

## I

## The Challenge of Winning Votes and Ethnic Politics in Africa

The challenge for politicians to forge linkages with voters is a substantial one in all democracies. This is particularly true in the relatively young, immature, weakly institutionalized democracies of sub-Saharan Africa. Along these lines, conventional wisdom and a great deal of scholarship argue that ethnic bonds are the most important link, the easiest default option, in the African political arena. In this book, I challenge that portrait by highlighting that even in some ethnically diverse societies politicians often forge very different types of personalistic links. I show that the use of ethnicity<sup>1</sup> is just *one possible* strategic choice on the part of calculating politicians. We now have a sufficient historical record to demonstrate that African voters and African politicians are far more dynamic in their choices and behaviors than has been previously recognized. In fact, we can predict when politicians are more or less likely to use ethnic appeals given the resources available to them.

In contrast to much of the existing scholarship, I argue that in crafting their mobilization strategies, politicians don't only look at demographics, such as the ethnic composition of the electorate, but pay attention to

<sup>1</sup> The term "ethnic identity" is conventionally used by comparative political scientists to denote identities based not only on ethnicity per se but also on language, race, religion, caste and tribe (Horowitz 1985, Varshney 2002, Chandra 2004, Wilkinson 2004, Posner 2005). Chandra (2006) provides the clearest definition that captures the conventional meaning of the term. It states simply that ethnic identity is a subset of identity categories that is based on descent. Chandra aptly points out that we should rid the definition of characteristics of ethnic groups, such as common culture or myth of origin, that are variable rather than intrinsic. Throughout this book, I follow the convention and use the term "ethnic identity" to refer to identity categories, such as religion, tribe, language in addition to ethnicity in a strict sense.

patterns of influence and dependence. Social structure, in which electoral politics take place, plays a central role in politicians' decisions of how to mobilize voters. In particular, politicians are likely to consider the strength of local leaders, such as chiefs, or religious dignitaries, who have historically played a crucial role in many parts of rural Africa. The existing literature acknowledges the importance of local leaders in rural Africa, but it fails to consider how they *alter* electoral mobilization. Local leaders are pivotal, if undertheorized, actors. They change the electoral dynamics because they can help politicians secure votes among non-coethnics. Ethnic politics thus can be avoided where there are local leaders who can serve as credible electoral intermediaries between voters and politicians.

Yet, politicians can't mold social structure to their liking in the short term; it takes years to build trust and following that are necessary to command authority on the ground. Instead, in crafting their strategies, politicians are responding to *preexisting* conditions, which are historically contingent. Because of widespread variation in the standing of local leaders across Africa – an artifact of precolonial and colonial legacy, exogenous to the earliest mass elections – politicians have mobilized voters in qualitatively different ways, resulting in strikingly different levels of ethnic mobilization across the continent.

As the main cases in this book will show, politicians made varying use of ethnic appeals. In Senegal, where local leaders have been historically strong and remain influential to this day, several generations of politicians built ethnically diverse clientelistic networks through local leaders, avoiding electoral mobilization of ethnic groups. In contrast, in Benin, where local authority figures were severely undermined during the colonial period, politicians consistently resorted to appeals to their coethnics, generating ethnic electoral patterns.

#### WHY ETHNIC POLITICS? THE PROBLEM OF WINNING VOTES IN AFRICA

Ethnic politics are often considered the norm in Africa, largely due to the difficulties of forging ties with voters. Underdeveloped media, linguistic fragmentation and a poor communication infrastructure make it hard for politicians to connect with voters. Whereas political choices in developed democracies are to a large degree determined by ideology and programmatic differences, this framework is widely viewed as less suitable to developing ethnically diverse democracies. Indeed, limited ideological or programmatic differences are some of the trademark features

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of political competition in African inchoate democracies (van de Walle 2003, 2007).

Most African parties do not present voters with competing strategies of developing and running their countries. As van de Walle notes, “[I]deological differences have been minor across parties, and debates about specific policy issues have been virtually non-existent” (2007: 62). Case studies of individual elections consistently confirm this view over time. Describing political competition in West Africa in the 1950s, Thompson (1963) notes that parties were not programmatic and that one should rather view them as “cliques around personalities.” In his study of Ghanaian elections in the 1990s, Jeffries (1998) stressed the virtually nonexistent programmatic difference between parties and candidates. Joseph highlights that ideological content is often present in exchanges between party enthusiasts, but not in the actual recruitment of supporters (1987: 36). The Far Left or Communist parties, which have a consistent platform, have been a notable historical exception to this trend, but they are electorally marginal.

Recent studies add nuance to this view: They show that African voters are not indifferent to what their governments are doing and to the qualities of their candidates. People notice economic progress or lack thereof (Posner and Simon 2002, Bratton, Bhavnani and Chen 2011), and they often judge their candidates perhaps not on their platforms but on their character, qualifications or their career achievements. Several studies highlight the importance of evaluative voting behavior (Lindberg and Morrison 2008, Hoffman and Long 2013, Weghorst and Lindberg 2013). Some prominent candidates in recent years campaigned as “technocrats,” even if they did not fit neatly into an ideological category. Other politicians, such as the late president of Zambia, Michael Sata, ran populist campaigns (Resnick 2011, 2014). The discourse on the campaign trails throughout Africa is not devoid of discussions of problems and challenges. Politicians do refer to issues important to voters, such as unemployment or the scarcity of basic services, but their pronouncements are best described as valence rather than position issues; politicians promise to tackle social problems, but they do not articulate competing solutions to these challenges (Bleck and van de Walle 2011, 2013). Yet, despite a growing variety of concerns of African voters and their demand for solutions, few parties in Africa present a distinct policy platform, and policy debates during electoral campaigns remain scarce.

Some scholars indicate that this low salience of ideology contributes to the prominent role that ethnicity plays in electoral politics. As Ottaway

has pointed out, “[T]he absence of ideological or programmatic differences left ethnicity as the major characteristic by which the various parties could differentiate themselves” (1998: 311, quoted in van de Walle 2007: 63). In contrast to weak political structures or underdeveloped political platforms, ethnic identities are a very tangible aspect of life in Africa. Ethnic identities are socially salient: People define themselves and others in ethnic terms, and one’s ethnicity is usually easy to decipher. Voters do not need much information to know a given politician’s identity. Ethnicity acts as an easily available “organizing principle” (Ajulu 2002).

In addition to the limited role of programmatic politics, the primacy of clientelist access to resources is the principal reason why ethnicity seems to be an important factor in electoral politics. Distribution of resources is one of the most tangible stakes of electoral competition. Voters try to affect how resources are allocated and make sure that they are not left out. In many developing countries, especially in Africa, a substantial part of resources is spread through clientelism or redistribution targeting specific communities (Lemarchand 1972, 1988, Bratton and van de Walle 1997, van de Walle 2001, 2007, Lindberg 2003). The rush for spoils, or what Bayart (1987) evocatively called the “politics of the belly,” has been an important dynamic in African politics since the first mass elections. The conditional benefits offered to African voters range from cash, small consumer goods, bureaucratic intermediation to collective goods for communities, including wells, roads, school buildings or water pumps. Given the high centralization of power in most African countries (van de Walle 2001), insufficient government transparency and a relatively weak private sector, access to elected office has very important implications for ordinary people’s lives. It is worth highlighting that in contrast to many cases of clientelism in Latin America that are dominated by individual benefits to voters,<sup>2</sup> collective communal benefits play a significant role in African political competition. African politicians distribute gifts and cash to individuals during political campaigns, but they also make promises to provide important infrastructure to voters’ villages or neighborhoods, conditional on voters’ electoral behavior. The competition over resources thus should not be equated merely with individual vote buying; it takes a much broader range of contingent transactions.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Auyero (2001).

<sup>3</sup> The *contingent* nature of provision of public goods makes this practice clientelistic. This view is consistent with Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007).

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Although expressive motivations for ethnic voting should not be discounted,<sup>4</sup> most scholars believe that voters choose candidates from the same group because of expectations of *material* gains. Bates argues that “ethnic groups persist largely because of their capacity to extract goods and services from the modern sector and thereby satisfy the demands of their members for the components of modernity” (1974: 471). Likewise, Kasfir (1979) suggests that groups use ethnicity to advance their goals, improve their own share of economic rewards and avoid domination by others.<sup>5</sup> For Joseph (1987), political competition between ethnic groups is about the division of what Nigerians call “the national cake.”<sup>6</sup>

More recent studies support the connection between competition over resources and ethnic politics, and they articulate more clearly the specific mechanism through which ethnicity helps advance voters’ material goals. Posner argues that in situations of information scarcity, such as lack of credible policy platforms, ethnic affiliation gives voters credible information about which groups will benefit, if a given party or candidate wins the election (Posner 2005: 104). Similarly, Chandra (2004) claims that ethnic cues act as information shortcuts about who will benefit from a given politician’s policies. Arguably, voters believe that politicians from the same ethnic group will favor their group more than a non-coethnic would. As van de Walle puts it, “[C]itizens may feel that only a member of their own ethnic group may end up defending the interests of the ethnic group as a whole, and that voting for another ethnic group will certainly not do so” (2007: 65).

Yet, despite widespread assumptions about the importance of ethnicity in African elections,<sup>7</sup> there is significant empirical variation in the extent to which ethnicity plays a role in politics. The primacy of ethnicity in electoral politics manifests itself in ethnic voting, namely, voting for a coethnic politician, and the existence of ethnic parties or candidates,

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Horowitz (1985).

<sup>5</sup> See also Skinner (1985) who argues that ethnic groups compete for material goods and the resources of the state.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph further argues that this competition for material goods, and hence the control of the state which governs access to them, further accelerated the “ethnicizing of Nigerian society” (1987: 49). Similarly, Young highlights “the importance of scarcity of resources and competition for status in crystallization of contemporary identities” (1982: 89).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Dresang (1974) and Posner (2003, 2005) on Zambia, Kaspin (1995) on Malawi, Chazan (1982) on Ghana, Ferree (2004) on South Africa, Young (1976) on Congo and Ndegwa (1997), Ajulu (2002) on Kenya.

i.e. those that garner *most* of their support from their coethnics.<sup>8</sup> We can think about ethnic candidates and parties as the opposite of national candidates and parties. National parties and national candidates draw support from all groups in society, and the composition of their electorate is broadly similar to the composition of the general public. Ethnic parties and ethnic candidates, in contrast, are much less representative of the electorate because they largely rely on votes from one or two allied ethnic groups.<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, there is a gap between ethnic diversity and ethnic politics. For example, Daniel Posner's Politically Relevant Ethnic Group (PREG) Index, which measures the politicization of ethnic cleavages, shows that there are several countries in Africa with high levels of ethnic fragmentation but low levels of politicized ethnicity (2004: 856). Other studies of political dimensions of ethnicity, such as Wimmer, Cederman and Min (2009) and Cheeseman and Ford (2007), further indicate that diversity is not automatically translated into ethnic politics. This gap raises an important question, namely, why is ethnicity politicized in some contexts but not others, and when does ethnic diversity lead to ethnic politics?

There are countries in Africa without ethnic electoral patterns in otherwise similar environments. Consider the case of Senegal. Like most countries in Africa, it is a very diverse society, not only in terms of ethnicity but also religion. Its parties do not present substantially different programs; policy debates are rare or nonexistent; and clientelism, or the proffering of material goods in return for electoral support,<sup>10</sup> is and always has been an important component of political competition.<sup>11</sup> Yet, none of the major parties or candidates has an ethnic or religious base. Instead, each party's electorate is as diverse as the electorate as a whole.

Senegal is an illustrative example, but it is not an isolated phenomenon; there are other African countries where we see clientelist, non-programmatic competition and yet no ethnic politics. An index, developed by Dowd and Driessen, which measures the association between ethnic identity and vote choice, provides a good illustration of this variation (see Figure 1.1). The values of the index can be interpreted as the percentage of vote choice that can be predicted by voters' ethnic

<sup>8</sup> Horowitz defines an ethnically based party as a party which "derives its support overwhelmingly from an identifiable ethnic group (or a cluster of groups) and serves the interests of that group" (1985: 291).

<sup>9</sup> Given the domination of African politics by individuals, rather than parties, throughout the book, I study candidates and parties, rather than parties alone.

<sup>10</sup> Definition of clientelism from Stokes (2007). <sup>11</sup> See, for example, Beck (2008).

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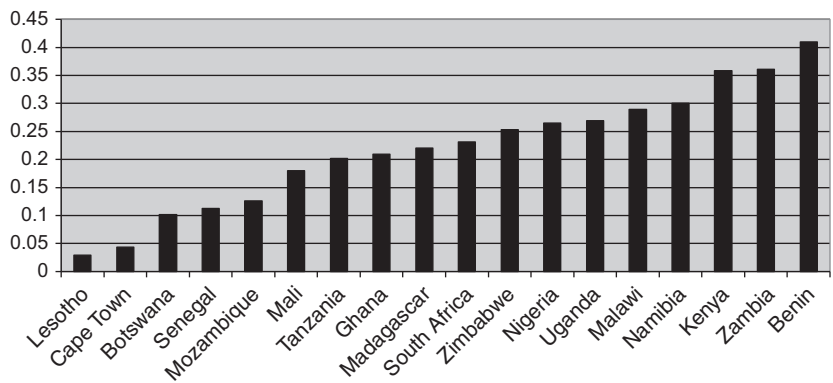


FIGURE 1.1 Level of Ethnic Politics in Africa

identity. The graph shows that while ethnicity is a good predictor of vote in some places, such as Benin, Zambia or Kenya, where it can account for over a third of vote choice, it has little explanatory value in Botswana, Senegal or Mali (under 20 percent). Why then do ethnic electoral blocs emerge in some countries but not in others?

The case of Senegal also helps highlight other electoral anomalies, which are difficult to understand by focusing on ethnic identity. In the most recent presidential election in 2012, President Abdoulaye Wade enjoyed very high levels of support in his hometown of Kébémér. Winning by a high margin in one’s home region is not surprising, but what is more remarkable is that the inhabitants of Kébémér did not start voting for their “favorite son” until he became president. When Wade was a challenger, his town preferred to side with the then incumbent, Abdou Diouf, who was from a different ethnic background and who had no personal connections to the area.

Kébémér was not the only area in Senegal that exhibited strikingly different support toward presidential candidates, depending on their incumbency status. Indeed, the vast majority of rural areas throughout Senegal changed their electoral allegiance. As a challenger, Abdoulaye Wade had sparse support in the countryside, but as an incumbent, the rural areas voted overwhelmingly for him. This shift was so dramatic that between 2000 and 2012, Wade’s electorate changed its composition from a largely urban one to one dominated by rural voters. In some rural areas, the incumbent increased his support by over 50 percentage points in just a few years’ time. Why does the same candidate have an urban base with little rural support as a challenger but builds a predominantly rural base as an incumbent? Theories that focus exclusively on ethnic ties

neglect the importance of incumbency advantage and the spatial dynamics of electoral support in urban and rural areas. In this book, I engage with these questions, helping paint a more complete understanding of electoral politics in Africa.

#### EXISTING THEORIES OF VARIATION IN ETHNIC POLITICS

Despite puzzling empirical variation, there is a shortage of answers as to why ethnic politics emerge in some ethnically diverse settings but not others. In fact, seeing ethnic mobilization in Africa as almost inevitable most scholars over the past several decades tended to ask why one particular dimension of ethnicity becomes salient, and not why any dimensions of ethnicity become salient at all (Laitin 1986, Posner 2005). Although several recent studies highlight that, despite the conventional wisdom, ethnicity is not a perfect determinant of vote choice in Africa (Bratton and Kimenyi 2008, Hoffman and Long 2013), most of the works have focused on why, in countries with widespread ethnic politics, some *individuals* vote ethnically whereas others do not, rather than why there are significantly different levels of ethnic voting in different *societies*.

In an experiment in Uganda, Conroy-Krutz (2012) finds that as voters gain more information, especially negative, about their coethnic politicians, they are less likely to support them. Ichino and Nathan (2013) provide a compelling argument, with evidence from Ghana, that when voters are an ethnic minority in a district they are less likely to vote for their coethnic politician. These studies elucidate important individual or local variation in the propensity to vote for coethnics, but they do not address the question of why entire countries or regions with similar socio-economic characteristics have surprisingly different levels of ethnic politics. Why is ethnic politics rampant in Benin but visibly absent in Senegal?

There are no convincing explanations for the divergent electoral patterns in Senegal and Benin, the key set of cases examined in this book. First, it is important to point out that the absence of ethnic politics in Senegal does not result from a lack of social salience of ethnicity. Ethnic categories in both Senegal and Benin are regularly used by people to describe themselves and others; they also feature in official documents, such as censuses. Ethnic labels have social meaning and markers, such as names, rituals or stereotypes attached to different identities.<sup>12</sup> As Diouf

<sup>12</sup> Certain family names in Senegal, as in Benin, are associated with different ethnic groups. For example, Bâ or Diallo would be immediately identified as Peul.



points out, among most Senegalese there exists a “certain dose of ethnocentrism: one has a very flattering auto-portrait of one’s own ethnic group,” and one paints portraits of other ethnic groups “made of prejudices” (1994: 61). A study commissioned by UNESCO found that, for example, the Wolof view the Tukolor as overly conservative, whereas the Tukolor and other ethnic groups describe the Wolof as loud (*gueulard*), proud, materialistic and deceitful (Diouf 1994: 57).<sup>13</sup> The Diola frequently describe the Wolof as “impolite and disrespectful” (Lambert 1998: 597).

These ethnic stereotypes are an important corrective to the commonly held views by outsiders about the Wolof hegemony, namely, the dominance of the Wolof culture. McLaughlin (1995) shows that the spread of the Wolof culture in Senegal has generated resistance, especially among the Peul community. Wolofization has not eliminated ethnic differences. Nor has it privileged the Wolof in political competition. Only one president, Abdoulaye Wade, out of the four Senegalese presidents since independence, was Wolof.

But perhaps it is in politicians’ interest to mobilize different identities instead of ethnicity? Advocates of institutionalist arguments (e.g. Posner 2005, Chandra 2004) suggest that politicians will mobilize along a cleavage, which creates groups closest in size to the minimum winning coalition at a given level of competition, national in the case of former French colonies. Based on these theories, one could hypothesize that Senegalese politicians do not mobilize ethnic identities because they are better off activating a different ascriptive identity, one which gets them closer to the minimum winning coalition. Yet, this is not what Senegalese politicians do, even though they could.

Senegalese politicians do have other socially salient identity cleavages that they could activate, just like in Benin. In addition to ethnicity, political entrepreneurs could feasibly mobilize voters based on religion and brotherhood affiliation. Brotherhood affiliation in Senegal is highly

<sup>13</sup> See also Smith (2006) for other ethnic stereotypes and McLaughlin (1995) on the manifestations of Haalpulaar (Peul and Tukolor) identity. Some additional stereotypes are based on the most common occupations of different ethnic groups: The Wolof are traditionally merchants, the Peul are pastoralists, the Tukolor are sedentary agriculturalists and the Serer and Lebou are fishermen. Moreover, ethnic groups have their ethnic homelands. Just like in Benin Abomey and its surroundings are the Fon heartland, or the Borgu is Bariba territory, the Senegal River Valley is home to the Tukolor, Casamance is considered the “Diola country” (*pays Diola*), Sine-Saloum is the heart of the Serer homeland and much of central Senegal is *pays Wolof*. See Diouf (1994: 33–40) for detailed data on ethnic composition of different regions.

socially salient. There is a marked variation in religious practice and celebration, with distinct pilgrimages and holy places for different Sufi orders.<sup>14</sup> People display allegiance to their brotherhoods by hanging pictures of religious leaders, or the founders of the respective brotherhoods. Many of my interviewees invoked common stereotypes about members of the two largest brotherhoods. For example, the Tijanis describe the Mourides as loud, boisterous and ostentatious, while portraying themselves as calm, discreet and modest. Given the plethora of social markers, politicians could in principle easily appeal to brotherhood affiliation in their political campaigns, just as their counterparts do across Africa. Yet, as the Senegalese electoral data indicate, *none* of the three most socially salient identities – ethnicity, brotherhood affiliation or religion – structures political competition, demonstrated later in Chapter 4. Nor do we find coalitions of different ethnic groups. It is thus not the case that Senegalese politicians don't mobilize along ethnic lines because they choose to activate a different identity cleavage, even though they could feasibly do so.

This outcome is inconsistent and even runs counter to the expectations of leading institutionalist theories (Chandra 2004, Posner 2005), in particular because the size of ethnic groups in Senegal and Benin is similar. While no ethnic group or brotherhood constitutes an outright majority, ethnic or religious groups in Senegal are no more fragmented than in Benin: The Wolof in Senegal constitute around 43 percent of the population, similar in size to the Fon in Benin, whereas brotherhood divisions create the largest group close to the desired 50 percent. The very similar sizes of the largest ethnic groups in Senegal and Benin allow us to account for Elischer's (2013) important alternative explanation that countries with a majority (core) ethnic group are less likely to have ethnic parties than more ethnically fragmented states. The difference between Senegal and Benin cannot be ascribed to electoral demography and group size.

It is also worth pointing out that electoral strategies in Benin do not follow the predictions of the minimum-winning coalition theory, as articulated by Posner (2005) and Chandra (2004). Based on their theories, it would be more advantageous for southern Beninese politicians to activate the "Southern" identity, a label that is very socially salient,<sup>15</sup> rather than a Fon, Adja or Yoruba ethnic identity. If they followed this logic,

<sup>14</sup> Touba is the holy place of the Mouridiyya, whereas Tivaouane is the holy place of the Tijaniyya. The most important pilgrimage for the Mourides is the *Magal*, whereas for Tijanis it is the *Gammu*.

<sup>15</sup> Banégas (2003: 8–9) provides a good description of the meaning of Southern identity.