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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTONOMY AND GRASSROOTS DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION: AN EXAMINATION OF THE SOUTH-EAST AND NORTH-EAST GEOPOLITICAL ZONES OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

Local government reform in Nigeria continues to attract scholarly and policy attention due to persistent debates over autonomy, democratic participation, and the role of traditional authorities in local governance. Although the Constitution formally recognizes local governments as a third tier of government, practical autonomy remains constrained by institutional arrangements such as the State–Local Government Joint Account (SJLGA), state-level control over local elections, and varied subnational political influences. At the same time, traditional authorities ranging from town unions in the South-East to emirate councils in the North-East continue to exert significant influence over community mobilization, conflict resolution, and local service delivery. This study undertakes a systematic, secondary-data-based comparative analysis of the South-East and North-East to evaluate how variations in autonomy and traditional authority structures shape grassroots democratic participation. Drawing on decentralization theory, hybrid governance, and participatory democracy scholarship, the study develops an analytical model linking three domains of autonomy (administrative, fiscal, political) to traditional authority influence and participation outcomes. The review reveals that while both regions experience structural constraints on autonomy, the nature and consequences differ: civic-based traditional institutions in the South-East often complement participatory structures, whereas emirate-based hierarchies in the North-East sometimes centralise authority in ways that mediate participation differently. Evidence also shows that grassroots engagement is shaped not only by autonomy levels but by historical, cultural, and security contexts. The paper contributes to debates on subnational governance by offering a cross-regional synthesis that foregrounds traditional authorities as mediating actors, clarifies the institutional determinants of participation, and

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advances region-sensitive policy recommendations aimed at strengthening meaningful autonomy and inclusive local governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Local Government Autonomy, Grassroots Democratic Participation, Traditional Authority, Hybrid Governance, Civic Mobilisation

Introduction

Debates about the nature and practice of decentralisation in Nigeria remain central to understanding the dynamics of local governance and democratic deepening. The 1999 Constitution (as amended) entrenches a three-tier federal system and guarantees the existence of democratically constituted local governments, but in practice local councils' administrative, fiscal and political autonomy is regularly contested by state governments (Idoko, 2022; Ogunnubi, 2022). One of the most salient institutional mechanisms shaping the fiscal autonomy of local government councils is the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), under which federal allocations intended for local government service delivery are pooled and disbursed at the discretion of state executives, a practice widely identified in the literature as a major constraint on genuine local government autonomy (Okafor, 2010; Ikpeata, 2025). These structural tensions have important implications for service delivery, local accountability and the capacity of ordinary citizens to engage meaningfully with governance at the grassroots (Ogunnubi, 2022; Okafor, 2010). At the same time, formal state institutions are neither the only nor always the most consequential authorities at the local level. Across much of Nigeria, customary and religious leadership in the forms of emirs, chiefs, town unions, and lineage heads continue to play active roles in dispute resolution, land administration, local mobilisation, and informal service provision (Tonwe, 2013; Blench, 2006). In the South-East, town unions and other lineage-based civic associations often perform governance and development functions that the formal local government either neglects or is unable to deliver; these civic structures have been invoked by scholars as adaptive forms of "community governance" that can both complement and complicate state-led decentralisation (Amadi, 2023; Nwobodo, 2021). In the North-East and other predominantly Hausa-Fulani regions, emirate institutions and district heads retain recognised roles in local administration and customary justice, and have in recent years been the focus of state and donor programmes aimed at strengthening community stability and dispute resolution (Blench, 2006; Trust Fund for Africa, 2019). The persistence and salience of these traditional authorities point to a hybrid governance landscape in which formal decentralised institutions and informal customary structures coexist, interact, and often mutually shape patterns of grassroots political participation.

Comparing the South-East and North-East regions is analytically useful because each region exemplifies different historical legacies, institutional arrangements, and socio-political configurations that mediate the relationship between local government autonomy and citizen participation. The South-East's civic model, with comparatively weak chieftaincy but robust town unions and lineage organisations, contrasts with the North-East's emirate and district head structures that combine religious authority and hierarchical customary administration (Amadi, 2023; Ribadu & Gaji, 2024). These regionally distinct forms of traditional authority are likely to shape how citizens access, contest, and engage with local governance in different ways: town unions may serve as platforms for collective action and localized development initiatives in the South-East, while emirate councils and district heads may structure political deference, conflict mediation and the articulation of communal interests in the North-East (Tonwe, 2013; Blench, 2006). A comparative cross-regional lens

therefore enables the paper to highlight how institutional variations at the intersection of formal and customary authority affect grassroots democratic participation and the substantive meaning of “local government autonomy.”

Methodology

Methodologically, this paper relies exclusively on secondary data derived from a systematic review and synthesis of peer-reviewed scholarship, official government publications, constitutional documents, budgetary analyses, and policy briefs produced by reputable civil society organisations. Key sources include the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), decisions of the Supreme Court on local government powers, reports by the Nigerian Governors’ Forum, the National Bureau of Statistics, and analyses by election-monitoring and governance-focused organizations such as the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) and the International Crisis Group. Secondary studies on the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), fiscal federalism, and decentralization provide essential empirical grounding (Arowolo, 2011; Khemani, 2006; Oviasuyi et al., 2010). Likewise, region-specific research documenting the authority of town unions in the South-East (Odoh & Chukwuemeka, 2020) and the centrality of emirate institutions in the North-East (Alemika, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2016) supports comparative analysis.

This desk-based approach enables systematic cross-referencing of constitutional provisions, judicial interpretations, fiscal relations, and socio-cultural governance patterns. The use of only secondary sources ensures that all findings are anchored in verifiable, publicly available materials, thereby enhancing the reliability and transparency of the study. It also facilitates a multi-dimensional analytical framework that integrates legal, political-economic, and cultural perspectives on decentralization and grassroots political participation. The article contributes to debates on decentralization, hybrid governance, and democratic participation in three important ways. First, it provides a cross-regional synthesis that places traditional authorities at the centre of local governance analysis, thereby extending existing conceptualisations of hybrid governance in Nigeria (Boege et al., 2009; Meagher, 2012). Second, by linking detailed assessments of autonomy - administrative, fiscal, and political, with documented patterns of grassroots participation, the study offers conceptually robust and policy-relevant insights into how formal institutional design interacts with customary authority in shaping democratic engagement. Third, the comparative evidence presented supports region-sensitive policy recommendations aimed at improving meaningful local autonomy and strengthening participatory mechanisms, for example, by clarifying fiscal flows, formalizing consultative roles for civic bodies, and enabling customary dispute-resolution in ways that enhance rather than undermine democratic inclusion. Together, these contributions seek to inform both scholarly debate and ongoing reforms towards more accountable and participatory local governance in Nigeria.

Research Questions

- i. How does local government autonomy differ between the South-East and the North-East of Nigeria in terms of administration, finance, and politics?
- ii. How do traditional authorities influence local governance in both regions, especially in service delivery, conflict resolution, and community mobilisation?
- iii. How does the relationship between local governments and traditional authorities affect grassroots democratic participation in the South-East and North-East?
- iv. What social and political factors explain the differences in grassroots political participation between the two regions?

Research Objectives

- i. To compare the levels of administrative, fiscal, and political autonomy that local governments have in the South-East and North-East.
- ii. To examine how traditional authorities contribute to local governance in both regions and how their roles affect service delivery, community mobilization, and social cohesion.
- iii. To analyze how local governments and traditional authorities interact, and how this relationship shapes grassroots participation.
- iv. To identify and compare the social, political, historical, and cultural factors that influence patterns of participation in the two regions.

Conceptual Framework

Local Government Autonomy: Local government autonomy refers to the extent to which local councils exercise independent administrative, fiscal, and political authority without undue control by higher levels of government (Wunsch & Olowu, 1995). Administrative autonomy concerns control over internal management, staffing, and service delivery. Fiscal autonomy relates to the power to raise revenue, prepare budgets, and undertake expenditures independently. Political autonomy denotes the ability to conduct elections, formulate policies, and govern without excessive interference from state or federal authorities (Oviasuyi et al., 2010). Although the Nigerian Constitution recognises local governments as a distinct “third tier,” scholars consistently argue that their actual autonomy is limited due to institutional mechanisms such as the SJLGA and the widespread use of state-appointed caretaker committees (Khemani, 2006; Arowolo, 2011). These constraints weaken the capacity of local governments to serve as vehicles for democratic participation and service delivery.

Grassroots Democratic Participation: Grassroots democratic participation refers to the involvement of ordinary citizens in local-level governance processes, including elections, public consultations, community development meetings, deliberative forums, and informal mobilisation (Gaventa, 2004). It emphasises bottom-up decision-making, civic agency, and local accountability. Decentralisation theory predicts that increased local autonomy enhances participation by reducing the distance between authorities and citizens and by making governance more accessible and responsive (Ribot, 2002). However, weak institutional capacity or political interference can undermine these participatory benefits.

Traditional Authority and Hybrid Governance: Traditional authority encompasses customary leadership institutions such as chiefs, kings, emirs, and lineage heads, whose legitimacy derives from history, culture, and community recognition rather than election (Vaughan, 2000). In Nigeria, traditional rulers play crucial roles in areas such as land management, conflict resolution, community mobilisation, and social regulation, often operating alongside or in support of formal state structures (Alemika, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2016). Hybrid governance refers to the coexistence and interaction of formal state institutions with informal or customary authorities in shaping governance outcomes (Boege et al., 2009). In many African contexts, hybrid institutions are central to everyday governance, especially where state capacity is weak. In the South-East, town unions often function as powerful civic bodies that complement or challenge local government authority (Odoh & Chukwuemeka, 2020). In the North-East, emirate systems remain deeply embedded in political and social life, often serving as intermediaries between the state and communities (Alemika, 2019). This conceptual framework thus understands local

government autonomy, grassroots political participation, and traditional authority as interconnected dimensions that jointly shape governance outcomes. Where formal autonomy is weak, traditional authorities may step in to fill governance gaps; where civic associations are strong, participation may be pluralistic; and where insecurity is high, traditional authority may overshadow local government institutions. The theoretical lens of hybrid governance, combined with decentralisation and participatory democracy theory, helps explain these dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

Decentralization Theory: Decentralization theory underlines the transfer (or delegation) of powers from central or higher-level government to lower-level administrative units (such as local governments). According to classical formulations, decentralisation can improve governance by bringing decision-making closer to citizens, enhancing efficiency, responsiveness, accountability, and enabling policies tailored to local needs. In Nigeria, decentralisation was institutionalised through successive reforms culminating in constitutional recognition of local governments, granting them nominal authority for grassroots governance. However, empirical assessments reveal significant constraints on true devolution: vertical decentralisation (central → state → local) often retains supervisory controls at the higher levels, while horizontal decentralisation (empowering non-state actors – civil society, community associations, traditional authorities) remains weak or inconsistent. Therefore, decentralization theory provides a baseline normative expectation: that enhancing local government autonomy should create the institutional precondition for grassroots democratic participation.

Social Capital and Participatory Democracy

Social capital theory and participatory democracy offer normative and analytic tools to understand grassroots participation beyond formal institutions. Social capital, understood as networks, norms, trust, and civic associations facilitates cooperation, collective action, and effective participation in public affairs. In communities with strong social capital, formal and informal organizations (associations, community groups, traditional institutions) can mobilise citizens, encourage participation, and foster accountability. While much of this literature originates in Western contexts, the core insight, that civic embeddedness fosters participatory governance remains relevant for African settings. Scholars of decentralization and governance have argued that decentralisation's success depends not only on institutional design but also on local social structures and civic capacities. Participatory democracy as a normative model emphasizes that citizens should have opportunities for meaningful engagement in decisions that affect their lives. It values not just periodic voting, but sustained involvement, deliberation, local problem-solving, and co-production of public goods. In settings where formal institutions are weak or distrusted, participatory democracy may actualise through hybrid governance, traditional authorities, civic associations, and informal networks. Therefore, combining social capital and participatory democracy with hybrid-governance and decentralisation theories permits a richer, more context-sensitive analysis of grassroots participation in Nigeria. It allows for the possibility that participation thrives not only through formal local government institutions, but also via customary institutions and community networks, particularly where state institutions are weak, underfunded, or captured by elite interests.

Literature Review

Evolution and Structure of Local Governments in Nigeria: The historical evolution of local government in Nigeria reflects a complex interaction between colonial legacies, post-independence administrative reforms, and constitutional restructuring. Colonial indirect rule institutionalized a dual-governance arrangement in which traditional rulers acted as intermediaries between the British administration and local populations. This model shaped the early normative and institutional framework of local governance, particularly in Northern Nigeria where emirate structures were deeply entrenched (Blench, 2006). With the post-independence state seeking a uniform administrative system, the 1976 Local Government Reform marked a major turning point. The reform aimed to make local governments a distinct tier with defined boundaries, statutory responsibilities, and funding arrangements, particularly fiscal transfers from the federation account (Monday, 2022). However, the uniformity envisaged by the 1976 Reform has remained largely aspirational. Monday (2022) observes that successive military regimes frequently dissolved elected councils, appointed caretaker committees, and modified local government boundaries, thereby politicizing their structure and weakening institutional continuity. The 1999 Constitution reaffirmed the creation and functions of local governments but left substantial discretionary power to state governments particularly in the administration of elections, financial oversight, and structural modifications. Scholars argue that this constitutional ambiguity is a core explanation for ongoing contestations around autonomy and functionality (Tonwe, 2013). Beyond constitutional design, local governments face persistent institutional challenges including capacity deficits, weak fiscal management systems, poor staffing, and political clientelism. Many councils depend almost entirely on monthly allocations from the federation account, with internally generated revenue remaining grossly inadequate (Okafor, 2010). These structural limitations have contributed to inconsistent service delivery and reduced legitimacy of local governments in the eyes of citizens across regions.

Autonomy Debates and Constraints (SJLGA and State Interference)

Debates on local government autonomy in Nigeria revolve around three central dimensions; political, administrative, and fiscal autonomy. Fiscal autonomy remains the most contested, with the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA) emerging as the single most frequently cited structural constraint. Although the SJLGA was originally conceived as an oversight mechanism to ensure proper financial management, evidence demonstrates that many state governments use the account to retain or divert funds intended for local councils (Okafor, 2010). This diversionary practice leads to unpredictable monthly allocations, delayed payments, or significant deductions, thereby undermining fiscal planning and project execution at the local level. Empirical work in Borno State by Dibal et al. (2020) provides concrete evidence of how SJLGA arrangements distort local government operations. Their study shows that reduced access to statutory funds led to incomplete or abandoned capital projects, particularly in infrastructure, primary health care, and rural development. Similarly, studies on Plateau State document a pattern of state-level control that effectively constrains administrative discretion of councils, leading to poor service delivery outcomes and weakened local-level accountability systems (State-Joint-Local Government Account studies, 2022). Beyond fiscal constraints, state interference also manifests politically through the prolonged use of caretaker committees in place of elected councils. Although Nigerian law anticipates democratic governance at the local level, numerous states have maintained appointed committees for years, thereby limiting political autonomy and citizen

participation. Okafor (2010) argues that such practices transform local governments into extensions of state-level political networks rather than autonomous institutions responsive to grassroots needs. Administrative autonomy is similarly curtailed. Local governments often depend on state approval for recruitment, project implementation, and sectoral coordination. This hierarchical governance structure has created what several scholars term “dependent autonomy,” wherein constitutional guarantees exist on paper but are contradicted by political realities. The consequence is an institutional environment where local governments are unable to fulfil their statutory responsibilities or effectively engage citizens.

Roles of Traditional Authorities in Service Delivery, Conflict Resolution, and Mobilisation

Traditional authorities remain central actors in Nigeria’s local governance ecosystem, despite the formal establishment of modern local government councils. Blench (2006) emphasises that traditional rulers, whether emperors, chiefs, obas, emirs, or district heads, retain substantial legitimacy and play critical roles in customary dispute resolution, community mobilisation, land administration, and cross-community mediation. Their embeddedness within local social structures often gives them higher credibility than elected officials, particularly in rural communities where state institutions are weak. Traditional authority in the South-East of Nigeria operates through a hybridised governance structure that combines hereditary leadership, lineage heads, village councils, and, most distinctively, town unions, which have evolved into highly organised civic institutions. Town unions emerged during the early twentieth century as part of broader Igbo self-help traditions and have remained central to grassroots governance (Afigbo, 1981; Uchendu, 1965). Studies consistently show that these unions play leading roles in financing community infrastructure, coordinating village development projects, organising collective labour, maintaining local security arrangements, and negotiating with external authorities (Omenka, 2014; Nwangwu & Eze, 2020). Their autonomy and organisational strength are rooted in Igbo republicanism and the long-standing norm of communal self-governance. Empirical analyses of community development across the region demonstrate that town unions often outperform local government councils in service delivery due to their stronger accountability mechanisms, participatory decision-making forums, and deeper legitimacy within the community (Nwobi, 2016). For example, Omenka (2014) documents how town unions raise and manage community levies, construct schools and roads, and supervise local dispute-resolution committees. During the COVID-19 pandemic, reports by CLEEN Foundation (2021) and International IDEA (2020) show that South-Eastern community associations, especially town unions mobilised relief materials, implemented public health campaigns, coordinated local surveillance, and filled administrative gaps created by overstretched state institutions. These activities reaffirm scholarly arguments that town unions function as *de facto* local governance institutions, often more trusted and more effective than formal local governments. Overall, traditional authority in the South-East reflects an institutional pluralism in which civic-based traditional organisations work alongside hereditary rulers to shape governance outcomes, influence participation, and facilitate community mobilisation. In contrast, traditional authority in the North-East of Nigeria is anchored in the centralised emirate system, characterised by emirs, district heads, village heads, and ward leaders in a nested hierarchy. This structure traces its origins to precolonial Islamic statecraft and was strengthened under colonial indirect rule (Last, 1967; Paden, 1970). Blench (2006) emphasises that the emirate system’s combination of hierarchical authority, Islamic

jurisprudence, and institutional continuity grants it substantial influence in conflict mediation, land administration, community mobilisation, and social regulation. In contemporary governance, traditional rulers in the North-East remain indispensable actors, especially in rural areas where formal state presence is weak. Research conducted during the Boko Haram insurgency shows that emirs and district heads played critical roles in peacebuilding dialogues, intelligence gathering, humanitarian coordination, and early-warning systems (International Crisis Group, 2016; Mercy Corps, 2016). Their local legitimacy and cultural authority enabled them to mediate between security agencies, humanitarian actors, and local populations, often functioning as intermediaries where distrust of formal state institutions was high. Assessments by UNDP (2018) and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2019) further highlight that traditional rulers were central to mobilising displaced persons, coordinating relief distribution, restoring disrupted social norms, and maintaining community resilience during prolonged insecurity. Their engagement has also contributed to reintegration efforts for former combatants, community-level dialogue platforms, and civilian protection strategies. Thus, traditional authority in the North-East reflects a highly centralised governance tradition, where hereditary rulers command significant influence in both routine governance and crisis situations. This contrasts sharply with the more decentralised, civic-driven structure in the South-East and shapes distinct patterns of grassroots participation, community mobilisation, and local governance.

Patterns of Grassroots Democratic Participation in South-East and North-East Nigeria

Grassroots participation varies substantially across Nigerian regions, shaped by socio-cultural norms, security conditions, and institutional performance. In the South-East, participatory culture is historically anchored in communal assemblies, age grades, women's groups, and town unions. These bodies frequently convene meetings, influence decision-making, and support local development planning. Even though formal local governments exist, much community-level governance occurs through these civic structures. Studies analysing voter behaviour in the region highlight the high levels of political awareness but also note the negative effects of electoral malpractice, mistrust in political institutions, and rising security risks on voter turnout (Transforming Voter Behaviour, 2025). In contrast, civic participation in the North-East is significantly shaped by insecurity, displacement, and reliance on traditional authority structures. For communities facing conflict, opportunities for deliberation, public meetings, or community-based development planning are often limited. Oyewo (2024) documents how insecurity reduces participation in formal political processes while increasing dependency on traditional leaders for communication and decision-making. This creates a unique scenario where participation remains high but largely channels through traditional institutions rather than state-led forums. Additionally, studies on community development programmes across Nigeria highlight that meaningful participation is strongly correlated with the legitimacy and accessibility of governance actors (Journal of Sustainable Development, 2013). In communities where local governments are perceived as distant or ineffective, citizens gravitate toward traditional leaders and informal associations as preferred mechanisms for engagement.

Autonomy Constraints and Their Implications for Governance

Although the constitutional framework theoretically locates local governments as the third tier of government, both regions demonstrate substantial deficits in fiscal and political autonomy. Secondary evidence consistently points to the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA) as the most significant bottleneck, preventing LGAs from accessing funds

directly and weakening incentives for independent local development planning. In both regions, these constraints curtail the capacity of LGAs to engage the public meaningfully, deliver services, or foster inclusive participation. However, the effects are more acute in the North-East, where conflict, displacement, and fragile local economies heighten dependence on higher tiers of government. Consequently, local authorities become less visible and less capable of stimulating participation, which opens greater room for traditional institutions and non-state actors to step in. A key cross-regional contrast emerges in how traditional authorities interact with the weakened autonomy of LGAs. In the North-East, where emirate councils retain strong historical legitimacy, traditional rulers often play substantive roles in dispute resolution, community mobilisation, and local security. Therefore, while traditional actors influence participation in both regions, the intensity, legitimacy, and institutionalisation of their authority is far higher in the North-East.

Hybrid Governance and Participation Outcomes

The study's analytical framework posits that the degree of local government autonomy directly influences the role and prominence of traditional authorities as mediators between citizens and the state. In contexts where local governments are constrained, administratively, fiscally, or politically, traditional authorities often step in to fill governance gaps, shaping access to resources, dispute resolution, and community mobilisation. This dynamic is evident across both the North-East and South-East regions of Nigeria, but it manifests in markedly different forms due to historical, social, and institutional variations. In the North-East, hybrid governance is largely centralised around traditional rulers, including emirs, district heads, and ward leaders, who frequently perform quasi-state functions. These authorities often substitute for absent or weakened local governments, particularly in areas affected by insecurity, such as regions impacted by Boko Haram insurgency. Traditional rulers in this region mediate service delivery, coordinate humanitarian interventions, and act as conduits for information between citizens and higher levels of government. Their authority is reinforced by hierarchical social structures, Islamic jurisprudence, and long-standing cultural legitimacy, which grants them considerable influence over local political and social life. In contrast, the South-East exhibits a more diffuse, pluralistic form of hybrid governance, where traditional rulers operate alongside an array of other community organisations, including town unions, lineage associations, and civic groups. Here, authority is less concentrated, and governance is shaped collectively by multiple actors, each contributing to community development, mobilisation, and dispute resolution. Traditional rulers remain influential but are one component within a broader ecosystem of civic participation and collective action. These structural and institutional differences have important implications for grassroots democratic participation. In the North-East, citizen engagement tends to occur through indirect, informal, or customary channels, reflecting the centralised and hierarchical nature of traditional authority. By contrast, in the South-East, participation is more pluralistic, issue-based, and mediated by active civil society networks, allowing for multiple points of entry for citizens to influence governance. Understanding these regional variations is critical for analysing how local government autonomy interacts with traditional authority structures to shape the opportunities, patterns, and quality of grassroots political engagement across Nigeria. Overall, the findings suggest that reforms must account for regional diversity rather than assuming a uniform national model of decentralisation or community participation.

Table 1: Nigeria Local Government Statistics by State

State	Number of LGAs	Approx. Number of Wards*
Abia	17)	267
Adamawa	21	226
Akwa Ibom	31	328
Anambra	21	330
Bauchi	20	323
Bayelsa	8 (least)	105
Benue	23	277
Borno	27	310
Cross River	18	192
Delta	25	267
Ebonyi	13	235
Edo	18	192
Ekiti	16	177
Enugu	17	280
Gombe	11	114
Imo	27	376
Jigawa	27	288
Kaduna	23	255
Kano	44 (most in Nigeria)	484 (most wards)
Katsina	34	361
Kebbi	21	225
Kogi	21	239
Kwara	16	193
Lagos	20	377
Nasarawa	13	147
Niger	25	275
Ogun	20	240
Ondo	18	203
Osun	30	332
Oyo	33	351
Plateau	17	325
Rivers	23	318
Sokoto	23	244
Taraba	16	167
Yobe	17	178
Zamfara	14	147
Total / National	774 LGAs	≈ 9,410 Wards

Source: 1999 Constitution (as amended)

Nigeria's 774 Local Government Areas (LGAs) are distributed unevenly across the country's 36 states, reflecting historical, political, and demographic considerations. The number of LGAs per state varies considerably, ranging from as few as eight in Bayelsa State to as many as 44 in Kano State, illustrating significant regional disparities in administrative structuring. This uneven distribution is particularly notable between the northern and central zones, which tend to have a higher concentration of LGAs and electoral wards. These differences often correspond to larger populations and a need for finer administrative segmentation to facilitate governance, service delivery, and political representation. The number of wards within each state serves as a practical proxy for sub-LGA administrative and electoral granularity. States with a higher number of wards provide more localized electoral units, potentially creating greater opportunities for citizen engagement and grassroots

representation. Wards function as the smallest official electoral and administrative units, shaping the scale and scope of political participation at the community level. However, the presence of many wards does not automatically translate into effective governance or increased civic engagement. The quality of service delivery, the capacity of local administrators, and the degree of fiscal and political autonomy enjoyed by LGAs critically mediate the potential for meaningful participation. From a research perspective, tabulated data on the number of LGAs and wards offers an essential structural baseline for studies on decentralisation, local government autonomy, and grassroots democratic participation. Such data can guide the selection of case-study LGAs, inform stratified sampling strategies, and provide a contextual framework for comparative analysis across different states and regions. By integrating these structural indicators with qualitative and quantitative measures of governance performance, researchers can better understand the complex interplay between administrative design, institutional capacity, and citizen participation in Nigeria’s multi-tiered governance system.

Table 2: Revenue-sharing Formula

Tier / Revenue Pool	% Share (Vertical Formula)	Mechanism (or Notes)	Implication for LGA Autonomy
Federal Government	52.68% <i>(National Bureau of Statistics)</i>	Federal retains majority of federation-account revenue; mineral/oil resources, statutory allocations, stabilization, FCT maintenance, etc. <i>(National Bureau of Statistics)</i>	Little direct effect on LGAs — federal control reduces overall pool available for downward transfer, strengthening dependence of lower tiers.
States (36 States + FCT)	26.72% <i>(National Bureau of Statistics)</i>	States receive this portion, then apply a horizontal allocation formula to distribute among state-level obligations and LGAs. <i>(National Bureau of Statistics)</i>	States act as gatekeepers: they control what portion of their share reaches LGAs. This limits LGA fiscal autonomy and creates potential for state-level discretion or diversion.
Local Government Areas (LGAs) overall	20.60% (of the net distributable federation-account revenue) <i>(National Bureau of Statistics)</i>	LGA allocations are pooled at state level (via the State Joint Local Government Account SJLGA), then disbursed to individual LGAs. <i>(allAfrica.com)</i>	Because allocations are mediated by states — often with delays or non-disbursement — LGAs frequently lack the resources needed for independent planning, capital projects, or consistent service delivery. This undermines both fiscal and administrative autonomy.

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (NBS)

The allocation of revenue to Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Nigeria is not solely determined by vertical distribution from the federation account; it is further shaped by a complex horizontal sharing formula applied at the state level. Once a state receives its share of federally collected revenue, it is responsible for distributing funds among its LGAs and fulfilling other state obligations. The horizontal formula incorporates multiple principles intended to ensure equity and reflect local needs. These include population size, which ensures that more populous areas receive proportionally higher allocations; landmass or terrain, which acknowledges the higher costs of administering geographically large or difficult-to-access LGAs; internally generated revenue effort, which rewards LGAs that actively raise their own funds; and social development factors, such as allocations for

education, healthcare, and water infrastructure, which aim to address community welfare and development disparities (National Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). However, the application of these principles is uneven, with significant variation across states depending on political priorities, administrative capacity, and transparency mechanisms. In addition to statutory allocations, Value Added Tax (VAT) revenue and other federally pooled revenues follow separate sharing arrangements. These revenues are distributed according to rules that are often more technical and complex, taking into account consumption patterns, state contributions, and other fiscal parameters. The process can be contentious, with disputes frequently arising between states and federal authorities over the interpretation of allocation rules and the timing of remittances (jmscholarship.org). Despite these formulas, multiple analyses by civil society organizations, policy monitors, and media outlets have highlighted a persistent pattern of state-level retention or delay of funds earmarked for LGAs. Over a prolonged period, these practices have significantly constrained local government autonomy and capacity to deliver services effectively. For example, a recent 16-year aggregate assessment estimated that state governments collectively retained or diverted over ₦23 trillion intended for LGAs, highlighting a systemic challenge in ensuring fiscal accountability and protecting the constitutional financial entitlements of local governments (allAfrica.com, 2024). These practices underscore the practical limitations of fiscal decentralization in Nigeria, as LGAs remain heavily dependent on state-level discretion, undermining both their administrative independence and their ability to facilitate grassroots democratic participation.

Findings and Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the complex and uneven ways in which local government autonomy intersects with traditional authority structures to shape grassroots democratic participation in Nigeria. Across both the South-East and the North-East, decentralisation operates within a highly centralised federal system in which state governments exercise decisive control over local government finances, political processes, and administrative decision-making. This persistent state dominance, manifested through joint allocation systems, ambiguous constitutional provisions, and political influence over local councils—limits the autonomy necessary for local governments to perform effectively. Yet, the implications of this constrained autonomy for participation diverge considerably across the two regions due to differences in historical governance cultures, patterns of communal organisation, and the nature of traditional authority. This study set out to examine how local government autonomy and traditional authority structures interact to shape grassroots democratic participation in Nigeria, using the South-East and North-East as comparative cases. The analysis demonstrates that while decentralisation frameworks promise local empowerment, the reality of local governance remains constrained by state-level political and fiscal dominance. These constraints significantly limit the effectiveness of LGAs and shape how citizens engage with governance at the community level. Traditional authorities remain central to local governance, but their influence varies markedly across the two regions. In the North-East, emirate structures possess institutional depth, historical legitimacy, and administrative functions that allow them to fill governance vacuums and mobilise participation—albeit in hierarchical forms that do not always align with democratic ideals. In the South-East, the multiplicity of civic organisations diffuses authority and produces a more participatory, community-driven framework, although traditional rulers continue to play symbolic and cultural roles. The study concludes that strengthening

grassroots democracy in Nigeria requires a dual strategy: enhancing genuine local government autonomy and recognising regionally specific roles for traditional institutions without undermining democratic accountability. Reform efforts must move beyond uniform templates and instead design decentralisation systems that integrate local realities, political cultures, and authority structures. Only through such context-sensitive reforms can Nigeria's decentralisation achieve the goals of inclusive participation, responsive governance, and sustained local development.

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