

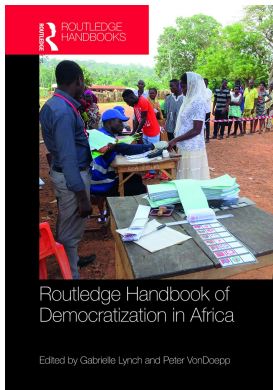
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### Ethnic politics

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ETHNIC POLITICS<sup>1</sup>*Dominika Koter*

Scholars debate the degree to which ethnicity—or a sense of belonging to an ethnic group—plays a role in African politics, with some going so far as to argue that certain African elections are a mere “ethnic census” whereby electoral choices mirror the ethnic demographics (Horowitz 1985; Ferree 2010). However, nobody disputes that ethnicity is an important factor in electoral politics, with a transition to multiparty politics across much of the subcontinent from the early 1990s having made ethnic cleavages even more conspicuous. This chapter will review existing scholarship and consider the following questions: What is ethnic politics? Why is ethnic politics so widespread? And how can we understand variations in the level of ethnic politics?

**Understanding and measuring ethnic politics**

Ethnic identity conventionally refers to any descent-based identity, including not just ethnicity per se but also race, caste, tribe, religion, and language (Horowitz 1985); with measures of ethnic politics focusing on the extent to which ethnic identity explains, and predicts, vote choice. While measures of ethnic politics may vary, they all consider the relationship between voters’ ethnic characteristics and the distribution of support of different candidates and parties.

In his classic book *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Donald Horowitz (1985) suggests that ethnic politics are based on two intertwined phenomena: ethnic voting, namely voting for a candidate or party of the same ethnic background; and the existence of ethnic parties, or ethnic candidates, namely those that garner a disproportionate share of their electoral support from their co-ethnics. In this sense, ethnic candidates and parties are the opposite of national political actors with broadly representative, multiethnic electorates. The existence of ethnic parties is not determined by whether an entire ethnic group votes for the same party, but by whether a party relies disproportionately on the support of a single group. Importantly, Horowitz’s definition is agnostic about whether parties intentionally aim to have an ethnic base or whether they simply end up with one. In other words, a party dominated by a single ethnic group is an ethnic party whether it explicitly seeks to represent only a specific ethnic group or not. Such an understanding differs from some other definitions of ethnic parties, such as the one developed by Chandra and Metz (2002), which requires overt appeals to ethnicity.

Horowitz’s approach is arguably more suited to the African setting, given that the formation of parties based on ethnic identities is outlawed in many African countries. For example,

Benin's constitution forbids the creation of parties on ethnic or regional bases (Seely 2007), yet Beninese parties cater to ethnic constituencies without making overt appeals. Parties and candidates across Africa typically make discreet verbal appeals to ethnicity during campaigns without leaving a paper trail of their intention to favor a certain group. Looking for overt appeals to ethnicity, instead of studying parties' distribution of support, would most certainly undercount the number of ethnic parties in Africa. To illustrate, several Beninese parties would be classified as ethnic because they rely primarily on support from specific ethnic groups,<sup>2</sup> but none of them would be classified as ethnic if we looked for explicit claims that they only seek to represent their ethnic constituency.

For the reasons just outlined, it is preferable to use Horowitz's concept of an ethnic party, namely one with an overwhelming share of its support coming from a specific ethnic group. While his concept is straightforward, one of its drawbacks is establishing a threshold, i.e., the percentage of the vote coming from a single group, as any threshold is somewhat arbitrary.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, it can be helpful to think about ethnic parties and candidates in terms of "degree" and not just "either/or" coding. Such continuous measure of ethnic politics is at the basis of several indices, such as Cheeseman and Ford's (2007) ethnic polarization and ethnic diversity of political parties, Elischer's (2013) Party Nationalization Scores (PNS), and Dowd and Driessen's (2008) Cramer's V Ethno-linguistic Voting Index (CVELI).

Despite subtle differences, these measures generally lead to similar conclusions because they all use similar data to assess the relationship between voters' ethnic characteristics and vote choice. Nevertheless, it is often worth consulting several different measures to check whether a party or a party system labeled as non-ethnic according to one index would be classified as ethnic by others. Another consideration to bear in mind is that some of the indices only consider one dimension of ethnic identity, such as language, and evaluate the association between that particular identity and vote choice. Yet, empirically we know that in most heterogeneous societies ethnic identity is multidimensional (Laitin 1986; Posner 2005). An index based on a single dimension of ethnic identification, for example, of linguistic cluster or clan, can better attest the existence of ethnic parties rather than prove their absence, because electoral results could be strongly associated with another dimension of identity. This highlights potential pitfalls of solely relying on off-the-shelf indices. Scholars should consider all salient ethnic dimensions (such as clan, larger ethnic blocks, and linguistic clusters) and verify whether any one of them is a good predictor of vote choice.

### **The political salience of ethnic identities**

To answer the question of why ethnicity plays a role in electoral politics we need to investigate politicians' and voters' choices and motivations. We need to understand why political leaders seek to mobilize support along ethnic lines and when and why voters support ethnic candidates. The following section will review answers to these questions. In order to understand why politicians might want to use ethnic identity for electoral mobilization, we need to weigh the appeal of ethnicity vis-à-vis other modes of electoral mobilization; the discussion is accordingly bisected into the limitations of non-ethnic electoral strategies in Africa and the appeal of ethnic mobilization.

#### ***Limitations of non-ethnic mobilization strategies***

One of the main reasons why scholars expect African politicians to mobilize along ethnic lines is the perceived scarcity of viable alternatives. For most of the postindependence period, African

politicians had to campaign in environments with underdeveloped media, high linguistic diversity, and poor roads, which made it both time-consuming and expensive to travel across the country to reach voters. This characterization generally applies to this day, notwithstanding technological improvements that have alleviated some of these problems in recent years. In such contexts, structural theories expect ethnic cues to exert a strong influence on voting choices and party support (see Norris and Mattes 2003 for review).

Second, some of the logical alternatives to ethnic appeals, such as programmatic campaigns, have been rather limited over the course of mass electoral competition in Africa. Countless studies over the past sixty years have noted the low salience of ideology and programmatic debates in African campaigns (inter alia Thompson 1963; Jeffries 1998; van de Walle 2007). Even when parties had policy manifestos, their programs were rarely discussed with voters during campaign events (Joseph 1987). Most voters would struggle to differentiate parties based on their programs since parties did not articulate clear ideological distinctions between themselves and their competitors (e.g., van de Walle 2007).

Recent scholarship adds important nuance to the study of the role of ideology in African politics and its limitations. For example, Resnick's (2014) study of the campaign of the late Michael Sata in Zambia showcases both the appeal of populism and its boundaries; Sata successfully used populist appeals in the capital city of Lusaka but when campaigning in rural areas he reverted to ethnic appeals. Resnick's work implies that many politicians do not view populist campaigns as suitable for the countryside, where the majority of African voters live. Bleck and van de Walle (2013) clarify that while politicians frequently discuss social problems and voters' concerns, they do not offer specific policy prescriptions. The authors convincingly show that African politicians typically present valence rather than position issues. Yet, valence issues, namely issues on which there is full agreement, such as the need to fight crime or boost development, do not offer actual strategies on how to achieve such desired goals, in contrast to position issues, which articulate specific policy prescriptions. Thus, distinguishing between parties remains difficult when parties invoke valence issues alone.

### ***The appeal of ethnic mobilization***

Many scholars believe that this limited use of ideological and programmatic appeals contributed to the spread of ethnic politics. In the absence of stark ideological differences, ethnicity became the key distinguishing factor between different parties and candidates. In contrast to policy platforms that might be difficult to articulate and sell to voters, ethnic markers are readily available and easy to communicate even in information-poor environments. Names, dress, or clothing can inform voters about different candidates' or parties' ethnic background. Ethnic identity communicated this way can then serve as an "organizing principle" (Ajulu 2002).

Ethnicity is not only highly visible but it can offer important information about who will benefit if a given candidate or party wins. Electing a co-ethnic candidate can potentially confer two types of benefits: expressive and instrumental (material). These two approaches are not mutually exclusive but they differ in their understanding of what primarily drives ethnic voting. Proponents of expressive understandings of ethnic voting, such as Horowitz (1985), assert that individual self-worth is linked with group standing; when one's ethnic group prospers, members of the group feel validated, whereas when one's group loses power and prestige, individuals' self-worth suffers as a result.

In contrast to theories that put psychological benefits at the center of ethnic voting, the instrumentalist school of thought argues that the principal reason why ethnicity matters to

voters is because of expectations of material gain. In this respect, Lonsdale's (1994) differentiation between moral ethnicity, which is a reflection of pride in one's group, and political tribalism, namely competition over resources, highlights the centrality of material competition to ethnic politics. Work by Bates (1974), Kasfir (1979), Skinner (1975), and Joseph (1987) suggests that groups use ethnicity to advance their material goals. From their perspective, ethnic groups offer efficient vehicles to advance group demands and to help voters access resources. Voters are thus amenable to ethnic mobilization because they expect to benefit materially. They also see ethnicity as instrumental in negotiating access to power (Ajulu 2002). Scholar such as Bates (1974), Young (1982), and Joseph (1987) also believe that this use of ethnicity for material advancement further increases the salience of ethnicity in society. This would explain how ethnic mobilization, once started, would create a vicious cycle that would be long-lasting and hard to break. This cycle can be perpetuated for several reasons; once some political actors mobilize ethnicity successfully, this creates an attractive template for other actors to replicate, creating an ethnic outbidding effect. Ethnic mobilization by some political entrepreneurs also encourages defensive mobilization by other groups who fear being excluded (Bratton and Kimenyi 2008), or who develop a sense of shared marginalization (Lynch 2011).

Work by scholars such as Posner (2005) and van de Walle (2007) further supports the view that ethnic electoral mobilization is about defending material interests of different groups. Posner (2005) provides a very clear rationale as to why voters and politicians rely on ethnic identity. He argues that in situations of information scarcity, ethnic affiliation gives voters credible information about which groups will benefit, if a given party or candidate wins the election. He suggests that voters widely believe in ethnic favoritism, namely they expect their co-ethnics to help them materially more than a non-co-ethnic would, and stresses that it is the perception of ethnic favoritism that suffices rather than an established empirical pattern of preferential treatment. Posner adds that ethnic affiliation can help to enforce politicians' promises because, while an individual voter cannot successfully punish a politician who reneges on his promise, an entire ethnic group can do so by withholding future support. Ethnic affiliation can thus serve as an enforcement mechanism, making co-ethnic politicians' promises more credible. Politicians, in turn, take advantage of voters' perceptions of ethnic favoritism. They rely on ethnicity for political mobilization because they can employ it as a cheap information shortcut when appealing to voters.

Ferree (2010) presents a similar understanding of ethnic politics, or what she calls census elections, wherein parties and voters rely on racialized (ethnicized) party images as cognitive shortcuts to guide their behavior. She also highlights how politicians can sow doubts in voters' minds about whether a non-co-ethnic party would have their interests at heart. Ferree convincingly shows that part of the ANC's strategy in South Africa is to paint their opponents in racial terms to question their commitment to non-co-ethnic voters. As she argues, presenting rival parties as "white" helps to delegitimize and discredit them in the eyes of black voters. Ethnic mobilization can thus rely both on leading voters to believe that their co-ethnics would favor them and on raising doubts as to whether non-co-ethnic politicians would care about them. This dynamic is also consistent with Lynch's (2014) account of how William Ruto in Kenya successfully convinced his co-ethnics not to vote for Raila Odinga by stoking fear of the consequences of his victory. Lynch (2008) also documents the persistent use of language of Kalenjin persecution and state bias to mobilize Kalenjin voters. Both Ferree's and Lynch's work discussed here also show clearly the role of political elites in accentuating ethnic differences and keeping them politically salient. In addition to fear of non-co-ethnics, Padró i Miquel (2007) suggests that voters' support for co-ethnics is further strengthened by the belief that other

groups will vote for their co-ethnics. For example, the belief that Kikuyus are “incapable of voting for non-Kikuyu” appeared to be very common in Kenya (Lynch 2014, 98).

The existing literature also links the current competition for resources to the effects of colonialism and imposition of capitalism. It is a well-established view that European colonialism affected ethnic groups and regions differently and created unequal access to resources, be it through differential development, uneven missionary activity and access to education, or employment patterns (Ajulu 2002; Berman 1998; Lonsdale 1994; Ndegwa 1997). By highlighting and accentuating group differences, the colonial experience played an important role in politicizing ethnic identities. The colonial experience mattered in several ways: it made some identities salient and led to the creation of others (Ndegwa 1997), it unleashed an acute contestation over resources and bore witness to the uneven impacts of capitalist penetration (Ajulu 2002), and contributed to the centrality of ethnic patron–client networks of support and protection over other networks (Berman 1998). Some scholars, such as Mafeje (1971), also argue that the whole concept and vocabulary of tribalism is a European colonial import. The contribution of these works is that they highlight the historical origin of politicization of ethnicity and the centrality of ethnicity in determining access to resources.

Despite a quasi-consensus that ethnic mobilization is about competition for material goods, this scholarship is largely agnostic about the specifics of groups’ wants. There has been a tendency to believe that all groups want essentially the same thing, namely access to scarce state resources, development, and security (e.g., Melson and Wolpe 1970; Joseph 1987). In contrast, recent work by Lieberman and McClendon (2013) suggests that different ethnic groups have distinct priorities and preferences over how resources should be spent. The question of what groups want deserves more attention because it has implications for the durability and perpetuation of ethnic politics. If groups essentially want the same goods, ethnic politics might wither if politicians could credibly ensure equal access to resources for all groups, for example, through universal redistributive programs that are now becoming common in Latin America (e.g., Zucco 2013). In contrast, if groups have different wants, ethnic politics is more likely to persist since it partly reflects underlying policy preferences of different groups.

In sum, the bulk of the literature suggests that ethnicity matters to voters, especially in information-poor contexts, because it sends signals about which politicians and parties will advance their needs and benefit their group and which politicians are unlikely to do so. Other pieces of information that would allow voters to assess candidates’ expected performance in office are underdeveloped, underutilized, and often not credible. From politicians’ perspective, ethnic mobilization is a logical strategy, based on their understanding of how voters think. When politicians know that voters believe in ethnic favoritism, highlighting one’s ethnic credentials is a logical electoral strategy. Politicians also weigh their alternatives and conclude that ethnic mobilization is advantageous to them because it is cheap and easy, whereas other strategies, such as developing a program and communicating it to voters effectively, are more challenging.

To be sure, ethnic considerations need not push out all other factors. Several recent studies provide evidence of evaluative (or retrospective) voting behavior in Africa (Lindberg and Morrison 2008; Weghorst and Lindberg 2013; Hoffman and Long 2013; see also Long, this volume). Harding (2015) shows that voters reward incumbents who deliver local public goods. These studies suggest that voters weigh the expectations of benefits from co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic politicians against their actual or likely performance and thus evaluative behavior could dampen the impact of ethnicity. In contrast, Carlson’s (2015) experiment in Uganda suggests that voters care only about co-ethnic candidates’ past performance but do not attach much importance to non-co-ethnics’ competence because they do not expect to benefit from the latter, irrespective of their record. In sum, while there is a general acknowledgement that

ethnic considerations coexist with other factors, such as candidate evaluation, the existing literature is much less clear as to how exactly these ethnic and non-ethnic factors interact. This is an area of research where there is still a great deal to learn.

Overall, one of the main strengths of the existing research on the factors that drive ethnic politics is the persistent finding on the importance of material benefits in generating ethnic voting. This view emerges consistently across many different cases, over time and across methodologies. In contrast, one of the weaknesses of the existing scholarship is that certain key assumptions are not questioned because of widespread belief in them. For example, as discussed, Lieberman and McClendon's (2013) work suggests that we should question rather than assume that all ethnic groups have similar wants. Another assumption that is rarely questioned is the belief that ethnic ties provide the most logical basis for clientelist networks. One of the consequences of this widespread belief in the utility of ethnic networks for accessing material benefits is that the literature is much better at explaining why politicians rely on ethnic mobilization than why political entrepreneurs do not mobilize along ethnic lines. In some contexts, such as national elections in Senegal, politicians rely on ethnically diverse clientelist networks. Less prosperous challengers in turn activate anti-incumbent sentiment. In other cases, especially at the local level when politicians compete against their own co-ethnics, they rely on personal ties with people in their community, frequently centered on economic dependence. While this is beginning to change, earlier scholarship has largely ignored the question of why ethnicity plays a variable role in electoral politics in Africa.

Assuming that African politicians are bound to use ethnic ties, scholars long privileged the question of why a particular ethnic cleavage becomes salient. In this vein, David Laitin in *Hegemony and Culture* (1986) asks why ancestral city and not religion became the line of political division in Nigeria's Yorubaland. Laitin argues that while both of these ethnic cleavages play a major role in social life of the Yoruba and thus could be potentially used for political mobilization, the current salience of ancestral city in politics is historically contingent and the result of particular strategies adopted by the British colonial administration, which politicized the ancestral city cleavage.

Likewise, Posner (2005) asks why Zambian politicians sometimes mobilize along tribal and at other times along linguistic lines. While Posner views the repertoire of ethnic identities as a legacy of British colonial rule, he shows that changes in electoral institutions create incentives to mobilize different ethnic cleavages. According to Posner, depending on the locus of competition, politicians look at the size of ethnic groups created by different cleavages to decide which cleavages should be mobilized because in the context of patronage politics, politicians will always try to create a minimum winning coalition in order to conserve resources. Posner's work provides a compelling argument about the relative appeal of different ethnic cleavages for politicians in different electoral settings. However, his assumption that politicians always want to create a minimum winning coalition has some shortcomings: it ignores the benefits of winning by large electoral margins and having a supermajority, and overestimates politicians' ability to make accurate calculations relating to ethnic demographics. Furthermore, like much of the existing scholarship, Posner takes the reality of ethnic mobilization for granted. As a result, neither Posner's nor Laitin's work can be used to explain when or why politicians might avoid ethnic mobilization altogether. The inability to explain the absence of ethnic politics is not necessarily the fault of any given researcher, because their works ask important questions, but rather a collective shortcoming of the literature, which has focused too much on studying some questions at the expense of others. This outcome seems to result from the asserted assumption regarding the salience of ethnicity in electoral politics and the utility of ethnic mobilization.

## **Variation in ethnic politics across Africa**

Despite the conventional wisdom that ethnicity plays an important role in elections on the continent as a whole, an increasing number of studies highlight the variation in ethnicity's effects both between and within countries (Bratton and Kimenyi 2008; Hoffman and Long 2013; Ichino and Nathan 2013; Koter 2016). Realizing that ethnic identity is a powerful predictor of voting behavior in some contexts but not others, these studies address the reasons for this variation.

First, some studies focus on the limits of ethnic mobilization. One of the constraining factors for them is the fact that in most African countries no single group makes up the majority of voters. As a result, even when politicians would like to mobilize along ethnic lines, relying exclusively on co-ethnics' votes would make victory impossible in many settings. While members of parliament (MPs) could often win seats in single member districts solely with the support of their co-ethnics, this would be impossible in most presidential elections. Jeremy Horowitz (2016) highlights that given the typical ethnic demographics of an average African country, where no group constitutes an outright majority, African politicians not only need to mobilize their core (i.e., co-ethnic) voters but also have to persuade swing (or non-co-ethnic) voters to support them. In his study of presidential elections in Kenya, Horowitz (2016) analyzes the location of presidential rallies and finds that the main presidential candidates concentrate their efforts on campaigning among swing/non-co-ethnic voters, holding more rallies among swing than among core voters. Kenyan politicians, however, are highly unlikely to campaign among non-co-ethnic groups that have a co-ethnic presidential candidate in the race. The outreach to non-co-ethnics is thus largely limited to politically unaffiliated non-co-ethnics. At the same time, Horowitz finds that co-ethnic voters are more likely to be offered handouts on behalf of their co-ethnic candidate. He interprets these findings as a division of labor practice, where mobilization of co-ethnics is delegated to local-level politicians whereas presidential candidates focus on persuasion of unaffiliated non-co-ethnics.

Similarly, Arriola (2013) highlights how, even when ethnic voting takes place and parties have ethnic bases, ethnic candidates can rarely win elections relying only on ethnic support. He suggests that African politicians need to construct multiethnic coalitions in order to win; yet not all politicians succeed in this task. His research explains why some politicians in some African countries are able to construct electoral coalitions across ethnic divides at the time of presidential elections, while others fail to do so. Arriola convincingly argues that where business is autonomous from state-controlled capital, as is the case in Kenya, opposition candidates can access the necessary resources to buy support from their potential competitors representing different ethnic groups, thus stitching together multiethnic coalitions in presidential elections. Together, these approaches highlight the limitations of ethnic strategies resulting from the electorate's demographics and politicians' consequent need to construct alliances with non-co-ethnics. However, they do not explain why politicians eschew ethnic mobilization altogether.

In contrast, there is an emerging body of work that explores the question of when ethnic politics are less likely to emerge. Different works concentrate on different levels of variation, ranging from the individual or regional to the national. Keeping in mind which level of analysis they address is important because it is often difficult to apply insights from arguments developed at one level of analysis to another. For example, individual-level explanations rarely shed light on cross-country differences, suggesting that differences between countries are not just an aggregate result of differences between individuals.



At the individual level, some scholars focus on the role of information since instrumental theories of ethnic voting contend that ethnicity plays an important role in elections due to information scarcity. For example, Conroy-Krutz's (2013) experiment in Uganda finds that as voters gain more information, especially negative, about their co-ethnic politicians, they are less likely to support them. Conroy-Krutz's findings would imply that more knowledgeable individuals should be less swayed by candidates' ethnic profiles, since they are more likely to weigh them against other pieces of information. Yet, there are also reasons to doubt that increased information would transform ethnic politics, beyond the fact that we should be careful while generalizing from a single field experiment. The scarcity of information among African voters is often asserted rather than measured. Barkan (1976) argued already in the 1970s that African peasants are not as uninformed as we might think. Additionally, arguments about access to information are better suited to explain differences in propensity toward ethnic voting between individuals than between countries. It does not appear that voters in Mali, where there is little ethnic voting, have any more information than voters in Benin, where ethnic politics are rampant.

One of the most compelling explanations of subnational variation comes from Ichino and Nathan (2013), who focus on the effect of ethnic geography of voters' localities on voters' electoral decisions. They provide evidence from Ghana to show that when voters are an ethnic minority in a district, they are less likely to vote for their co-ethnic politician. The authors argue that geographic contexts shape voting behavior because they modify the information conveyed by ethnicity. Voting for co-ethnic politicians becomes less attractive to voters when district geography favors other ethnic groups. They point out that many local public goods that voters desire are not excludable, therefore supporting a non-co-ethnic politician who brings public goods to the district will not deprive the voter of access to these benefits. An important implication of Ichino and Nathan's argument is that expected benefits from co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic politicians will depend on the nature of goods in question and whether they are excludable or not. While the subnational evidence in the case of Ghana is very persuasive, it cannot be easily adapted to understanding different outcomes in presidential elections across Africa.

At the country level, several different factors have been suggested to explain the varied salience of ethnicity in politics. Elischer argues that ethnic parties and party systems tend to occur in countries with high ethnic fragmentation and without a core ethnic group whereas non-ethnic party systems prevail where ethnic fractionalization is low and there is a core ethnic group (Elischer 2013, 224). He suggests that high ethnic fragmentation poses an imperative for groups to seek unity and vote as a bloc. While this is an intuitively appealing argument, it leaves important unanswered variation. For example, some African countries, such as Senegal and Benin, have very similar ethnic fragmentation and numerically dominant groups of roughly the same size and yet they see very different outcomes in the level of ethnic politics.

The design of electoral systems is another factor that some suspect might explain this variation (e.g., Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2007; Mozaffar, Scarritt, and Galaich 2003). Such approaches suggest that differences in electoral rules, such as district size, can affect politicians' mobilization strategies and the resulting electoral outcomes. However, while electoral rules are certainly relevant to politicians' calculations and strategic choices, we find ethnic voting across the whole range of electoral systems in Africa, as well as divergent outcomes in countries with similar electoral institutions (see, for example, Elischer 2013). This suggests that electoral systems might matter more for determining *how*, rather than *if*, ethnicity will feature in electoral politics. For example, Posner's (2005) study of Zambia shows how changes in electoral institutions, namely a shift from one-party to multiparty politics, did not result in politicians resorting to

more or less ethnic politics but in the activation of different ethnic cleavages. Furthermore, while electoral institutions, in conjunction with ethnic demographics such as concentration and fragmentation, affect the number of resulting parties, they do not necessarily determine their (non-)ethnic nature (Mozaffar, Scarritt, and Galaich 2003).

Other prominent arguments include the expectation that cross-cutting cleavages can prevent crystallization of electoral competition along a single identity cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Dunning and Harrison 2010). For example, Dunning and Harrison provide experimental evidence from Mali to show that cross-cutting ties based on an informal institution of joking kinship, or *cousinage*, can counterbalance ethnic ties. Because voters feel affinity toward both candidates who are their co-ethnics as well as non-co-ethnic “cousins,” the effect of ethnicity is dampened. For Dunning and Harrison, this countervailing force of cross-cutting cleavages explains why we do not see ethnic politics in Mali, despite the salience of ethnicity in social life. Yet, even when cross-cutting cleavages exist, this does not mean that they will play a role in politics, suggesting that Dunning and Harrison’s finding does not easily travel to other settings. For example, Galvan (2006) shows that *cousinage* ties are employed inconsistently by local political entrepreneurs in West Africa; they are activated when it is advantageous to use them and ignored on other occasions. This would explain why ethnic politics is absent in some countries with *cousinage* ties, such as Mali, but it is present in others, such as Guinea. Thus, *cousinage* ties have the potential to counterbalance ethnic ties, but this outcome depends on how they are actually used.

In contrast, I have suggested in previous work (Koter 2013, 2016) that in order to understand the variation in ethnic politics one should focus on existing *alternatives* to ethnic mobilization. Instead of assuming that ethnic ties provide the only viable way of forging ties with voters, I contend that where there are powerful local notables, such as traditional and religious leaders, they can serve as intermediaries between politicians and voters, helping politicians to reach out to non-co-ethnic voters. Intermediaries have much more bargaining power than individual voters and they have incentives to work with politicians who can deliver the most resources, irrespective of ethnic identity. Consequently, because intermediaries can help to forge linkages between politicians and non-co-ethnic voters, mobilization through local leaders produces more ethnically diverse electorates. Yet, because the power of local leaders varies greatly across Africa, this strategy is viable only in some places. Greater strength of local leadership thus makes the emergence of ethnic politics less likely because it broadens politicians’ mobilization options. In contrast to arguments that focus on structural factors, such as group sizes or electoral institutions, I suggest that politicians craft their strategies (and decisions whether to target groups through ethnic appeals or not) in response to social organization and the existing landscape of local authority. This argument is thus in agreement with the prevailing view that ethnic politics results from clientelist competition of resources, but questions whether ethnic ties are always the bases of clientelist networks and shows how, when clientelism is not organized along ethnic lines, we should not see the emergence of ethnic politics.

## Conclusion

In many African countries, ethnic politics have been a consistent feature of elections since independence and it is hard to imagine that they will disappear in the near future. Where ethnic politics exist, they have typically endured over time (Koter 2016). Contemporary ethnic cleavages are path-dependent (e.g., Laitin 1986) and can be hard to dislodge. Individuals’ decisions to vote for ethnic candidates depend not just on their own expected payoffs, but on their expectations of what other individuals in society will do (Padró i Miquel 2007). Such perceptions may be hard to change, especially when politicians actively try to perpetuate them. In turn, many of

the factors that can help to explain the absence of ethnic politics—such as ethnic demography, strength of local leaders, or cross-cutting cleavages—do not change rapidly and are thus not expected to significantly affect ethnic dynamics in the short term (Dunning and Harrison 2010; Koter 2016; Elischer 2013). On the other hand, some studies offer clues about circumstances under which we might see an erosion of ethnic politics. As African societies urbanize rapidly, populist mobilization, which can be used more effectively in cities (Resnick 2014), could displace ethnic appeals to some degree. Other research suggests that as voters gain more information (Conroy-Krutz 2013), or as local geography changes (Ichino and Nathan 2013), voters might become more open to voting for non-co-ethnic politicians. Because electoral patterns are sticky, we should expect longstanding, broad ethnic cleavages to endure; but social changes, such as urbanization and migration, will complicate these electoral patterns over time and will create more incentives and opportunities for politicians to eschew ethnic appeals.

### Notes

- 1 This chapter draws in part from Koter 2016.
- 2 For example, *Parti Social-Démocratique* has a predominantly Adja base whereas *Parti du Renouveau Démocratique* is seen as a Goun/Yoruba party.
- 3 For example, Horowitz suggests 85 percent as a threshold, which is a high number given the diversity and ethnic fragmentation of most African electorates. Scarritt (2006) suggests adding additional thresholds and categories where 66.6–85 percent indicates “potentially ethnic parties” and 50–66.6 percent means “multiethnic party with a majority ethnic group.”

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