Mixed Records, Cognitive Complexity, and Ethnic Voting in African Elections

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Acknowledgements: We thank Nathan Combes, Sara Kerosky, and Lauren Pearson for camaraderie and assistance in the field and Inbok Rhee for research assistance at home. We also gratefully acknowledge the advice and wisdom of Claire Adida, Joel Barkan, Dan Butler, Ruth Carltz, Nic Cheeseman, Boniface Dulani, Josephine Gatua, Adam Harris, Seth Hill, Sean Ingham, Danielle Jung, Karuti Kanyinga, Kimuli Kasara, Kristen Kao, Pierre Landry, Ellen Lust, Lauren Prather, Christina Schneider, Branislav Slantchev, and Salvo Nunnari.
Abstract
The preference of African voters for co-ethnic candidates is well documented in studies of African political behavior. However, African voters also seem to value good government performance. When does ethnicity trump performance? We theorize that a citizen’s vote choice depends in part on the cognitive complexity she faces when assessing candidates. We argue that citizens incur greater cognitive costs when appraising candidates with mixed – versus uniformly positive or negative – performance records, inducing them to rely more on informational shortcuts like ethnicity to guide their vote. Thus, performance voters may become ethnic voters when the challenges of evaluating performance increase. We test and find support for this hypothesis using a survey experiment implemented in a nationally representative exit poll during Kenya’s 2013 election. Findings demonstrate that ethnic and performance voting are not always the product of fixed dispositions, but instead may emerge in response to voters’ informational context.

Keywords: Africa; Kenya; Accountability; Ethnic voting; Government performance; Survey experiment.
I. Introduction

Mwai Kibaki could boast of many accomplishments by the end of his two terms as Kenya’s president. Over the period 2003-2013, Kibaki presided over the country’s highest sustained growth rate since its independence. He provided free universal primary education and oversaw the expansion of public services. Even after citizens rejected his proposed constitutional overhaul in 2005, Kibaki rallied citizens to pass reforms in 2010. Kibaki would not leave office with an unblemished record, however. His administration failed to stem the uneven nature of Kenya’s increasing prosperity and persistent unemployment. He ignored allegations of corruption targeting close allies. And a loud chorus of domestic and international observers claimed that his party riged his 2007 re-election bid, which produced significant levels of post-election violence. By 2013, a Kenyan voter might reasonably have viewed Kibaki’s record in government as mixed: important successes alongside significant failures. If a Kenyan citizen sought to assess the overall performance of Kibaki’s government and hold the government accountable for its record in office, she would first face the complex task of weighing and aggregating these positive and negative outcomes across multiple policy dimensions of performance.

Like many African elections, Kenya’s 2013 elections occurred in an ethnically charged polity. Kibaki and his anointed successor, Uhuru Kenyatta, are both Kikuyus, an ethnic group long dominant in Kenya. Raila Odinga, their perennial rival, hailed from the politically influential Luos. Although Odinga had come close many times, especially in the fraught 2007 election, Luos had never captured the presidency. Given the salience of both performance and ethnicity to Kenyan elections, which factor would determine an individual’s vote?

Voters across Africa confront similar challenges as they seek to balance their evaluation of multidimensional and mixed performance records with the information provided by ethnicity and how they resolve these challenges has implications for whether elections can act as mechanisms of accountability on the continent. Explorations of African voting behavior offer conflicting arguments and evidence about the relative significance of these factors on vote choice. On the one hand, African voters appear to care deeply about their government’s performance (Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi, 2005; Lindberg and Morrison, 2008; Bratton and Kimenyi, 2008; Bratton, Bhavnani, and Chen, 2011), suggesting they might discipline poorly performing incumbents. On the other hand, many studies find significant and persistent evidence that, when given a choice, voters choose a co-ethnic (Posner, 2005; Ferree, 2011), even one that might have delivered sup-optimal results.
Recent influential work attempts to reconcile these seemingly contradictory accounts by arguing that voters only care about good performance when delivered by co-ethnics (Carlson, 2015), or view performance through ethnically biased lenses (Adida et al., 2017). These studies start from the perspective that ethnic voting is the norm, inducing voters to ignore the performance of non-co-ethnics, or degrading the very ability of voters to evaluate performance in the first place. We argue instead that ethnic or performance voting are not fixed dispositions, but rather a response to informational context: ethnic voting dominates performance voting when the cognitive challenges of evaluating performance are high. We focus here on a specific cognitive challenge: evaluating multidimensional mixed performance records, such as Kibaki’s going into the 2013 Kenyan election.

We argue that multidimensionality raises the complexity of generating a single assessment of performance, especially when records are mixed. If performance is uniform across dimensions, voters can infer positive (negative) overall performance without having to engage in the extra step of weighing outcomes against each other. When performance is mixed, however, voters must assign weights to different dimensions before aggregating. The more dimensions the voter faces, and the more mixed the record, the more complicated this task of weighting and aggregating becomes. We hypothesize that mixed multidimensional records make candidate evaluation more difficult, which in turn induces voters to rely more heavily on informational shortcuts like ethnicity. Therefore, while performance and ethnicity may independently shape evaluations and voting behavior, the conditional effect of ethnic voting increases with the complexity of evaluating performance.

The idea that ethnicity acts as an informational shortcut in African elections is not new. Previous work on voting in Africa has argued that voters use informational shortcuts like ethnicity when they lack reliable information about a candidate’s future distributive behavior (Posner, 2005), policy choices (Ferree, 2011), or quality (Carlson, 2015; Conroy-Krutz, 2012). We build on these ideas, exploring the effects of an alternative mechanism for heuristic voting: cognitive complexity, which is distinct from the level and quality of information. Studies in other settings find that complexity increases reliance on heuristics in voting. In Brazil, Aguilar, Cunow, and Desposato (2015) find that voters are more likely to vote racially when confronted with longer lists of candidates. Meanwhile, in the US, Crowder-Meyer et al. (2018) find that individuals tend to vote along racial dimensions when voting for more than one candidate at the same time. Rather than the number of options in a voter’s choice set, we...
focus here on the cognitive complexity generated by multidimensional and mixed performance records.

We test predictions about the effects of mixed performance records on vote choice using an experiment embedded within a nationally representative exit poll we conducted during Kenya’s 2013 elections. Our experiment manipulates two factors: 1) co-ethnicity between survey respondents and a hypothetical incumbent presidential candidate, reflecting the two main groups competing in the 2013 election, Kikuyu and Luo, and; 2) the candidate’s performance record on several outcomes salient to Kenyan voters. The bad performance treatment lists uniformly negative outcomes, the good performance treatment uniformly good ones, and the mixed performance treatment presents a combination of positive and negative results. While earlier experiments (Adida et al., 2017; Carlson, 2015; Conroy-Krutz, 2012) also manipulated performance, they presented voters with uniformly good or bad records. Our design innovates on these experiments by adding the mixed treatment, which arguably improves the validity of the experiment, as voters rarely see purely good or purely bad performing incumbents. It also allows us to test our hypothesis about the effects of information complexity. We predict that co-ethnicity has the largest effect on individuals receiving the mixed performance treatment.

We find that co-ethnicity and performance both independently shape voting behavior. Co-ethnicity increased reported support for the incumbent by around 7 percentage points, while the difference between a good and bad record was around 33 percentage points. More importantly, we find a significant interaction effect between mixed performance and co-ethnicity. Confirming our central hypothesis, exposure to the mixed performance record substantially increased the impact of co-ethnicity on voting. The effect of co-ethnicity on voting was 16 percentage points for respondents under the mixed condition, versus 8 percentage points under the good condition, and no effect at all for the poor one. This effect is strongest for voters with a co-ethnic in the experiment, but also appears in responses of voters in ethnic groups aligned with the experimental ethnicities. While our experiment was primarily designed to test the mixed performance hypothesis, it also allowed us to examine the claims of earlier studies. We find no support for Carlson’s (2015) argument that good performance only matters for co-ethnics, and only partial evidence for Adida et al. (2017)’s ethnically motivated reasoning, suggesting that exploration of additional theories, like the one we propose here, remain important avenues for research.
We are less pessimistic about the likelihood that voters hold leaders accountable for their records in office than other work; unambiguously bad performance is sanctioned and unambiguously good rewarded for co-ethnics and non-co-ethnics alike. We do, however, identify new challenges to accountability. Even clear-eyed voters intent on considering performance may none the less utilize ethnic heuristics when the informational context is contradictory or hard to assess. While we focus here on the cognitive challenges created by mixed performance records, our argument is more general. We suspect that many sources of complexity create difficulties in evaluating incumbent performance in Africa. Voters may struggle to attribute credit in blame where international actors intervene heavily in domestic economies. Lack of clarity over the rules and responsibilities of different levels of government can also generate challenges of evaluation. The pervasiveness of these challenges suggests the true nature of accountability problems in Africa: not in voter attachment to co-ethnics but in the difficulty of knowing what constitutes “good enough” in a place where barriers to success are formidable.

2. Performance, Ethnicity, and Voting in Africa

Research exploring African voting behavior falls into two main camps: those giving primacy to performance voting, and those emphasizing ethnicity. We review each here, and then – drawing from work in psychology and behavioral economics about the difficulty of decision making in the face of informational complexity – offer a more general theory that incorporates insights from both approaches.

Scholars frequently document correlations between Africans’ vote choice and subjective evaluations of government (Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi, 2005; Bratton and Kimenyi, 2008; Ferree and Horowitz, 2010; Hoffman and Long, 2013). Objective performance indicators such as: household poverty (Posner and Simon 2002); inflation and income growth (Bratton, Bhavnani, and Chen, 2011); the provision of fertilizer (Dionne and Horowitz, 2016); and the accessibility and quality of schools (Travaglianti, 2017; Harding and Stasavage, 2013) also covary with election outcomes.¹

¹ An important exception is a study by de Kadt and Lieberman (2017) showing that voters in Southern Africa paradoxically reduce support for service-providing incumbents.
The rhetoric of African politicians on the campaign trail further suggests that candidates believe constituents value performance. Incumbents tout records of service provision. New entrants associate themselves with incumbents’ successes, while opposition candidates highlight incumbents’ failures (Harding, 2015; Ferree, 2011). Kenyan incumbents paint their names and faces on the sides of health dispensaries built for constituents (Combes, 2016); in Ghana, they boast about road improvements to crowds chanting “No road, no vote” (Harding, 2015, p. 667). Incumbent success or failure in delivering development goods dominate newspaper coverage of campaigns throughout the continent (Bleck and van de Walle, 2012, 2018).

If African citizens respond to the performance of politicians, they generate a favorable feedback loop wherein principals (voters) incentivize agents (politicians) to deliver good outcomes by conditioning votes on performance. African elections may thus produce accountability devices along the lines developed by Barro (1973), Ferejohn (1986), Fearon (1999), and Besley (2006).

Experimental studies randomizing information about candidate records challenge the performance approach, however. An early study by Bjorkman and Svensson (2009) found Ugandans reacted to information about health clinic performance by increasing monitoring, but Humphreys and Weinstein (2012) and Lieberman et al. (2014) found at best contingent evidence of this connection. The Metaketa I project, which explored information and accountability in six developing democracies (three in Africa), primarily delivered null findings (Chowdhury et al., 2019). Studies in India (Banerjee et al., 2010; Banerjee et al., 2011) and Mexico (Chong et al., 2012) similarly demonstrate inconsistent evidence.

Persistent evidence that African voters prefer co-ethnics also challenges performance-based theories. Research in Benin (Adida, 2015), Ghana (Nugent, 1999), Zambia (Posner, 2005), Malawi (Ferree and Horowitz, 2010), Kenya (Long and Gibson, 2015; Ferree, Long, and Gibson, 2014), Uganda (Carlson, 2015), and South Africa (Ferree, 2006, 2011) find strong correlations between the ethnic, regional, or racial identity of the voter and the candidate they support. While candidates flaunt accomplishments in campaign speeches, they also employ ethnic cues in speeches and balance ethnic groups on tickets, lists, and cabinets (Arriola, 2013).

There are exceptions; ethnic voting is lower in Botswana, Tanzania, and Mozambique (Dowd and Driessen, 2008; Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi, 2005).
How can we reconcile robust correlations between performance evaluations and voting with evidence that Africans favor co-ethnics and respond only weakly, if at all, to information about performance records? Maybe voters only care about performance when evaluating co-ethnics, since good outcomes produced by non-co-ethnics are unlikely to benefit them (Carlson, 2015). The correlation between performance evaluations and voting may alternatively be spurious, or what Adida et al. (2017) call “ethnically motivated reasoning”: voters only credit performance information confirming ethnically generated priors. Both explanations – which we evaluate below – give primacy to ethnicity as either conditioning when voters pay attention to performance, or shaping evaluations of performance in the first place.

**Our Approach**

We propose an alternative explanation that focuses on the cognitive challenges of evaluating performance. Our explanation suggests that even voters who care primarily about performance may shift to ethnic voting when mixed and contradictory outcomes raise the complexity of evaluation. We argue that ethnic- and performance-based voters are not distinct types or fixed dispositions. Instead, ethnic voting emerges in response to the cognitive complexity of evaluating candidates.

Accountability models present performance voting as a straightforward task: voters receive a signal about incumbent performance; if performance exceeds some threshold, voters support the incumbent; if it falls below, they select a challenger. In real elections, however, voters confront numerous obstacles to gauging performance (Stokes, 2001; Lieberman et al., 2014). Here, we focus on one in particular: multidimensionality and how it increases the complexity of the evaluative task facing voters, especially when performance across dimensions is mixed.

Many studies conceptualize incumbent performance as a single dimension, but voters in fact evaluate candidates on many dimensions (Stokes, 2001; Adida et al., 2017), and incumbents rarely perform uniformly across them. Our opening example of Mwai Kibaki is one such instance, but others abound. Indeed, we would argue that mixed records represent the modal outcome in elections around the world.

Multidimensionality, combined with mixed outcomes, raises the complexity of evaluation. To arrive at an assessment of performance, voters must aggregate across dimensions. If performance is uniform,
this task is relatively simple: voters can infer positive (negative) overall performance if performance on all dimensions is positive (negative), without weighing outcomes against each other. When performance is mixed, however, voters must assign weights to different dimensions before aggregating. Does success in reducing childhood mortality outweigh failure to address insecurity? Does a corruption scandal count the same as a successful constitutional reform? The more dimensions the voter faces, and the more mixed the record, the more complicated this task of weighting and aggregating becomes.

Research in psychology suggests that the more complex a cognitive task, the more likely individuals shift from deliberative thinking to the use of information shortcuts based on easily observable indicators that reliably predict outcomes (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974; see Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier, 2011 for a review). Political scientists have built on these insights, arguing that voters use informational shortcuts to make decisions when faced with uncertainty about politician type or preferences (Downs, 1957; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Popkin, 1991). Others have argued that too many choices also push voters to use shortcuts (Iyengar and Kamenica, 2010; Aguilar et al., 2015; Crowder-Meyer et al., 2018). We add to this literature by identifying a new source of complexity: multidimensional aggregation.

While co-partisanship is the primary cue in consolidated democracies with institutionalized party systems (Green et al., 2002; Dalton and Weldon, 2007), in countries with less institutionalized parties, partisan cues may operate under certain circumstances (Conroy-Krutz, Moehler, and Aguilar, 2016). However, heuristics more likely derive from ascriptive characteristics like candidate religion or religiosity (Pepinsky, Liddle, and Mujani, 2012; Benstead, Jamal, and Lust, 2015), race (Mattes, 1995; Ferree, 2011; Aguilar, Cunow, and Desposato, 2015) or ethnicity (Chandra, 2004; Birnir, 2007; Adida et al., 2017). Indeed, researchers studying African elections frequently explain the persistent correlation between ethnicity and voting behavior as a by-product of voter reliance on candidate ethnicity as a predictor of candidate preferences or quality (Posner, 2005; Conroy-Krutz, 2012; Carlson, 2015). Voters’ beliefs are not unreasonable in this regard, as data on the location of government distribution correlates with the enclaves of leaders’ co-ethnics (Burgess et al., 2015). Our argument is similar, but emphasizes a different mechanism driving voters to ethnicity. Rather than insufficient information about candidate preferences or quality, we focus on the challenges of information aggregation.
Bringing together these strands, we hypothesize that mixed records – because they place higher cognitive demands on individuals – induce voters to rely more on informational shortcuts like ethnicity when casting ballots than either purely positive or negative records.

3. Electoral Context

We test our hypothesis about mixed records during Kenya’s 2013 presidential election, a context particularly fruitful for examining performance and ethnic voting. Kenyan elections contain narratives of both ethnicity and performance. Here we highlight how these narratives shaped the 2013 race between Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga.

Kenyan voters tend to prefer co-ethnic candidates (Atieno-Odhiambo, 2002; Njogu, 2009; Long and Gibson, 2015; Ferree, Gibson, and Long, 2014; Horowitz, 2019; Gutiérrez-Romero and LeBas, 2020), which may reflect beliefs about: distribution (Kramon and Posner, 2016; Posner and Harris, 2018); chauvinism (wa Wamwere, 2008); loss of status (Lynch, 2011; Murunga and Nasong’o, 2007); or threats to physical safety (Mueller, 2008) should another group win. In 2013, the candidates, Kenyatta and Odinga, came from two groups – the Kikuyu and Luo, respectively – that have played important, and frequently oppositional, roles in Kenyan politics. The parties they represented, the Party of National Unity (PNU) in the case of Kenyatta and the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) for Odinga, have strong ethnic associations. The “Kikuyu vs. Luo” division in 2013 thus maps onto a long-standing, substantive axis of the country’s political competition (Ajulu, 2002).

Beyond ethnicity, government performance narratives also animate Kenyan elections. Kenyan voters have a history of tossing out poor performers. Barkan (1976) describes performance as an important consideration for voters choosing local parliamentary candidates, even when the ruling party, KANU, only allowed within party competition in local one-party races. Although Moi won the 1992 and 1997 elections, deep dissatisfaction with his performance meant he captured only slim pluralities.

Voter concern over performance also played a role in evaluations of Kibaki in 2007 and 2013. In his first term (2002-2007), Kibaki’s record was mixed. He improved the economy, turning a near zero growth rate at the end of Moi’s government into a 7% surge ahead of the 2007 race. He introduced

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3 Kenya has 42 separately identified tribes; the Kikuyu form the largest with 22%, followed by the Luhya (14%), Kamba (11%), Luo (11%), and Kalenjin (8-11%).
universal primary education, increasing school attendance and literacy (Harding and Stasavage, 2013). Infant mortality declined as health services improved. However, unemployment and inequality remained high, Kibaki refused to prosecute politicians involved in high-profile corruption scandals (Khamisi, 2018), and voters rejected his constitutional reforms in a 2005 referendum (Mutua, 2009). After winning 62% percent of the vote in 2002, his share dropped to the mid-40s in 2007 (Gibson and Long, 2009). Voters ousted 22 of Kibaki’s cabinet ministers in their constituency races, and 60 percent of all running MPs.

Kibaki’s second term also generated a mixed record. Kibaki undertook an ambitious foreign investment policy, and the government developed a poverty-reduction strategy called “Kenya 2030.” The popular Kazi kwa Vijana program brought jobs and microfinancing opportunities to young people, and the government could finally claim credit for a constitutional referendum passed overwhelmingly by voters in 2010. However, economic growth did not erase inequality or reduce unemployment. Kibaki failed to introduce land reforms and land clashes flared (Kanyinga, 2009; Boone, 2011). Corruption allegations dogged members of the GoNU, and reluctance to prosecute post-election crimes stymied attempts to rebuild communities (Lynch, 2018). Increasing attacks by al-Shabaab and irredentists in Kenya’s Coast Province generated further insecurity.

Voters in 2013 thus faced a familiar Kikuyu/Luo choice in the context of a mixed performance record. Kenyatta, Kibaki’s successor, ran on a newly minted “Jubilee” ticket, gaining support from Kibaki allies and defections from ODM, including William Ruto, a powerful Kalenjin, as Deputy President. Odinga headed a newly formed Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD), with Kalonzo Musyoka, a Kamba, as Deputy President. Odinga, in spite of his participation in the Government of National Unity (GoNU) formed after the 2007 election, portrayed himself as a political challenger to a Kibaki-Kenyatta incumbency; he campaigned on opposition to the status quo (Ferree, Gibson, and, Long 2014). Kenyatta, on the other hand, argued for continuing the government’s work. If Kenyatta highlighted Kibaki’s successes, Odinga ran on his failures, accentuating the mixed picture. Kenyatta won the election in the first round, with 50.07 percent of the vote reported by the Kenya’s Electoral Commission, but not without controversy (Ferree, Gibson, and Long, 2014).
4. Research Design

We test our hypothesis about mixed performance and ethnic voting with a survey experiment contained in an exit poll we administered during the 2013 Kenyan national election. The exit poll was nationally representative; it randomly sampled 6,258 voters from Kenya’s 47 counties with probability proportionate to size selection of 404 polling stations (the primary sampling unit) based on the Kenyan election commission’s final published voter registry. Enumerators selected every second voter leaving the polling station and asked if they would take part in a survey. Respondents could choose to answer questions in English or Swahili. The exit poll began with the mixed performance experiment to prevent priming from other questions.

Experimental Treatments

The experiment utilized a 2x3 factorial design about a hypothetical incumbent presidential candidate. The first factor, candidate ethnicity, took on two values (Luo/Kikuyu), which we operationalized via candidate surname. Surnames are strongly indicative of ethnicity in Kenya (Kasara, 2013) and succinctly convey information without directly priming ethnicity. Our Luo candidate was “Onyango” and the Kikuyu candidate was “Kamau.” As all recent elections have featured tight Luo/Kikuyu contests, these groups represent the most realistic option for the experiment.

Although the experiment manipulated candidate ethnicity, the theoretical treatment of interest is shared ethnicity between respondent and candidate. Our interest lies in the effect of being assigned a co-ethnic versus a non-co-ethnic, not differential responses to Luo and Kikuyu candidates. Randomizing candidate ethnicity achieves randomization of co-ethnicity for Luo and Kikuyu respondents, but not for others in the survey (who have no chance of being assigned a co-ethnic). For our analysis of co-ethnicity, we therefore restrict the sample to just Luo (n=679) and Kikuyu (n=1,313) respondents. Results from exit polls in 2007 and 2013 suggest both Luos and Kikuyus vote for co-ethnics at rates exceeding 90 percent (Gibson and Long, 2009; Ferree, Gibson, and Long, 2014).

The second factor we experimentally manipulated was the performance record of the hypothetical candidate. This treatment arm contained three values: good, mixed, or bad. For all, we listed outcomes across eight government performance dimensions: infant mortality, national income, economic

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4 We confirmed that these were commonly understood Luo and Kikuyu surnames via manipulation checks in pre-testing.
growth, the ratification of a new constitution, corruption, unemployment, land, and security. The “good” performance treatment described outcomes as uniformly positive or improving. The “bad” performance treatment described them as uniformly negative or deteriorating. The “mixed” treatment described the first four in positive terms and the last four in negative ones. We identified the performance outcomes in pre-election surveys and focus groups as particularly salient to Kenyan voters in 2013. The exit poll confirmed their centrality; Table A-1 (Appendix) shows responses to the question “Which one issue mattered the most in deciding how you voted?” The economy, constitutional implementation, security, corruption, and land top the list.

We provide the text for the treatments here (the Appendix includes the full script with response options and Swahili translations). To restate our hypothesis, we expect the effect of co-ethnicity should be largest under the mixed performance record compared to the good or bad performance records. We do not have prior expectations about the differential impact of co-ethnicity in the good versus bad treatments.

**Good:**

“Imagine the following scenario and give me your opinion. Imagine that during President [Onyango, Kamau]’s time in office, infant death rates fell significantly, national income rose, the economy grew at 3%, and a new constitution was delivered. Moreover, corruption and unemployment both improved, as did problems with land and security.”

**Bad:**

“Imagine the following scenario and give me your opinion. Imagine that during President [Onyango, Kamau]’s time in office, infant death rates increased, national income stagnated, the economy contracted, and needed constitutional reforms failed. Moreover, corruption and unemployment remained challenges, and there were many problems with land and security.”

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5 A nationally representative household survey administered two months before the election to 5,895 respondents revealed high cost of living (31%), lack of employment (23%), poor leadership/corruption (14%) and crime/insecurity/violence (11%) formed voters’ top priorities.
“Imagine the following scenario and give me your opinion. Imagine that during President [Onyango, Kamau]’s time in office, infant death rates fell significantly, national income rose, the economy grew at 3%, and a new constitution was ratified. However, corruption and unemployment remained challenges, and there were many problems with land and security.”

Survey experiments trade internal validity against construct validity. The survey experiment with a hypothetical candidate allowed us to randomize candidate ethnicity, improving the internal validity of our design over field experiments that do not. On the other hand, the hypothetical nature of the experiment reduced its alignment with choice in real elections. We sought to mitigate this artificiality by running the experiment during an exit poll, immediately after the act of voting, so respondents approached the experiment in a state of mind keyed to the election, with realistic choices familiar to them. At the same time, by utilizing a hypothetical incumbent in an election without an incumbent, we reduced the chances that voters would confuse the hypothetical candidate with the real ones they had just seen on the ballot. The exit poll also enhanced external validity by ensuring that we only interviewed voters and provided a large, nationally representative sample.

Another potential issue concerns the reliability of utilizing abstract hypothetical scenarios in surveys given to populations with less formal education. Although we kept treatments short and simple, extensively trained interviewers for smooth delivery, and the experiment question came first on the survey, it is likely that some respondents found the treatments unclear or confusing. Any respondents confused by the hypothetical nature of the question would, however, be randomly assigned across treatments.

A final concern involves our single candidate design. Conjoint experiments offering a choice between two candidates varying across multiple attributes have become popular in studies of African politics (Carlson, 2015; Gutiérrez-Romero and LeBas, 2020). Such experiments may more accurately capture the actual choices of voters, but also multiply cognitive demands on respondents, particularly in oral face to face surveys like exit polls. Unlike respondents in conjoints delivered over online platforms, our respondents could not review information on a screen. They listened to an oral treatment, held

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6 We do not want to overstate this issue: Kenyans have had some of Africa’s highest literacy rates. Estimates of adult literacy in Kenya put it close to 80%.
characteristics in memory, and then made a choice. We believed a two-candidate design would complicate this task, reducing data quality, and wanted to strategically manipulate complexity through the mixed performance treatment rather than inject it across the board. We, therefore, opted for the single candidate design, prioritizing simplicity and brevity over detail.

5. Results

Treatment Checks
We begin with validity checks on the experimental treatments. If our performance treatment effectively communicated good, mixed, and bad records, then performance evaluations should reflect the treatment assignment. Reassuringly, the performance treatments generate the expected effects in all samples (see Table A-2 in Appendix). In the full sample, the mixed scenario increases the probability of giving a positive evaluation by 18 percentage points over the baseline pure negative scenario, and the pure positive scenario increases it by 33 percentage points. We also evaluate whether better performance records increase the probability of supporting the candidate. Again, we find the expected pattern: the mixed scenario increases the probability of supporting the candidate by 25 percentage points over the poor performance record; the good record bumps it by 34 points (see Table A-3 in Appendix).

Finally, if the surname treatment effectively primes ethnicity, and voters prefer co-ethnics, Luo respondents should prefer the Luo candidate and Kikuyu respondents the Kikuyu. Table 1 shows the expected effects in linear probability models where the outcome variable is reported vote. We also examined the Luo/Kikuyu treatment effects for other ethnic groups (see Appendix Table A-8). Other groups are less responsive to the ethnic treatment, except for the Kisii and Kamba, who supported the Kikuyu about 9 percentage points less than the Luo, a result consistent with the recent alignment of these groups with Raila Odinga.

7 All models are linear probability models, with fixed effects for polling stations and standard errors clustered by polling stations. We use polling station fixed effects as a noise reducing strategy; coefficients are similar without them. We cluster standard errors to reflect our sampling strategy (polling stations were primary sampling units). For performance evaluations, collected as a four level scale, “good” and “very good” responses are grouped as positive evaluations; “fair” and “poor” evaluations are grouped as negative evaluations. For the voting variable, collected as a four level scale, “somewhat likely” and “very likely” responses are grouped as voting for the candidate; “somewhat unlikely” and “not likely” are grouped as not voting for the candidate. These are reasonable simplifications for the validity checks in this section. See Figure A-1 Appendix 2 for disaggregated responses to the voting question.
Table 1: Co-ethnicity Treatment on Vote Choice

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Luos &amp; Kikuyus</td>
<td>Luos</td>
<td>Kikuyus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-ethnic</td>
<td>0.0726***</td>
<td>0.0622</td>
<td>0.0702**</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
<td>(0.029)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.557***</td>
<td>0.478***</td>
<td>0.602***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.012)</td>
<td>(0.021)</td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1,992</td>
<td>679</td>
<td>1,313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.298</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Robust standard errors, clustered by polling station; Polling station fixed effects; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Co-ethnicity and Performance: Interaction Effects

Our central hypothesis is that the effect of co-ethnicity on voting is largest when the performance record is mixed. In Table 2, we show the effects of the co-ethnicity and performance treatments, as well as their interactions. Across all models, the interaction term for co-ethnicity and mixed performance treatment, bolded for emphasis, is positive and significant at the 95 percent confidence level or higher. Results are fully robust in logit models (see Appendix Table A-5).

Table 2: Conditional Co-ethnicity Effects on Vote Choice

<table>
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<th>(1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Luos and Kikuyus</td>
<td>Luos</td>
<td>Kikuyus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-ethnic</td>
<td>-0.0132</td>
<td>-0.0347</td>
<td>0.000734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0329)</td>
<td>(0.0658)</td>
<td>(0.0407)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Record</td>
<td>0.203***</td>
<td>0.0943</td>
<td>0.261***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0408)</td>
<td>(0.0747)</td>
<td>(0.0512)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Record</td>
<td>0.373***</td>
<td>0.350***</td>
<td>0.392***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0476)</td>
<td>(0.103)</td>
<td>(0.0533)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-ethnic Mixed</td>
<td><strong>0.172</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>0.182</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.184</strong>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0486)</td>
<td>(0.0878)</td>
<td>(0.0648)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-ethnic Good</td>
<td>0.0895*</td>
<td>0.108</td>
<td>0.0590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0457)</td>
<td>(0.0860)</td>
<td>(0.0562)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.361***</td>
<td>0.330***</td>
<td>0.375***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0285)</td>
<td>(0.0600)</td>
<td>(0.0329)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1,992</td>
<td>679</td>
<td>1,313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.357</td>
<td>0.388</td>
<td>0.374</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Robust standard errors, clustered by polling station; Polling station fixed effects; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
In Table 3, we show marginal effects for the co-ethnicity treatment in the pooled Luo and Kikuyu sample across different performance scenarios. Under the mixed scenario, respondents rewarded co-ethnics with a 16 percentage point bonus. However, when performance is poor, the co-ethnicity treatment has no effect at all, supporting our hypothesis. Voters also responded to co-ethnicity under the positive performance scenario in the pooled sample, with an estimated effect size about half of that for the mixed treatment – an effect not anticipated by our theory.

| Performance Level | Marginal Effect of Co-ethnicity | Std. Error | T    | P>|t|  | 95% CI    |
|------------------|--------------------------------|------------|------|------|----------|
| Good             | 0.08                           | (0.04)     | 2.16 | 0.03 | (0.01, 0.15) |
| Mixed            | 0.16                           | (0.04)     | 4.36 | 0.00 | (0.09, 0.23) |
| Poor             | -0.01                          | (0.03)     | -0.40| 0.69 | (-0.08, 0.05) |

While the experiment was designed primarily to test the effects of mixed performance, we can also use it to examine Carlson’s (2015) claim that performance only matters for co-ethnics. Our results (Table 4) surprisingly show no support for this hypothesis. We find instead that better performance improves the probability of voting for a candidate for both co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic candidates. In the shift from bad to good performance, non-co-ethnics improved the probability of getting a vote by 37 percentage points, perhaps less than co-ethnics (estimated at 46 percentage points), but still substantial. In the shift from mixed to good performance, non-co-ethnics likely benefited as much or more than co-ethnics (estimated at 17 percentage points versus 9). The inconsistency between our findings and Carlson’s suggest the value of continued work on the interactive relationship between ethnicity and performance.

| Co-ethnicity | Marginal Effect of Performance: | Std. Error | T    | P>|t|  | 95% CI    |
|--------------|---------------------------------|------------|------|------|----------|
|              | Good to Mixed                   |            |      |      |          |
| Not co-ethnic| -0.17                           | 0.04       | -4.24| 0.00 | -0.25    | -0.09    |
| Co-ethnic    | -0.09                           | 0.04       | -2.29| 0.02 | -0.16    | -0.01    |
|              | Good to Bad                     |            |      |      |          |
| Not co-ethnic| -0.37                           | 0.05       | -7.85| 0.00 | -0.05    | -0.28    |
| Co-ethnic    | -0.46                           | 0.04       | -10.50| 0.00| -0.55    | -0.38    |
We also consider co-ethnicity and performance effects for members of ethnic groups that aligned with Kikuyus or Luos during the 2013 elections. These alliances shift from election to election in Kenya. In 2007, the Kalenjin aligned with the Luos; in 2013 they aligned with Kikuyus. Shifting alliances allow us to explore whether the ethnicity as a heuristic is strongest under the mixed condition for a set of voters with a co-ethnic ally but not an actual co-ethnic in the race, testing Chauchard’s (2016) argument that such voters may still use ethnicity as a cue. It also allows us to use more of our sample (an additional 3000+ voters). We find that respondents were around 4 percentage points more likely to say they would vote for a co-ethnic ally and the marginal effect of co-ethnic ally is significant in the mixed category but neither of the pure ones (although the interaction for co-ethnic ally and mixed record is not); see Appendix Tables A-6 and A-7. The pattern thus weakly echoes the Luo/Kikuyu pattern, which is not surprising as these were temporary electoral alliances.

**Alternative Mechanisms**

Our experimental findings indicate that co-ethnicity matters most in mixed performance situations. We postulated that the mechanism underlying this effect involves cognitive complexity. Here we consider three alternative mechanisms: indifference between the candidate described in the mixed condition and an unstated challenger; social desirability bias; and ethnically motivated reasoning.

As a design feature of the experiment, we presented respondents with the incumbent record and no information about the challenger. We did this to keep the experiment simple enough for a face to face survey. The design is also more faithful to accountability models that do not specify challenger characteristics. While it has advantages, the design opens the possibility that respondents “fill in the blanks” by making assumptions about the challenger’s characteristics or record. Respondents may have done so by assuming that the unspecified challenger was of middling quality. If respondents also interpreted the mixed treatment as signaling middling quality in the incumbent, then the mixed treatment might have generated indifference between the (middling) incumbent and (middling) challenger. Respondents might then have resolved their indifference by considering incumbent ethnicity as a tie-breaker, thereby generating an alternative explanation for the potency of co-ethnicity in the mixed condition.

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8 Kamba, Mijikenda, and Kisii aligned with Raila Odinga (Luo) and Ameru and Kalinjin aligned with Kenyatta (Kikuyu).
The indifference mechanism implies cognitive sophistication: it requires respondents to imagine a challenger, form priors on the quality of that candidate, and compare him/her with the middling condition. If the indifference mechanism drives results, the largest interaction between co-ethnicity and the mixed treatment should then occur for the most cognitively sophisticated voters. To test, we use education as a proxy for sophistication and segment the data into three groups: respondents with low (did not complete secondary), medium (completion of secondary school), and high (post-secondary) education and re-ran the pooled Luo/Kikuyu model for each subset (see Appendix). We find no evidence that mixed performance records enhance the effect of co-ethnicity for only educated respondents. If anything, the interaction effect is strongest for the least educated segment of the sample.

Social desirability bias presents a second alternative mechanism. “Tribalism” is generally seen as socially inappropriate, if pervasive, behavior in Africa and survey respondents may therefore seek to conceal co-ethnic preferences (Carlson, 2016). Indeed, in the question about the most salient issue in Kenya politics (Table A-1), tribalism was the sixth most frequent response. It is possible that respondents, wishing to give the socially appropriate answer, avoided giving overtly ethnic answers. As the pure scenarios convey the “correct” response, while the mixed scenario does not, the mixed treatment may allow greater expression of this hidden tribalism. The between-subjects design of the experiment guards against this by only showing respondents one scenario (respondents never directly compare co-ethnics with non-co-ethnics), conveying ethnicity indirectly through surname, and placing the experiment at the beginning of the survey before soliciting respondent ethnic identity. Our findings for co-ethnic allies also suggest that social desirability concerns do not drive the mixed performance effect, as voters are unlikely to have or hide chauvinism about temporary electoral alliances. We nonetheless conduct several robustness tests for social desirability.

We utilize responses to three exit poll questions to capture the sensitivity of respondents to social desirability concerns (Table 5). First, we consider non-response to the (politically sensitive) vote choice question. Restricting our sample to those who willingly reported vote choice (88%), our general results hold. Second, we utilize responses to a question asking, “In your area, how often are people like you intimidated to vote for a certain candidate?” Restricting the sample to those who report only rare or non-existent intimidation (74%), we find the same effects as in the general sample. Third, we examine responses to a vote-buying question (“Have you been offered money or gifts to vote for a particular
candidate?"), another sensitive topic in Kenya (Kramon, 2018). We take the small group of respondents who answered positively (6.6%) as particularly unconcerned about socially undesirable responses. Our results persist in this sub-sample.

Next, we consider social desirability effects provoked by interview context – specifically interviewer/respondent co-ethnicity. Adida et al. (2016) find more socially appropriate responses to ethnicity questions in the Afrobarometer for respondents interviewed by non-co-ethnics. Our results nonetheless remain the same, even after restricting the sample to people interviewed by co-ethnics. The robustness of our findings across these sub-samples helps to alleviate concerns that social desirability drives our findings.

Ethnically motivated reasoning provides a third possible mechanism underlying our results. Adida et al. (2017) suggest that ethnicity shapes the process through which African voters assess information about performance. “Ethnically motivated reasoning” occurs when voters discount negative and

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It is also possible that respondents interviewed by non-co-ethnics in the exit poll were local minorities, who would also feel more social pressure to conform.
prioritize positive information about co-ethnic candidates, while doing the opposite for non-co-ethnics.

Table 6: Co-ethnicity Effects on Performance Evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1) Pooled sample</th>
<th>(2) Luo only</th>
<th>(3) Kikuyu only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co-ethnic</td>
<td>0.042**</td>
<td>0.042</td>
<td>0.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.021)</td>
<td>(0.042)</td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Record</td>
<td>0.207***</td>
<td>0.152***</td>
<td>0.237***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
<td>(0.046)</td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Record</td>
<td>0.369***</td>
<td>0.385***</td>
<td>0.357***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.079)</td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.240***</td>
<td>0.165***</td>
<td>0.282***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.022)</td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1,992</td>
<td>679</td>
<td>1,313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Robust standard errors, clustered by polling station; Polling station fixed effects; 
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

If motivated reasoning applies, one would expect voters to view the same performance record differently depending on whether a co-ethnic or non-co-ethnic produced it. Table 6 shows the effects of the co-ethnicity treatment on performance evaluations. In the pooled sample, voters give co-ethnics a somewhat higher evaluation than non-co-ethnics, but the effect size is swamped by the performance treatments. In additional analyses, we find that this is mostly driven by more positive evaluations for co-ethnics in the good performance treatment; there does not appear a more negative response to non-co-ethnics under the bad performance treatment (results not shown). We thus find only limited evidence of ethnically motivated reasoning. Our experiment, unlike Adida et al. (2017), randomized both performance and co-ethnicity, which could explain the different findings, as could the different contexts (Kenya versus Benin). We also note that the partisan version of motivated reason has mixed results in studies of American voters (Bullock, 2015). We thus view the jury as still out on this appealing, but insufficiently tested, theory and its application to Africa, highlighting the value of efforts like ours to propose and test new theories of performance and ethnic voting.
6. Conclusion

We have investigated how complexity generated by mixed performance outcomes induces citizens to rely more on ethnic cues when voting. African voters, like voters everywhere, value a government that performs well, one that delivers the services and policies needed to improve their country’s economic and political position. But few governments deliver uniformly positive outcomes across the numerous dimensions upon which they are judged. If a government’s performance record is mixed, how do performance-minded voters respond? We argue that mixed performance records increase the cognitive challenges of evaluation, inducing voters to fall back on more easily assessed forms of information, such as candidate ethnicity. Ethnic voting thus emerges as a reasonable response to the challenges of evaluating and acting on performance information. A survey experiment, conducted via exit poll during the 2013 Kenyan general elections, supports the logic: the effects of co-ethnicity between a respondent and hypothetical candidate were largest when the performance record was mixed.

Our analysis offers insights for the wider literature on ethnic and performance voting in emerging democracies in Africa. Other work gives theoretical primacy to ethnicity. Carlson (2015) suggests voters only pay attention to the performance of co-ethnics; Adida et al (2017) argue that ethnicity shapes the very act of evaluating performance in the first place. We find only mixed support for these perspectives: voters care about the performance of both co-ethnics and non-co-ethnics and, at most, give a mild bump to positively performing co-ethnics. We instead identify the difficulty of assessing performance, not the fixed ethnic disposition of voters, as the key source of accountability challenges in African elections.

We have emphasized complexity induced by mixed records, but suspect that other challenges of evaluation also induce voters to shift to quick thinking heuristic modes of behavior, thus bringing out the “ethnic voter” in many, otherwise performance-oriented, individuals. One possibility intimated by the Kenyan election of 2013 concerns the challenges of performance voting when incumbents do not run, and parties are weak or fleeting. Another involves attribution challenges when politicians can claim, credibly, that they do not control outcomes due to interference by international actors or devolution to local governments.
Although we take mixed records as an exogenous feature of electoral context for the purposes of this paper, future extensions could explore facets of elections that increase or decrease dimensionality and the uniformity of perceptions about performance. For example, the media might focus on a small number of outcomes, reducing multidimensionality, or, conversely, introduce more. Politicians themselves might attempt to reduce or increase dimensions. The diversity of information sources could plausibly shape perceptions of uniformity, with polarized media reducing diversity and increasing uniformity (all good, all bad). Party discipline and message control could also reduce perceptions of mixed outcomes, if parties focus on a single uniform narrative about performance. We hope future work can further explore these avenues.
References


