

Mobilised, Not Marginalised: Ethnicity, Gender, and Political Participation among Older Nigerians

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Abstract

Patronage-centred accounts of Nigerian politics assume that members of ethnic minority groups are excluded from political life, yet this assumption has never been tested among older adults. Using the Afrobarometer Round 10 survey in Nigeria (N = 1,600; adults aged 50 and above, n = 184), analysed with survey weights and cluster-robust standard errors, this article asks whether ethnic minority status predicts political exclusion in later life, whether trust in traditional leaders mediates any disparity, and whether gender and ethnicity intersect. Contrary to the deficit hypothesis, minority elders reported substantially higher non-electoral participation than majority-group elders (57.9% versus 29.0%; adjusted OR = 3.50, 95% CI [1.39, 8.82]), a difference carried by collective petitioning of government rather than by low-cost online activity, with no detectable difference in self-reported turnout. The association is nonetheless fragile. Ethnicity and region are nearly collinear among older respondents: comparing respondents within the same state reduces the estimate to OR = 1.52 (95% CI [0.85, 2.71]), and measuring ethnicity with the survey's direct identity item rather than home language reduces it to OR = 1.62 (95% CI [0.35, 7.57]). Across twenty-four specifications the estimate ranges from 1.16 to 7.17. Trust in traditional leaders neither varies by ethnicity nor predicts participation, so patronage-based trust cannot mediate the relationship, although contact with traditional leaders predicts participation strongly (OR = 6.55) and equally across groups. The most robust finding is gendered: older women's adjusted odds of participation are a fraction of older men's (OR = 0.06, 95% CI [0.01, 0.34]); 4.8% of majority-group women participated, against 43.1% of majority-group men, with no reliable gender-by-ethnicity interaction. Deficit accounts find no support, but it is gender, not ethnicity, that constitutes the consistent axis of exclusion from political voice among older Nigerians.

Introduction

Nigeria's political development has been shaped throughout by the management of ethnic difference. With more than 250 ethnic groups and a federal architecture built explicitly around ethno-regional balance, the country has institutionalised ethnicity as a principle of distribution through mechanisms such as the Federal Character Principle (Afigbo, 1989; Federal Character Commission, 1995). Scholarship on Nigerian politics has, in consequence, been dominated by the analysis of ethnic patronage: the claim that access to public goods, political networks and state recognition is mediated by membership of one of the three dominant groups — Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo — and that minority groups are correspondingly marginalised (Osaghae, 1998; Suberu, 2001; Mustapha, 2006; Demarest, Langer, & Ukiwo, 2020).

This literature carries an implicit behavioural prediction that has rarely been examined directly. If political participation depends on access to distributive networks, then those excluded from such networks should participate less. Yet an alternative tradition, drawing on grievance and collective-action theory, predicts the opposite: sustained marginalisation may intensify group identity, sharpen perceptions of injustice, and generate mobilisation through channels that do not require state validation (Hillesund, 2021; Titus & Ita, 2025). These two accounts — which may be termed the deficit and mobilisation

hypotheses — make opposing predictions about the same population, and the question of which better describes Nigerian political behaviour remains empirically open.

It is especially open for older adults, who are almost entirely absent from this literature. Age is routinely entered as a control variable in African political behaviour research rather than treated as an analytical category (Dim & Schafer, 2021; Tambe & Kopacheva, 2024), and Nigeria's ageing population — a consequence of demographic transition rather than of policy success — has attracted no quantitative study of ethnic disparities in political participation. This matters because the mechanisms proposed by both accounts are plausibly age-dependent. Patronage relationships accumulate over a lifetime; so do experiences of exclusion. Whether later life consolidates the advantages of majority-group membership or, alternatively, the political repertoires of the excluded, is a question that existing scholarship cannot answer.

This article addresses that gap using the Afrobarometer Round 10 survey in Nigeria. It asks four questions. First, does ethnic minority status predict lower political participation among Nigerians aged 50 and above, as the deficit hypothesis implies, or higher participation, as the mobilisation hypothesis implies? Second, does trust in traditional leaders — the most plausible patronage mechanism available in these data — mediate any observed relationship? Third, does local demographic context, in the form of a group's numerical position within its own state, moderate it? Fourth, how do gender and ethnicity jointly structure political voice in later life? The analysis is deliberately conservative in its inferences: because the subsample of older adults is small and because ethnicity in Nigeria is spatially concentrated, considerable attention is given throughout to establishing how much weight the observed associations can actually bear.

The article makes three contributions. Empirically, it provides the first quantitative evidence on ethnic disparities in political participation among older Nigerians, and finds a pattern opposite in sign to the one patronage theory predicts. Theoretically, it shows that the mechanism most often invoked to explain ethnic differences in African political behaviour — patronage-based trust in traditional authority — fails at its first link: ethnicity does not predict such trust, and such trust does not predict participation. Methodologically, it demonstrates how far conclusions in this field depend on decisions that are rarely reported — whether survey weights are applied, whether ethnicity is measured by language or by self-identification, and whether respondents are compared within or across regions — and it reports its own results across the full range of those decisions rather than selecting a single specification. The most robust finding to emerge is not about ethnicity at all, but about the near-total absence of older Nigerian women from extra-electoral political life.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Ethnic Patronage and the Deficit Expectation

Nigerian political scholarship has long characterised the state as neopatrimonial: formal institutions coexist with, and are frequently subordinated to, informal networks through which public resources are distributed along ethno-regional lines (Osaghae, 1998; Suberu, 2001). Ethnicity in this account is not merely a social identity but a currency of political exchange, structuring appointments, contracts, and the siting of public investment. The Federal Character Principle, introduced to guarantee proportional representation across states and groups, is the institutional expression of this logic, and a substantial literature argues that it has entrenched rather than dissolved the salience of ethnicity in claims upon the state (Afigbo, 1989; Ejibowah, 2001; Demarest, Langer, & Ukiwo, 2020; Ibhide & Mukoro, 2023). Recent assessments are more equivocal, suggesting that the principle protects minority representation in formal appointments while doing little to alter the informal distribution of power (Oikhala & Giwah, 2025; Ejere & Umana, 2025).

Empirical work on distributive politics is broadly consistent with the neopatrimonial characterisation. Ethnic favouritism shapes the allocation of public goods across much of sub-Saharan Africa (Mousseau & Mousseau, 2023; Bandyopadhyay & Green, 2025), and in Nigeria campaign targeting and vote-buying follow ethnic and partisan lines (Awoyemi, 2025; Uthman & Alli, 2026). Political loyalty and patronage have been implicated in the persistence of corruption and in the weakness of programmatic policy (Habane & Arrey, 2025), and identity-based political competition is a recurrent feature of Nigerian electoral contests (Alabi, SulaimanJamiu, & Akinkunmi, 2023; Osadola & Oludemi, 2021).

The behavioural corollary of this account is a deficit expectation. If political engagement is sustained by the anticipation of distributive return, then groups systematically excluded from patronage networks should disengage, and their exclusion should be visible not only in outcomes but in behaviour. This expectation is rarely stated as a testable hypothesis, yet it underwrites a substantial body of work on minority marginalisation in Nigeria (Ademiluyi & Kehinde-Awoyele, 2024; Nnabuihe, Onwuzuruigbo, & Ihembe, 2024; Odanwu, 2026), and it accords with resource-based models of participation in which political engagement follows access, skills, and recruitment through networks (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Putnam, 2000). It is this prediction — lower participation among minority-group citizens — that the present study is designed to test.

Minority Mobilisation: The Competing Expectation

An alternative literature reverses the prediction. Where exclusion is experienced as injustice rather than as mere disadvantage, it may generate political action rather than suppress it, and specifically action that bypasses formal institutions whose legitimacy is contested. Cross-national evidence links horizontal inequality — inequality between culturally defined groups — to non-violent protest rather than to quiescence (Abbs, 2019; Hillesund, 2021; Solomon & Cocodia, 2023), and comparative work on attitudes toward redistribution finds that group grievance sustains political demand rather than dissolving it (Kuppens, Leopold, & Langer, 2024; Leopold, Langer, & Ukiwo, 2026).

Nigeria supplies a conspicuous illustration. Decades of resource-control agitation in the Niger Delta constitute sustained collective action by communities defined precisely by their minority status and by their exclusion from the distribution of oil revenue (Titus & Ita, 2025). Comparable, if less studied, patterns of communal mobilisation are found across the Middle Belt. Digital communication has widened this repertoire further, providing channels of political expression that require neither party sponsorship nor state recognition, and that have been used with particular effect by groups poorly served by conventional representation (Bello & Kaufhold, 2023; Nasidi, Hassan, Mustapha, & Ahmad, 2025; Bamidele, 2026).

The mobilisation account therefore predicts that minority status will be associated with higher, not lower, participation, and that the association will be concentrated in extra-electoral forms – petitioning, protest, media contact, online political expression – rather than in voting, which is comparatively insensitive to grievance and heavily structured by mobilisation drives and partisan machinery (Blais, 2000; Paget, 2019). The two hypotheses are distinguishable in the same data because they differ in the sign of the expected association. Adjudicating between them is the first task of this article.

Traditional Authority as the Proposed Mechanism

If the deficit account is correct, some mechanism must transmit patronage exclusion into political behaviour. Traditional leaders are the most plausible candidate in the Nigerian context. They retain substantial legitimacy, mediate access to local public goods and dispute resolution, and are frequently characterised as ethnic brokers linking communities to the state (Baldwin, 2016; Honig, 2019; Igwubor, 2021; Gana & Umar, 2025). Where political trust in formal institutions is low – and in Nigeria it is very low, with corruption perceptions corroding confidence in government at every level (Gebrihet, 2024) – traditional authority may be the principal institutional channel through which ordinary citizens, and older citizens especially, articulate demands.

The comparative evidence on the democratic consequences of this role is genuinely divided. Traditional leaders have been shown to improve service delivery and to strengthen electoral accountability in some settings (Baldwin & Raffler, 2019; Harding, 2020), and to facilitate elite capture and the entrenchment of unaccountable power in others (Acemoglu, Reed, & Robinson, 2014; Ubink & Duda, 2021). The difference appears to turn partly on whether chiefs are ethnically aligned with the citizens they serve, and on whether the state has formally recognised their authority (Mustasilta, 2018; Chlouba, 2020). This ambiguity is precisely why traditional authority is worth testing rather than assuming as a mechanism.

The patronage hypothesis makes two specific and separable claims about it. Ethnic group membership should predict trust in traditional leaders, since majority-group citizens are the presumed beneficiaries of chiefly brokerage; and that trust should in turn predict participation. Both links are testable in these data, and both are tested below – an approach that, as the results show, matters, since the failure occurs at the first link rather than the second.

Age and the Gerontological Silence

Two populations are systematically under-examined in this literature. The first is older adults. Life-course models developed in established democracies predict that participation rises with age as civic skills, political knowledge and community attachments accumulate, before declining in advanced old age as health and mobility constrain activity (Goerres, 2007; Bhatti & Hansen, 2012). Recent evidence adds that social capital and network embeddedness sustain political engagement in later life (Nygqvist, Serrat, Nygård, & Näsman, 2024; Lai et al., 2026).

The African evidence is thinner and less consistent. Comparative Afrobarometer analyses find that the relationship between age and participation varies substantially with political context, and that older Africans are more engaged in some arenas and less in others (Dim & Schafer, 2021; Tambe & Kopacheva, 2024). More importantly for present purposes, age is almost invariably entered as a control variable rather than treated as an analytical category, so that the possibility that ethnicity structures participation differently at different life stages has gone untested. This omission is consequential because the mechanisms proposed by both the deficit and the mobilisation accounts are plausibly cumulative: patronage relationships are built over decades, and so are experiences of exclusion and the repertoires developed in response to them. Nigeria's ageing population makes the omission increasingly untenable (Agunbiade & Adumashi, 2026).

Gender, Age, and Political Space

The second under-examined population is women, and older women in particular. Women's under-representation in Nigerian formal politics is extensively documented and is generally attributed to structural constraints: economic dependence, restricted mobility, the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, and religious and cultural norms governing women's speech in public settings (Okorie, 2016; Likinyo & Arum, 2025; Ojo, 2025; Adesoye, Israel, & Kholofelo, 2025; Musengimana, 2025). Comparative African evidence links women's political representation to financial access and economic inclusion (Dianda, Ouedraogo, Ouedraogo, & Goumbri, 2020; Fokwa, 2025), and shows that where women do gain political voice, the consequences for public goods provision are substantial (Opoku & Acheampong, 2024).

Purely structural accounts are, however, incomplete. Historical work demonstrates that the depth of women's political exclusion varies with pre-colonial kinship structures and with the disruptions of the slave trade (Walters, Chisadza, & Clance, 2024), and religious and cultural scholarship shows that women contest as well as absorb patriarchal norms (Manyonganise, 2023; Bond, 2018). What is largely missing is any treatment of gender as a moderator of ethnic effects rather than as a control variable, and any treatment of older women as a distinct political category. Whether the participatory consequences of minority status differ for older men and older women is therefore unknown — and it is the fourth question of this study.

The Present Study

Figure 1 summarises the framework. Ethnic minority status is expected, under the deficit pathway, to reduce political participation through diminished patronage access, indexed here by trust in traditional leaders; under the mobilisation pathway, it is expected to increase participation, particularly in non-electoral forms, without operating through institutional trust. Gender and regional ethnic concentration are modelled as potential moderators, and age functions as the boundary condition defining the population rather than as an explanatory variable. The two pathways generate opposing predictions about the sign of the ethnic association, and the analysis is designed to adjudicate between them while establishing, transparently, the limits of what a survey of this size can settle.

Methodology

Design and Data

The article analyses the Afrobarometer Round 10 survey in Nigeria, a nationally representative cross-sectional survey of 1,600 adult citizens administered by NOI Polls between 19 June and 17 July 2024. The sample is a clustered, stratified, multi-stage area probability sample, stratified by region and urban–rural location, with primary sampling units drawn with probability proportionate to size, eight households per unit, and respondents selected through a gender-alternating randomised procedure. Because the design is not simple random, all analyses reported below apply the Afrobarometer within-country weight and cluster-robust standard errors.

Analyses focus on respondents aged 50 and above, a threshold conventional in the African ageing literature given lower life expectancy and earlier markers of social ageing than in the global North. Of the 1,600 respondents, 219 were aged 50 or above; 34 reported English, Pidgin or an unspecified “Other” home language and could not be assigned an ethnic category, and one was missing on education, yielding an analytic sample of $n = 184$ (142 majority-group, 42 minority-group). Two features of this subsample require acknowledgement. Respondents aged 50 and above constitute only 14.1% of the weighted adult sample, against a national projection nearer one fifth; and the subsample is 68% male (33.5% female after weighting) against a population value near 52%. The sex ratio is exactly balanced at ages 45–49, as the survey's quota requires, and then collapses at every subsequent band – a pattern indicating age misreporting by older women rather than Nigerian demography. Findings concerning older women rest, accordingly, on a small and possibly selected group ($n = 61$).

Measures

Ethnicity was coded from respondents' home language (Q2), with Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo speakers classified as the ethnic majority and all other groups as ethnic minorities. Because this coding decision proves consequential, two alternatives are carried through the analysis: the survey's direct ethnic identity item (Q83A), which is available for many respondents excluded by the language coding; and a variant of

the language measure in which Fulani respondents are classified as majority, on the grounds that the Hausa-Fulani bloc is conventionally treated as one of Nigeria's dominant political formations.

Non-electoral participation was measured as a binary composite of four items asking whether respondents had, in the preceding year, joined others to request action from government (Q11A), contacted the media (Q11B), posted about politics on social media (Q11C), or participated in a demonstration or protest (Q11D). Because these acts differ markedly in cost, results are also reported item by item and for a restricted outcome comprising the two higher-cost acts alone. Turnout was measured by self-reported voting in the 2023 national election (Q13A). Trust in traditional leaders (Q37K, four-point scale) served as the candidate mediator; it was adopted after data inspection, in place of awareness of social protection schemes, which the Round 10 instrument does not contain. A behavioural indicator of engagement with traditional authority was constructed from contact with a traditional leader in the past year (Q12C). Local minority status was operationalised as the respondent's ethnic group's weighted population share within their state, and as a binary indicator of local plurality. Covariates were gender, urban–rural residence, education (ten-category ordinal), and age; a lived-poverty index and religious affiliation were added in an extended specification.

Analysis

All models are weighted logistic regressions with cluster-robust standard errors (67 sampling areas), estimated in Python. Estimates are presented as an ordered sequence — naive specification, then weights, then cluster-robust errors, then geopolitical-zone fixed effects, then extended covariates — so that the sensitivity of the result to each analytic choice is visible rather than concealed within a single preferred model. Because ethnicity and region prove to be nearly collinear within the older subsample, the regional confounding of the ethnic association is examined further in the full adult sample, where sufficient within-state variation exists to compare co-resident respondents of different groups.

Mediation is assessed in a manner appropriate to a non-linear model. Coefficients from nested logistic regressions are not directly comparable, because the latent outcome is rescaled whenever a covariate is added (Mood, 2010); the familiar practice of comparing coefficients with and without a mediator is therefore not a valid test. Mediation is instead evaluated by estimating the path from ethnicity to the mediator and by comparing y^* -standardised coefficients following Karlson, Holm and Breen (2012). Robustness is summarised through a specification curve (Simonsohn, Simmons, & Nelson, 2020) across twenty-four combinations of three ethnicity codings, region fixed effects, survey weights and covariate sets. The gender-by-ethnicity interaction is estimated within the 50-and-above sample; a full-sample estimate is reported for comparison. A post-hoc power analysis quantifies the limits of the design. Afrobarometer adheres to established ethical protocols for survey research, including informed consent, voluntary participation and anonymisation; the present analysis of de-identified secondary data required no further approval.

Results

Ethnic Disparities in Participation

The findings run counter to the deficit hypothesis. Older adults from ethnic minority backgrounds were considerably more likely than majority-group elders to have engaged in non-electoral political action: 57.9% reported at least one such act in the preceding year, against 29.0% of majority-group elders (Table 1). Adjusting for gender, residence, education and age, and applying survey weights and cluster-robust standard errors, the association remained strong (OR = 3.50, 95% CI [1.39, 8.82], $p = .008$). It was confined to extra-electoral voice: self-reported turnout did not differ meaningfully (92.5% versus 88.3%; OR = 1.19, 95% CI [0.16, 8.85], $p = .863$). That null should not be over-read. Self-reported turnout in this sample is approximately 90%, whereas the Independent National Electoral Commission (2023) recorded turnout of 26.7% in the 2023 presidential election; the measure is saturated by social desirability and cannot register group differences of plausible magnitude.

The disparity is not an artefact of costless online expression. Decomposing the composite (Table 1), it is carried overwhelmingly by collective petitioning of government, the most common act in the battery, on which minority elders exceeded majority-group elders by nearly thirty percentage points. Restricting the outcome to the two higher-cost acts – petitioning and demonstrating – produced a larger, not a smaller, estimate (OR = 6.48, 95% CI [1.33, 31.44], $p = .021$).

Table 1

Political participation by ethnic group, adults aged 50+ (weighted percentages; odds ratios adjusted for gender, residence, education and age, with survey weights and cluster-robust standard errors)

Any non-electoral act (%)	Majority (n = 142)	Minority (n = 42)	Adjusted OR [95% CI]
	29.0	57.9	3.50 [1.39, 8.82], $p = .008$
Voted in 2023 election (%)	88.3	92.5	1.19 [0.16, 8.85], $p = .863$
Joined others to request govt action (%)	23.8	53.4	—
Contacted the media (%)	7.8	11.5	—
Posted about politics on social media (%)	5.7	11.9	—
Demonstration or protest (%)	2.4	8.6	—
Higher-cost acts only (%)	25.2	53.4	6.48 [1.33, 31.44], $p = .021$

How Much Weight Can the Disparity Bear?

The estimate is nonetheless less secure than its confidence interval alone implies, and the reason must be stated plainly: within the older subsample, ethnic category and region are very nearly the same

variable (Table 2). Four of the six zones contain effectively one group – the South-South contains no majority-group elders at all, while the North-West, South-East and South-West contain two, one and one minority elder respectively. A model with zone fixed effects is therefore identified almost entirely off the thirty-five respondents of the North-Central and North-East, which is why the coefficient rises (OR = 5.46) while its interval expands to [1.13, 26.28]. The zones themselves differ sharply for reasons unrelated to individual ethnicity: the South-South, the historic centre of resource-control mobilisation, is the country's most participatory zone and is 95.5% ethnic minority; the South-West is the least participatory and is 97% majority.

Table 2
Distribution of the 50 + analytic sample by zone and ethnic category, with weighted zone participation rates

Zone	Majority (n)	Minority (n)	Participation (%)
North-Central	6	16	48.1
North-East	7	6	60.9
North-West	53	2	35.7
South-East	30	1	37.7
South-South	0	16	49.1
South-West	46	1	14.9

Because the older subsample cannot separate these explanations, the question was taken to the full adult sample ($n = 1,331$), where minority and majority respondents co-reside in sufficient numbers to permit a within-state comparison (Table 3). Without regional controls the association resembles that among elders (OR = 3.27, 95% CI [1.88, 5.69]); with zone fixed effects it falls (OR = 2.66); and with state fixed effects – comparing respondents living in the same state – it falls to OR = 1.52 (95% CI [0.85, 2.71], $p = .156$), no longer distinguishable from no effect. Roughly two-thirds of the apparent ethnic advantage is attributable to where minority Nigerians live rather than to ethnicity as such.

Measurement is a second source of fragility. Using the survey's direct ethnic identity item rather than home language, the association is OR = 1.62 (95% CI [0.35, 7.57], $p = .538$). Two coding decisions account for most of the difference: the language scheme discards 34 of the 219 age-eligible elders who report English, Pidgin or “Other” as their home language, though most of them do report an ethnic group; and it classifies Fulani respondents as a minority, which is difficult to defend given the position of the Hausa-Fulani bloc in Nigerian federal politics. Recoding Fulani respondents alone halves the estimate (OR = 2.77). Across the twenty-four specifications of the specification curve the minority odds ratio ranges from 1.16 to 7.17, and only fourteen reach conventional significance; every specification combining the direct ethnicity measure with a regional control is null.

Table 3

Sensitivity of the ethnic minority association to analytic and measurement decisions (M1–M6: adults aged 50+, n = 184; M7: all adults, n = 1,331)

Specification	OR (minority)	95% CI	p
M1. Unweighted, iid SE, no regional control	3.66	[1.60, 8.37]	.002
M2. + survey weights and cluster-robust SE	3.50	[1.39, 8.82]	.008
M3. + geopolitical zone fixed effects	5.46	[1.13, 26.28]	.034
M4. + lived poverty and religion	4.32	[0.71, 26.32]	.113
M5. Fulani coded as majority (zone FE)	2.77	[0.66, 11.58]	.162
M6. Direct ethnicity item, Q83A (zone FE)	1.62	[0.35, 7.57]	.538
M7. Full adult sample, state fixed effects	1.52	[0.85, 2.71]	.156
Range across 24 specifications	1.16–7.17	—	14 of 24 at p < .05

Trust, Traditional Authority, and the Absence of Mediation

Trust in traditional leaders does not mediate the relationship, and the reason is more fundamental than a weak indirect effect. The first link of the chain is absent: ethnic group membership is unrelated to trust in traditional leaders ($b = 0.115$, $SE = 0.271$, $p = .671$). Where the path from the independent variable to the mediator is null, no indirect effect is possible. For completeness, the mediator is also unrelated to the outcome — trust in traditional leaders predicts participation for no one in this sample ($OR = 0.92$, 95% CI [0.57, 1.48], $p = .723$) — and the y^* -standardised coefficient for minority status is unchanged by its inclusion (0.690 versus 0.693).

The behavioural indicator is more informative than the attitudinal one. Older Nigerians who had contacted a traditional leader were markedly more likely to have engaged in non-electoral action ($OR = 6.55$, 95% CI [1.79, 24.01], $p = .005$) — but they were equally likely to have done so irrespective of ethnic group (62.6% of minority elders versus 55.5% of majority-group elders, n.s.). Traditional authority thus operates as a substantial but ethnically undifferentiated channel of political voice.

Local demographic context added little. Respondents outnumbered within their own state participated at 56.1% against 32.0% among those whose group held a local plurality, but with only 29 locally outnumbered elders the estimate is imprecise ($OR = 2.19$, 95% CI [0.43, 11.05], $p = .342$), and the indicator adds nothing once national minority status is in the model ($OR = 1.50$, $p = .624$). The moderation hypothesis is untested rather than refuted.

Gender as the Dominant Axis of Exclusion

The gender main effect is the largest and most robust finding in this study, and — contrary to the original analysis plan — it is estimable within the older subsample itself. Among majority-group elders, 43.1% of men but only 4.8% of women reported any non-electoral act; among minority-group elders the figures are

71.3% and 22.8% (Table 4). Adjusted for ethnicity, education, residence, age and zone, older women's odds of participation are a small fraction of older men's (OR = 0.06, 95% CI [0.01, 0.34], $p = .002$). This holds under every specification examined.

Table 4
Non-electoral participation by gender and ethnic group, adults aged 50+ (weighted; gender-by-ethnicity interaction $b = 0.645$, $SE = 1.169$, $p = .581$)

Men	Majority	Minority
	43.1% (n = 92)	71.3% (n = 31)
Women	4.8% (n = 50)	22.8% (n = 11)

The interaction does not survive. Within the older subsample the gender-by-ethnicity interaction is small, imprecise and in the opposite direction to that initially expected ($b = 0.645$, $SE = 1.169$, $p = .581$). In the full adult sample it is negative under the naive specification ($b = -0.672$, $p = .031$) but loses statistical reliability as soon as survey weights are applied ($b = -0.566$, $p = .130$) and remains non-significant with cluster-robust errors and zone fixed effects ($p = .183$). The data support a large gender gap operating additively within both ethnic categories, and provide no reliable evidence that ethnicity modifies it.

Finally, the limits of the design deserve quantification. With 142 majority-group and 42 minority-group elders and a baseline rate of 30%, the study has approximately 24% power to detect a ten-point difference, 44% for fifteen points, 66% for twenty and 84% only at twenty-five. The observed difference of roughly twenty-nine points sits at the edge of detectability. Every null reported here – for turnout, local concentration, and the gender-by-ethnicity interaction – should therefore be read as an absence of evidence rather than as evidence of absence.

Discussion

This study set out to adjudicate between deficit and mobilisation accounts of ethnic political behaviour among older Nigerians. On balance the evidence favours mobilisation: at no point, under any specification, do minority elders participate less than majority-group elders, which is what the deficit hypothesis requires. The adjudication is, however, partial rather than decisive, and the qualifications matter as much as the headline.

Minority Advantage and Its Limits

Minority elders reported non-electoral participation at roughly twice the rate of majority-group elders, and the gap is carried by acts that carry real costs – collective petitioning and protest – rather than by costless online expression. This is a genuine departure from the expectations of patronage-centred scholarship, which anticipates withdrawal among those excluded from distributive networks.

Two qualifications bound the conclusion tightly. The first is spatial. Ethnic minority status in Nigeria is not distributed randomly: it is concentrated in the Niger Delta and Middle Belt, regions with dense and historically specific repertoires of contention built around resource control, environmental grievance and communal conflict. Within the older subsample these cannot be distinguished, and when they can — by comparing co-resident respondents in the full adult sample — two-thirds of the apparent ethnic effect disappears. A substantial part of what is read here, and arguably in the wider literature, as minority mobilisation may in fact be the political culture of particular places, in which majority-group residents participate at elevated rates too. The second qualification is measurement: with the survey's direct ethnicity item the association is roughly a third of its headline size and statistically indistinguishable from zero. The finding is therefore best characterised as exploratory and directionally informative rather than as an established quantity.

Traditional Authority Reconsidered

The mediation result challenges patronage theorising more cleanly than anticipated. If traditional leaders functioned primarily as ethnic patrons, ethnic group membership should predict trust in them. It does not, and trust in traditional leaders predicts nothing at all here. Where the mechanism is visible is behavioural: older Nigerians who had contacted a traditional leader were more than six times as likely to have acted politically — equally so whichever group they belonged to. This suggests a reformulation. Traditional authority in contemporary Nigeria may be better understood not as an ethnically selective patronage machine but as a general-purpose infrastructure of political voice: a locally available channel through which citizens with a grievance take it somewhere, used by minority and majority elders in roughly equal measure. That reading is consistent with Baldwin's (2016) account of chiefs as development intermediaries and with Chlouba's (2020) finding that the complementarity of traditional and state institutions depends on alignment rather than on ethnicity as such.

Implications for the Patronage Paradigm

Taken together, these results place a burden of specification on patronage theory that it has not so far had to carry. The paradigm's descriptive claims about Nigerian distributive politics are not in question here: the evidence that public goods, appointments and campaign resources flow along ethno-regional lines is strong (Demarest, Langer, & Ukiwo, 2020; Awoyemi, 2025). What is in question is the behavioural inference commonly drawn from those claims — that exclusion from distribution produces political withdrawal. Among older Nigerians, it demonstrably does not. Whatever minority elders are doing when they petition government, contact the media and join demonstrations at twice the rate of their majority-group peers, it is not withdrawal, and it is not mediated by their relationship to traditional authority. Patronage theory can accommodate this, but only by specifying explicitly the conditions under which exclusion demobilises and those under which it mobilises — a specification the literature has largely left implicit.

The findings also converge with a growing body of African political behaviour scholarship that finds participation sustained, and sometimes intensified, in contexts of low institutional trust and weak

distributive return (Abbs, 2019; Hillesund, 2021; Bello & Kaufhold, 2023). They diverge sharply, however, from accounts that treat federal-character-style inclusion as the principal determinant of minority political confidence (Ibhade & Mukoro, 2023; Oikhala & Giwah, 2025). If formal ethnic inclusion were the operative mechanism, the participatory gap should run in the opposite direction to the one observed.

The Primacy of Gender

The most consequential result concerns gender rather than ethnicity. Within the older subsample, women's adjusted odds of non-electoral participation are approximately one-sixteenth of men's; fewer than one majority-group woman in twenty reported any non-electoral political act in the preceding year, against more than two men in five. This is not a marginal disparity but a near-absence of older Nigerian women from the extra-electoral public sphere, and it extends the established scholarship on women's exclusion from formal politics (Okorie, 2016; Likinyo & Arum, 2025; Ojo, 2025): the exclusion documented at the level of candidacy and office is reproduced, and if anything intensified, in precisely those arenas where formal barriers to entry are lowest.

It is equally important to state what the data do not show. There is no reliable evidence that this gap interacts with ethnicity. The interaction attains significance only under the naive assumption of simple random sampling; applying the survey weights removes it, and within the older subsample the point estimate reverses sign. Gender operates as a large, consistent, additive constraint within both ethnic categories. This is arguably a stronger claim than the intersectional one, and it has a direct policy implication: older Nigerian women's exclusion from political voice does not depend on their ethnic group, and would not be remedied by measures aimed at ethnic inclusion alone.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations constrain these findings. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Most importantly, ethnic category and region are nearly collinear within the older subsample, so this study cannot cleanly separate an ethnic from a regional effect; the within-state analysis suggests much of the association is regional, and future work should oversample older minority respondents living outside their regional strongholds. The estimate is also sensitive to the measurement of ethnicity, and future studies should prefer the direct identity item and report their sensitivity to this choice rather than a single coding.

The subsample is small ($n = 184$, of whom 42 belong to minority groups) and markedly male-skewed, in a pattern consistent with age misreporting by older women; the study is therefore underpowered for anything beyond a large main effect, and its estimates for older women rest on a small and possibly selected group. Outcome measures are self-reported and, in the case of turnout, over-reported by a factor of more than three. Marital status was not retained in the Round 10 instrument, precluding examination of widowhood. Most fundamentally, while this study documents what minority elders do, it cannot establish why: no measure of grievance, perceived marginalisation or political efficacy was available, and the mobilisation interpretation is therefore consistent with the data rather than

demonstrated by them. Future research should include such measures directly. Finally, the single-country design limits generalisability.

Conclusion

Among older Nigerians, ethnic minority status is associated with elevated rather than depressed non-electoral political participation — a pattern inconsistent with the deficit predictions of patronage-centred theory and more compatible with a mobilisation account. The association is carried by comparatively costly acts of collective petitioning, and it is not explained by trust in traditional leaders, which neither varies by ethnicity nor predicts participation for anyone. It should nonetheless be treated as exploratory: ethnicity and region are nearly collinear among older respondents, two-thirds of the effect disappears when co-resident respondents are compared, and the estimate shrinks materially when ethnicity is measured directly rather than through language.

What emerges most clearly from these data is not an ethnic story but a gendered one. Older Nigerian women are close to absent from non-electoral political life, and this gap operates consistently within both ethnic categories. Policy aimed at strengthening political inclusion among older Nigerians should therefore begin with the barriers facing older women, which are pervasive, consistent and considerably better evidenced than any ethnic disparity these data can establish. The contribution of this article lies less in settling the debate between deficit and mobilisation accounts than in showing, with a transparently bounded analysis, exactly how far the available evidence can carry it.

Declarations

Ethical Consideration

The empirical evidence was generated using publicly available, anonymised secondary data from Afrobarometer. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to during the data collection, and the results presented in this paper are anonymised, thereby eliminating any personal identifiers of the respondents who participated in the survey.

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Author Contribution

OMA conceived the research idea, drafted the outline and the review of relevant literature, and drafting of the full manuscript. JWM conducted the data analysis, interpretation and drafting of the report and the manuscript. JK drafting of the full manuscript

Data Availability

Afrobarometer Data, Nigeria, Round 10, 2024, available at <https://www.afrobarometer.org>

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Figures

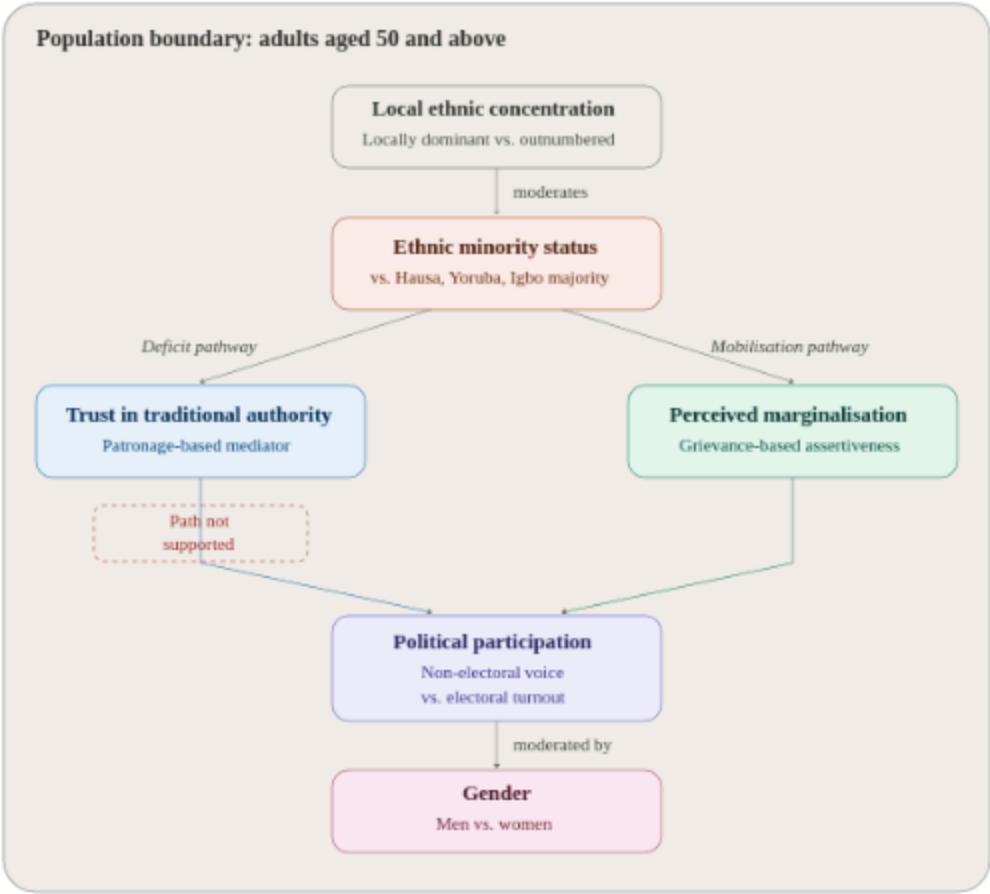


Figure 1

Conceptual framework depicting ethnic minority status, the deficit and mobilisation pathways, and the moderating roles of gender and local ethnic concentration, within the age 50+ population boundary.