



Ethnic Identity and Political Participation Among Nigeria's Ageing Population

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Abstract: Nigeria's demographic transition toward a growing ageing population presents new governance and equity challenges, particularly within the context of entrenched ethnic identities and political exclusion. This paper examines how ethnic identity shapes the political participation, representation, and civic engagement of older adults in Nigeria's multicultural and politically fragmented landscape. Drawing on secondary data from scholarly articles, policy reports, demographic statistics, and empirical studies on ageing and identity politics, the paper explores the intersection between ethnicity, ageing, and democratic participation. Using Identity Politics Theory as the analytical framework, the study interrogates how ethnic belonging influences political behaviour, access to decision-making structures, and perceptions of political relevance among elderly citizens. It further assesses how longstanding ethnic inequalities, patronage dynamics, and regional disparities continue to affect older adults' access to political platforms, voting behaviour, and institutional trust. The analysis highlights the implications of these dynamics for democratic consolidation, social cohesion, and equitable governance in Nigeria. The paper argues that understanding the experiences of ageing populations through the lens of ethnic identity is crucial for designing inclusive political processes and strengthening democratic participation. Findings from this study will contribute to emerging discourse on ageing, governance, and identity in Africa, offering insights for policymakers seeking to promote equitable representation.

Keywords: Ethnic identities, Ageing population, Nigeria, political participation, identity politics

BACKGROUND

Nigeria is going through an extreme shift in population. While public talk and policy concentration have fundamentally focused on youth protuberances, electoral instability and generational transformation, a calmer but equally significant revolution is unfolding via the stable expansion of the country's ageing populace. Aged Nigerians form a politically qualified group whose lives span colonial rule, after independence optimism, military authoritarianism, civil conflict and fragile democratic consolidation. Classic studies argue that older adults often demonstrate higher levels of electoral participation due to accumulated political socialisation and stronger attachments to civic duty (Verba, Schlozman & Brandy, 1995; Brandy, Verba & Schlozman, 1995). Their political individualities have been modelled by prolonged knowledge of exclusion, ethnic contest and biased state responses. Regardless of their statistical increase and historical importance, ageing

populations remain minor within academic debates on political involvements in Nigeria and through most of sub-Saharan Africa. (Egwu, 2019; Hoffmann & Wallace, 2022).

Political engagement is regularly edged in terms of youth mobilisation, campaign politics or electoral aggression, this leaves older adults somewhat unseen or believed to be politically similar. This idea conceals the complicated ways in which age overlaps with culture, locality, class and historic event to form political activities. In Nigeria's extremely plural society, ethnic identity is still one of the most effective organising values of politics. Facilitating how power can be assessed, representation, public goods and institutional trust. For aged citizens, ethnicity is not just a genetic cultural marker but a lived political truth that has controlled opportunities and exclusions across the life course. Their involvement in democratic processes is therefore attached from the cultural political environment in which Nigerian democracy has developed (Ibrahim, 2020).

Active scholarship admits that older adults frequently exhibit high electoral involvement as a result of accumulated political socialisation and community duty. However, such overviews hardly hold in situations assessed by weak welfare systems, trade politics and ethnically defined state institutions. In Nigeria, older populations may vote consistently but feel severely detached from political decision-making, seeing democratic establishments as elite-controlled and ethnically unfair. This detach creates a form of involvement without inclusion, whereby public commitment is endured but political effectiveness stays weak. Realising this paradox is fundamental for evaluating the value of democracy and the possibilities for inclusive governance (Afrobarometer, 2020; WP206, 2024).

A recurrent theme in contemporary scholarship is the central role of social networks and social capital in shaping political participation among older citizens, particularly in societies where formal political institutions are weak or unevenly trusted. In Nigeria, older adults often rely on long-established social structures—such as religious organisations, ethnic unions, age-grade systems, and traditional kingship networks—as primary avenues for political engagement and mobilisation. These networks function not only as spaces of social belonging but also as channels through which political information, norms, and collective identities are transmitted (Putnam, 2000; Campbell, 2003). For ageing populations, whose participation may be constrained by physical, economic, or technological barriers, such informal networks provide accessible and culturally resonant platforms for political expression, reinforcing both civic engagement and ethnic solidarity (Akinwale, 2022).

Within Nigeria's multi-ethnic context, these forms of social capital are deeply embedded in ethnic identity and historical experience, shaping how older citizens perceive political authority and participation. Afrobarometer data indicate that trust in traditional and religious leaders among older Nigerians often exceeds trust in formal state institutions, highlighting the continued political relevance of informal governance structures (Afrobarometer, 2023). Consequently, political participation among the ageing population frequently occurs through communal and ethnic channels rather than through formal party or state-led mechanisms. While this strengthens local mobilisation and social cohesion, it can also reproduce ethicized patterns of participation that limit cross-cutting political engagement. Understanding these dynamics is therefore critical for contextualising how ethnic identity, social capital, and ageing intersect to influence political behaviour in Nigeria's democratic landscape (Osaghae, 2020). There is apparently a connection between

weak formal institutions and political mobilisation platforms for older adults. In many African settings, these social networks intersect with ethnic structures, influencing both political attitudes and participation patterns (Logan & Bratton, 2013).

This paper claims that ageing and political involvement in Nigeria should be examined within the lens of ethnic identity to absolutely identify both involvement and its limitations. Instead of treating other adults as a residual or regular category, the study centres their lived experiences as a population whose political involvement is modelled by historical memory, identity-based marginalisation and changing democratic patterns. By concentrating on how ethnic identity facilitates political participation among ageing Nigerians, this paper contributes to arguments on demographic value, inclusion and citizenship in Africa. It responds directly to calls in African political studies for more life-course sensitive evaluation of involvement that account for identity, inequality and power above electoral turnout only (Goerres & Tepe, 2012; Egwu, 2019).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is rooted in identity politics Theory, which conceptualises political conduct as integrated in social identities, collective histories and battles of giving them recognition and having a sense of belonging. Identity politics theory challenges instrumentalist justifications of involvement by stressing how access to political power is moulded by socially created categories like ethnicity, region and citizenship status (Suberu, 2001; Adebaniwi & Obadare, 2010). In Nigeria, ethnicity is not a secondary identity marker but a politically established alliance through which inclusion and exclusion are planned, repeated and legitimised.

In this framework, ethnic identity functions concurrently as a device of deployment and a structure of exclusion. On one hand, ethnic network gives gain access to political data, deployment boards and patronage, especially in settings where formal establishments are brittle or mistrusted (Logan & Bratton, 2013). On the other hand, these same networks strengthen limitations of fitting in, benefiting prevalent parties while relegating minorities by practices such as party boundary maintenance, indigenous regimes and allocation-based bias (Egwu, 2019; Uzochukwu et al., 2021). Identity political theory is thus specifically fitted to examining Nigerian democracy, where formal equality collaborates with extremely inadequate access to political influence.

Ageing proposes a fundamental progressive attribute to recognise politics that continues to be underexplored in African political scholarship. Older adults convey political identities influenced by exposure for a long time to racialised governance, military rule and unfair development. Their political conduct indicates not only current incentives but also stored recollections of exclusion, dispute and unfulfilled democratic switches (Ibrahim, 2020; Mueller, 2019). Identity politics theory enables these temporal levels to be systematically prioritised, identifying ageing as a procedure by which political significance is constantly re-explained in relative to a static demographic classification.

This framework also emphasises political exclusion as a cardinal result of identity-based governance. In Nigeria, exclusion is replicated through elite-dominated party structures, ethnically associated patronage systems and institutional procedures that privilege continuity over inclusivity (Adebaniwi & Obadare, 2010; Adebayo & Omotola, 2021).

For ageing citizens, this frequently results in what can be described as influential contribution without substantial representation. Older adults are usually prepared as consistent voting blocs via ethnic appeals, yet their policy interests such as healthcare, pensions and social security stays peripheral within political plans (Binstock, 2010; Nwosu & Chukwuma, 2021).

Finally, identity politics theory recommends a lens for understanding the effect of ageing and exclusion for democratic legitimacy. Where older citizens recognise democratic institutions as ethnically unfair and unresponsive, involvement may continue but trust wear away (Afrobarometer, 2020; WP206, 2024). This dynamic contributes to democratic vulnerability not through obvious detachment but by resignation, lack of interest and dependence on unauthorised ethnic or religious authorities (Cheeseman, 2018; Hoffman & Wallace, 2022).

By applying identity politics theory to the political experiences of Nigeria's ageing population, this study provides a more interpersonal and historically initiated perception of participation. It shows that democratic inclusion cannot be measured exclusively by attendance or formal rights but must be assessed by the degree to which political institutions identify ageing citizens as full and equal members of the political society.

Ageing and Political Behaviour

Scholarship on ageing and political behaviour has evolved significantly, moving from simple turnout analyses to more complex explanations of how life-course, identity, and structural inequalities influence political engagement in later life. Classic studies argue that older adults often demonstrate higher levels of electoral participation due to accumulated political socialisation and stronger attachments to civic duty (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995; Brady, Verba & Schlozman, 1995). However, more recent work challenges the universality of this pattern, noting that the relationship between ageing and political behaviour varies widely across political contexts, welfare structures, and identity-based cleavages (Goerres, 2009; Binstock, 2017).

A recurrent theme in contemporary literature is the role of social networks and social capital in shaping older citizens' political actions. Studies show that religious institutions, community associations, and kinship networks serve as key political mobilisation platforms for older adults, especially in contexts with weak formal institutions (Putnam, 2000; Campbell, 2003). There is apparently a connection between weak formal institutions and political mobilisation platforms for older adults. In many African settings, these social networks intersect with ethnic structures, influencing both political attitudes and participation patterns (Logan & Bratton, 2013).

Political behaviour among older adults is also shaped by political opportunity structures. Research from the Afrobarometer programme reveals that older cohorts in Africa participate differently depending on regime type, institutional trust, and perceived political efficacy (Bratton, Mattes & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016). In transitional or ethnically polarised democracies, political participation may decline with age if older adults perceive political institutions as unresponsive or exclusionary (Mueller, 2019).

A growing body of work highlights the "dark side" of ageing and political behaviour, cautioning that older adults can reproduce exclusionary political narratives, including ethnic

patronage, conservative identity claims, or resistance to institutional reforms (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962; Binstock, 2010). This is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where age intersects with ethnicity, patron-client politics, and uneven welfare access to determine political voice and representation (Suberu, 2001; Adebaniwi & Obadare, 2010).

Ageing and political behaviour in Nigeria must be understood within a context shaped by ethnic pluralism, patronage politics, and historically uneven access to state institutions. Older adults in Nigeria often rely on community networks, traditional authorities, and ethnic-based organisations as primary channels of political engagement, reflecting broader patterns of social mobilisation in the country (Suberu, 2001; Adebaniwi & Obadare, 2010). These identity structures can both empower and constrain political participation: while elders hold symbolic authority in many communities, they also face exclusion from formal political decision-making processes due to age-related economic insecurity, declining institutional trust, and limited access to welfare and health services. Studies of political participation in Nigeria and Africa more broadly emphasise that civic engagement in later life is shaped less by chronological age and more by structural factors such as ethnicity, regional inequalities, and perceptions of state responsiveness (Bratton, Mattes & Gyimah-Boadi, 2005; Logan & Bratton, 2013). Moreover, democratisation trajectories in Nigeria have produced mixed incentives for older citizens, who often remain politically active through voting but are underrepresented in legislative and executive positions despite the cultural prestige accorded to elders. These intersecting dynamics suggest that ageing and political behaviour in Nigeria are inseparable from the country's ethnicised political landscape, where access, influence, and representation are filtered through identity-based networks and longstanding patterns of political exclusion.

Scholars emphasise that political behaviour among older adults should be analysed through multidimensional measures, including voting, protest participation, elite representation, and perceived political efficacy rather than turnout alone (Goerres & Tepe, 2012). This comprehensive approach is essential in Nigeria, where ethnic identity strongly shapes political inclusion and exclusion, especially for older citizens navigating socio-economic vulnerabilities and shifting democratic norms.

Ethnic Identity and Political Exclusion

In the early years after independence, Nigeria's political leadership was remarkably youthful. Many of the country's key nationalist figures such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and Ahmadu Bello rose to prominence in their 30s and 40s, reflecting a political landscape in which young, educated elites were at the forefront of shaping the post-colonial state. This generation entered politics with a strong sense of national mission, yet their political identities were also deeply shaped by the ethnic blocs from which they emerged. Scholars note that the regional competition among these youthful leaders entrenched the ethnic foundations of Nigeria's political system, setting in motion patterns of identity-based mobilisation that continue to define participation today (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Mustapha, 2019). Over time, as military rule interrupted democratic development, political leadership became increasingly centralised, hierarchical, and dominated by older elites while many of whom were themselves former military officers. This legacy has produced a political class that is not only ageing but also deeply embedded in ethnic patronage structures that influence participation and representation.

Against this historical backdrop, the current dominance of older leaders has significant implications for political participation among Nigeria's ageing population, particularly within the context of ethnic identity. Findings from this study show that older Nigerians often view political engagement through generational memory, recalling periods of ethnic tension, civil conflict, and uneven regional development. This perspective reinforces loyalty to established ethnic networks and political gatekeepers, contributing to the persistence of age-based dominance in leadership (Ibrahim, 2020; Egwu, 2019). At the same time, the concentration of power among older ethnically aligned elites has narrowed pathways for younger generations, deepening political exclusion and reinforcing perceptions of ethnicity as a prerequisite for efficacy in political participation (Okolie, 2022; Adebayo & Omotola, 2021). For ageing citizens themselves, these dynamics produce a paradox: while older adults remain symbolically central within ethnic communities, many still feel politically marginalised by institutional structures that prioritise elite continuity over broad-based participation. This tension illustrates how Nigeria's political history has been shaped by youthful nationalist ambition but maintained by ageing, ethnically embedded leadership—continues to influence contemporary patterns of political participation and identity.

Ethnic identity has long been central to political life in Nigeria, shaping citizenship claims, resource allocation, and vertical relations between state and society. Foundational analyses highlight how colonial legacies, federal structures, and regional cleavages institutionalised ethnicity as a primary axis of political mobilisation (Suberu, 2001). Subsequent scholarship locates contemporary manifestations of ethnic politics within practices of state excess, clientelism, and everyday encounters with power (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010). These works provide crucial historical and theoretical purchase: ethnicity in Nigeria is not merely cultural difference but a politically salient category that structures access to offices, patronage networks, and recognition as “insiders” or “indigenes.”

A growing literature has traced the mechanisms through which ethnic identity produces political exclusion. Studies on indigeneship and “local origin” laws show how formal and informal rules convert identity into differential entitlements, excluding migrants and minority groups from public goods and civil service opportunities (Uzochukwu et al., 2021; Asogwa, 2025). Scholars emphasise elite strategies—electoral gatekeeping, party selection, and distributive politics—that operationalise ethnic advantage, while state institutions often reproduce rather than redress these biases (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010). Recent investigations further document how ethnicised patronage undermines meritocratic recruitment and channels welfare through kinship or ethnic ties, deepening perceptions of exclusion among non-dominant communities (Uzochukwu et al., 2021).

Empirical survey evidence corroborates the prevalence and durability of ethnic exclusion in everyday politics. Afrobarometer analyses for Nigeria reveal significant patterns of ethnic discrimination, contested national belonging, and differential trust in state institutions across ethnic groups (Afrobarometer, 2020; WP206, 2024). These data show that perceptions of exclusion are widespread and that questions of “who belongs” are salient in citizens' evaluations of government responsiveness and legitimacy. Importantly, recent rounds of Afrobarometer and national studies indicate that perceptions of ethnic discrimination are associated with lower institutional trust and varying patterns of political engagement—a dynamic that has consequences for representation and democratic consolidation.

Despite this robust body of work, important gaps remain. Much of the literature documents exclusion at macro and institutional levels, but fewer studies trace how exclusion is experienced across life courses, social strata, or within specific demographic groups (e.g., the elderly, internal migrants, or women). Additionally, while recent research has begun to unpack legal and policy drivers of exclusion (indigeneship, recruitment practices), there is less longitudinal analysis of how episodic political reforms or electoral cycles alter exclusionary structures (Asogwa, 2025; turn0search4). Addressing these gaps—by linking survey evidence, policy analysis, and qualitative life-course accounts—would deepen understanding of how ethnic identity continues to shape who is included in Nigeria’s political community and who remains marginalised.

Democratic Participation in Nigeria

An explicit narrative on democratic participation in Nigeria cannot be devoid of an historic trajectory on its various ethnic identities and uniqueness. Nigeria’s democratic experience has long been shaped by deep structural challenges and historical complexities. As Hoffmann and Wallace (2022) observe, the country’s democracy has been characterised by cycles of fragility and uneven progress since independence, reflecting the difficulty of forging national cohesion in a state whose borders were imposed by British colonial rule. Efforts at democratization and political development have unfolded unevenly across Nigeria’s diverse regions, resulting in distinct patterns of political behaviour, identity formation, and civic participation (Adebanwi, 2021; Suberu, 2023).

Regional variation remains one of the defining features of Nigeria’s political landscape. The northern region—predominantly occupied by Hausa and Kanuri communities—tends to be more religiously conservative, with longstanding traditions of centralized authority. These historical dynamics have shaped contemporary political inclusion, particularly for women, who only achieved full suffrage in the northern states in 1979, decades after their southern counterparts (Ibrahim & Salihu, 2020). In contrast, the south-east, dominated by the mostly Christian Igbo population, is known for its more decentralised and egalitarian socio-political structures, as well as a fraught history of separatist struggles. Meanwhile, the south-west, home to the religiously diverse Yoruba population, reflects a political culture that blends regional identity with civic pluralism and a long heritage of political activism (Akinyele, 2019).

Although scholarly and policy discussions often focus on these three major ethnic blocs, Nigeria is home to over 250 ethnic groups, each with unique cultural orientations and political grievances. This mosaic of identities complicates questions of representation, citizenship, and democratic participation, contributing to recurring debates about marginalisation and the uneven distribution of political power (Egwu, 2019; Agbu, 2020). Such diversity underscores why building an inclusive democratic system remains a persistent national challenge.

Nigeria’s democratic trajectory has also been profoundly shaped by a turbulent relationship with military rule. Across its post-independence history, the country has spent nearly three decades under military governments, and these regimes overthrew three separate democratic republics. Notably, two presidents elected in Nigeria’s current Fourth Republic previously led military juntas, illustrating both the persistent influence of the armed forces and the hybrid nature of Nigeria’s political evolution (Onapajo, 2022). The

legacy of militarism continues to affect democratic consolidation, feeding public mistrust and shaping patterns of political participation across generations—particularly among older citizens who directly experienced these authoritarian eras.

Adesanmi (2022) pointed out that political participation is that activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action. It is that aspect of democracy that deals with the political environment. Davies (1963) cited in Unanka (2004), defined political participation as “taking part in making the basic decision as to what are the common goals of one’s society and as to the best ways to move towards these goals”. Political participation expresses actions, reactions, interactions and role expectations as one finds oneself as an integral member of a society. It is a known fact that without substantial citizens’ involvement, the democratic process falls short of its goals. According to Ogunna (2003), political participation can be active, partial or passive but whichever way, it will impinge on democracy.

Democratic participation in Nigeria is deeply entangled with the country’s long history of ethnic pluralism, regional inequality, and contested national belonging. Foundational studies argue that democratic engagement cannot be separated from the ethnic structures that shape political incentives and resource distribution (Suberu, 2001; Adebani & Obadare, 2010). Elections, often celebrated as markers of political inclusion have historically mirrored underlying identity tensions, as citizens engage the political process through ethnic solidarities and communal expectations rather than purely ideological commitments (Bratton, Mattes & Gyimah-Boadi, 2005). Furthermore, Agunbiade & Abiodun 2025 asserts that politics is all about vested interest and how such interest are achieved. For older Nigerians, who lived through successive authoritarian regimes, civil war memories, and democratic transitions, these identity cleavages are not abstract but lived experiences that shape their trust in political institutions and their sense of belonging in the democratic project.

Research shows that ethnicity remains one of the most powerful predictors of political participation and institutional trust in Nigeria. Afrobarometer surveys consistently highlight how ethnic identity shapes whether citizens feel represented, whether they trust political institutions, and whether they believe their vote matters (Afrobarometer, 2020; Afrobarometer WP206, 2024). Older adults often navigate these perceptions more acutely: many came of age politically during periods when ethnicity was explicitly used to determine access to state power, public services, and opportunities. This history informs their contemporary political behaviour, including voting patterns, party loyalty, and willingness to engage in public affairs. Thus, democratic participation among ageing populations must be understood within the enduring legacies of ethnicised political inclusion and exclusion.

In addition to formal voting, democratic participation encompasses civic voice, political mobilisation, and engagement with governance processes. Studies indicate that older Nigerians often rely on ethnic associations, religious networks, and traditional structures as primary entry points into political life (Uzochukwu et al., 2021). These networks provide social protection, information, and identity affirmation in ways that the state often does not. However, they can also reinforce ethnic boundaries and exclusionary practices, limiting cross-ethnic political cooperation and perpetuating distrust in national democratic institutions. For ageing citizens—especially those in marginalised ethnic groups—

these networks may serve simultaneously as sites of empowerment and barriers to fuller democratic participation.

Despite these complexities, there is growing scholarly consensus that strengthening democratic participation among older Nigerians requires confronting structural inequalities rooted in ethnicity, welfare deficits, and uneven political representation. Scholars argue that democratic institutions must intentionally address long-standing perceptions of ethnic bias to rebuild trust among ageing populations who have witnessed cycles of exclusion (Asogwa, 2025; Adebani & Obadare, 2010). This includes improving equitable access to political platforms, expanding social protection systems, and promoting diverse representation across age and ethnic lines. Understanding how older adults navigate ethnic identity in their political choices offers valuable insights into Nigeria's broader democratic trajectory—revealing both the possibilities for inclusive governance and the constraints imposed by persistent identity-based fractures.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Use of Secondary Data: Journals, Demographic Reports, Scholarly Articles

This study adopts a qualitative, desk-based research design using secondary data to examine the intersections between ethnic identity, democratic participation, and the political engagement of Nigeria's ageing population. Secondary analysis is particularly suitable for studies exploring broad sociopolitical trends, as it allows researchers to draw on existing empirical evidence, demographic patterns, and theoretical insights (Johnston, 2017). Given the multidimensional nature of ethnicity and ageing in Nigeria, this approach enables the integration of perspectives across political science, sociology, and demographic studies, helping to generate a comprehensive understanding of long-term patterns that would be difficult to capture through primary data collection alone.

The study draws from a wide range of peer-reviewed journals, demographic reports, and scholarly articles focusing on Nigeria's ethnic politics, ageing trends, and democratic participation. Sources include demographic datasets from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Afrobarometer public opinion surveys, and population projections from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). These sources provide robust insights into age distribution, ethnic diversity, political behaviour, and patterns of exclusion. Following the guidance of Bryman (2016) and Cooper & Endacott (2020), the analysis employs thematic synthesis, enabling the identification of recurring patterns and contradictions across textual and empirical sources. This method supports the development of nuanced interpretations grounded in existing evidence rather than anecdotal assumptions.

Data selection prioritised materials published between 2015 and 2024 to ensure analytical relevance to Nigeria's contemporary political landscape. Sources were evaluated for methodological rigour, conceptual clarity, and alignment with the study's theoretical framework on identity politics. The analysis was guided by three thematic anchors: (1) ethnic identity formation and political inclusion, (2) age-related patterns of democratic participation, and (3) structural conditions influencing the political visibility of older citizens. The triangulation of multiple secondary data sources strengthens the credibility of the findings and aligns with best practices in qualitative political research (Silverman, 2020).

This approach also recognises the limitations inherent in secondary data—particularly issues of contextual variability and reporting gaps—but mitigates these through cross-checking of findings across diverse academic sources.

Qualitative Content Analysis

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis to explore how ethnic identity shapes political participation among Nigeria's ageing population. Qualitative content analysis is appropriate for unpacking the deeper meanings, narratives, and socio-political dynamics embedded within texts, allowing the researcher to interpret how issues of ethnicity, exclusion, and democratic engagement are constructed across different sources (Schreier, 2021). The study relies exclusively on secondary data, drawing from peer-reviewed journal articles, demographic reports, policy documents, and scholarly analyses published between 2015 and 2024. These sources were purposively selected to ensure conceptual relevance, contemporary insights, and methodological credibility. Analytical categories were developed inductively, enabling themes such as identity politics, generational participation gaps, political exclusion, and regional disparities to emerge organically from the material rather than being imposed a priori.

The analysis followed an iterative, multi-stage process involving data familiarisation, coding, category development, and interpretive synthesis. During coding, segments of text related to ethnic identity, ageing, and political participation were highlighted and grouped into emerging thematic clusters. This approach aligns with the interpretive tradition of qualitative research, which emphasises understanding patterns of meaning rather than quantifying occurrences (Bengtsson, 2016). Themes were then compared across different types of sources and scholarly articles, demographic reports, electoral analyses to identify consistencies, tensions, and contextual variations. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation and through continual revisiting of the data to refine emerging interpretations, following best practices recommended in qualitative content analysis literature (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This methodological approach allows for a nuanced examination of how ethnicity and ageing interact within Nigeria's democratic processes, providing a rich foundation for analysing the socio-political realities faced by older citizens.

Findings And Discussion

Ethnicity and Pathways to Political Participation

Findings from the qualitative content analysis reveal that ethnicity remains one of the most powerful determinants of political participation in Nigeria, shaping not only voting behaviour but also perceptions of citizenship, belonging, and political trust. Across the secondary data, older citizens consistently interpret political engagement through the lens of ethnic identity, often recalling how historical narratives of marginalisation or dominance influence their willingness to participate in elections or civic activities. For many ageing Nigerians, ethnicity is not simply a social marker—it is a lived experience that has structured access to political networks, shaped expectations of representation, and defined who is perceived as a legitimate political actor (Agbu, 2020; Okolie, 2022). This generational perspective reinforces the finding that older citizens—especially in ethnically plural

regions—tend to view political participation as a continuation of long-standing communal struggles for visibility and recognition within the state.

The analysis also highlights significant differences in participation pathways across Nigeria's major ethnic blocs. Among older voters in the northern region, political participation is heavily influenced by patronage networks and long-standing alliances between ethnic communities and local political elites. These networks serve as both incentives and constraints, mobilising some groups while sidelining others (Bello, 2021). By contrast, older citizens in the south-east, where historical experiences of conflict and secession inform collective memory, engage politically from a place of cautious scepticism. Their participation is often shaped by discourses of exclusion and demands for structural reforms that would guarantee equitable representation for all ethnic groups (Egwu, 2019). Meanwhile, in the south-west, regional identity and civic institutions create a more decentralised pattern of participation, where older adults tend to mobilise through community associations, socio-cultural organisations, and issue-based coalitions (Adebayo & Omotola, 2021).

A consistent theme that emerges across regions is the role of ethnic identity as both an enabler and inhibitor of democratic participation. On one hand, ethnicity provides older Nigerians with a sense of community, continuity, and political relevance, fostering strong mobilisation during elections through cultural associations, religious groups, and local leadership structures. On the other hand, ethnic competition and exclusionary practices continue to limit participation pathways, especially for those outside dominant regional groups. Findings from INEC and Afrobarometer datasets show that older citizens from minority ethnic groups report lower levels of trust in political institutions, feeling that electoral processes seldom prioritise their interests or reflect their cultural identity (INEC, 2023; Amnesty International, 2022). This duality underscores the complex role ethnicity plays in shaping how older adults navigate Nigeria's political space.

The study further reveals a generational dimension in how ethnicity influences political participation. Older Nigerians tend to rely on collective, group-based participation strategies—such as voting blocs and ethnic endorsement structures—while younger generations exhibit more individualised and issue-driven political behaviour. For the ageing population, participation is interwoven with memories of past conflicts, military rule, and shifting patterns of regional dominance, all of which shape how they interpret current political developments. This historical consciousness makes older citizens particularly attentive to issues of identity-based exclusion, power rotation, and ethnic balancing. These findings align with emerging scholarship arguing that Nigeria's democratic future depends on reconciling identity politics with inclusive governance mechanisms that protect both minority rights and generational equity (Oni & Gbadegesin, 2019; Ibrahim, 2020). Ultimately, the pathways through which older Nigerians participate politically remain deeply rooted in the country's history of ethnic pluralism, uneven development, and persistent contestations over national belonging.

Ageing, Inequality, and Access to Political Representation

Findings from this study indicate that ageing in Nigeria is closely intertwined with structural inequalities that shape access to political representation. Older adults are often assumed to occupy privileged positions within communities due to cultural norms that value seniority;

however, the analysis reveals a more uneven reality. While some elderly individuals—particularly those embedded within dominant ethnic or patronage networks—retain access to political influence, many others experience systematic marginalisation driven by poverty, declining health, and weak social protection systems. These inequalities are especially pronounced among older citizens from minority ethnic groups and less developed regions, where access to political platforms and decision-making spaces remains limited (Egwu, 2019; Uzochukwu et al., 2021). Ageing, in this context, does not automatically translate into political authority but instead interacts with ethnicity and socio-economic status to produce differentiated outcomes.

The study further shows that inequalities in access to representation are reinforced by Nigeria's elite-dominated political system, which privileges continuity over inclusivity. Political offices at both national and subnational levels are largely occupied by ageing elites who control party structures and candidate selection processes through ethnic and clientelist networks (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010; Adebayo & Omotola, 2021). For many older citizens outside these networks, political participation is reduced to voting rather than meaningful representation or agenda-setting. Afrobarometer data consistently suggest that older Nigerians report lower confidence that elected officials represent their interests, particularly where ethnic identity intersects with historical patterns of exclusion (Afrobarometer, 2024). This disconnect contributes to a sense of political invisibility among ageing populations, despite their numerical and symbolic significance within society.

At the same time, the findings highlight a paradox at the heart of ageing and representation in Nigeria. Older adults are frequently mobilised as reliable voting blocs through ethnic appeals and communal loyalties, yet their substantive interests—such as healthcare, pensions, and social welfare—remain marginal within policy agendas. This reflects what scholars describe as *instrumental inclusion* without *representational equity* (Binstock, 2010; Ibrahim, 2020). Ageing populations thus participate in sustaining democratic processes while benefiting unevenly from their outcomes. The persistence of inequality in access to representation underscores the need to rethink democratic inclusion beyond electoral participation, particularly in ethnically diverse societies like Nigeria. Addressing the political marginalisation of older citizens requires institutional reforms that confront ethnic bias, expand social protection, and create inclusive channels through which ageing populations can influence governance in meaningful ways.

Trust, Exclusion and Democratic Fragility

The findings indicate that trust in democratic institutions among Nigeria's ageing population is deeply shaped by long-standing experiences of ethnic exclusion and uneven state responsiveness. Older citizens who have lived through multiple political transitions from colonial rule, military regimes, and fragile democratic experiments often express scepticism toward political institutions that have repeatedly failed to deliver inclusive governance. This historical memory of exclusion is particularly pronounced among elderly individuals from minority ethnic groups and peripheral regions, where the state is perceived as distant or selectively present (Egwu, 2019; Mustapha, 2022). Rather than viewing democratic participation as a pathway to influence, many ageing Nigerians interpret political engagement as a symbolic ritual that reinforces existing power hierarchies, thereby weakening affective trust in democratic processes.

Exclusionary political practices further compound this erosion of trust and contribute to democratic fragility. The study finds that political parties and governing elites continue to rely heavily on ethnic mobilisation and patronage networks, which privilege established actors while marginalising broader ageing constituencies. Older citizens outside elite ethnic blocs often encounter structural barriers to representation, including limited access to party platforms, financial constraints, and declining physical capacity to engage in competitive politics (Adebayo & Omotola, 2021; Hoffmann & Wallace, 2022). This pattern of selective inclusion reinforces perceptions that democracy functions primarily as an elite project rather than a collective social contract. Afrobarometer surveys show that older Nigerians are less likely than younger cohorts to believe that elections lead to meaningful accountability, a perception closely linked to experiences of ethnicised exclusion and policy neglect (Afrobarometer, 2024).

The cumulative effect of low trust and persistent exclusion is a fragile democratic environment in which participation is sustained without deep legitimacy. While ageing populations continue to vote, often mobilised through ethnic or communal loyalties, their disengagement from deliberative and representative dimensions of democracy undermines democratic consolidation. This fragility is not expressed through outright rejection of democracy but through resignation, political apathy, and reliance on informal ethnic or religious authorities for security and welfare (Ibrahim, 2020; Cheeseman, 2018). The findings suggest that Nigeria's democratic vulnerability lies less in the absence of participation and more in the failure to convert participation into trust-building, inclusive governance. Strengthening democratic resilience therefore requires addressing the structural and ethnicized forms of exclusion that alienate ageing citizens and weaken their confidence in the democratic promise.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND DEMOCRACY

Inclusive Political Reforms

There are implications for policy and democracy with particular attention to inclusive political reforms. The continued salience of ethnic identities in Nigeria has significant implications for democratic participation among the ageing population, particularly in how public policy recognises and engages older citizens as political actors. Older Nigerians often possess long-standing ethnic affiliations shaped by historical experiences of colonial governance, civil conflict, and post-independence political competition, which continue to influence their voting behaviour and political trust (Osaghae, 2020; Akinwale, 2022). While ethnic identity can serve as a mobilising force that encourages participation, it can also reinforce exclusionary politics when democratic institutions privilege dominant ethnic groups. For policy, this underscores the need for inclusive political reforms that acknowledge ethnic diversity without allowing it to undermine national cohesion. Civic education programmes tailored to older populations, particularly in rural and ethnically diverse areas, can help reframe political participation around shared democratic values rather than ethnic loyalty alone (INEC, 2023).

Inclusive political reforms must also address institutional barriers that limit meaningful participation by ageing citizens across ethnic lines. Nigeria's democratic framework, including the federal character principle, was designed to manage ethnic pluralism but has often prioritised elite representation over grassroots inclusion (Suberu,

2021). For older adults, especially those from minority ethnic groups, political participation is further constrained by physical access to polling units, digital exclusion, and limited representation within party structures (HelpAge International, 2022). Democratic reforms should therefore integrate age-sensitive and ethnicity-aware measures, such as accessible voting infrastructure, decentralised consultation forums, and internal party reforms that promote the inclusion of older candidates and advisers from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Such reforms would strengthen substantive representation and enhance the legitimacy of democratic outcomes (Diamond, 2023).

More broadly, the intersection of ageing, ethnicity, and political participation highlights the need to reconceptualise inclusion as a democratic norm rather than a corrective policy response. As Nigeria's population continues to age, failure to integrate older citizens into participatory governance risks deepening democratic deficits and reinforcing ethnic polarisation (United Nations, 2023). Inclusive political reforms that promote intergenerational dialogue, protect minority rights, and encourage cross-ethnic political engagement can contribute to a more resilient democracy. By valuing the lived experiences and political memory of older citizens, Nigeria can harness their potential as stabilising agents within democratic processes. Ultimately, policies that bridge ethnic identity and inclusive participation are essential for sustaining democratic accountability and social cohesion in an increasingly diverse and ageing society (Arowolo & Aluko, 2021).

Strengthening Representation Mechanisms (SRM)

Strengthening representation mechanisms in Nigeria's democratic system has significant implications for inclusive governance, especially for the ageing population whose political voices are shaped by intersecting identities including ethnicity and age. Current political dynamics show that ethnic identity remains a potent influence on electoral behaviour and political mobilisation, yet formal institutions have struggled to convert this diversity into equitable representation (Afrobarometer, 2024). Robust reforms aimed at enhancing representational equity such as constitutional amendments to decentralise political appointments and expand sub-national decision-making forums can help alleviate the sense of marginalisation felt by older citizens from minority ethnic groups. Without such structural adjustments, electoral systems risk perpetuating exclusionary patterns where ethnic majorities capture political influence at the expense of older adults who may lack the social capital or resources to contest effectively (Afrobarometer, 2024).

In addition to constitutional and institutional reforms, strengthening political party processes is critical for inclusive representation that resonates with Nigeria's ageing electorate. Studies of Nigerian political parties highlight persistent gaps between formal provisions for inclusivity and their implementation, with under-representation across demographic groups—including older persons—suggesting that parties often remain closed networks that privilege entrenched elites (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2023). To address this, policy interventions could mandate transparent candidate selection criteria that consider age, ethnic diversity, and civic experience, thereby providing older Nigerians with equitable opportunities to contribute to party leadership and legislative roles. Embedding accountability mechanisms within party constitutions—such as regular audits of member diversity and affirmative action thresholds—will help institutionalise representation

beyond rhetorical commitments and reinforce the democratic legitimacy of political organisations (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2023).

In addition, strengthening representation mechanisms must also encompass broader civic engagement frameworks that empower ageing citizens to participate meaningfully beyond elections. Nigeria's 2023 electoral cycle revealed persistent challenges in citizen engagement, including limited participatory budgeting and inadequate channels for sustained feedback, which together weaken institutional trust and democratic responsiveness (Athena Centre for Policy and Leadership, 2025). Policy reforms that prioritise participatory governance—such as institutionalised consultative councils for older adults and mechanisms for deliberative democracy at local government levels—can bridge the gap between citizens and decision-makers. These reforms not only enhance representation but also promote civic inclusion by recognising the valuable insights and political agency of older Nigerians, fostering a democratic culture in which age and ethnicity enrich rather than hinder political participation (Athena Centre for Policy and Leadership, 2025).

A crucial implication for policy is the recalibration of electoral and legislative frameworks to better reflect Nigeria's ethnic and age diversity. Current mechanisms such as the federal character principle attempt to balance representation across ethnic lines but often fall short of ensuring substantive inclusion for minority groups and older citizens, who remain under-represented in political offices despite constitutional provisions (Jurnal Constitutionale, 2024). This gap highlights the need for legislative reforms that go beyond symbolic distribution toward mandated representational thresholds for older and minority ethnic groups within legislative bodies. For example, affirmative legislative measures akin to gender quotas could be adapted to include age- and ethnicity-based thresholds, ensuring that senior representatives from diverse ethnic communities are present and influential in policy deliberations. Implementing such mechanisms would not only improve descriptive representation but also empower historically marginalised constituencies to influence governance outcomes.

Strengthening representation mechanisms also requires attention to internal political party reforms that can democratise candidate selection and policy platforms. Political parties in Nigeria have traditionally operated as elite-driven organisations with limited transparency and minimal internal quotas or guidelines for diverse candidacies, disproportionately affecting older citizens from minority ethnic communities (Demarest, 2023). This structural exclusion reinforces patronage networks and undermines meritocratic participation, reducing the incentives for broader civic engagement among the ageing population. Policy interventions could mandate inclusive party statutes that require proportional representation of older candidates and ethnic minorities on party executive committees and electoral lists, complemented by capacity-building initiatives to support their campaign viability. Such measures enhance the procedural inclusivity of parties, making them more responsive and representative of Nigeria's plural society.

Finally, reinforcing representation mechanisms must embrace institutionalised participatory governance beyond elections, ensuring that older citizens have continued engagement in democratic processes. Civic engagement frameworks that include consultative councils, deliberative forums, and participatory budgeting at local levels can provide institutionalised avenues for older adults to articulate policy preferences and hold decision-makers accountable (Athena Centre for Policy and Leadership, 2025). These

platforms can act as bridges between formal political institutions and citizen voices, particularly for those who feel side-lined by mainstream electoral politics, thereby strengthening democratic legitimacy. Furthermore, these mechanisms can mitigate the risk of episodic protest-driven mobilisation by enabling structured dialogue and consistent feedback loops between citizens and elected representatives. Embedding such participatory reforms into Nigeria's governance architecture will fortify democratic resilience and ensure that diverse ethnic identities and ageing voices are not only recognised but meaningfully integrated into the political process.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that ethnic identity remains a powerful and enduring factor shaping political participation among Nigeria's ageing population. Older citizens engage with politics through historically grounded ethnic affiliations that both mobilise participation and, in some cases, reinforce exclusionary political practices. While these identities provide a sense of belonging and political meaning, their interaction with weak institutional frameworks has often limited the translation of participation into effective representation. The findings underscore that ageing Nigerians are not politically disengaged, but rather constrained by structural and institutional dynamics that fail to accommodate their complex social identities and lived experiences.

The paper further demonstrates that inclusive democratic outcomes depend on the strength of representation mechanisms capable of bridging ethnicity, age, and political access. Existing arrangements, including electoral systems and party structures, have struggled to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward substantive representation. Strengthening these mechanisms—through legislative reform, internal party democratisation, and age-sensitive electoral policies—emerges as a critical pathway for enhancing democratic legitimacy. When older citizens from diverse ethnic backgrounds are meaningfully represented in decision-making spaces, democratic institutions become more responsive, credible, and socially grounded.

In conclusion, addressing ethnic identity and political participation among Nigeria's ageing population is not merely a demographic or cultural concern, but a democratic imperative. Policies that integrate ethnic pluralism with inclusive representation can harness the political wisdom and civic capital of older citizens as stabilising forces within Nigeria's democracy. By institutionalising participatory governance and strengthening representation mechanisms, Nigeria can move toward a more inclusive and resilient democratic system—one that recognises diversity as a resource rather than a challenge and ensures that no generation or ethnic group is left at the margins of political life.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should deepen empirical understanding of how ethnic identity intersects with ageing to shape political behaviour across different regions of Nigeria. While existing studies often treat older adults as a homogeneous category, there is a need for disaggregated analyses that consider variations by ethnicity, gender, rural-urban location, and socio-economic status. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in tracing how political attitudes and participation evolve over the life course, especially in response

to electoral reforms, decentralisation, and changing party systems. In addition, mixed-methods approaches that combine survey data with life-history interviews can capture the lived political experiences of older Nigerians, offering richer insights into how historical memory, intergenerational relations, and ethnic narratives influence democratic engagement.

Further research should also explore the institutional dimensions of representation and inclusion with greater specificity. Comparative studies examining how other multi-ethnic African democracies incorporate ageing populations into political decision-making could generate transferable lessons for Nigeria. Attention should be given to evaluating the effectiveness of representation mechanisms such as consultative councils, party quotas, and participatory governance platforms in enhancing substantive rather than merely descriptive representation. Finally, future work should investigate the role of emerging technologies and digital political spaces in either enabling or excluding older citizens, particularly within ethnically diverse contexts. Such research would not only advance academic debates but also provide evidence-based guidance for policymakers seeking to strengthen inclusive democracy in Nigeria.

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