

essence of democracy and national development. From Obasanjo to Tinubu, each administration has, in varying degrees, succumbed to the temptation of rewarding ethnic loyalty at the expense of national inclusion. Federal appointments, budget allocations, and infrastructural projects have too often been tools for securing ethnic legitimacy rather than advancing collective welfare.

This study has argued that the politicisation of ethnicity in the distribution of democratic dividends fractures the principle of good governance. It entrenches mediocrity, reinforces ethnic suspicion, and stalls the promise of nationhood. Indeed, where government is seen as belonging to one group, others become alienated from the national dream. And when development is perceived to be ethnically selective, unity becomes elusive.

Drawing insights from multiple administrations and supported by scholarly works—including those of Azeez (2004, 2009, 2015, 2018, 2023)—this paper has shown that Nigeria must choose between ethnic gratification and democratic consolidation. The former may yield temporary political stability, but the latter secures sustainable governance and genuine nation-building.

The road ahead must be defined by reforms that prioritise needs over ethnicity, merit over loyalty, and national interest over parochialism. Nigeria's democracy must evolve from a patronage system into a people-driven structure—where every citizen, irrespective of tribe, feels seen, heard, and served.

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