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Economic Inequality, Ethnic Identity Politics, and Federal Stability in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

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Abstract

This paper examines how economic inequality and perceptions of systemic exclusion drive ethnic identity politics and threaten democratic consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The central research question is: to what extent does perceived systemic exclusion, rather than income disparity alone, mediate the relationship between economic inequality and ethnic mobilisation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic? Drawing on Gini coefficient data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) disaggregated across all six geopolitical zones, and supported by qualitative analysis of secondary literature, the study argues that it is the interaction between perceived marginalisation, skewed resource distribution, and political exclusion, rather than statistical income dispersion, that fuels ethnic competition and undermines Nigeria's federal bargain. The analysis demonstrates that low measured inequality does not preclude intense ethnic grievance, as evidenced by the South-East and North-West zones. Federal resource control, regional patronage networks, and historically skewed development priorities have heightened inter-ethnic mistrust and deepened democratic disenchantment, particularly among Nigeria's youth. The paper proposes targeted reforms, including restructuring Nigeria's fiscal federalism, investing in youth employment infrastructure in high-poverty zones, and strengthening merit-based appointment mechanisms within federal institutions.

Keywords: Economic Inequality, Ethnic Identity Politics, Fiscal Federalism, Elite Capture, Youth Unemployment, Political Mobilisation, Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria, the most populous black nation, is among the world's most culturally diverse countries with over three hundred ethnic groups and more than five hundred languages (Green, 2023). Out of the hundreds of ethnic nationalities, the dominant Hausa-Fulani (North), the Yoruba (West), and the Igbo (East) together take up over sixty per cent (CIA, 2025; Záhorský et al., 2025) of the total population of the nation, alongside many other ethnic nationalities making up the remaining numbers. Chapter II (3) of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution (as amended) acknowledges the nation's ethnic diversity and mandates that representation in governmental institutions and other relevant agencies reflect the federal character of Nigerian society (1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2023). The Constitution further provides for federalism, prohibits ethnically motivated discrimination, and encourages intermarriage as mechanisms for managing the country's inherent diversity.

While these constitutional provisions reflect recognition of Nigeria's ethnic diversity and strategies to mitigate the manipulation of ethnic identities to promote individual or group interests, the previous constitutional arrangement laid the foundation for ethnic identity politics in Nigeria. Thus, the colonial introduction of regionalism and the tripartite division (Adegoke, 2023) of Nigeria into North, West, and East, with three major ethnic groups dominant in each regional division, laid the foundation of ethnic identity in Nigerian politics. In this case, the three dominant ethnic groups, for instance, leverage their regional dominance as a platform to dominate the Nigerian political space at both the national and regional levels. According to Suberu (2009), this colonially inherited tripartite ethno-regional federal system fostered the hegemony of the three main ethnic groups in general and the larger northern area (the Hausa-Fulani base) in particular. Nigeria's First Republic (1960–1966) was therefore destabilised by the system, which fostered interregional polarisation, minority insecurity, and ethnic majority chauvinism (Suberu, 2009). Furthermore, the emergence of three regionally based ethnic political parties, which unapologetically wear the socio-cultural cloak of the dominant ethnic groups in each of the regions, created the groundwork for a complex political structure full of rivalries between ethnic groups, mistrust, and suspicion (Záhorský et al., 2025) which eventually culminated in a series of political crises that led to the collapse of the First Republic with military intervention in Nigerian politics.

Thus, ethnic identity politics is a regular phenomenon in Nigeria's political arena and has similarly attracted respectable scholarly attention (Olanrewaju et al., 2019; Osaghae, 2003; Titus & Ogundiya, 2025). However, there are limited studies that focus on the connection between ethnic identity politics and economic inequality. In line with this, this study aims to explain and deepen understanding of how economic inequalities reinforce ethnic identity politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, thereby shaping political behaviour, governance outcomes, and national cohesion. Towards this end, this paper addresses the gap by asking: to what extent does the perceived systematic exclusion, rather than income disparity alone, mediate the relationship between economic inequality and ethnic mobilisation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic? This study advances the argument that the

interaction between perceived marginalisation, skewed resource distribution, and political exclusion, rather than raw statistical measures of income dispersion, drives ethnic identity politics in Nigeria. The contribution of this paper is threefold: it provides an ethno-regionally disaggregated inequality analysis using NBS Gini coefficient data across all six geopolitical zones; it challenges the mechanistic link between inequality and ethnic conflict by demonstrating that low measured inequality does not preclude intense ethnic grievance; and it connects youth demographics and unemployment to ethnic mobilisation in a manner that carries direct policy relevance. In doing so, the paper also advances a more explicit engagement with the crisis of federalism – the progressive erosion of Nigeria’s federal bargain through ethno-regional capture of state resources and patronage networks – as the structural context within which inequality and ethnic politics interact. The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature and identifies the research gap, which is followed by the historical context of ethnic identity politics in Nigeria. This is followed by a presentation of the conceptual clarifications and theoretical framework that anchor the study. The methodology is then described, after which the empirical analysis of ethno-regional inequality is presented. The paper then examines the interplay between economic inequality and ethnic identity politics before concluding with policy-relevant recommendations.

Literature Review

The scholarly literature on economic inequality and ethnic politics in Nigeria collectively establishes that ethnic mobilisation in Nigeria is a historically rooted, elite-driven phenomenon sustained by colonial legacies, structural federalism deficits, socioeconomic inequality, and governance failures, all of which have persistently undermined national cohesion, democratic consolidation, and inclusive development. This provides a summary of some scholarly works in this regard and identifies the gap that the present study addresses. The instrumentalisation of ethnicity by Nigeria’s political class represents one of the most enduring obstacles to stable governance and equitable development in the country. According to [Madueke \(2025\)](#), Nigeria’s developmental and security crises stem largely from the deliberate manipulation of ethnic, religious, and regional identities by political elites. Rather than reflecting organic social divisions, these cleavages are strategically deployed to secure electoral gains and consolidate access to state resources. Grounded in instrumentalist theory, Madueke (2025) demonstrate that ethnicity in Nigeria functions as a political tool, most evident in the elections of 2011, 2015, and 2019. According to him, such manipulation erodes institutional legitimacy, entrenches elite dominance, and obstructs nation-building.

This elite instrumentalisation of identity, however, did not emerge in a vacuum; its foundations were laid considerably earlier, through deliberate colonial policies that fractured indigenous solidarity. Along these lines, Chimee and Ojiakor (2021) contend that the entrenchment of ethnicity in Nigerian politics is a product of both colonial engineering and elite self-interest. Deliberately exploited by British colonial administrators to keep indigenous groups divided, ethnic identity was subsequently inherited as a political instrument by post-colonial elites. Particularly from the 1940s onward, political leaders mobilised primordial sentiments to consolidate power and preserve privilege. This sustained manipulation, the authors argue, has fundamentally undermined national unity, inter-ethnic cohesion, and the broader project of nation-building in Nigeria.

Beyond the political dimensions of this manipulation, Oyejide and Adeleke (2026) draw scholarly attention to its material underpinnings, demonstrating that socioeconomic inequality constitutes both a cause and a consequence of ethnic mobilisation. They establish that ethnic diversity, socioeconomic inequality, and political fragmentation are deeply interconnected drivers of conflict in Nigeria. Ethnic and ethnoreligious cleavages, the authors demonstrate, pervade most hostilities even when identity is not the primary cause, as agitators frequently exploit these fault lines to mobilise public sentiment. Political and financial restructuring, though employed as remedial instruments, risk yielding unintended consequences. Sustainable conflict resolution, they argue, necessitates equity-driven policies, inclusive economic growth, and a revised revenue allocation framework to reduce states’ dependence on federal patronage (Oyejide & Adeleke, 2026).

This nexus between economic marginalisation and ethnic tension is further reinforced when examined through the lens of Nigeria’s broader governance failures and historical fault lines. Abasili et al. (2023) contend that ethnic conflict in Nigeria is the product of intersecting historical, political, economic, and governance failures.

Colonial boundary-making and an unequal power distribution established enduring ethnic tensions, which were subsequently deepened by post-independence power struggles and the Civil War. Resource inequalities, particularly in the Niger Delta, have intensified grievances, while weak institutions and corruption obstruct resolution. Cultural fault lines further compound these divisions, rendering the conflict landscape persistently complex.

The structural contradictions embedded within Nigeria's federal arrangement have rendered it a site of contestation rather than a mechanism of equitable governance. Olatunji and Osuolale (2025) contend that Nigeria's federal structure, originally designed to manage ethnic, regional, and resource diversity, has paradoxically deepened political fragmentation and regional inequality. Oil dependence, they demonstrate, intensifies distributive conflicts and territorial contestation, while excessive centralisation undermines subnational autonomy and entrenches the North-South divide. This overcentralisation, as the historical record reveals, was significantly accelerated by military governance, which fundamentally distorted the federal architecture Nigeria had initially adopted. Abasilim and Ogunwa (2024) establish that military rule suspended Nigeria's federal and democratic frameworks, concentrating power at the centre while reducing federating states to near-inconsequence. This jurisdictional usurpation, they argue, impeded socioeconomic and political development and produced enduring institutional distortions.

These structural deformities have, in turn, sustained the national question, a constellation of unresolved tensions that continue to undermine democratic consolidation. Oluwasanmi (2025) reveals that ethnoreligious conflicts, minority agitations, political corruption, and inequitable resource allocation constitute inbuilt contradictions within Nigeria's federal experiment. Successive reform efforts have yielded no definitive resolution, underscoring the mutually reinforcing relationship between the national question and democratic fragility. At the intersection of these tensions lies the persistent instrumentalisation of ethnicity, which continues to distort fiscal relations and political development alike. Joy (2023) confirms that ethnic conflict exerts a significant negative impact on Nigerian federalism, compounded by fiscal imbalances that discourage internally generated revenue. Nevertheless, emerging empirical evidence suggests a gradual shift in this dynamic. Brigevech and Oritsejafor (2024) find that while dominant ethnic identity marginally reduces democratic satisfaction, institutional trust and government economic performance are stronger predictors, indicating a declining salience of ethnic cleavages in Nigeria's democratic experience.

Historical Context of Ethnic Identity Politics in Nigeria

Much of the politics in Nigeria's post-independence history to date has its roots firmly ingrained in the nation's colonial experience (Osaghae, 1998). The amalgamation of many disparate ethnic groups in 1914 by the British imperialists into a single political unit ostensibly planted the seed of ethnicity in Nigeria's future politics. While the creation of ethnic regions was designed to promote regional self-government to preserve cultural values and allow self-paced development (Fashagba, 2021), the arrangement, however, led to the domination of the three major ethnic groups in each of the newly created three regions – Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the east. According to Omaka (2017), the establishment of three sizable territories by the then Nigerian colonial framework, the Arthur Richards Constitution, sidestepped the creation of more states to accommodate ethnic and cultural diversity and ignored the glaring cultural, linguistic, territorial, and historical differences among the ethnic nationalities in the country, which was partly responsible for the upheavals that overtook Nigeria shortly after independence.

In addition to the tripartite division of the nation along ethnic lines, one major issue with the Richards Constitution, which went into effect in January 1947, was that it produced a flawed regional framework that promoted regionalism in Nigerian politics both before and after independence. Aside from the fact that one region was large enough to politically control the other two, the federation's political parties were regionally focused, with leaders like Ahmadu Bello, Obafemi Awolowo, and Nnamdi Azikiwe primarily relying on regional and ethnic support to gain power at the federal level. For instance, the Northern People's Congress (NPC), led by Fulani Ahmadu Bello, was regarded as a Hausa-Fulani party, whereas the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (later renamed the National Council of Nigerian Citizens, NCNC), led by Igbo Nnamdi Azikiwe,

was viewed as an Igbo organisation. Because Obafemi Awolowo, the Action Group's (AG) leader, was Yoruba, the group was dubbed a Yoruba party (Omaka, 2017).

The ethnicisation of political parties was one of the dominant themes in Nigerian political space before independence and in the ensuing republics that followed. It is worth noting that these ethnic parties were in part responsible for the combustible political atmosphere in Nigeria at independence and the eventual collapse of the first republic with the emergence of military dictatorship in 1966. Despite the ethnic colouration of the political parties and zero-sum strategies to political competition, a few of them indeed worked together at different junctions to pursue a seemingly common goal, which, however, could not ameliorate the dangerous consequences of the ethnicisation of the political terrain. According to Fashagba (2021), even the occasional shaky alliance between parties (the National Party of Nigeria (NPN)/Nigerian People's Party (NPP) in 1979–1981 and the Northern People's Congress (NPC)/National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in 1960–1966) was unable to lessen the detrimental effects of the disintegrating party practice. The ethnicisation of party formation and membership has thus frequently exacerbated group division, sectionalisation, and polarisation rather than fostering unity in variety.

Interestingly, Nigeria's military administrations understood the cancerous roles ethnic political parties played in Nigeria's First Republic. To mitigate this and ensure that these political parties have a national spread and a broad-based membership, the military regimes of Murtala/Obasanjo and Babangida devised stringent criteria for potential political parties that wanted to take part in future democratic governments. General Babangida went further to establish two brand new and ideologically identical political parties, namely the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC), after discontinuing the initial call for registration of political parties based on tight national criteria (see Siollun, 2013). Since ethnic-based political parties are no longer popular, the present republic (1999 to date) and the attempted third republic (1991–1993) seem to be doing better. The political parties in the fourth republic have a more national perspective, membership, and mode of operation than those in the first and second republics, even though some ethnic parties have come and gone, such as the Alliance for Democracy (AD), while others, particularly the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), are still in existence. The obstacles and restrictions placed on political competitiveness by regional or ethnic parties seem to be becoming more widely recognised (Fashagba, 2021).

Despite the relative easing of the ethnic configurations of political parties, the nation's political space is still very much shrouded in layers of ethnicity. Leadership recruitment since the inception of the current fourth republic has largely been defined and evaluated by ethnic identity and bargaining among ethnic groups on the distribution of power and the wealth of the nation. Thus, access to power is defined by the ability of different groups to assert their dominance on home fronts and, at the same time, to use their local advantage as bargaining power to secure political positions. In the recently concluded 2023 general elections, for instance, each of the three leading candidates left their opponent with no chance in their ethnic base, with Peter Obi getting almost 100% of the votes cast in his region of origin, Atiku Abubakar similarly getting the bulk of his support from the north, and Bola Tinubu enjoying the support of his kinsmen in the Southwest. It is worth noting that none of these leading candidates could have won the election without decent electoral gains outside their ethnic homeland, which each of them played to their ultimate ability. Much of the strategy employed by Peter Obi, for instance, revolved around playing a religious card and using the youth demographics with its cross-cutting attribute to gain more supporters. Bola Tinubu, on the other hand, banked on his supposedly ripe political capital, built on his (a Yoruba) age-long support of the incumbent president (a Fulani) and other illustrious sons of the region. It is on this note that his Yoruba '*lokan*' and '*emi lokan*' campaign rhetoric was birthed, which unsurprisingly had a profound impact in sending a message to his adversary and Nigerians across the nation that the presidency is the turn of the Yoruba and himself.

Conceptual Clarifications

Economic Inequality

Economic inequality has been rising around the world in recent decades (Du et al., 2024), with over 70% of the global population, increasing the likelihood of conflicts and impeding social and economic advancement (UN

News, 2020). Central to economic inequality is the differing levels of wealth, income, and purchasing power in a society. It is common to associate economic inequality with income inequality, with the two terms sometimes used interchangeably, especially in economics (Sen, 1997). Sen (1997), however, clarified the differences between these two ideas by pointing out that economic analysis of inequality frequently focuses on income inequality, which provides a very limited and skewed perspective of inequality, even when it comes to those who can be significantly impacted by economic policy. In a nutshell, economic inequality is the unequal allocation of financial resources (Salvador Casara et al., 2022). According to Lin et al. (2024), economic inequality is the extent to which the rich and the poor have different incomes or levels of wealth. Liu et al. (2024) defined it as the unequal distribution of income and consumption. For this paper, economic inequality is defined as the uneven distribution of income, wealth, and access to essential resources across different segments of society. This encompasses not only disparities in financial assets and earnings but also differential access to opportunities such as quality education, healthcare, employment, and basic infrastructure that collectively determine individuals' and communities' economic well-being and prospects for social mobility.

Ethnic Identity Politics

The conceptualisation of ethnic identity politics encompasses the complex intersection of cultural belonging, political mobilisation, and power dynamics within diverse societies, where ethnic categories become politically salient and significantly influence institutional outcomes and societal stability. Chandra (2012) addresses the gaps in social science research on politics, economics, and ethnicity. He suggests a constructivist framework to comprehend how ethnic identities evolve over time and how they affect political and economic outcomes. This framework aims to dismantle theoretical arguments linking ethnic diversity to unfavourable outcomes such as state collapse and political destabilisation. Oskolkov's research, on the other hand, examines the complex interplay between ethnicity and politics through a comprehensive analytical framework, distinguishing four interconnected yet distinct phenomena (Oskolkov, 2021). The study establishes politicisation of ethnicity as the attribution of political functions to ethnic identity, while differentiating this from ethnopolitical mobilisation, which is characterised by its goal-oriented nature and driven by group dissatisfaction with status, available political opportunities, resource accessibility, and elite leadership activities (Oskolkov, 2021). The analysis extends to pan-ethnic mobilisation, which operates through broader identity constructs encompassing '*linguaculturally*' related groups beyond the immediate ethnic community. Additionally, Oskolkov conceptualises the ethnicisation of politics as the systematic integration of ethnic elements into political processes, noting its predominantly top-down implementation through the strategic deployment of memory archetypes and culturally significant symbols (Oskolkov, 2021).

Posner (2017), in his analysis, identified a variety of social identities, such as race, religion, and ethnicity, and explained how the relative size of the group influences the decisions people make about their identities at the individual level and how this makes the social identities more politically salient. This relationship between group size and identity salience demonstrates how political relevance emerges not from inherent characteristics of ethnic categories themselves, but from the strategic calculations individuals make within specific demographic and institutional contexts. In the case of Nigeria, for instance, ethnic identity politics became salient with the tripartite division of the country into North, East, and West, which gives the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba a demographic advantage over other ethnic groupings and enables them to use this for political mobilisation in the later stages of colonial rule.

This Nigerian example illustrates the broader phenomenon of ethnic identity politics, which requires a precise conceptual definition to understand its mechanisms and implications. This research will use Bekele and Oyeade's exposition of identity politics as the practice of using shared identities or links pertaining to race, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, and sexual orientation to manipulate and mobilise groups of people (Bekele & Oyeade, 2018) as a point of departure for what ethnic identity politics is. They further noted that identity politics usually concerns a group's battles to have identities that have been suppressed in the larger society recognised by the public or by the law (Bekele & Oyeade, 2018). Ethnic identity politics, therefore, represents the strategic deployment of ethnically defined group boundaries and shared cultural markers to achieve political objectives, encompassing both the instrumental mobilisation of ethnic solidarity for competitive advantage and

the substantive pursuit of recognition, representation, and resources for ethnically defined communities. This conceptualisation encompasses two interconnected dimensions: first, the tactical utilisation of ethnic categories as vehicles for political organisation and electoral mobilisation; and second, the transformative struggle for the legitimisation and institutionalisation of previously marginalised ethnic identities within broader political frameworks. Ethnic identity politics thus operates simultaneously as a mechanism of political competition and as a means of challenging existing hierarchies of recognition, making it both a tool of elite strategic behaviour and a vehicle for group empowerment and social justice.

The Crisis of Federalism

The concept of a 'crisis of federalism' in the Nigerian context refers to the progressive erosion of the federal bargain through the ethno-regional capture of state institutions and patronage networks. When federalism becomes a facade for ethnic domination rather than a genuine framework for power-sharing, it loses legitimacy as a solution to Nigeria's diversity challenge (Oloruntoba, 2021). This paper uses the concept to describe a condition in which structural inequality, elite capture, and exclusionary resource allocation have hollowed out the federal system's capacity to manage ethnic diversity, thereby creating the conditions for separatist demands, institutional delegitimisation, and democratic backsliding.

The Political Economy of Ethnicity

The political economy of ethnicity provides the theoretical anchor for this study. This theoretical construct explores the intricate relationships between ethnic identities, political structures, and economic outcomes. Central to this framework is the understanding that ethnicity operates as a dynamic and socially constructed identity rather than a static or primordial characteristic, making it particularly responsive to changing political and economic contexts (Chandra, 2013). The framework posits that ethnic competition and conflict are fundamentally driven by the allocation of resources and access to economic opportunities, with ethnic boundaries becoming politically salient when they align with patterns of economic advantage or disadvantage.

This resource-driven dimension of ethnic politics manifests distinctly across African political contexts, where the intersection of weak institutions and intense resource competition creates dynamics of ethnic mobilisation. In many African countries, ethnic groups mobilise to acquire, maintain, or monopolise power, especially as competition for resources intensifies. Ethnic identification becomes a crucial factor in influencing state power and resource distribution (Lekunze, 2020; Njogu et al., 2010). These scholars (Lekunze, 2020; Njogu et al., 2010) demonstrate that ethnic identity serves as both a mobilising tool and a distributional criterion, creating predictable patterns of political coalition-building along ethnic lines. Inequality between ethnic groups is often driven by political factors, where powerful groups channel state resources towards their constituencies. This creates a dynamic where politically marginalised groups may gain or lose ground depending on the strength of state institutions and economic policies (Bormann et al., 2021). Their analysis reveals that institutional weakness amplifies ethnic favouritism by reducing accountability mechanisms that might otherwise constrain discriminatory resource allocation. In weakly institutionalised states, economic gains from globalisation tend to benefit political insiders and their co-ethnics, while excluded groups may see little improvement or even worsening conditions (Bormann et al., 2021). This pattern suggests that globalisation's benefits are mediated through existing political networks rather than distributed through market mechanisms.

Theoretically, ethnicity is not a fixed trait but a social phenomenon that evolves through group interaction and competition over resources. This fluidity allows ethnic identities to be manipulated for political and economic gains (McCauley, 2017; Weingrod, 2018). Similarly, the institutionalisation of ethnicity in political processes can create and sustain a sense of "us vs them," influencing resource allocation and political stability (Nazukina, 2020). This institutionalisation transforms fluid social categories into rigid political divisions that become self-reinforcing through repeated cycles of competition and exclusion. The political economy of ethnicity provides an understanding of how ethnic identities become politically salient through their intersection with resource competition, institutional weakness, and elite strategic behaviour in diverse political contexts. This theoretical framework resonates with Nigeria's political trajectory, where the tripartite regional structure established during colonial rule created enduring patterns of ethnic competition over federal resources, political representation,

and economic opportunities that continue to shape contemporary governance and inter-group relations. The political economy of ethnicity thus provides a framework for understanding Nigeria's political trajectory, where the tripartite regional structure established during colonial rule created enduring patterns of ethnic competition over federal resources, political representation, and economic opportunities – patterns that continue to shape contemporary governance and the Crisis of federalism that is the central problematic of this paper.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative inequality analysis with qualitative interpretation of ethnic mobilisation patterns to examine the relationship between economic inequality and identity politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The research draws on primary quantitative data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) 2020 reports on poverty and inequality, analysing Gini coefficients at national, regional (six geopolitical zones), and state levels to map income distribution disparities across Nigeria's ethno-regional landscape. The analysis adopts the World Bank's operationalisation framework, classifying Gini coefficients above 40 as high inequality and those below as low or moderate inequality. Secondary sources, including academic literature, policy documents, and reports from organisations such as Oxfam International, Afrobarometer, and development research centres, provide contextual data on resource allocation patterns, political appointments, youth unemployment, infrastructural investments, and historical governance dynamics. The methodology employs comparative regional analysis to identify intra-regional and inter-regional variations in inequality, examining how these disparities interact with independent variables such as federal resource control, elite patronage networks, colonial legacies, and skewed development policies. The study traces causal pathways linking economic grievances to ethnic political mobilisation by analysing the interplay between statistical inequality measures and perceived systematic exclusion, focusing on dependent variables including ethnic identity politics, democratic satisfaction, separatist demands, and youth radicalisation. This approach enables both quantitative documentation of regional inequality patterns and qualitative understanding of how perceptions of marginalisation, rather than income dispersion alone, drive ethnic competition and threaten democratic consolidation in Nigeria's multi-ethnic federation.

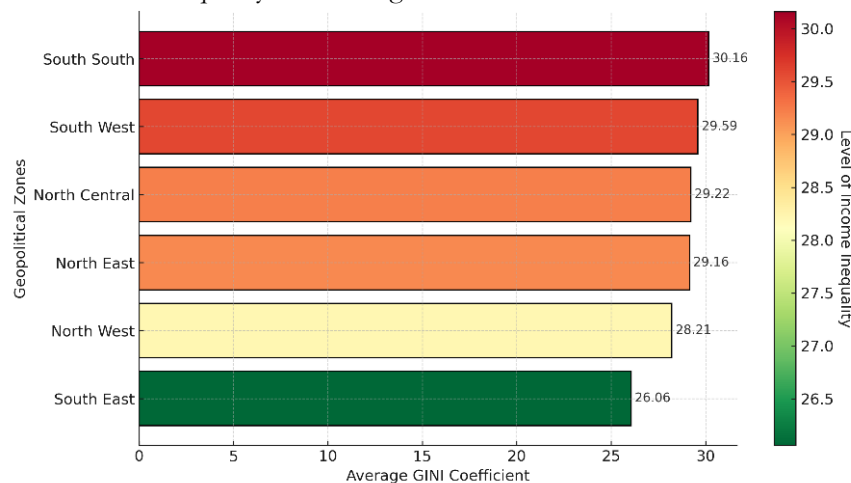
Economic Inequality in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

With a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 188.27 billion U.S. dollars, Nigeria ranks fourth behind South Africa (410.34 billion U.S. dollars), Egypt (347.34 billion U.S. dollars), and Algeria (268.89 billion U.S. dollars) as one of the biggest economies in Africa in 2025 (Galal, 2025). Even though Nigeria has one of the largest economies in Africa, economic inequality has reached extremely high proportions across ethno-regional and demographic divides. Essentially, Nigeria has a thriving economy, a wealth of human capital, and the financial capacity to help millions of people escape poverty. Fascinatingly, the misuse, misallocation, and theft of resources, rather than a lack of them, is the cause of poverty and inequality in Nigeria. A culture of corruption and a political elite disconnected from the everyday difficulties of ordinary Nigerians are at the root of the glaring inequalities (Oxfam International, n.d–b). Socio-economic factors such as natural resources, the Human Security Index, geographical security, governance, history, and social cohesion determine the level of economic development within and across ethnic and regional divides in Nigeria. It has been stated elsewhere that historical conflicts such as the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) and governmental policies and decisions that marginalise a component unit or region are contributory factors to regional economic inequality in Nigeria (Ingwe et al., 2013). To quantify the magnitude and distribution of regional economic disparities, the Gini coefficient provides a precise statistical measure of inequality across Nigeria's geopolitical zones, revealing the extent to which historical and structural factors have translated into measurable patterns of income and wealth concentration.

The following analysis examines ethno-regional inequality patterns across Nigeria's geopolitical zones, drawing on data from the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reports on poverty and inequality to illustrate the disparities that characterise the country's economic landscape (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Furthermore, the analysis will adopt the World Bank's operationalisation (Cameron Nadim Haddad et al., 2024) of the Gini Index, where countries with coefficients greater than 40 are classified as having high inequality, while those below this threshold are considered to have low or moderate inequality levels. According to the

NBS report, Nigeria's Gini coefficient stands at 35.13, with the urban and rural figures at 31.94 and 32.77 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020) respectively, indicating a relatively moderate equality at the national level.

Fig.1: Regional Variations in Inequality Across Nigeria



Source: Adapted from the National Bureau of Statistics (2020).

A quick dash into regional variations in inequality in Nigeria from Figure 1 above shows that inequality varies moderately across the six geopolitical zones. The South-South records the highest inequality (30.16), reflecting stark contrasts between oil-related wealth and widespread poverty. The South-East has the lowest inequality (26.06), indicating relatively more balanced income distribution, while the South-West (29.59) and North Central (29.22) exhibit moderately high inequality. The North-East (29.16) and North-West (28.21) have slightly lower inequality, though both remain among Nigeria's poorest regions overall.

Table 1. Gini coefficient of the North Central states and zone

Geographical Zone	State	Gini Coefficient	Regional Average
North Central	Benue	29.43	29.22
	Kogi	24.42	
	Kwara	25.06	
	Nasarawa	25.57	
	Niger	27.59	
	Plateau	40.22	
	FCT	32.26	

Source: Adapted from the National Bureau of Statistics (2020).

Aside the fact that Nigeria's seat of power is in the North Central, the geopolitical zone is among the region with diverse groupings in Nigeria and is home to a mix of majority and minority ethnic nationalities some of which are the Tiv (Benue), Nupe (Kwara and Niger), Igala (Kogi), Gbagyi (FCT and Niger), and Yoruba (Kwara and Kogi). Table 1 above shows that North Central's average inequality is moderate relative to the national Gini (35.13), but this figure conceals substantial intra-regional variation. Plateau's Gini (40.22) far exceeds both the national average and neighbouring states, making it an outlier in the zone. In contrast, Kogi (24.42) and Kwara (25.06) have relatively low inequality, indicating more equitable income distribution. This internal disparity suggests that while the region overall experiences moderate inequality, localised inequality hotspots like Plateau may foster distinct socio-economic grievances, potentially influence perceptions of exclusion, and shape political mobilisation differently from states with lower inequality.

Table 2. Gini coefficient of the North-East states and zone

Geographical Zone	State	Gini Coefficient	Regional Average
North-East	Adamawa	27.78	29.07
	Bauchi	26.51	
	Borno	-	
	Gombe	31.54	
	Taraba	32.23	
	Yobe	27.31	

Source: Adapted from the National Bureau of Statistics (2020).

North-Eastern Nigeria is home to the Kanuri (Yobe and Borno), Fulani (Bauchi, Yobe, and Adamawa), Babur (Borno), and Tiv (Taraba), among others. The region, according to Table 2 above, exhibits moderate inequality, with a regional Gini slightly below the national level. However, the states cluster tightly around the average, showing limited internal dispersion of inequality compared to zones like North Central. This relative homogeneity suggests that within-region inequality is not extreme and instead, the zone's economic challenges could better be understood through poverty levels, with over 70 per cent of the population of the region classified as poor according to the World Bank (Olatunji, 2021).

Table 3. Gini coefficient of the North-West states and zone

Geographical Zone	State	Gini Coefficient	Regional Average
North-West	Jigawa	28	28.2
	Kaduna	35.19	
	Kano	28.64	
	Katsina	24.57	
	Kebbi	29.55	
	Sokoto	28.02	
	Zamfara	23.49	

Source: Adapted from the National Bureau of Statistics (2020).

From Table 3 above, the North-West (dominated by the Hausa-Fulani) records the lowest regional average Gini among the six zones, indicating a comparatively more equal distribution of income. Most states in the region cluster closely around the mean (28.2), resulting in low intra-regional dispersion. However, it is important to note that low inequality does not necessarily imply high welfare; complementary poverty data show that the North-West has the highest rate of poverty incidence across the geopolitical zones in Nigeria, with 77.7 percent (Jaiyeola & Bayat, 2020, cited from; Jaiyeola & Choga, 2021), meaning that many households share similarly low living standards.

Table 4. Gini coefficient of South-East states and zone

Geographical Zone	State	Gini Coefficient	Regional Average
South-East	Abia	24.48	26.06
	Anambra	24.99	
	Ebonyi	28.6	
	Enugu	24.99	
	Imo	27.24	

Source: Adapted from the National Bureau of Statistics (2020)

The South-East (Igbo) zone, according to Table 4 above, has the lowest inequality of all zones, with a regional Gini significantly below the national average. The states exhibit remarkable homogeneity, with Gini coefficients

tightly clustered, indicating a relatively equitable distribution of income. This pattern aligns with the region's strong traditions of communal networks (Irom et al., 2025) and kinship networks (Smith, 2011).

Table 5. Gini coefficient of the South-South states and zone

Geographical Zone	State	Gini Coefficient	Regional Average
South-South	Akwa Ibom	31.78	30.16
	Bayelsa	29.69	
	Cross River	30.68	
	Delta	29.84	
	Edo	29.52	
	Rivers	29.47	

Source: Adapted from the National Bureau of Statistics (2020)

In the South-South are the Ibibio people (Akwa Ibom), Ijaw (Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers), Itsekiri (Delta), Efik (Cross River), Bini (Edo), among others. From Table 5 above, the South-South region records the highest regional Gini among the six zones, indicating relatively higher inequality despite being Nigeria's bedrock of oil resources and a major earner of the country's foreign exchange.

Table 6. Gini coefficient of the South-West states and zone

Geographical Zone	State	Gini Coefficient	Regional Average
South-West	Ekiti	29.7	27.63
	Lagos	27.23	
	Ogun	27.1	
	Ondo	25.54	
	Osun	25.12	
	Oyo	31.09	

Source: Adapted from the National Bureau of Statistics (2020)

The South-West (Yoruba) has a moderate average inequality level, well below the national figure, but the region shows considerable internal variation. States like Ondo and Osun generally report lower inequality, indicating a more balanced distribution of income, with Oyo and Ekiti falling at the high end of the spectrum. This internal contrast underscores the urban-rural divide (Lagos and Oyo, for instance) within the region: metropolitan concentration of wealth alongside widespread low-income populations. These ethno-regional inequality patterns take on particular significance when viewed through the lens of Nigeria's demographic reality, where the burden of economic disparity falls disproportionately on the country's youth population. Nigeria's youthful population (those under the age of 30), comprising approximately 70% of the nation's total populace (development Research and Projects Centres, 2024), faces disproportionately high unemployment rates as a direct consequence of the country's systematic resource mismanagement (Oxfam International, n.d–b). According to a 2024 Afrobarometer poll, more than two-thirds (68%) of Nigerian youths were reported to have secondary or postsecondary education, yet nearly a quarter (23%) of this demography (those between the ages of 18 and 35) are unemployed and seeking employment (Mbaegbu, 2025). This paradox of respectable educational attainment coexisting with massive unemployment underscores the structural disconnect between Nigeria's human capital development and its economic opportunities, revealing a system that educates its youth but fails to productively engage their skills and potential. A macro analysis of Nigeria's political economy reveals a nation endowed with the resources to eradicate extreme poverty and level the playing field between the rich and poor and across different ethno-regional and demographic divides, yet is piloted by the least committed government in West Africa (Oxfam International, n.d–a).

The Interplay between Economic Inequality and Ethnic Identity Politics

Although Nigeria's overall Gini coefficient (35.13) suggests moderate inequality, a closer look at ethno-regional patterns reveals significant variations in the lived experience of economic disparity. The South-South, despite being the country's primary oil-producing zone, records the highest inequality of 30.16, reflecting stark contrasts between the resource-rich geo-political zone, while the communities in the region are excluded from the benefits of extraction (see Osaghae, 2015). In contrast, the South-East has the lowest inequality (26.06) yet continues to express some of the strongest grievances of political and economic exclusion (see Nsoedo, 2019; Osimen et al., 2025). Similarly, while the North-West exhibits relatively low inequality of 28.21, it remains one of the country's poorest regions, where deprivation is widespread and fuels collective banditry and violence (Ejiofor, 2022). These divergent patterns illustrate that economic inequality and ethnic mobilisation are not mechanically linked through dispersion of income and material wealth alone; rather, it is the interaction between perceived exclusion, resource distribution, and political representation that drives ethnic identity politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

The historical context of Nigeria demonstrates how fierce ethnic struggle has resulted from regional inequalities and centralised resource management, turning governance from a forum for national progress to a battlefield for resource distribution. The Northern region, for instance, has historically dominated federal patronage (Ekanade, 2012), a pattern that has not only entrenched regional inequalities but also fostered resentment among other regions who perceive themselves as systematically excluded from national resource distribution. This dominance has inevitably led to political instability and crises (Asadurian et al., 2006), as marginalised groups resort to various forms of resistance and counter-mobilisation to challenge what they view as an unjust political order. The resulting dynamic has made unequal access to resources a self-perpetuating cycle, making politics a dangerous enterprise where electoral victories translate directly into resource control, with ruling elites institutionalising inequitable fiscal policies that favour their regions (Ekanade, 2012) while systematically disadvantaging others, thereby deepening the very inequalities that fuel continued ethnic competition.

Ethno-regional capture of political power in Nigeria has resulted in skewed resource allocation, creating a governance system where political appointments and budgetary decisions are filtered through ethnic and regional considerations rather than merit or national equity. The Northern region's dominance in federal appointments and resource distribution has been a significant factor in this dynamic (Ekanade, 2012), establishing what amounts to an informal quota system that prioritises regional representation over competence and effectively locks out qualified candidates from other regions. This systematic bias has created entrenched patterns of exclusion that transcend individual administrations, leading to persistent horizontal inequalities that manifest across multiple dimensions of socio-economic development, particularly in wealth accumulation, educational opportunities, and access to federally administered services like electricity (Archibong, 2018). These disparities are not merely statistical artefacts but reflect deliberate policy choices that systematically favour certain regions over others. The federal government's historical policies have compounded these inequalities through infrastructure investments, educational funding, and industrial location decisions that consistently favour certain regions (Archibong, 2018), creating a cumulative disadvantage that becomes increasingly difficult to overcome as regions fall further behind in human capital development and economic competitiveness, ultimately reinforcing the very ethnic divisions that drive continued resource competition.

The interplay between economic inequality and ethnic identity politics has significant implications for democratic consolidation and political stability in Nigeria, creating a vicious cycle where economic grievances fuel ethnic mobilisation, which in turn undermines the institutional foundations necessary for sustained democratic governance. When citizens perceive that their ethnic group's economic marginalisation stems from systematic political exclusion, they lose faith in democratic processes as legitimate mechanisms for addressing grievances. This erosion of trust becomes particularly pronounced when ethnic competition and patronage politics undermine confidence in democratic institutions and decrease overall satisfaction with democracy (Brigevich & Oritsejafor, 2024), as citizens begin to view democratic participation as futile when outcomes appear predetermined by ethnic calculations rather than electoral competition. The resulting disillusionment creates fertile ground for alternative forms of political expression, often violent, as groups seek redress outside

democratic channels. Moreover, persistent ethnic inequalities and the resulting political violence create a destructive feedback loop that destabilises democracy and impedes economic development (Higashijima & Houle, 2018), as investment flees uncertain environments and human capital development suffers in conflict-prone regions, thereby perpetuating the very inequalities that sparked the initial ethnic tensions.

The ethno-regional capture of political power and skewed resource allocation pose serious threats to Nigeria's federalism and nation-building efforts, fundamentally undermining the federal bargain that promised equitable representation and resource sharing among constituent units. When federalism becomes a façade for ethnic domination rather than a genuine framework for power-sharing, it loses its legitimacy as a solution to Nigeria's diversity challenges. The centralisation of resources and the dominance of certain regions have created such deep resentment that they have led to calls for secession and increased conflicts (Oloruntoba, 2021), as marginalised groups begin to question whether remaining within the federation serves their interests or merely perpetuates their subordination. This dynamic represents a fundamental crisis of the Nigerian state, where the failure to ensure inclusive governance and equitable resource distribution has not only deepened ethnic divisions but also questioned the very legitimacy of the state (Oloruntoba, 2021) as a neutral arbiter capable of protecting all citizens equally.

This dynamic is further complicated by Nigeria's youth demographics, where young people bear the brunt of economic inequality irrespective of region. With persistently high unemployment rates and limited access to quality education, infrastructure, and social mobility, large sections of the youth population experience a form of structural exclusion that deepens their identification with ethnic and regional blocs as alternative avenues of security and belonging. In regions like the North-East, where inequality is moderate but poverty and unemployment remain pervasive, youth disenchantment has become a significant factor in their radicalisation and involvement in violent extremism (Ocheli, 2022). Conversely, in Lagos and other urban centres in Nigeria, where inequality is sharpened by urbanisation and migration (Ayuba et al., 2023), youth-led grievances manifest in protests like #EndSARS, underscoring how economic deprivation feeds political frustration and, ultimately, identity-based claims against the state.

Taken together, the interplay between economic inequality and ethnic identity politics in Nigeria is mediated less by statistical measures of income and wealth dispersion and more by historical narratives, structural exclusion, and access to state-controlled resources. Regional Gini coefficients provide valuable insights into patterns of inequality, but they cannot fully explain the intensity of ethnic mobilisation without accounting for perceptions of systematic marginalisation and the politicisation of resource allocation. Thus, while the federal system ostensibly promises equitable representation and redistribution, persistent disparities – whether in wealth, infrastructure, educational access, or employment opportunities – have entrenched cycles of grievance that shape political behaviour and identity formation. For Nigeria's youth in particular, whose socio-economic precarity transcends ethnic boundaries, the failure of the state to deliver inclusive development has made ethnic and regional solidarities increasingly salient, further undermining the legitimacy of democratic governance and national cohesion.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This paper set out to examine whether perceived systematic exclusion – rather than income disparity alone – mediates the relationship between economic inequality and ethnic mobilisation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The empirical analysis across all six geopolitical zones, combined with qualitative interpretation of the mechanisms linking inequality to political behaviour, supports a positive answer to this research question. The study shows that the South-East's combination of low inequality and intense separatist demands, the South-South's highest regional Gini despite being Nigeria's oil wealth source, and the North-West's lowest inequality alongside the country's highest poverty incidence all confirmed that perceived exclusion from state-controlled resources and political representation – rather than statistical income dispersion – drives ethnic identity politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

These findings challenge mechanistic economic determinism in the study of Nigerian ethnic politics. It confirms and extends the political economy of ethnicity framework, demonstrating that ethnic boundaries become politically salient through abstract income comparisons but through historically mediated narratives of exclusion, reinforced by observable patterns of biased federal appointments, skewed infrastructure investments, and asymmetric resource revenue distribution. It also deepens the comparative African literature by providing a detailed, zone-level empirical analysis that illustrates why the relationship between inequality and ethnic conflict is neither linear nor simple. The crisis of federalism that the paper identifies is not primarily a constitutional crisis, though constitutional reform may be part of the solution. It is, fundamentally a crisis of trust – a condition in which Nigeria's diverse ethnic communities have lost confidence that the federal system will treat them equitably. Addressing this crisis requires reforms that are specific, measurable, and grounded in the empirical findings of this study. Three reform directions are proposed here. First, fiscal federalism should be restructured through a more equitable and transparent revenue allocation mechanism. Specifically, the derivation principle for oil revenues should be revisited to ensure that South-South communities, as the source of Nigeria's primary export earnings, receive a more equitable share of resource revenues.

Second, youth-targeted economic investment should be concentrated in the zones where the combination of high poverty, high youth unemployment, and documented pathways to radicalisation or militancy is most acute. This should take the form of direct infrastructure investment in education-to-employment pipelines, including vocational training centres, technology hubs, and agricultural value-chain development, rather than generic youth enterprise schemes that have historically been captured by patronage networks. Third, federal appointments and the civil service should be governed by transparent, merit-based criteria that are independently monitored. A merit-based federal civil service, with transparent recruitment and published appointment data disaggregated by ethnicity and region, would provide both substantive equity and the symbolic signal of impartiality that the federal system currently fails to send. Future research should strengthen the empirical basis of this analysis by incorporating primary qualitative data from community-level actors across Nigeria's geopolitical zones. Survey data on perceptions of exclusion, paired with the Gini-based inequality analysis provided here, would enable more rigorous testing of the mediation argument advanced in this paper.

Nigeria's Fourth Republic continues to grapple with persistent economic inequalities and entrenched ethnic identity politics, which have transformed federalism into a zero-sum contest rather than a framework for inclusive governance. An examination of inequality along regional lines shows that ethnic political activation stems more from feelings of systematic marginalisation from government resources and political participation than from actual income and wealth differences. The abundance of natural resources, particularly evident in the South-South region, has failed to minimise inequality and has intensified resentment and distrust through elite monopolisation and exclusionary policies. These patterns undermine the credibility of Nigeria's federal bargain, encourage separatist movements, and impair democratic development. Given that seven out of ten Nigerians are below age 30, persistent youth unemployment despite high levels of education has strengthened group-based loyalties and promoted non-traditional and often aggressive political activities. Resolving these issues demands wide-ranging changes: reorganising financial federalism, emphasising economic programs focused on young people, and reinforcing democratic structures to advance merit-based governance, accountability, and inter-ethnic political partnerships. In the absence of these transformations, Nigeria risks maintaining grievance patterns that endanger national cohesion and the viability of its federal structure.

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