THE ROLE OF CIVIC EDUCATION IN ADDRESSING ETHNIC IDENTITY AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE: INSIGHT FROM THE NIGERIAN 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN LAGOS STATE

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Abstract

Ethnic identity has consistently shaped Nigeria's political processes, often contributing to voter polarization and electoral violence. The 2023 general elections in Lagos State revealed that 53% of surveyed voters reported their electoral choices were influenced by ethnic affiliations, which escalated violence in key hotspots. This study examines the drivers of ethnic identity, its impact on electoral outcomes, and the mitigating role of civic education. Anchored in Social Identity and Planned Behaviour theories, the study utilized a mixed-methods approach, collecting data through 400 structured surveys and key informant interviews across six violence-prone Local Government Areas (LGAs) identified by INEC reports. Findings reveal that cultural heritage and group solidarity were significant drivers of ethnic identity, influencing voter behaviour and perpetuating violence. While civic education reduced susceptibility to ethnic rhetoric, only 47% of respondents agreed they had received adequate civic education, highlighting gaps in its implementation. The study recommends integrating ethnic inclusivity into civic education curricula, leveraging digital tools, and fostering collaboration among government, civil society, religious and traditional leaders to promote peaceful elections.

Keywords: Ethnic identity, electoral violence, civic education, Lagos state, voter behaviour

Introduction

Nigeria's democratic journey has remained deeply intertwined with the realities of ethnic plurality, especially in electoral contexts. The 2023 general elections in Lagos State marked a critical turning point, revealing deeply entrenched patterns of ethnic mobilisation and targeted political violence. Reports by The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) (2023) and SBM Intelligence (2023) documented disturbing trends of ethnic profiling, voter suppression, and intimidation, especially in areas like Surulere, Ojo, Alimosho, and Eti-Osa. These incidents were widely circulated on both traditional and social media, highlighting the increasing weaponisation of ethnic identity as a political tool. In many polling units, voters of Igbo descent were reportedly denied access to vote, with threats and violence used to dissuade perceived "outsiders" from influencing outcomes (International Crisis Group, 2023). At the heart of this discourse lie three interrelated concepts: ethnic identity, electoral violence, and civic education. Ethnic identity, as a social construct, forms a central component of group belonging and political allegiance. In electoral contexts, it often manifests in "ethnic outbidding"—a process where political actors make extreme ethnic appeals to secure loyalty (Horowitz, 2022). Electoral violence, in turn, emerges when these ethnic sentiments escalate into threats, suppression, and physical confrontations. Civic education, positioned as a mitigating instrument, aims to reshape attitudes, promote tolerance, and encourage issue-based participation rather than identity-based voting. While numerous civic education initiatives have been deployed by civil society organisations, INEC, and the National Orientation Agency (NOA), their efficacy remains limited. The 2023 Lagos elections provide a critical case study to assess whether civic education has meaningfully influenced voter behaviour

or merely served as a ceremonial intervention. This paper seeks to examine this intersection how ethnic identity shaped voting behaviour and electoral violence, and what role, if any, civic education played in mitigating these tensions. This study is theoretically anchored in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which explains how individuals derive identity from group membership, often leading to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination. The electoral implications are profound: voters are more likely to support candidates perceived to represent their ethnic group, regardless of competence or policy agenda. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) complements this by focusing on how attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioural control influence electoral conduct. Civic education, therefore, has the potential to reshape norms and expectations around elections, encouraging voters to make informed and peaceful choices.

Notwithstanding increasing awareness campaigns and civic education programs in Lagos State, ethnic-based electoral violence continues to recur with troubling intensity. The persistence of this phenomenon suggests disconnect between civic education content and the lived realities of urban voters. A significant portion of the electorate still prioritises ethnic identity over democratic ideals and policy engagement (Okonkwo, 2023). Furthermore, most civic education frameworks appear ill-equipped to address the deep-seated grievances, historical distrust, and socio-political inequalities that fuel ethnic polarisation and electoral violence. The challenge is twofold: first, to understand the depth of ethnic influence on voting behaviour; second, to evaluate the extent to which civic education has succeeded—or failed in countering this influence, particularly in the context of Lagos State's 2023 elections. Conceptual discussions around civic education and electoral violence underscore the role of informed citizenship in promoting democratic stability. Branson and Quigley (1998) define civic education as a system for preparing citizens to participate meaningfully in democratic governance. In Nigeria, however, scholars like Oloyede (2016) argue that civic education is often inconsistently implemented and fails to reach marginalised communities. Similarly, electoral violence remains a recurring challenge—manifesting through ballot box snatching, intimidation, and targeted attacks, often driven by ethnic and political rivalries (Fischer, 2021). Ethnic identity, particularly in urban settings like Lagos, is both a cultural and political construct. It shapes perceptions of power, access, and inclusion. Horowitz (2022) and Onapajo (2014) contend that Nigeria's multi-ethnic landscape fosters zero-sum political competition, where group interests overshadow national cohesion. Kadiri and Jeremiah (2023) observed that Lagos' 2023 elections were marred by strong ethnic rhetoric and threats of exclusion, especially towards the Igbo community. Empirical studies further confirm that civic education plays a moderating role. The International Republican Institute (2021) and Bratton and Logan (2021) found that robust civic engagement reduced susceptibility to ethnic manipulation in African elections. However, gaps persist. Iwilade (2021) notes the lack of focus on urban electoral dynamics, while Duruji et al. (2018) criticise the superficial implementation of civic education programs in Nigeria. Additionally, most Nigerian studies fail to incorporate behavioural theories like Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour, limiting their ability to explain voter attitude transformation (Olayode, 2020).

Purpose of the Study
1. To investigate how ethnic identity influenced voter behaviour, and electoral violence during the 2023 general elections in Lagos State.

2. To evaluate the moderating role and implementation gaps of civic education in reducing ethnic-based tensions.
3. Make evidence-based recommendations for strengthening civic education programs and policies aimed at reducing ethnic-based electoral violence.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. To what extent did ethnic identity influenced voter behaviour, and electoral violence during the 2023 general elections in Lagos State?
2. What role did civic education play in mitigating ethnic-based electoral violence, and what were its limitations in the Lagos context?
3. What evidence-based recommendations for strengthening civic education programs and policies aimed at reducing ethnic-based electoral violence can be made?

Methods

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach, which involves collecting both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, analysing them independently, and then merging the findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. This approach was chosen to enable triangulation of findings on how civic education interacts with ethnic identity and electoral violence in Lagos State. The study was conducted in six violence-prone Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Lagos State—Mushin, Oshodi-Isolo, Ojo (Alaba), Eti-Osa, Alimosho, and Surulere—based on incident reports from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2023) and verified election observer data. A multistage sampling technique was employed. First, the LGAs were purposively selected due to their history of electoral violence. Within each LGA, specific wards were randomly selected, and from those, respondents were drawn using systematic sampling. For the quantitative component, structured questionnaires were administered to 400 registered voters (male and female) across the six selected LGAs. The questionnaire consisted of both closed and scaled questions focusing on ethnic identity, voter behaviour, exposure to civic education, and experiences of electoral violence. Trained research assistants, fluent in English and local languages, conducted the field administration. While for the qualitative component, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with 6 participants. These included: one community leader, one officials from the Lagos State Independent Electoral Commission (LASIEC), one civic education officers from an NGO, one peace expert and lecturer at the Lagos state university of Lagos and two religious leaders involved in civic mobilization. The selection criteria – Inclusion, includes individuals who must have participated in civic education, election monitoring, or community-based peacebuilding activities during or prior to the 2023 elections. While the exclusion includes individuals with partisan political affiliations and those unavailable during data collection - were excluded. Hence, participants were identified using purposive and snowball sampling, beginning with known community focal points and electoral officials, who then referred others who met the inclusion criteria. The interviews were semi-structured, audio-recorded (with consent), and later transcribed and thematically analysed. Additional qualitative data were obtained from the content review of civic education program documents, INEC reports, and Lagos State electoral security incident logs from 2023.

Findings
A. Drivers of Ethnic Identity in Lagos Elections
Ethnic identity significantly influenced voting decisions and perceptions during the 2023 elections. Statistical analysis showed strong correlations between voters' sense of cultural heritage and group solidarity, and their voting choices. Table 4.1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for these variables, where Cultural Heritage and Group Solidarity Scores among Respondents (N = 400)

Table 4.1   Descriptive Statistics in Relation to Voter Behaviour

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Cultural Heritage	10.96	4.65
Group Solidarity (Social Perception)	12.01	4.53

Source: Field Survey, 2024.
Note: Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

Furthermore, the above table highlights how ethnic consciousness shaped political alignment. Social perception and group solidarity ($p < 0.01$) emerged as the strongest predictors of voter behaviour, reinforcing the role of ethnic identity in fostering in-group favoritism and out-group exclusion in electoral choices. Ethnic rhetoric was heavily deployed in six key Local Government Areas (LGAs)—Mushin, Oshodi-Isolo, Ojo (Alaba), Eti-Osa, Alimosho, and Surulere—identified as hotspots for ethnic tensions. Socio-economic factors, including competition for resources and disparities in political representation, also contributed significantly to heightened ethnic consciousness ($p < 0.05$). These results suggest that beyond historical affiliations, structural inequalities fueled the politicization of ethnic identity, raising concerns about democratic consolidation in Lagos State. Much more, regression analysis further confirmed that social perception/group solidarity ($\beta = 0.229$, $p < .01$) had the most significant influence on voting behaviour.

Impact of Ethnic Identity on Voter Behaviour
Survey results show that 38.5% of respondents identified as Igbo, 34.8% as Yoruba, and 10.5% as Hausa, while 16.3% belonged to other ethnic groups. Voting patterns strongly reflected ethnic allegiances, with over 50% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that ethnic affinity influenced their electoral decisions. These findings align with existing literature on the role of ethnic identity in Nigerian elections, reinforcing the argument that ethnicity remains a primary determinant of political behaviour (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Regression analysis further demonstrated the relationship between ethnic identity and electoral behaviour. Cultural heritage and social perception collectively explained 7.5% of the variance in electoral violence ($R^2 = 0.075$, $p < 0.01$). While Socio-economic grievances and political mistrust were particularly prominent in Ojo and Alimosho LGAs, where reports of voter intimidation were most prevalent.ethnic identity played a significant role, other structural and situational factors also contributed to electoral tensions. Structural and situational factors that includes:
- Socio-economic marginalisation: Respondents from Ojo and Alimosho reported high levels of unemployment and exclusion from political benefits.
- Competition over scarce resources: Particularly in densely populated LGAs, where access to land, housing, and public services was ethnically skewed.
- Political mistrust: A deep-rooted belief among minority ethnic groups that state institutions favour the dominant group (e.g., Yoruba majority).

- Discriminatory political messaging: Disseminated via social media and political rallies, often targeting non-indigenes.
- Security lapses: Reports of selective protection of polling units, with law enforcement perceived to be complicit or inactive.
- These factors collectively intensified the perception of threat among minority voters, thereby increasing the likelihood of identity-based political mobilisation and electoral violence.

Table 4.2: Distribution of Respondents by Ethnic Group and Influence of Ethnic Identity on Voting Behaviour (N = 400)

Ethnic Group	Percentage of Respondents (%)	Influence of Ethnic Identity on Voting Behaviour (%)
Igbo	38.5%	60% (agree/strongly agree)
Yoruba	34.8%	55% (agree/strongly agree)
Hausa	10.5%	45% (agree/strongly agree)
Others	16.3%	50% (agree/strongly agree)

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Note: *Values represent self-reported data from structured questionnaires administered across six LGAs in Lagos State.*

- Regression Analysis of Voting Behaviour and Electoral Violence

The regression analysis examined the relationship between ethnic identity (cultural heritage, socio-economic factors, political representation, and social perception/group solidarity) and the dependent variables: voting behaviour and electoral violence.

a) Voting Behaviour: The model showed that 9.4% of the variation in voting behaviour was explained by ethnic identity factors ($R^2 = 0.094$). Social perception/group solidarity ($\beta = 0.229$, $p < 0.01$) had the strongest direct influence on voter decisions.
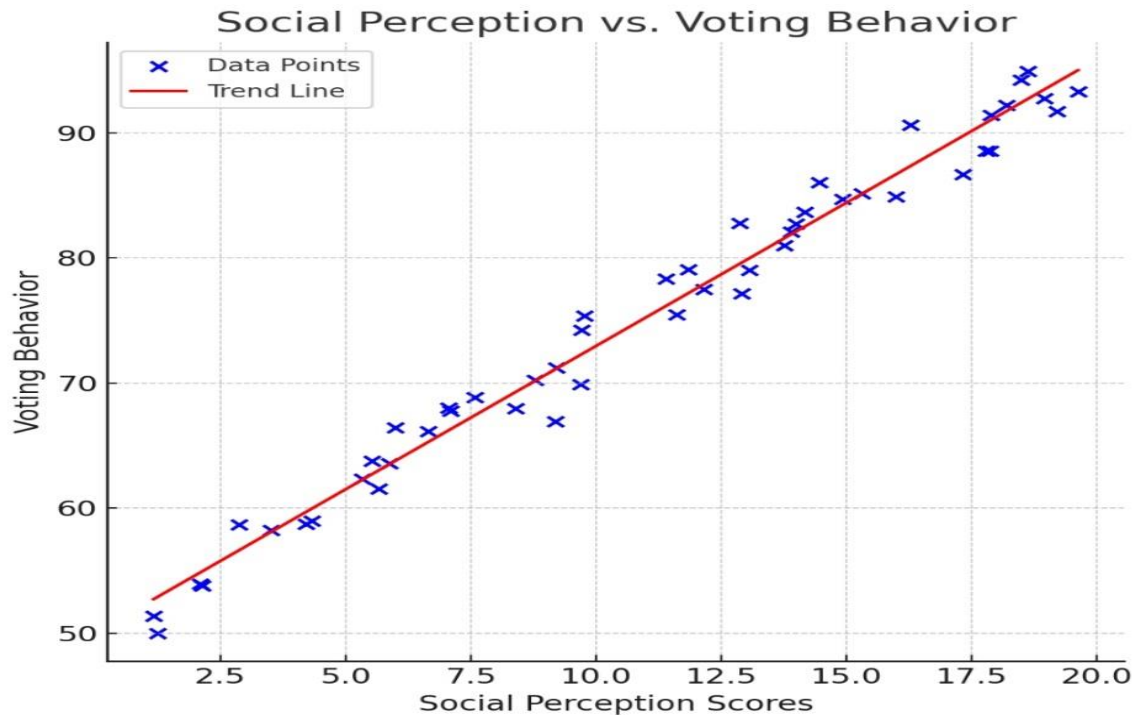
b) Electoral Violence: Ethnic group solidarity also had a significant impact on electoral violence ($\beta = 0.265$, $p = 0.001$), suggesting that ethnic divisions heightened electoral conflicts.
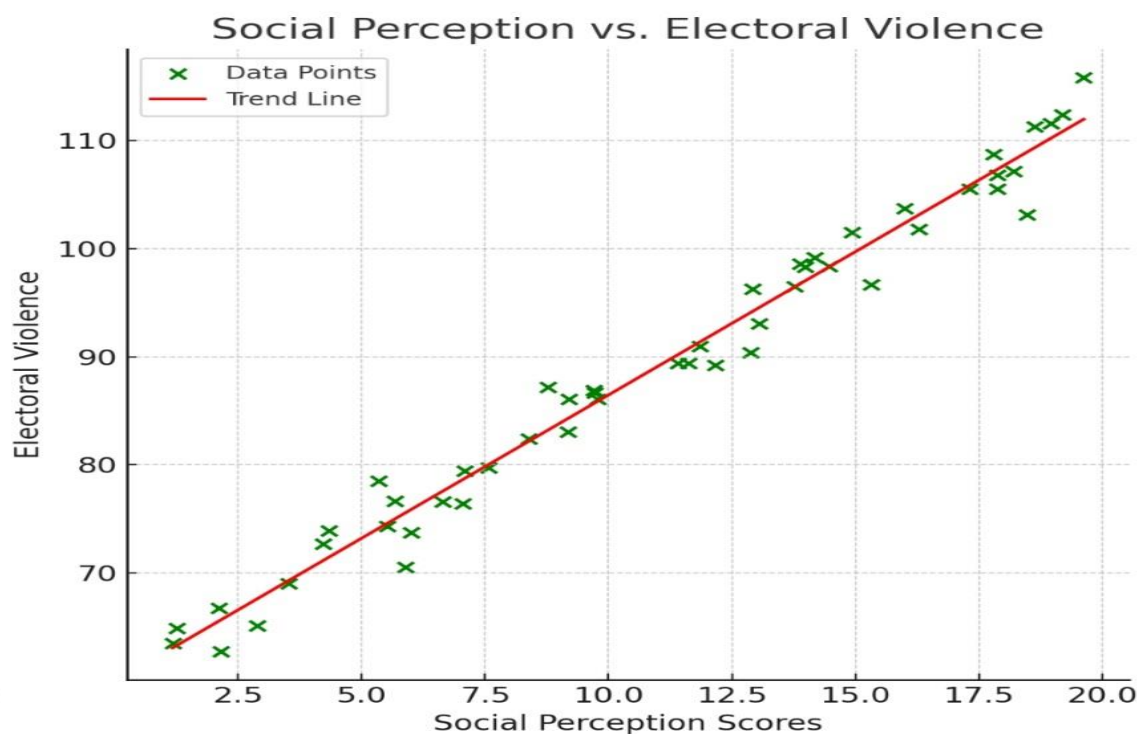

Table 4.3: Regression Analysis of Ethnic Identity Variables on Voting Behaviour and Electoral Violence (N = 400)

Model	R² Value	Significant Predictors	Beta (β)
Voting Behaviour	0.094	Social Perception/Group Solidarity	0.229
Electoral Violence	0.075	Social Perception/Group Solidarity	0.265

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Note: *Multiple regression analysis was conducted using SPSS version 25. A significance level of*

    p < .05 was used.

B. Role of Civic Education

The study examined the role of civic education in mitigating ethnic-based electoral violence. A significant portion of respondents (53%) acknowledged that ethnic affiliation influenced their voting behaviour. However, only 47% reported having adequate exposure to civic education. Notably, those who had received civic education showed a lower susceptibility to ethnic rhetoric ($p < 0.05$). This finding suggests that civic education serves as a crucial intervention in reducing ethnic-based electoral violence by fostering political awareness and promoting democratic values. Qualitative data from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) also shed light on how civic education shaped voter perceptions and behaviour. These narratives either supported or nuanced the statistical results. One civic education officer from Alimosho stated: "Many of the young people we

engaged in the pre-election town halls confessed they had never understood how to vote or what the consequences of ethnic bias were. But after our sessions, some said they were ready to vote based on issues and not tribe." (KII, Civic Educator, Alimosho). This aligns with the 47% of survey respondents who agreed they had received adequate civic education and reported a reduced susceptibility to ethnic rhetoric. However, some interviewees noted limitations. A community leader in Ojo observed: "INEC and civil groups tried, but the message didn't go round. Many of our people in the inner parts of Ojo didn't even get one flyer or attend any awareness campaign. That's why ethnic sentiments still controlled their vote." (KII, Community Leader, Ojo)

Table 4.4: Civic Education Exposure and Ethnic Affiliation in Voting Behaviour (N = 400)

Variable	Percentage of Respondents (%)	Statistical Significance (p-value)
Ethnic Affiliation Influencing Voting Behaviour	53%	$p < 0.05$
Received Adequate Civic Education	47%	$p < 0.05$

Source: Field Survey, 2024.
Note:
Percentages represent proportions of respondents who agreed/strongly agreed with the statements. Analysis based on Multiple Regression Analysis.

Discussion

The empirical patterns emerging from this study underscore the persistent and potent influence of ethnic identity on electoral behaviour and violence in Lagos State, confirming long-standing arguments in Nigerian political scholarship. However, beyond the surface-level correlation between ethnicity and voter choices lies a complex interplay of psychological, institutional, and structural dynamics that both reinforce and challenge the efficacy of civic education as a countermeasure. Anchored in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the findings highlight how voters' attachment to their ethnic group extends beyond cultural affinity it becomes a proxy for trust, security, and belonging in a politically volatile environment. When group identity is perceived as threatened, especially in ethnically diverse urban centres like Lagos, electoral preferences become less about issues and more about existential survival. This identity calculus shapes not just who individuals vote for but also how they interpret threats and justify defensive actions, including violence. In this context, ethnic identity functions as both a filter for political decision-making and a catalyst for collective mobilisation, often at the expense of democratic norms. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) further helps explain why civic education yielded limited behavioural transformation despite its theoretical potential. While civic education can positively shape attitudes and perceived behavioural norms, its success hinges on whether individuals feel they have the ability, support, and safety to act differently. In Lagos, the structural and situational realities—fear of violence, institutional mistrust, selective enforcement, and entrenched inequalities—undermined voters' perceived behavioural control. As a result, even those exposed to civic education may have defaulted to ethnic-based voting for fear of marginalisation or reprisal, revealing the limits of rational-choice assumptions in high-stakes electoral environments. Importantly, the uneven penetration of civic education campaigns further weakened their

transformative capacity. Civic education in Lagos, particularly in low-income, minority-dominated LGAs such as Ojo and Alimosho, appears to have been **logistically** fragmented and epistemologically shallow**.** The content often lacked nuanced engagement with ethnic fears and historical grievances, reducing civic messages to generic appeals for peace and tolerance. Without a deliberate strategy to contextualise these messages in the lived experiences of vulnerable communities, civic education risked becoming symbolic rather than substantive.

This study also raises a critical concern about policy myopia: civic education programs have historically assumed that information provision alone can shift entrenched political behaviours. However, the findings suggest that unless civic education is integrated into broader frameworks of urban equity, interethnic trust-building and electoral accountability, its capacity to disrupt ethnic-based electoral violence will remain marginal. Civic learning must therefore be deeply relational co-created with community leaders, religious figures, and local influencers who possess the cultural legitimacy to challenge entrenched biases. The implications are twofold. First, civic education must evolve from periodic pre-election campaigns to continuous democratic socialisation, embedded in schools, media, religious institutions, and urban community spaces. Second, future interventions must not only address individual voter psychology but also target the structural enablers of ethnic conflict discriminatory rhetoric, partisan policing, and exclusionary urban development policies. Finally, while this study makes a meaningful contribution to understanding the dynamics of civic education and ethnic identity in Nigerian elections, it acknowledges limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, and reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias. Furthermore, while the sample includes key LGAs in Lagos, it does not fully capture the rural-urban civic education disparity or the role of diasporic networks in shaping urban ethnic consciousness. Despite these limitations, the study points toward a crucial policy imperative: civic education alone cannot fix a structurally fractured democracy, but it remains a vital piece of the puzzle especially when reimagined as a culturally embedded, community-driven, and digitally enabled process of civic empowerment.

Conclusions

The study demonstrates that ethnic identity played a pivotal role in voter behaviour and electoral violence during the 2023 general elections in Lagos State. Ethnic group solidarity and cultural heritage significantly influenced political choices, reinforcing ethnic voting patterns. Socio-economic disparities further worsened ethnic divisions, making electoral violence more prev integration of ethnic inclusivity, particularly focused on voter behaviour, electoral rights of minorities, and the dangers of ethnic outbidding, should be embedded into the civic education curriculum at both formal and informal levels.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to promote inclusive and peaceful voter behaviour in urban multi-ethnic settings:

1. Civic education should be strengthened to include lessons on ethnic tolerance, issue-based voting, and electoral ethics for secondary school students, out-of-school youth, and first-time voters.
2. Community-based voter education campaigns should be expanded in grassroots areas using town hall meetings, radio messages, market sensitization, and materials in local languages.

3. Digital platforms and religious institutions should be leveraged to disseminate anti-ethnic propaganda messages and promote inclusive civic values among diverse populations.
4. Civil society organisations should work closely with local governments to deliver civic outreach in violence-prone communities and areas with a history of ethnic tensions.
5. Urban development policies should be made more inclusive to address the root causes of political exclusion and reduce competition over limited public resources.
6. Electoral security should be enhanced by deploying impartial security personnel at polling units and enforcing strict penalties against voter intimidation and ethnic incitement.

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