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VOTING INTENTIONS IN AFRICA: ETHNIC, ECONOMIC OR PARTISAN?

by Michael Bratton, Ravi Bhavnani and Tse-Hsin Chen

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Voting Intentions in Africa: Ethnic, Economic or Partisan?

Abstract

This paper offers a first comprehensive account of popular voting intentions in Africa's new electoral democracies. With reference to comparative aggregate and survey data from 16 countries, we show that competitive elections in Africa are more than mere ethnic censuses or simple economic referenda. Instead, Africans engage in *both* ethnic *and* economic voting. Not surprisingly, people who belong to the ethnic group in power intend to support the ruling party, in contrast to those who feel a sense of discrimination against their cultural group. But, to an even greater extent, would-be voters in Africa consider policy performance, especially the government's perceived handling of unemployment, inflation, and income distribution. Moreover, a full account of the intention to vote in Africa also requires recognition that citizens are motivated—sincerely or strategically—by partisan considerations; they vote for established ruling parties because they expect that incumbents will win. We show that voters attempt to associate themselves with prospective winners because they wish to gain access to patronage benefits and to avoid retribution after the election. These dynamics are most evident in African countries where dominant parties restrict the range of electoral choice.

Introduction

When Africans consider their voting choices, do they do so on ethnic or economic grounds? On one hand, advocates of identity voting draw attention to a citizen's sense of belonging to cultural collectivities—like ethnic and linguistic groups—that aggregate individual choices into blocs of votes. On the other hand, backers of interest-based accounts of voting argue that each citizen appraises the performance of government and uses the opportunity of periodic elections to punish or reward incumbents.

In new electoral democracies in the developing world, and especially in the multi-ethnic societies of sub-Saharan Africa, voting motivations may not be quite so clear-cut. For if Africans vote ethnically, why do so many African presidents hail from minority ethnic groups? And if Africans vote economically, why are incumbents routinely re-elected even when economic conditions are bad? The literature on voting behavior in Africa is therefore divided: some country studies report that ethnic attachments trump economic calculations, whereas, in other analyses, popular evaluations of government performance overshadow attachments to language and tribe. A definitive arbitration of this debate is long overdue.

We present systematic, cross-national evidence to the effect that economic interests play a larger role in African elections than has hitherto been recognized. We also consider alternative formulations. Perhaps voting intentions in new African democracies are driven by other factors, such as the partisan calculations made by clients in search of patronage. If so, then voters will seek to gain access to the positive benefits that ruling parties can bestow and to avoid the negative sanctions that can follow from supporting opposition groups. When voters express close identification with the ruling party, they may be either sincere or strategic. But, either way, they epitomize a widespread popular recognition that incumbents at the helm of dominant parties are most likely to win in African elections.

The paper proceeds in three steps. First, we present theories of ethnic, economic and partisan voting. Second, we describe operational indicators to distinguish voters' intentions along these lines, as well as relevant controls. Third, we present logistic regression models that explain why African voters say they plan to support ruling parties. In specifying these models, we compare the effects of ethnic and economic motivations while, at the same time considering other voting rationales and the effects of country contexts. As stated, we find evidence to support a thesis of economic voting in a context of dominant patronage parties. A concluding section draws out the implications of the evidence from Africa for the further development of theories of voting behavior.

Theories

Ethnic Voting

In Africa, ethnic identity—that is, the inclination of individuals to define themselves and others in terms of cultural origins—is widely perceived to be the predominant organizing principle of society and politics (Olorunsola 1972; Horowitz 1991; Berman, Eyoh and Kimlicka 2004.) Most thoughtful analysts agree, however, that, far from being primordial or atavistic, ethnic identity is constructed, fluid, and one among multiple identities that actors can adopt depending on the situations in which they find themselves. Importantly, however, “identities are frequently politicized and mobilized by the competitive pursuit of wealth, status or power... (but) they constitute distinct social roles and are not simply surrogates of nascent social classes; cultural pluralism is more than simply ‘false consciousness’ ” (Young 1976, 65). In short, from the subjective perspective of individual African citizens, feelings of ethnic identity are sufficiently concrete to constitute a basis for forming political opinion and stimulating political action.

The phenomenon of ethnic voting, a central concept in the present investigation, occurs whenever members of a cultural group show a disproportionate affinity at the polls for a particular political party (Wolfinger 1965). In short, they tend to vote as a bloc. The logic of ethnic voting is as follows: by expressing solidarity, sub-national groups seek to elevate leaders from their own cultural background into positions of power,

especially the top executive spot, thereby gaining collective representation (Posner 2005). In extreme manifestations, this form of identity-based voting can lead to outcomes that are mere head counts of ethnic groups. If voter turnout is high, and if all voters choose parties associated with their own communal identities, then an election can even resemble an ethnic “census” (Lever 1979; Horowitz, 1985; Ferree 2006; McLaughlin 2008). Under these circumstances, cultural demography is the principal determinant of the distribution of votes.

Economic Voting

The voluminous literature on economic voting posits a powerful alternative explanation. At its heart is a simple proposition: citizens vote for the incumbent government if economic times are good; otherwise, they vote against it (Key 1964; Tufte 1978; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000). Concisely stated, elections are won or lost on the economy: that economic recession boosts voter turnout; that voters punish governments for poor economic performance but do not necessarily reward success; and that “economic conditions may be far more important determinants of the vote in developing countries than in the West, at least when times are bad” (Pacek and Radcliff 1995, 756-7; see also Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2008).

In recent years, analyses of aggregate patterns in economic voting have taken a political and institutional turn. In particular, they emphasize the institutional arrangements that clarify (or obscure) the ruling party’s responsibility for economic conditions, and while the effects of such formal political institutions are evident across Western democracies, it remains to be seen whether these are also manifest in new multiparty political systems in Africa. Other generalizations have emerged from survey research at the individual level of analysis: that, when estimating economic interests, voters more commonly refer “sociotropically” to the condition of the economy as a whole rather than “egotistically” to their own living standards. (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Lewis-Beck 1988); and that prospective expectations of personal wellbeing are more determinative than retrospective evaluations of government popularity, at least in Britain and Russia (Price and Sanders 1995; Hesli and Bashkirova 2001). Quite apart from the implied applicability of such concepts to Africa, we have yet to learn whether voters there make the same sorts of economic calculations at election time.

Problematically, however, models of economic voting may suffer from circularity. We know that vote choice and partisan identification are closely related, not least because some studies use the latter as a proxy for the former. But partisan identification may colour economic perceptions: supporters of the incumbent party are often too generous in their evaluations of the government’s economic performance, while opponents are overly critical. At issue, therefore, is whether economic perceptions are sufficiently independent of vote preference to serve as the foundation of a theory of economic voting (Evans and Andersen 2006; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008a). At minimum, “party ID” must be included in any multivariate explanation, preferably in a strict operational form that distinguishes partisanship from considerations of economic performance.

A Reinterpretation

On the basis of cross-national research in Africa, we argue that the distinction between ethnic and economic voting is overdrawn. Based on data from Zambia and Kenya, some analysts argue that the structure of ethnic groups in society is a more formative influence on vote choice than the economic calculations of individuals (Posner and Simon 2002; Erdmann 2007; Author 2008). Using evidence from Ghana, others have countered that popular evaluations of government performance trump the pervasive tugs of language and tribe (Jeffries 1998; Bawumia 1998; Youde 2005; Fridy 2007; Lindberg and Morrison 2008). But the only cross-national voting studies yet completed in Africa do not reach agreement about the relative importance of group loyalty (Norris and Mattes 2003) or instrumental rationality (Author et al. 2005). As stated earlier, this debate requires adjudication, given that both patterns of voting behavior are evident in African elections. These complex contests cannot be reduced to a one-dimensional construct, for example as an ethnic census or an economic referendum. It remains to be seen whether ethnic or economic considerations—or some other influences—are paramount in driving a multivariate explanation. But, at minimum, we argue that African

voting intentions do not adhere to media stereotypes of Africans as exclusively ethnic voters,¹ nor to the popular assumption that elections always and everywhere are about “the economy, stupid.”²

The present study attempts such a resolution by departing from previous efforts in several important ways. First, the scope of the study is not limited to one election in one country, which has been a hallmark of the literature on Africa to date. Instead, we employ Afrobarometer Round 3, a large cross-national set of survey data with identical indicators for 23,039 adult citizens in 16 countries.³ Data are pooled and weighted to reflect an equal country sample size of $N = 1200$. Missing values—which range between 4 percent in Uganda and 9 percent in Tanzania—were replaced using multiple imputation (see Appendix).⁴ Round 3 surveys were conducted in 2005 with the timing of elections standardized with a question about vote choice on a hypothetical ballot at the time of the survey. A systematic cross-national analysis of variation on this dependent variable promises to eliminate any spurious generalizations derived from previous, case-based studies.

Second, the object of explanation is a citizen’s *intended vote choice* rather than proxies like presidential popularity, which were too often used in prior research. The main advantage is that voting intentions are a better guide to actual voting behaviour though, obviously, the reliability of this indicator decreases with temporal distance from the next election.⁵

Third, we recognize that rival concepts—ethnic identity and economic interest—are multi-dimensional and that their various aspects may have differential explanatory power. We therefore seek to capture the richness of each concept by measuring several facets with alternative indicators. By decomposing the broad concepts of ethnic identity and economic interest, we hope to cast light on the mechanisms that lead our respondents to arrive at an intended vote choice.

Fourth, we propose a multi-level explanatory model in a bid to account for variance in intended voting behavior across countries as well as among individuals. Guided by prevailing theoretical debates, we explore the influence of relevant social, economic and political differences at the country level.⁶

Finally, we emphasize that the intention to vote among Africans may be driven by political considerations rather than by ethnic or economic factors. Analysts have long recognized that *partisan identification*—a voter’s underlying allegiance to a political party—explains a great deal about individual attitudes and actions (Campbell et al. 1960; see also Shively, 1980; Lewis-Beck et al 2008b). Indeed, recent studies of electoral participation in African countries have confirmed the central mobilizing role of political parties (Author 1999; Kuenzi and Lambright 2007) and the stability of partisan alignments (Lindberg and Morrison 2005; Young 2009).

Thus, one would also expect voters to plan to vote for the party to which they say they feel closest. To avoid the obvious circularity in this relationship, we refine the concept of partisan identification in this study by distinguishing sincere and strategic voting. *Sincere partisans* are individuals who intend to vote for a party out of deep attachment or ingrained habit; they express partisan loyalty without reference (sometimes even in direct contradiction) to the party’s actual performance. We expect to find many such “uncritical citizens” among the adherents of the long-standing ruling groups in former one-party African regimes (Chaligha 2002; Mattes and Shenga 2007).

Alternatively, we contend that the structure of incentives in Africa’s neopatrimonial regimes (Clapham 1982; Nugent 1995; Author 1997; Wantchekon 2003; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Erdmann and Engel 2007) also gives rise to strategic voting. In Africa’s “winner take all” politics—where electoral victory conveys political control over state-dominated economies—the credibility of patronage parties depends on their ability to actually attain, hold, and exercise power. Since opposition parties are novel and weak, an incumbent ruling party can make the most credible patronage commitments. Under these circumstances, an individual’s expressed preference of “closeness” to a ruling party may therefore be deeply instrumental,

reflecting a calculation that incumbents will routinely win. Regardless of real preferences, *strategic partisans* will also associate themselves with the ruling party in the hope that they will be rewarded—or at least not punished --after the election.

If the above accounts are correct, then we would expect three important outcomes. First, a large portion of intended voting behavior should be explicable in terms of expressed partisan identification—whether sincere or strategic, or whether motivated by positive or negative incentives. Second, the greater the dominance of the ruling party over opposition parties—and thus the firmer the former’s control of material and coercive resources—the greater the likelihood that voters will signal an intention to vote for the ruling party. And, third, ethnic identities and economic interests, far from being rival sources of intended vote choice, would both matter. Table 1 presents a full set of independent variables plus associated hypotheses. Table A2 reports descriptive statistics for all variables used in analysis.

Measurement and Hypotheses

Intended Vote Choice

As stated, this study seeks to explain an African citizen’s intended vote choice. Specifically, the survey asks, “if a presidential election were held tomorrow, which party’s candidate would you vote for?” Because this is a politically sensitive question, the research team debated whether it would generate reliable responses. Because the stakes in African elections are high—winners control state resources in a context where private economies are weak—election campaigns often have the tenor of life-or-death struggles. On this uneven playing field (Schedler 2006; Levitsky and Way 2010), elites do not hesitate to manipulate electoral rules and openly offer patronage inducements; for their part, voters commonly feel exposed to surveillance, monitoring and intimidation. Thus we wondered if people would volunteer honest answers to a survey question about vote choice.

The survey results are reassuring. Only 6 percent of respondents refused to divulge their voting intentions, for example by invoking ballot secrecy. And just 13 percent said that they “didn’t know” how they would vote, of which some unknown proportion may have taken refuge in deliberate obfuscation. The remaining respondents were scored 1 if they intended to vote for the ruling party or 0 if they planned to support an opposition party.

Overall, the distributions of intended vote choice revealed by the survey enjoy face validity since they conform to known patterns, such as official results of previous or subsequent elections.⁷ On average, 60 percent of eligible voters reported an intention to vote for the presidential candidate of the ruling party in 2005, with the remainder saying they intended to vote for opposition candidates (33 percent) or to abstain (7 percent). As Figure 1 shows, however, the strength of support for the ruling party varies considerably across African countries from a high of 88 percent in Tanzania to a low of 28 percent in Benin. For this reason, we expect that the intention to vote for the political *status quo* is due not only to the characteristics and attitudes of individual citizens, but also to the national contexts within which they are voting. Hence, we undertake multi-level analysis in the explanation that follows.

Table 1: Research Hypotheses

Other things being equal, we expect to find that:
An intention to vote for the ruling party is positively related to an individual's:

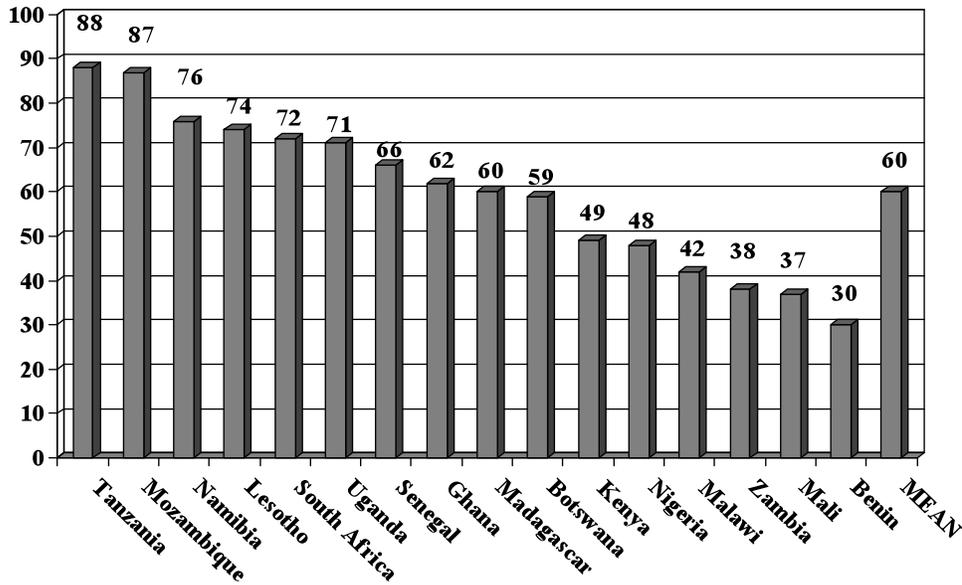
<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Concept</i>	<i>Indicator</i>
Ethnic Identities		
H1A	Nominal ethnic identity	Membership in the largest ethnic group
H1B	Ethnic group in power	Shared ethnicity with the head of government
H1C	Saliency of ethnicity	Preference for ethnic over national identity*
H1D	Interethnic distrust	Distrust in members of other ethnic groups*
H1E	Ethnic discrimination	Perception of unfair group treatment (negative relationship)
Economic Interests		
H2A	Retrospective, sociotropic assessments	Positive evaluation of past economic conditions
H2B	Retrospective, egocentric assessments	Positive evaluation of one's own past living standards
H2C	Prospective, sociotropic assessments	Positive evaluation of future economic conditions
H2D	Prospective, egocentric assessments	Positive evaluation of one's own future living standards
H2E	Attitude to economic policy performance	Positive evaluation of government handling of economic policies
Political Considerations		
H3A	Partisan identification (Sincere + Strategic)	Say "close" to ruling party, even if president has underperformed
H3B	Expectation of patronage	Perception that politicians will deliver development after election
H3C	Expectation of compulsion	Perception of survey as government sponsored (proxy)
Demographic Characteristics		
H4A	Gender	Female
H4B	Age	Years since birth
H4C	Education	Years of schooling
H4D	Poverty	Lack of access to basic human needs (negative relationship)
H4E	Residential location	Rural
Country Contexts		
H5A	a. Ethnic fragmentation b. Ethnic polarization	Contexts where one ethnic group is dominant, (a) demographically or (b) politically
H5B	a. GDP growth rate b. Inflation rate	Contexts where (a) the macro-economy is expanding and (b) consumer price rises are moderate
H5C	a. Presidential constitutions b. Effective number of parliamentary parties c. Level of democracy	Contexts of (a) institutional clarity of political responsibility and (b) limited vote choices, and (c) Freedom House inverted 14-point scale, 2005

* We expect the sign to depend on whether the respondent belongs to the ethnic group in power (EGIP). Positive if "yes", negative if "no."

Measuring Ethnic Identities

Turning to explanatory factors, we measure nominal ethnic identity in terms of an individual's answer to the blunt question, "What is your tribe?" Despite queasiness among some social scientists about the term "tribe," it is part of the everyday lexicon of ordinary Africans and its use in the Afrobarometer survey never evoked resistance from respondents.⁸ From the long list of 319 groups named spontaneously in the survey across 16 African countries, we classify four comparable types: (i) *majority* ethnic groups, which constitute 50 percent or more of the national population; (ii) *plurality* ethnic groups, which are the largest group in the country, but less than 50 percent of the population; (iii) *secondary* ethnic groups which, while not the largest group, constitute more than 10 percent of the population; and (iv) *minority* ethnic groups, comprising 10 percent or less of the population. Members of either majority or plurality groups are considered to belong to each country's *largest ethnic group*, an attribute that, due to sheer demographic weight in a mass democracy, might be expected to be associated with political ascendancy (H1A).

Figure 1: Intended Vote for Ruling Party (16 African Countries, 2005)



Note: The figure above depicts the percent of eligible voters who intend to vote, based on the following question: “If a presidential election were held tomorrow, which party’s candidate would you vote for?”

Source: Afrobarometer Round 3, N = 23,093

Because we recognize that ethnicity becomes politically germane via a group’s access to governmental authority, we also measure whether an individual is a member of the *ethnic group in power* (EGIP). Ideally, one would like to take account of a range of top officeholders in order to determine which group (or groups) is actually in charge. Absent comprehensive data on the social backgrounds of cabinet ministers or permanent secretaries in African countries, however, we resort to a conventional indicator: the ethnicity of the head of government. This operational pointer has been justified as doing “an excellent job of picking out the group locally regarded as most powerful. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, it is often thought that the president’s ethnic group is the most favored and politically dominant” (Fearon et al. 2007, 190). If an individual’s nominal ethnic identity is congruent with that of the incumbent head of government, then he or she is scored as a member of the EGIP, an identity that is expected to predict support for the ruling party (H1B).

Table A3 shows the EGIP across the 16 countries covered by Afrobarometer Round 3 in 2005. The most striking feature is the region’s ethnic fragmentation. Because there are few places where one group constitutes half the population or more, a majority ethno-linguistic group holds power in only three countries—Lesotho, Botswana and Namibia. As a result, it may be somewhat misleading to speak about minority and secondary groups being “in power,” since their leaders must form interethnic alliances in order to govern. Yet an EGIP indicator based on the narrow criterion of the head of government’s ethnicity is a conservative standard; if membership in an EGIP influences voting behavior where minorities control the presidency, then ethnic voting is likely to be even more widespread where several ethnic groups combine into ruling coalitions.

But demographic distributions and power positions do not exhaust the complexity of ethnicity. Three other dimensions are plausibly important to a voter’s intended choice. First is the *salience of ethnicity* or the weight that individuals place on ethnicity as a core identity, for example in comparison to other available identities (Author 2009; Eifert et al. 2010). In this study, ethnic salience is measured by asking respondents to choose between nominal ethnic identity and national identity, which is often taken to be a critical cultural tension in new nations. Across the 16 African countries studied here, some 40 percent of survey respondents claim to value national identity above ethnic identity, with some 15 percent taking the opposite view.⁹

Therefore, ethnicity would not seem to be highly salient for most Africans, at least according to their own self-descriptions. To the extent that voters are genuinely nationalistic rather than sectarian, we would therefore expect them to spurn ethnic identity as a basis for voting for the ruling party (H1C).¹⁰

Second is *interethnic distrust*. Voters are guided at the polls not only by their own self-described cultural attachments, but also by their expectations about the political behavior of others. To get at this reactive dimension of ethnic voting, the survey asks about an individual's trust in a range of other social actors: family members, neighbors, members of one's own ethnic group and, most importantly, members of other ethnic groups within the country. Whereas 43 percent trust people from other ethnic groups "somewhat" or a "lot," 55 percent do so "just a little" or "not at all." If a vote for the ruling party is to any degree a rejoinder to expected bloc voting by ethnic rivals, we would expect it to be captured by this indicator (H1D).¹¹

Third, the expression of ethnic identity in the voting booth may be triggered by an individual's sense of collective grievance. To measure perceived *ethnic discrimination*, the survey asks, "How often is (your named ethnic group) treated unfairly by the government?" Almost half say "never" (49 percent) and a further quarter say just "sometimes" (24 percent). Across the 16 countries, a relatively small proportion of the adult population, averaging only 18 percent, reports unfair treatment "often" or "always." As expected, we find evidence that minority ethnic groups are more prone than others to perceive ethnic discrimination: 40 percent report unfair treatment versus 34 percent for majority ethnic groups, a small but significant difference. But, because collective grievances are spread across society, we observe no significant aggregate difference on this score between the largest (majority and plurality) and smallest (secondary and minority) ethnic groups. Nonetheless, we expect a sense of ethnic discrimination to undermine citizens' willingness to vote the sitting government back into power (H1E).

Measuring Economic Interests

Several standard indicators capture economic influences on the intention to vote. For popular views of *past economic conditions*—retrospective sociotropic and retrospective egocentric evaluations—the survey asks, "looking back, how would you rate economic conditions in this country/your living conditions compared to twelve months ago?" And for *future economic conditions*—prospective sociotropic and prospective egocentric evaluations—the question is, "looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country/your living conditions to be better or worse in twelve months time?" In all cases, responses are scored on a five-point scale from "much worse" to "much better."

Africans apparently harbor mixed feelings about past economic performance. On average, 37 percent see the economy getting worse, but 34 percent see it getting better (with considerable cross-national variation). And when asked about personal living conditions over the last year, a similar proportion felt their conditions were worsening (35 percent) as improving (34 percent). However, when asked about their opinion of future economic conditions in their country, roughly twice as many individuals thought performance would be better (56 percent) as thought it would be worse (25 percent). And citizens everywhere harbor high hopes for future personal living standards; only 18 percent see life getting worse, with 49 percent seeing it getting better.

Whether looking forward or back, and regardless of point of reference—national or personal—voters are expected to lean towards incumbents if they see life getting better economically (H2A-D).

In addition, we introduce an original indicator that probes popular views about economic policy. *Economic policy performance* is an index that summarizes public opinion on a four-point scale of how well or badly the incumbent government is seen to handle economic management, job creation, control of inflation, and income distribution.¹² Generally speaking, the Africans who were interviewed resent the prevailing economic policy regime, which usually features austerity measures to reduce state spending. Two-thirds think that governments are managing the economy badly (66 percent). Other things being equal, one would expect such consistently negative sentiments to reduce the electoral support base of the ruling party (H2E).

Measuring Political Considerations

Among individuals, the main political considerations measured in this study are partisanship, patronage and compulsion. As discussed earlier, we expect that clients who quest to gain patronage (or avoid exclusion and compulsion) will be inclined to express partisan identification with the ruling faction. To stiffen the criterion for partisanship, we consider only those individuals who *disapprove* of the incumbent president's performance in office yet *still* say that they feel "close" to current the ruling party.¹³ Some of these self-described partisans will vote for continuity out of party loyalty (the *sincere* partisans) but others will do so because they know that their preferred candidate cannot win (the *strategic* partisans).¹⁴ Either way, we expect ruling party identification (strictly defined) will strongly bolster incumbents' chances of retaining office (H3A). But we infer that, for at least some voters, overt expressions partisanship are instrumental: they seek to reap the benefits of associating with prospective winners and try to avoid the costs of attachment to likely losers.

To further test this conjecture about instrumental partisanship, we add independent variables that directly measure the costs and benefits of neo-patrimonial rule. On the positive side, we measure citizen expectations of future patronage rewards with a question about the credibility of politicians: how often do they "deliver development" after elections? On an average four-point scale from "never" to "always," some 40 percent of respondents say "never" and 15 percent say "often" or "always." We anticipate that the minority of voters who find promises of patronage rewards to be credible will be inclined to vote for the ruling party (H3B).

On the negative side, we also test for compulsion-driven voting with a specification about political monitoring. As a parting question, the Afrobarometer asks, "By the way, who do you think sent us to do this interview?" Despite the fact that trained interviewers followed a script that introduced themselves as affiliated with "an independent research organization" which does not "represent the government or any political party," only 31 percent of respondents saw the survey as autonomous. The remainder either "didn't know" (17 percent) or saw the survey as sponsored by an agency of the incumbent government (52 percent). Under these circumstances, it is essential to consider the possibility that people might censor their stated vote choices according to misperceptions about who is asking politically sensitive questions. Because perceptions of official sponsorship are higher in less democratic countries and among more evasive respondents, we regard this indicator as a viable proxy for the costliness of political dissent.¹⁵ We expect it to be positively related to an intended vote for the ruling party (H3C).

Measuring Contextual Effects

We have seen that the percentage vote for the ruling party varies by country (Figure 1). Analysis of intended vote choice therefore cannot be restricted to the individual level alone. Thus we report a multi-level model with aggregate indicators for the contextual characteristics of countries. The logic of these procedures is that voting behavior is guided not only by political "nurture"—an individual's learned political attitudes—but also by the "nature"—the country context in which voters find themselves.

These contextual factors may be economic, social or political. For simplicity's sake, we take account of only two relevant country-level indicators of each type (see Table 2). To capture *economic context*, average GDP growth and inflation rates for the five-year period up to 2005 are entered into the model. To capture *social context*, we employ statistics that measure the fractionalization of "politically relevant ethnic groups" (PREG) (Posner 2004)¹⁶ and the degree of ethnic polarization, that is, fractionalization weighted by relative group size (ETHPOL) (Montalvo and Reynal-Querol 2005). The *political context* is represented by three institutional variables: (i) the constitutional form, whether presidential (1) or parliamentary (0); (ii) the party system, measured as the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP) in 2005 (Laakso and Taagepera 1979); and (iii) the level of democracy, measured as a country's combined inverted status of freedom score in 2005 as reported by Freedom House (range 2-14).

Table 2: Country-Level Contextual Factors, 16 African Countries, 2005

Country	GDP Growth Average Annual (2000-2005)	Inflation Average Annual (2000-2005)	Ethnic Fractionalization (PREG)	Ethnic Polarization (ETHPOL)	Constitutional Form 1 = Presidential 0 = Parliamentary	Effective Number of Parties (ENPP)	Level of Democracy (FH, 2005 CL + PR, inverted)
Benin	4.2	09.5	0.30	0.44	1	4.95	10
Botswana	5.9	11.7	0.00	0.65	0	1.56	10
Ghana	4.8	89.8	0.44	0.66	1	2.10	11
Kenya	3.1	08.6	0.57	0.38	1	2.21	8
Lesotho	2.8	18.7	0.00	0.34	0	2.16	9
Madagascar	3.0	29.2	0.00	0.02	1	2.31	8
Malawi	2.6	53.1	0.55	0.74	1	4.22	6
Mali	5.9	11.4	0.13	0.42	1	4.61	10
Mozambique	7.5	39.9	0.36	0.50	1	1.85	7
Namibia	4.4	21.8	0.55	0.72	0	1.68	9
Nigeria	5.5	40.1	0.66	0.40	1	2.15	6
Senegal	4.4	05.0	0.14	0.56	1	1.76	9
South Africa	3.9	20.2	0.49	0.72	0	1.94	11
Tanzania	6.3	19.7	0.59	0.27	1	1.30	7
Uganda	5.6	11.6	0.63	0.28	1	2.04	5
Zambia	4.6	70.2	0.71	0.61	1	2.99	6

Analysis and Results

In cross-national data sets like the Afrobarometer, individual attitudes are not randomly distributed but clustered within higher-level units, such as country. To ignore these data hierarchies is to run the risk of drawing incorrect statistical inferences and erroneous substantive conclusions about the sources of vote choice. We consequently utilize a multilevel model (Raudenbusch and Bryk 2002; Steenbergen and Jones 2002; Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2008) that allows us to examine how covariates measured at each of two levels—individual (Level One) and country (Level Two)—affect a respondent’s stated intention to vote for the ruling party, our outcome of interest.

Specifically, we present results from a logistic random-effects model that provides a maximum likelihood estimation of vote choice using adaptive quadrature to approximate integrals (Rabe-Hasketh and Skrondal 2008).¹⁷ We start by estimating the combined effects of individual level variables on vote choice in Model 1, controlling for standard demographic influences. We then specify Model 2 in an effort to test whether the inclusion of country-level indicators improves our model of intended vote choice. Given the difficulty associated with a direct interpretation of multilevel logistic coefficients, we end our discussion by reporting predicted probabilities. A number of interesting insights arise from the results.¹⁸

Ethnic Identities

Model 1 suggests that *ethnic identities* do indeed affect voters’ intentions (see Table 3), albeit with some dimensions of ethnicity pushing in unexpected directions.

For example, being a member of the *largest ethnic group* (H1A) is no guarantee that voters will express intent to support the party in power. This result reinforces the earlier observation that the largest ethnic group rules in fewer than half the countries studied here (see Table A3). It calls into question the assumption that, in Africa, the largest ethnic groups are always able to attain political dominance. Instead, what really matters for the expression of voting intentions is an individual’s relationship to the ethnic group—whether majority, plurality, secondary or minority—that currently controls executive power. An individual who belongs to the same ethnic group as the incumbent president (the *ethnic group in power*, or EGIP) is far more

likely to express an intention to vote for the ruling party (H1B). This strong and significant result lends credence to the interpretation that people expect leaders to treat co-ethnics more favorably than others when exercising public power.

On the other hand, we find that *the salience of ethnicity*—measured as the tendency of individual voters to self-define primarily in terms of ethnic rather than national identity—reduces the intention to support incumbents (H1C). Nor does *interethnic distrust* (H1D), which fails to reach statistical significance, incline a voter to back the ruling party. Two caveats are in order. First, the way in which these ethnic traits affect vote choice essentially depends on the relationship of the voter to power holders. Depending on whether the voter belongs to the same ethnic group as the sitting president (i.e. the EGIP) *ethnic salience* and *distrust* have divergent effects for intended vote choice: positive if voters are co-ethnics and negative otherwise. But since interactive terms do not reach statistical significance, neither is reported in the analysis.

Much more influential is a citizen's sense that his or her group suffers *ethnic discrimination* at the hands of the state authorities (H1E). As expected, a sense of political grievance—namely that the government has meted out unfair treatment to one's cultural group—helps to shape the voting calculus. Unlike people who belong to the EGIP, however, individuals who perceive ethnic discrimination are strongly and significantly inclined to vote *against* the ruling party.

Economic Interests

Turning next to *economic interests*, Model 1 confirms that Africans also express intentions to vote economically, with two of the five indicators of economic interests being statistically significant.

With reference to retrospective considerations, a voter's views about the past condition of the economy-at-large (H2A) appear slightly more formative for voting decisions than views about past personal living standards (H2B), though neither is statistically significant.¹⁹ Instead, a voter's expectation about the future condition of the economy-at-large has an important influence (H2C), more so than his or her views about future personal living standards (H2D). Most importantly, however, an individual's assessment of the government's performance (H2E) at implementing a range of macro-economic policies—managing the economy, creating jobs, controlling inflation, and closing income gaps—is a major economic influence on intended vote choice.

As such, we infer that Africans in the countries we surveyed take economic considerations into account as they form their voting intentions. Like voters elsewhere in the world, they calculate their economic interests with greater reference to the condition of the national economy than to the state of their family finances. And, contrary to the easy view that Africans think fatalistically, we find that they place greater weight on hopes of future economic prosperity than on evidence of past economic performance.

Political Considerations

As a final contender among rival explanations, we confront the possibility that voters resort to partisan identifications. In deciding how to allocate their vote they refer to feelings of closeness to the ruling party. To repeat, we do not take reports of “party ID” at face value. Instead we consider only those voters who claim to be close to the ruling party while also judging that the national president, having performed poorly, does not deserve re-election. We surmise that some of these partisans are sincerely motivated by party loyalty, while others are positioning themselves strategically behind the party most likely to win. In one of the most compelling results in the study, we discover that partisan identification, even when defined narrowly and instrumentally, exerts a very powerful effect on intended vote choice (H3A).

Table 3: Multi-Level Logistic Regression: Intention to Vote for Ruling Party

Model	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
<u>Level-One (Individual)</u>				
Constant	-1.766***	(0.241)	-0.230	(0.617)
<i>Ethnic Identities</i>				
Member of Largest Ethnic Group	-0.006	(0.090)	-0.019	(0.096)
Member of Ethnic Group in Power (EGIP)	0.462***	(0.134)	0.478***	(0.142)
Saliency of Ethnicity	-0.067**	(0.023)	-0.067**	(0.024)
Interethnic Distrust	-0.023	(0.018)	-0.025	(0.019)
Ethnic Discrimination	-0.202***	(0.041)	-0.210***	(0.046)
<i>Economic Interests</i>				
Retrospective Sociotropic	0.048	(0.025)	0.049	(0.027)
Retrospective Egocentric	-0.015	(0.022)	-0.015	(0.024)
Prospective Sociotropic	0.125***	(0.029)	0.129***	(0.031)
Prospective Egocentric	0.014	(0.024)	0.016	(0.026)
Economic Policy Performance	0.551***	(0.069)	0.579***	(0.068)
<i>Political Considerations</i>				
<u>Partisan Identification</u>	1.946***	(0.336)	1.972***	(0.333)
<u>Expectation of Patronage</u>	0.058*	(0.029)	0.061*	(0.031)
<u>Expectation of Compulsion</u>	0.228***	(0.044)	0.243***	(0.045)
<i>Demographic Controls</i>				
Female	0.086*	(0.038)	0.091*	(0.041)
Age	-0.001	(0.002)	-0.001	(0.002)
Education	-0.024	(0.022)	-0.026	(0.024)
Poverty	0.042	(0.040)	0.042	(0.043)
Rural	0.230***	(0.056)	0.243***	(0.058)
Level-Two (Country)				
Ethnic Fragmentation			0.495	(0.826)
Ethnic Polarization			-0.725	(0.966)
GDP Growth Rate			0.038	(0.118)
Inflation Rate			0.003	(0.004)
Presidential Constitution			-0.409	(0.339)
Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties (ENPP)			-0.359***	(0.077)
Level of Democracy			-0.083	(0.055)
<i>Variance Components</i>				
Intercept	0.518 ^a		0.383 ^b	
-2 x Log Likelihood	63235.32		64834.46	
Number of Level-One Units	23093		23093	
Number of Level-Two Units	16		16	

Note: The above coefficients are maximum likelihood multi-level logit estimates, with *Country* specified as random intercept. ^a χ^2 , 15 df = 37.6, $p < 0.001$; ^b χ^2 , 8df = 23.6, $***p < 0.001$; $**p < .01$, $*p < .05$. Significant coefficients in bold.

Consistent with this outcome, we find that popular anticipation of future patronage rewards adds extra positive impetus to a voter's intention to choose the ruling party (H3B). Some voters apparently calculate that incumbents are more credible than opposition politicians in promising to "deliver development" after the election. At the same time, other voters are even more strongly motivated by concern about potential negative sanctions. People who (wrongly) suspect that the government had a hand in the Afrobarometer survey are likely to say that they would vote for the ruling party (H3C). We interpret this result as a fear of political surveillance and monitoring. Being seen by the ruling party to have voted the "wrong" way exposes individuals to the risk of post-election retribution. Not wanting to be excluded from official patronage

networks or exposed to coercive state sanctions, some individuals will opt for the safe strategy of voting for the ruling party.

Demographic Controls

It may be tempting to think that African voting intentions are a direct function of an individual's place in the *social structure*. To be sure, as shown in Table 4, women and (especially) rural dwellers are significantly more likely than other voters to say they would cast a ballot for the ruling party (H4A, H4E). But other demographic controls, including age, education and poverty remain insignificant in Model 1.

Country Contexts

So far, by using pooled data to arrive at general results, our analysis has paid scant attention to the distinctive social structures, economic conditions and political institutions prevailing in particular countries. When Model 1 is run separately for each of the 16 Afrobarometer countries, however, differences emerge in the strength, significance and hierarchy of explanatory factors.

We therefore take account of country-level variance by estimating coefficients for the social, economic and political macro-indicators discussed earlier in this paper. The results of Model 2 suggest that only one contextual factor, *the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP)*, is significant.²⁰ As expected, the larger the number of political parties that secure seats in the national legislature, the *less* likely are voters to opt for the presidential candidate of the ruling party (H5Cb). We interpret this finding to indicate that voters have little choice but to vote for the incumbent in dominant party systems. By contrast, as multiparty competition increases, so voters are better able to express their identities and interests when choosing who will rule them.

The current evidence suggests that aggregate patterns of ethnic fragmentation and political polarization among rival ethnic groups do not have a significant impact on intended ballot box behavior.²¹ Moreover, higher ethnic fragmentation is associated with votes for, not against, the ruling party. And ethnic polarization prompts more opposition voting and less ruling party support. These findings resonate with recent scholarship on conflict by Esteban and Ray (2008), who find that measures of fractionalization and polarization tend to run in opposite directions: conflict occurrence in polarized societies will be low whereas its intensity will be high, with the relationship reversed for highly fractionalized societies.

Marginal Effects

The concrete implications of our findings are summarized in Table 4. For the full model, it shows the marginal effects of each independent variable on the likelihood of an individual's intent to vote for the ruling party. These effects are computed as the differences in predicted probabilities from the lowest to the highest response category on each independent variable. The point of reference is a rural female voter who does not belong to the ethnic group in power, who evaluates the government as performing badly on economic policy performance, and who does not identify with the ruling party.

Table 4: Marginal Effects: Intention to Vote for the Ruling Party

	Marginal Effects
Level-One (Individual)	
<i>Ethnic Identities</i>	
Member of Largest Ethnic Group	-0.005
Member of Ethnic Group in Power (EGIP)	0.108
Ethnic Salience	-0.066
Interethnic Distrust	-0.018
Ethnic Discrimination	-0.154
<i>Economic Interests</i>	
Retrospective Sociotropic	0.047
Retrospective Egocentric	-0.015
Prospective Sociotropic	0.125
Prospective Egocentric	0.016
Economic Policy Performance	0.372
<i>Political Considerations</i>	
<u>Partisan Identification</u>	0.317
<u>Expectation of Patronage</u>	0.043
<u>Expectation of Compulsion</u>	0.060
<i>Demographic Controls</i>	
Female	0.022
Age	-0.016
Education	-0.051
Poverty	0.040
Rural	0.060
Level-Two (Country)	
Ethnic Fragmentation	0.105
Ethnic Polarization	-0.123
GDP Growth rate	0.045
Inflation Rate	0.078
Presidential Constitution	-0.096
Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties (ENPP)	-0.311
Level of Democracy (FH2005 1-14 inverted)	-0.119

Note: Marginal probabilities were calculated by taking the difference in predicted probabilities from highest to the lowest response category. See Appendix Table A4 for a full specification of predicted probabilities for each value of the independent variable.

Value settings for probability calculation:

Ethnic: Largest ethnic group = 0 (no), EGIP = 0 (no)

Economic: Economic policy performance = 2 (lowest)

Political: Partisan Identification = 0 (no), Expectation of compulsion = 1(yes)

Demographic: Female = 2 (female), Rural = 2(rural);

All other variables are set at mean scores.

For a full specification of predicted probabilities and marginal effects, See Appendix, Table A4.

With respect to *ethnicity*, the results indicate that membership in the ethnic group in power (EGIP) increases this sort of voter's intention to cast a ballot for the ruling party by a margin of 11 percentage points. But if she feels the sting of ethnic discrimination, then the outcome is a negative effect of 15 percentage points. Comparing these results, we may infer that the negative consequence of felt group discrimination outweighs the positive inducement of belonging to the most powerful ethnic group.

With regard to *economic* factors, faith in the economic future (prospective sociotropic voting) increases intended support for the ruling party by 13 percentage points. And a favorable evaluation of the government's policy performance increases it by fully 37 percentage points. This hefty individual-level effect is the largest in the model, suggesting that a voter's overall response to public provision of job opportunities, low prices and income distribution is the prime mover of voting intentions. Indeed, this performance-based economic interest has at least twice as large an impact as any aspect of ethnic identity.

With regard to political factors, *partisan identification* increases support for the ruling party by some 32 percentage points, also a large effect. In weighing incentives for voting for the incumbent, the lure of patronage rewards has the expected positive effect (of 4 percentage points), but expectations of compulsion are even more influential (at 6 percentage points). Finally, at the country level, a shift from a party system in which one party is dominant to a system fragmented by multiple parties reduces intended support for the ruling party by a margin of 31 percentage points. In other words, the pattern of voting intentions reported here is most common in country contexts where a dominant incumbent party commonly wins.

Conclusion

This article confirms that conventional theories of voting behavior provide leverage as starting points for understanding the outcomes of multiparty elections in sub-Saharan Africa. Using survey and aggregate data gleaned from more than 23,000 would-be voters in 16 African countries in 2005, we show that, to measurable degrees, Africans seek to engage in *both* ethnic *and* economic voting.

Thus elections in Africa are much more than mere ethnic censuses or straightforward economic referenda. The complexity of voting motivations is evidenced by unforeseen facts: *contra* the stereotype of ethnic voting, many African heads of government hail from secondary or minority ethnic groups; and converse to the economic voting thesis, incumbent presidents often gain reelection despite the poor performance of African economies. It is therefore necessary to move beyond confirmatory results about single-factor explanations in order to make several original claims.

First, our systematic cross-national test of the relative importance of different voting rationales yields an unexpected result. Regardless of the commonplace trope that Africans voters are motivated mainly by ethnic solidarities, we find that economic interests are uppermost. Without denying that ethnic sentiments play a role in shaping vote choice, we note that rational calculations about material welfare are apparently at the forefront of voters' minds. We take this observation as a positive sign that African politicians cannot count indefinitely on cultural appeals to kith and kin but, in order to be consistently re-elected, must also establish a track record of social and economic delivery.

Second, by distinguishing various dimensions of economic interest and ethnic identity, we cast light on the mechanisms that drive the formation of voting preferences.

As for economic interests, we note that voter expectations about the future health of the economy outweigh any other past, present or future evaluation, especially of personal living standards. Thus, while we confirm that Africans resemble the sociotropic voters so common in other parts of the world, we also insist that they think about the economy more like future-oriented "bankers" than backward-looking "peasants." Of course, one wonders whether popular expectations about Africa's economic future are based as much on hope as on realism. Offsetting this concern, however, we note that, for the Africans we interviewed, rational assessment of actual government performance at macroeconomic policy management is the principal economic influence on intended vote choice.

As for ethnic identity, an individual's membership in the largest ethnic group and distrust of ethnic strangers play almost no role in shaping a vote for the political *status quo*. Instead, an individual's membership in the ethnic group that currently holds political power is a powerful factor explaining a vote for the ruling party.

Conversely, an intention vote for the opposition is driven mainly by whether an individual feels a collective sense of ethnic discrimination. In this regard, the principal line of ethnic cleavage in the context of electoral competition is whether individuals are “insiders” or “outsiders” to the prevailing distribution of political power.

²²Third, we cannot discount an individual’s partisan attachments. But we take a distinctly instrumental interpretation of overt expressions of party identification. Because the distribution of development resources in a winner-take-all system depends upon political connections, voters have a strong incentive to declare fealty to the incumbent, including by saying they will vote for him. Their hope is that, by overtly (but not necessarily sincerely) demonstrating political loyalty, material rewards will follow. Especially where one party is dominant and opposition parties are weak—the only contextual factor that we have found to be important—it is simply too risky to come out openly and express an intention to vote against an incumbent.

Fourth, the incentives for reelecting incumbents turn out to be positive as well as negative. On the positive side, the perception that incumbent politicians are able to make credible campaign promises to deliver patronage after elections leads to a measurable increase in ruling party support. On the negative side, some would-be voters state an intention to back the ruling party because they worry about harmful repercussions from agents of the state. For reasons of self-protection, some unknown but probably substantial proportion of these citizens therefore follows through with actual votes for the party in power.

Fifth and finally, we trace voting intentions to a feature of African political institutions at the country level. Our multi-level model suggests that African citizens are much more likely to vote for incumbents in places where there is a low effective number of parliamentary parties, that is, where dominant parties continue to stride the political stage. In places with weak oppositions—like, *inter alia*, Tanzania, Namibia, Mozambique, and even Botswana and South Africa—voters have a restricted range of political choice; they essentially face the narrow option of endorsing or rejecting some form of *de facto* single party rule. It is for this reason that instrumental expressions of partisanship are so widespread among African electorates. Thus, even as African voters increasingly seek to hold political leaders accountable for economic performance, they encounter the institutional constraints of party systems inherited from a postcolonial past.

Endnotes

¹ “Can African Democracy Survive Ethnic Voting?” *New York Times*, March 17, 1996.

² Coined by campaign strategist James Carville, “it’s the economy, stupid” highlighted the key issue in Bill Clinton’s successful 1992 U.S. presidential bid..

³ The countries are Benin, Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. For sampling, questionnaires, interviews and response rates, see <http://www.afrobarometer.org/surveys.html>. Variables used in the analysis are described in Appendix 1.

⁴

⁵ Hence, our explanation is likely to work best in countries where the incumbent party wins by a large margin and to have less applicability in countries where a greater portion of votes goes to the opposition.

⁶ To this end, we supplement survey data with aggregate indicators from several standard secondary data sets.

⁷ The mean share of the vote won by the ruling party in presidential elections previous and subsequent to the survey was 56 percent. Legislative elections were counted in parliamentary regimes. Source: *African Elections Database*, <http://africanelections.tripod.com/>.

⁸ An individual’s nominal tribal identity is closely correlated with his or her language of origin, but remains a distinctive and finer grained cultural characteristic. Cramer’s $V = .855$, $p < .001$.

⁹ The remainder say they either value national and ethnic identities equally (42 percent) or “don’t know”/can’t decide (3 percent). We recognize that identities are multiple, constructed and situational, which is reflected in the fact that almost half of all respondents wanted, in the situation of an interview, to have their identity both ways (national *and* ethnic *equally*).

¹⁰ The expected sign depends on whether the respondent belongs to the ethnic group in power (EGIP). Positive if “yes”, negative if “no.”

¹¹ See previous endnote.

¹² A maximum likelihood factor analysis extracted one factor without rotation ($\alpha = .791$).

¹³ This criterion is actually quite demanding. To begin with, only 39 percent of survey respondents claim to feel close to the ruling party, in good part because many citizens resist any party affiliation. And, overall, only 29 percent of survey respondents do not approve of presidential performance. A cross-tabulation of these two groups yields only 5 percent of the sample who meet *both* standards.

¹⁴ As expected, individuals who meet our narrow definition of partisanship are more knowledgeable than the rest of the electorate about which party won the last election (bivariate $r = .037^{***}$). At the same time, however, they are more sceptical about the quality of the last election ($r = -.067^{***}$) and more concerned about declining standards of voting freedom ($-.053^{***}$). Remarkably—but consistent with a strategic or instrumental interpretation—these citizens are also less trustful of the ruling party ($-.059^{***}$).

¹⁵ At an aggregate level, people are significantly more likely to see government sponsorship in countries with lower Freedom House scores. And, at the individual level, perceptions of governmental oversight are significantly more common among those respondents who interviewers judge to be “suspicious” of the interview rather than “at ease,” and “misleading” in their answers rather than “honest.”

¹⁶ We prefer PREG to a standard ethno-linguistic fractionalization index (ELF).

¹⁷ We utilized the default number of integration (quadrature) points, equal to seven.

¹⁸ Based on average coefficients from five imputed data sets. To ensure that the imputation of responses did not bias results, we re-ran analysis, dropping all cases in which the dependent variable was imputed (19 percent). We also re-estimated the models without the country (Tanzania) with the most missing data. In both cases, the results remain robust.

¹⁹ And retrospective egocentric considerations unexpectedly lean negative.

²⁰ Why are other contextual factors insignificant? The most likely explanation is that variation in voting intentions within countries is greater than across countries. The intra-class correlation coefficient for the country level is 0.1023. As such, country-level indicators account for just 10 percent of the variation in intended vote choice. We further note that the coefficient estimates for individual level explanatory variables remain robust with the inclusion of Level-Two indicators.

²¹ We acknowledge that this result is partly a consequence of the small number of country cases (n= 16).

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