



The Program on Governance
and Local Development
at Gothenburg



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Karen E. Ferree

Working Paper
No. 28 2020

The Program on Governance
and Local Development



UNIVERSITY OF
GOTHENBURG

Front Cover Image: Voter in the 2016 Ghanaian election (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

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GLD Working Paper: February 17, 2020

Karen E. Ferree

University of California, San Diego

Program on Governance and Local Development, University of Gothenburg

keferree@ucsd.edu

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank James Long and Clark Gibson for their brilliant idea to run exit polls and ask about legislative candidates -- and for including me in these projects. I would also like to thank Nick Obradovich, Alex Verink, Michael Seese and especially Julia Clark, for their help taming the data. And last but not least, Ellen Lust and Kristen Kao for continued moral support and for reading more drafts of this paper than is reasonable to expect.

Abstract

This paper argues for a reorientation of how we think about ethnic voting, away from an exclusive focus on voters to one that links voter behavior to the supply side of candidates. It introduces the concept of choice set, or the set of choices a voter sees on the ballot on election day, and shows that the modal choice set in three legislative elections – Kenya (2007), Ghana (2008), and Uganda (2011) – is not the mixed co-ethnic/non-co-ethnic set assumed in much of the literature on ethnic voting in Africa. Most African voters in fact see ballots that consist of either all co-ethnics or no co-ethnics. These uniform choice sets constrain choice in ways that predetermine behavior. Moreover, breaking behavior into choice and choice set reveals that differences in prevalence rates of co-ethnic voting across cases is driven as much by the choices voters see on their ballots as the choices they make in the voting booth. Shifting from choice to choice set thus induces us to identify and theorize factors shaping electoral outcomes in Africa beyond those rooted in individual voter psychology: the entry decisions of candidates and parties, constituency boundaries, and the distribution of groups across geography.

“If the people can choose only from among rascals, they are certain to choose a rascal.” –

V.O. Key

Observers of African politics have long noted the apparent preference of African voters for co-ethnic candidates in many African elections. Most explanations for co-ethnic preferences start with voters. One emphasizes beliefs about co-ethnic favoritism and suggests that voters use candidate ethnicity as a heuristic to predict future behavior (Ferree, 2011; Posner, 2005). Another argues that voters find it easier to hold co-ethnics accountable because monitoring and sanctioning is easier within ethnic networks (Habyarimana et al., 2007). A third suggests that ethnicity helps voters coordinate into winning coalitions (Mozaffar, 1995). Yet another sees co-ethnic voting as a form of expressive identity politics (Horowitz, 1985). While these explanations emphasize different causal mechanisms, they all begin with voters. The focus on voters is natural, of course; if the goal is to explain voting behavior, what better place to start?

This focus on the microfoundations of voting, while natural, obscures deeper, more structural, sources of political behavior. In this note, I push for a reorientation of how we think about ethnic voting, away from an exclusive focus on voters to one that links voter behavior to the supply side of candidates. I introduce the concept of the choice set, or the set of choices a voter sees on the ballot on election day. Choice sets constrain behavior. What seems voter-driven may in fact reflect the winnowing of options before voters even step foot into the polling station. This is true even in iconic “ethnic” cases like Kenya, where politics has long been infused with an ethnic logic. Indeed, differences between Kenya and other less clearly ethnic cases, like Ghana or Uganda, narrow substantially once we take into account the effects of choice sets.

I begin by defining choice sets and discussing assumptions about choice sets implicit in the literature on African voting behavior, focusing on candidate ethnicity. Most of this literature assumes voters have *mixed* choice sets of both co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic candidates. I then introduce a new individual-level measure of choice sets that explicitly links the supply and demand sides of voting. Using data from nationally representative exit polls, combined with candidate ethnicity data, I

document the actual ethnic choice sets of voters in three paired presidential/legislative elections – Kenya (2007), Ghana (2008), and Uganda (2011).

I show that the modal choice set in these elections was not, in fact, mixed. Voters more often faced uniform choice sets of all co-ethnics or no co-ethnics, particularly in legislative elections. The prevalence of uniform choice sets draws into question whether co-ethnic voting reflects choice rather than structure. Voters with only co-ethnic candidates vote co-ethnically by design. Voters with no co-ethnics depart from co-ethnic voting because they have no other option. We cannot infer anything about the preferences of these voters from their behavior. To paraphrase Key, if the people can choose only from among co-ethnics, they are certain to choose a co-ethnic.

When we look at aggregate rates of co-ethnic voting, Ghanaians vote co-ethnically about half as often as Kenyans (39 versus 78 percent) in legislative elections – a pattern that matches standard wisdom that Kenyans are “more ethnic” than Ghanaians. When we restrict the sample to the set of voters who actually have a choice between co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic, however, the difference between the two countries narrows considerably: 61 percent in Ghana, 74 percent in Kenya. The greater proclivity of Kenyans to support co-ethnics in the aggregate thus reflects both the constraints placed on them by the supply of candidates, and the higher rates of supporting co-ethnics when given a choice.

A focus on choice sets helps clarify the origins of the differences between cases like Kenya, Ghana, and Uganda. Separating behavior into choice set and choice also pushes us to theorize a richer set of questions about political outcomes on the continent. What are the underlying forces generating the choice sets of voters? Do they reflect elite ideas about voters and the types of candidates they believe will win? Do they rest more in the way electoral boundaries and demographic geography create homogeneous or diverse constituencies? When we think only of choice, we miss asking these questions. By bringing choice sets into focus, we begin to excavate the structural sources of behavioral outcomes.

The Choice Set

The choice set is the set of options a voter has on her ballot. It reflects, in the most proximate sense, the decisions of candidates to enter races. These decisions, in turn, reflect wider factors, such as who

parties decide to put on their tickets, and who gains the support of patrons before parties even make these decisions.

A choice set might be characterized along multiple dimensions: candidate partisanship, gender, ethnicity, religion, class, ideology, region, and so on. Constraints may occur along any of these dimensions; a voter may never see a candidate of her own age or religious group, or have the opportunity to vote for a woman. In some constituencies, only liberals (or conservatives) enter races. Here, I focus specifically on ethnicity as it is particularly relevant in the African context. I am interested in the ethnic composition of choice sets, specifically the breakdown of co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic candidates.

Studies of African voting often do not explicitly consider choice sets, although many make implicit assumptions about what these sets look like. Most conceive of choice sets as mixed: voters have a choice between a co-ethnic and a non-co-ethnic candidate. This assumption is most obvious in the growing experimental literature on co-ethnicity and voting behavior, where studies manipulate candidate ethnicity in hypothetical survey vignettes. Respondents see either a co-ethnic or a non-co-ethnic and then project their likely vote choice (Adida, 2015; Carlson, 2015; Conroy-Krutz, 2013; Gutiérrez-Romero & LeBas, 2020; Horowitz & Klaus, 2018; Kramon, 2019). Insufficient consideration of choice sets in these experiments can produce treatments lacking construct validity if, for example, voters are shown a set of choices that make no sense given prior experience. Most experiments avoid this problem by carefully tailoring samples and treatments to match, thus implicitly acknowledging the importance of choice sets. Non-experimental work on ethnicity and voting behavior also often implicitly assumes a choice set populated with co-ethnics and non-co-ethnics. Ichino & Nathan (2013a) argue that group size drives whether rural Ghanaian voters support a co-ethnic party or defect from it, taking for granted a particular choice structure. Harris (n.d.) also assumes a mixed choice set and explains choice as a function of phenotypical concordance with the ethnic group.

A few important exceptions explicitly consider choice sets. Horowitz (2019) argues that swing voters in African elections are those who lack co-ethnic candidates on their ballots. Hoffman & Long (2013) indicate that most Ghanaians in the 2008 Presidential elections did not have co-ethnics on the ballot, thus co-ethnicity fails to explain a large component of presidential voting. Platas and Raffler (2019:5)

justify their focus on partisanship rather than ethnicity in their field experimental study of Ugandan parliamentary candidates by arguing that the latter has little impact on voting behavior in parliamentary elections because most voters see only uniform co-ethnic slates. These studies anticipate the choice set focus of this paper, but they refer to choice sets only in passing or identify just one type of constraint on choice.

Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda

I consider choice and choice sets in legislative and presidential elections in three countries/elections: Ghana (2008), Kenya (2007), and Uganda (2011). These elections were typical of the period, with varying degrees of competitiveness, enthusiastic participation by most of the electorate, and assorted challenges of electoral integrity.¹ The countries represent a larger set of African cases: former British colonies that feature multiparty competition and majoritarian institutions like single member plurality legislative districts and presidentialism,² though they vary in the nature of their party systems. At one end, Ghana has an institutionalized party system in which two parties, the New National Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Party (NDC), run in all regions of the country and combined capture over ninety percent of the vote in regular, highly competitive elections. Kenya, in contrast, has a large and volatile party system and highly competitive races featuring shifting alliances of politicians. Meanwhile a single party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM), has governed Uganda since the mid-1980s. Opposition parties are legal and compete in Uganda, but do not effectively challenge NRM dominance. The countries, therefore, collectively represent a wide spectrum of current African party systems; patterns that hold across them suggest broader generalizability.

I focus on the ethnic composition of choice sets in these countries because ethnicity has been a fundamental axis of politics in all three, yet varies in salience, with the deepest imprint in Kenya.³ Ethnicity in Africa is not one dimensional, which complicates any operationalization of the ethnic composition of choice sets. African ethnic groups often have nested structures: large umbrella groups contain smaller sub-groups, which themselves contain smaller sub-groups and so on, like a series of

¹ For more on these elections, see Hoffman & Long (2013) on Ghana; Long & Gibson (2015) and Bratton & Kimenyi (2008) on Kenya; and Conroy-Krutz & Logan (2012) on Uganda.

² For historical comparisons of the cases, see Willis et al. (2018).

³ Dowd & Driessen (2008) and Huber (2012) rank Kenya as one of the most ethnically politicized cases in Africa. Elischer's comparative study of African party systems characterizes most Kenyan parties as mono-ethnic (Elischer, 2013: 181). In contrast, Morrison (2004:430) expresses the perspective of most scholars of Ghanaian politics when he writes: "whatever role ethnicity plays, it is mediated by other factors."

Russian dolls. The Akan of Ghana, for example, is an umbrella group with just under 50 percent of the population that contains smaller groups like the Ashanti and Fante (Ferree, 2012; Scarritt & Mozaffar, 1999). The Kalenjin of Kenya is a recent agglomeration of smaller sub-groups (Lynch, 2011). In Uganda, groups like the Baganda and Ankole nest into larger regional groupings (Tripp, 2010).

Nesting complicates measurement because answers depend on the level in question. Not all levels of the nested structure are equally relevant for a given sphere of politics (Scarritt & Mozaffar, 1999). Scholars of Ghana generally emphasize the middle sub-group level in national politics, associating the Ashanti with the NPP and the Ewe with the NDC (Asante & Gyimah-Boadi, 2004; Scarritt & Mozaffar, 1999). In Kenya, national politics also rotates around this middle level, with Kikuyu-Luo and Kikuyu-Kalenjin cleavages especially relevant (Bratton & Kimenyi, 2008; Elischer, 2013; Long & Gibson, 2015). The North-South division has been salient in Uganda, as have mid-level divisions, particularly concerning the Buganda, with the contentious history of the Baganda Kingdom, and the Ankole, the ethnic group of President Museveni (Tripp, 2010). Here, I focus on the mid-level divisions, as they have been salient in all three cases and the size of groups across cases is comparable, with largest groups at the national level falling under 30 percent.⁴

Measuring Choice Sets

To measure choice sets, I start with current practice and characterize the breakdown of candidate ethnicities in legislative constituencies (Burbidge, n.d.; Farole, 2019). I then present a new individual-level measure of choice sets that link supply side explicitly to behavior, creating a bridge between individual and structural approaches to politics.

Table 1 reveals that candidates' slates are not particularly diverse in any of the cases: a plurality of constituencies in each country have candidates from only one ethnic group. Kenya is the least diverse, with 64 percent of all legislative constituencies featuring only one candidate ethnic group. In Ghana, on the other hand, almost 30 percent of constituencies feature more than two ethnicities. Uganda falls in between. This pattern does not simply reflect the average number of candidates running in legislative elections, which was 4.7 in Ghana, 13.7 in Kenya, and 5.9 in Uganda. Kenya runs many

⁴ The Ashanti (Ghana) are 28 percent, the Kikuyu (Kenya) 21 percent, and the Baganda (Uganda) 17 percent.

candidates, mostly all from the same group, while Ghana runs fewer candidates from more groups, but even in Ghana the modal category is a uniform ethnic slate.

Table 1: The Supply Side of Ethnic Candidates in Legislative Elections

Candidate Ethnic Groups per Constituency	Ghana 2008	Kenya 2007	Uganda 2011
1	39.5	64.4	55.5
2	31.7	17.2	31.8
3	19.5	3.6	6.7
4	5.9	5.9	2.8
>4	3.5	9.0	3.2

Note: the average number of legislative candidates was 4.7 in Ghana, 13.7 in Kenya, and 5.9 in Uganda.

Focusing on constituencies neglects how the set of candidates maps to the ethnicities of individual voters. Even within relatively homogeneous constituencies, not all voters and choice sets are the same. A constituency with a uniform slate of all candidates from one group is likely to contain some voters with only co-ethnics in their choice sets and other voters with no co-ethnics in their choice sets. I therefore shift the unit of analysis from constituency to voter, characterizing the nature of choice faced by individual voters.

I use data from three large, nationally representative exit polls covering a large number of constituencies per country. Interviewers asked voters about the ballots they had just cast in concurrent presidential and legislative elections.⁵ I combine the exit poll data with data on the ethnic identities of legislative and presidential candidates running in the elections. By comparing a voter's ethnicity with the ethnicity of the presidential and legislative candidates, I create measures of the voter choice set for each election: respondent has *no co-ethnic* on her ballot, *only co-ethnics* on her ballot, or a *choice* between co-ethnics and non-co-ethnics. Table 2 displays the percentage of respondents in each country falling into each category for the presidential and legislative elections.

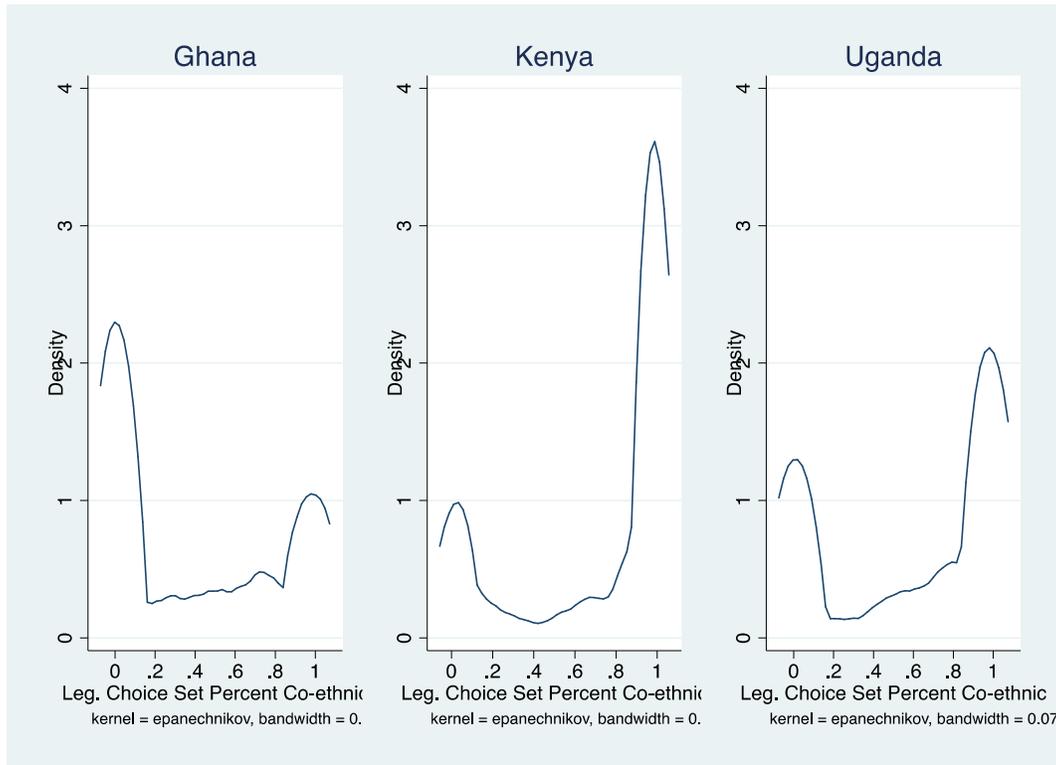
⁵ Non-response to the voting question was low in Ghana and Kenya (4 percent), and higher in Uganda (16 percent). For more about these surveys, see Long & Gibson (2015) and Hoffman & Long (2013).

Table 2: Voter Choice Sets

	Ghana	Kenya	Uganda
<i>Presidential Election</i>			
No co-ethnic	65.6	38.2	57.1
Only co-ethnics	0.0	0.0	0.0
Choice of co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic	34.4	61.8	42.9
<i>Legislative Election</i>			
No co-ethnic	50.4	14.4	29.0
Only co-ethnics	22.1	54.7	42.9
Choice of co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic	27.5	31.0	28.2

Table 3 reveals that most voters do not have a mixed choice set. This is particularly true for legislative elections, wherein a third of voters or less in all three countries had a mixed choice set. The nature of choice set constraint varies across cases and elections. None of the presidential races presented only candidates from a single ethnic group, hence no voter in any of the samples had only co-ethnics on her presidential ballot. In contrast, in legislative elections voters faced two different possible constraints – no co-ethnics and only co-ethnics. Here, Kenya stands out from the other cases as having substantially more voters with only co-ethnics on their ballot (over half) and substantially fewer with no co-ethnics. Ghana provides the other extreme: Ghanaians were quite unlikely to have ballots that had only co-ethnics (22 percent) and most likely to have ballots with no co-ethnics (50 percent). Ghana and Kenya, therefore, offer contrasting experiences to legislative voters: while the modal Kenya voters sees only co-ethnics, the modal Ghanaian sees no co-ethnics. Most Kenyans only encounter non-co-ethnics in presidential elections, whereas Ghanaians experience non-co-ethnics on both legislative and presidential ballots. We can also operationalize choice set as the percentage of co-ethnics on ballots. Figure 1, a density plot of this variable, helps visualize the differences across cases.

Figure 1: Percent Co-ethnic in Legislative Choice Set



Co-ethnic Voting

Co-ethnic voting – a behavior – reflects both choice and choice set. A voter may vote for a co-ethnic because she prefers the co-ethnic over a non-co-ethnic or she might vote for a co-ethnic because she only has co-ethnics on her ballot. Not voting for a co-ethnic might represent an active choice or simply reflect a ballot that does not present the possibility of voting co-ethnically. Too often studies of voting reduce behavior to choice and ignore the choice set.

Table 3 shows the aggregate rate of co-ethnic voting for all voters (ignoring choice set) and the rate of co-ethnic voting for only voters with a choice. It clarifies how conflating choice and choice set can lead to misleading conclusions. Thus, in presidential elections, the overall rate of co-ethnic voting looks quite low, particularly in Ghana and Uganda. These low aggregate rates reflect the fact that relatively few voters actually have a co-ethnic on the ballot in presidential races. Once we focus solely

on the voters with a choice, the rate of co-ethnic voting is higher in both cases – although still substantially lower than in Kenya.

Table 3: Two Parts of Co-ethnic Voting

	Ghana	Kenya	Uganda
<i>Presidential Election</i>			
Co-ethnic voting (all)	8.2	45.0	13.0
Co-ethnic voting (with choice)	24.5	72.5	31.1
<i>Legislative Election</i>			
Co-ethnic voting (all)	38.9	78.3	60.9
Co-ethnic voting (with choice)	61.2	73.7	63.3

The payoff of studying choice sets becomes more apparent in legislative elections. Kenya looks more “ethnic” than Ghana or Uganda in the aggregate, but differences between the cases narrow considerably when we examine only voters with a choice. Kenyans – who generally have only co-ethnics on their legislative ballot and therefore vote co-ethnically in aggregate by construction – have lower rates of co-ethnic voting when we examine only those with a choice. Ugandans, on the other hand, are less likely to have a co-ethnic option and have higher rates of co-ethnic voting when we restrict analysis to mixed choice sets. This pattern is starker in Ghana, where co-ethnic voting is modest at the aggregate rate (39 percent) but substantially higher when we restrict to voters with a choice (61 percent). Aggregate co-ethnic voting rates obscure these nuances by conflating choice set and choice. Kenyans vote at higher rates than either Ghanaians or Ugandans when given a choice between co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic (74 percent versus 61 or 63). They are, in this sense, “more ethnic.” Yet, this difference is far smaller than one might expect if simply looking at aggregate rates.

Future Directions

The pendulum swings in social science between structure and agency, institutions and behavior, macro and micro approaches, and supply and demand. There is nothing particularly original about calling for a return to the other side of the pendulum’s arc. However, the choice set offers a way to go beyond simple calls for a return to structure. Choice sets crystalize the meeting point of structure and agency, providing a concrete bridge between both sides.

Breaking behavior into choice and choice set and theorizing both enables a fuller understanding of electoral outcomes in Africa. It helps to pinpoint the nature of differences between cases, showing that divergence occurs, not only at the level of voters, but also in the choices they face. Regional and country scholars view Kenyan voters as among the most ethnic in Africa. Ghanaian and Ugandan voters, on the other hand, are portrayed as having more nuanced behavior. The nature of these differences become clearer when we separate choice from choice sets and differentiate presidential and legislative elections. Kenyans face highly constrained choice sets, particularly in legislative elections. Most of the time, a Kenyan legislative voter will see only co-ethnics. Her choice of whether or not to “vote ethnically” is made for her before she even enters the voting booth. Ghanaian legislative voters, on the other hand, typically face the opposite constraint: they often have no co-ethnics on their ballots; they are, in essence, constrained to not be co-ethnic voters. These differences in choice sets tell us a great deal about why Kenya is “more ethnic” than Ghana. To be sure, they do not tell us everything; amongst voters with a choice, Kenyans are still more likely to vote co-ethnically than Ghanaians, particularly in presidential elections. Voter preferences nonetheless only provide part of the story.

Separating choice and choice set also induces us to ask a different set of questions about the origins of behavioral outcomes, ones that identify factors located outside the individual psychology, beliefs, and preferences of voters. By focusing on voters and the microfoundations of choice, Africanists have opened a rich vein of research on behavior. This focus has, however, obscured the wider factors that shape voter choice: the decisions of candidates to run in particular constituencies and parties and local patrons to support them; the demography of particular constituencies and the factors creating homogeneous districts in some places and diverse ones in others; and the political and historical processes generating district boundaries. Behavioral outcomes, like voting for co-ethnics, reflect the confluence of currents from these various rivers, not simply the decision calculus of individual voters.

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