

Political Competition and Ethnic Identification in Africa

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This article draws on data from over 35,000 respondents in 22 public opinion surveys in 10 countries and finds strong evidence that ethnic identities in Africa are strengthened by exposure to political competition. In particular, for every month closer their country is to a competitive presidential election, survey respondents are 1.8 percentage points more likely to identify in ethnic terms. Using an innovative multinomial logit empirical methodology, we find that these shifts are accompanied by a corresponding reduction in the salience of occupational and class identities. Our findings lend support to situational theories of social identification and are consistent with the view that ethnic identities matter in Africa for instrumental reasons: because they are useful in the competition for political power.

Ethnic identities are believed to be powerful motivators of behavior in Africa, but the source of their salience in political and social affairs remains debated. One perspective holds that ethnic identities are salient in Africa because they reflect traditional loyalties to kith and kin. By this view, ethnic identities are hardwired—intrinsically part of who people are—and their salience follows directly from their link to people's natural makeup. A contrary perspective argues that ethnicity is salient because it is functional. The world is a competitive place, proponents of this position hold, and, in that world, ethnicity serves as a useful tool for mobilizing people, policing boundaries, and building coalitions that can be deployed in the struggle for power and scarce resources. By this view, the salience of ethnicity is intrinsically bound up in political competition.

In keeping with the conventional wisdom in the scholarly literature (e.g., Bates 1983; Horowitz 1985; Young 1976), we find strong evidence in favor of the latter perspective. In departure from that literature, however, we draw our conclusions from cross-national survey

data rather than case studies and anecdotal evidence. This approach permits us to generalize across settings and puts us in a much stronger position than previous work to rule out competing explanations for the patterns we find. Our results therefore rest on much firmer empirical foundations than prior research on the political sources of ethnic identification.

In generating our findings, we take advantage of two clear implications of the political logic of ethnic identification. First, if ethnic identities are tools that people use to get access to political power, then they are likely to be rendered most salient when political power is at stake—that is, at election time. We would therefore expect people's ethnic attachments to be stronger during the periods around national elections—and, given the highly centralized nature of political power in most African countries, especially *presidential* elections—than at other times. Second, if the role that ethnicity plays is to secure an advantage in the competition for power, then it is likely to be most useful, and to become most salient as a social identity, during elections that are closely fought. We would

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therefore expect ethnic attachments to be strongest not just when elections are proximate but when they are also highly competitive.

We test these expectations using survey data on the primary social identity of more than 35,000 respondents in 22 survey rounds across 10 African countries. We find evidence that the strength of ethnic identification (which we operationalize as the likelihood that a respondent names a tribal or language group membership in response to a question about the social group with which she feels she belongs to first and foremost) changes dramatically within African countries over time. We also find strong and robust evidence that these changes are associated with how close in time the survey is to a presidential election and that this proximity effect is conditional on the competitiveness of that election (which we define in terms of the margin of victory between the election's winner and his closest challenger). When the most proximate presidential election is very competitive (i.e., when the margin of victory is near zero), we find that the likelihood that a survey respondent will identify himself in ethnic terms rises by 1.8 percentage points with every month closer the survey is to the election. But as the competitiveness of the election falls, the impact of electoral proximity diminishes, reaching zero in landslide elections where the margin of victory exceeds roughly 40 percentage points. These are exactly the patterns we would expect to observe if ethnic identities in Africa are strengthened by political competition—and *not* the patterns we would expect to see if, as journalistic accounts of Africa imply, ethnic attachments are simply “in the blood.”

Two potential mechanisms might account for these relationships. The first emphasizes the mobilizing actions of politicians who “play the ethnic card” at election time; the second stresses voters’ recognition, without having to be told so by politicians, that the allocation of resources in Africa tends to follow ethnic lines and that elections are the time for deciding who will allocate those resources. Unfortunately, our data do not permit us to discriminate between these two mechanisms, and our findings are consistent with either or both. Either way, however, the close correspondence between ethnic identification and the electoral cycle underscores ethnicity’s instrumental role.

Having demonstrated that exposure to electoral competition is associated with a strengthening of ethnic identity, we then examine which other identities are displaced when people identify more closely with their ethnic groups. Individuals have identities rooted not just in their ethnicity but also in their membership in religious communities, occupation or class groups, and

gender categories, among other social affiliations. To explore the impact of elections on these other dimensions of social identification, we employ a multinomial discrete choice (logit) framework to estimate simultaneously the effects of electoral proximity and competitiveness on four different categories of social identity: ethnicity, class/occupation, religion, and gender. Our main finding is that the increasing salience of ethnic identification that occurs in proximity to competitive presidential elections corresponds with a decreasing salience of class/occupational identities. For every additional month closer a survey respondent is to a competitive presidential election, the salience of his or her class/occupational identity decreases by one percentage point—an effect that diminishes (as with the corresponding increased salience of ethnicity) with the declining competitiveness of the election. In keeping with case study findings (e.g., Melson 1971), our results thus imply that electoral competition causes ethnic identities to displace class/occupational identities.

We then move beyond the aggregate effects of electoral competition on ethnic identification to explore whether certain types of individuals are more likely to identify in ethnic terms, both generally and (in somewhat more tentative fashion due to data constraints) in proximity to competitive electoral contests. Although we do not report the specific coefficient estimates for these covariates, all of our main analyses control for the individual characteristics of respondents, such as their age, gender, education, occupation, urban/rural residence, media exposure, and socioeconomic status.¹ We focus on several individual characteristics that are of particular theoretical interest. First, in keeping with the expectations of what we call “second-generation modernization theory,” we test whether people located in the modern sector of the economy are more likely to identify in ethnic terms than those in the traditional sector. We find strong evidence that they are.

Then, following theories that emphasize the impact of group size on incentives for ethnic mobilization, we investigate whether the size of the ethnic group to which a person belongs affects the likelihood that he or she will identify in ethnic terms. We find that it does not. We then explore whether supporters of ruling parties are more or less likely to identify themselves in ethnic terms. We find them to be no different than supporters of opposition

¹Our measure of socioeconomic status combines information about the materials from which the respondent’s house is built, the respondent’s assets, and a “hardship” index built from answers to questions about how often the respondent’s family goes without food.

parties. Finally, we test whether young men are particularly likely to identify ethnically—a hypothesis made plausible by the images of gun-toting and brick-throwing youth that dominate media coverage of African ethnic conflicts. Again, we find no evidence that this particular subset of the population is more likely to identify in ethnic terms. When we investigate whether ethnic identities become systematically stronger for any of these subcategories of respondents when elections are proximate—a test of these respondents' susceptibility to politically motivated ethnic mobilization—we find no effect. Although this result is consistent with the hypothesis that political competition raises the salience of ethnic identity for all citizens, we note that we have limited statistical power to identify heterogeneous effects of proximity to a competitive election among population subgroups.

Apart from these empirical findings, the article also makes three important methodological contributions. First, along with Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi (2004) and in keeping with the literature that stresses the multidimensional nature of social identities (Chandra 2006; Horowitz 1985; McLaughlin 2007; Posner 2005; Scarritt and Mozaffar 1999), we define our main dependent variable in terms of the social group that respondents feel they belong to first and foremost from among multiple categories of social identity. Thus while our main interest is in the political sources of *ethnic* identification, the multinomial logit empirical methodology we adopt permits us to make inferences about the impact of political competition on other kinds of social identification as well, and about the kinds of identities that individuals *switch out of* when attachments to their ethnic groups move to the forefront of their identity repertoires. The use of this statistical technique represents the first attempt of which we are aware to simultaneously generate estimates of the factors associated with the salience of multiple dimensions of social identity.

A second methodological contribution is our use of repeated country-level observations with micro-individual survey data. One of the difficulties with isolating the sources of ethnic identification among survey respondents sampled from multiple countries is that the importance that a respondent attaches to his or her ethnicity is likely to be affected by the characteristics of the broader political and social environment in which he or she lives. For example, factors such as a country's level of economic development (Bates 1983; Melson and Wolpe 1970), its electoral institutions (Reilly 2001; Reynolds 2002), its ethnic diversity (Bates 2000; Collier 2001), its colonial heritage (Laitin 1986), and the nation-building emphasis of its leaders (Miguel 2004) have all been argued to affect the importance that citizens attach to their ethnic

identities.² While it is fairly straightforward to control for many of these factors, others are either very difficult to operationalize (for example, "leadership") or are collinear with the country-level political variables whose impact on ethnic identification we seek to estimate.³ A major advantage of the data we employ in this study is that it has been collected not just across multiple countries but at multiple points in time for the same countries. This permits us to employ country fixed effects that control for country-level features, including unobservable characteristics that we cannot measure. This, in turn, permits us to focus attention on factors that vary within countries across survey rounds, such as our key parameters of interest, the proximity of the survey to the nearest presidential election and the competitiveness of that contest.

To appreciate the utility of the specification we employ, suppose that we had data from just two surveys: one conducted in Country A two months prior to a competitive presidential election, the other conducted in Country B at the exact midpoint of its presidential electoral cycle. If we found that a higher share of respondents said that they ranked their ethnic identity as most important in Country A than in Country B, it would be impossible to know whether the higher salience of ethnicity in Country A was due to the close proximity of its survey to a competitive election or to the fact that, for reasons of history, ethnic demography, leadership, or some other factor, baseline levels of ethnic salience are simply higher in Country A than in Country B. The only way to disentangle the two explanations would be to compare the results of surveys conducted in each country at multiple points in time—sometimes close to and sometimes distant from a competitive presidential election—thereby holding each country's baseline level of ethnic salience constant. This is precisely what the country fixed-effects specification permits us to do.

Finally, the measure of ethnic salience we adopt in this article represents a significant advance over those employed in earlier studies, almost none of which measure ethnic salience directly.⁴ Most studies that deal with this issue rely on inferences based on the presumed effects of ethnic salience. In effect, they reason that, because there is ethnic violence in the country in question or because voting patterns or the distribution of patronage appears to

²For a test of the impact of several of these factors, see Bossuroy (2008) and Miguel and Posner (2006).

³Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001) discuss these economic concerns in cross-country regressions.

⁴Bossuroy (2008), Lewis (2007), and Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi (2004), who also draw on survey data and who adopt methodologies similar to our own, are exceptions.

follow ethnic lines, ethnicity must be a salient motivating factor in people's behavior. Others rely on assumptions about what the diversity of ethnic groups in a society implies about the salience of ethnicity in that society's politics (e.g., Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly 1999)—a relationship that finds little support in the empirical literature. Neither approach is as defensible as the one pursued here, which bases its assessment of ethnic salience on the self-reported identities of individuals as collected in nationally representative sample surveys.

Data and Methodology

To investigate the sources of ethnic identification in Africa, we employ data collected in rounds 1, 1.5, and 2 of the Afrobarometer, a multicountry survey project that employs standardized questionnaires to probe citizens' attitudes in new African democracies.⁵ The surveys we employ were administered between 1999 and 2004. Nationally representative samples were drawn through a multistage stratified, clustered sampling procedure, with sample sizes sufficient to yield a margin of sampling error of ± 3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.⁶ Our data consist of 35,505 responses from 22 separate survey rounds conducted in 10 countries: Botswana, Malawi, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. To make possible the inclusion of country fixed effects, we limit our analysis to countries for which more than one survey round is available.⁷

The main dependent variable we employ comes from a standard question designed to gauge the salience for respondents of different group identifications. The question wording as follows:

We have spoken to many [people in this country, country X] and they have all described themselves in different ways. Some people describe themselves in terms of their language, religion, race, and others describe themselves in economic terms, such as working class, middle class, or a

farmer. Besides being [a citizen of X], which specific group do you feel you belong to first and foremost?

As noted, a major advantage of the way this question was constructed is that it allows multiple answers and thus permits us to isolate the factors that are associated with attachments to different dimensions of social identity. We group respondents' answers into five categories: ethnic, religion, class/occupation, gender, and "other."⁸

Before turning to the findings, several methodological issues bear mention. First, as we have stressed, the salience of any social identification—be it ethnic or otherwise—is necessarily context specific, and the Afrobarometer data only permit us to ascertain the way respondents identified themselves in the specific context in which they were surveyed. Our task is to use what we know about that context to make inferences about the factors that determine when ethnic group memberships become most salient. The context specificity of respondents' answers is not something we ignore; it is central to our research design. Since our main focus is on the timing of the survey vis-à-vis the most proximate presidential election, we report coefficient estimates only on the election-related variables. However, all of our analyses are robust to the inclusion of controls for other contextual factors, including the characteristics of the interview (whether people other than the respondent were present, whether the respondent consulted other people while answering, whether, in the interviewer's judgment, other people influenced the respondent's answers, and whether the respondent seemed engaged, at ease, suspicious, or threatening) and the characteristics of the enumerator (his or her age, gender, urban-rural background, and education). The country fixed-effect framework we adopt also automatically controls for many other aspects of context that are correlated with the country in which the survey is taking place—its history, its diversity, its colonial heritage, its level of economic development, etc.⁹

⁵Afrobarometer data are currently available through round 4. However, the key question from which we construct our dependent variable was dropped after round 2, so our analyses are limited to rounds 1, 1.5, and 2.

⁶Further details of the Afrobarometer project, including the sampling procedures used in collecting the data, are described in Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi (2004).

⁷While this forces us to exclude five additional surveys, the loss of data is more than compensated by the benefits of the fixed-effects framework.

⁸There is some debate in the literature as to what constitutes an "ethnic" identity (Chandra 2006). In the analyses reported in this article, we define "ethnic" identities as synonymous with tribal or language group identities. However, we also generate an alternative definition of "ethnic" that includes such nontribal and nonlinguistic identities as race in the former settler colonies of Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe; region in Malawi and Nigeria; and religion in Nigeria. Our results (not shown) are substantively unchanged when we substitute this alternate definition. The "other" category includes identities such as race, region, age, "I'm my own person," etc.

⁹There are some aspects of context for which we cannot control: for example, the proximity of the survey interview to religious festivals, harvest times, and other events that might cause some

Second, quite apart from the issue of the reliability of responses across contexts, the use of self-reported identities introduces the possibility of bias. Respondents in countries where the social norm is not to talk openly about ethnicity might be less likely to confess that their most important social affiliation is with their ethnic community, which would generate a downward bias in measured ethnic salience in that country. This may be particularly likely in a context where open confessions of ethnic solidarity are frowned upon by the regime and where survey enumerators are suspected of being affiliated with the government. While this concern cannot be ruled out, it is dampened by the way the Afrobarometer survey was conducted—confidentially and in private by enumerators who were not affiliated with the government or any political party.

Also, the Afrobarometer survey is not primarily about ethnicity or social identity. The question we use to construct our measure of ethnic salience is just one out of more than 175 questions asked in the standard Afrobarometer questionnaire, only a handful of which make any mention of ethnicity or social identity. Respondents are thus likely to have treated the “with which group do you identify” question as a background query rather than as the central issue around which the survey revolved. Indeed, questions about ethnic background, religious group membership, and language use are standard background questions included in most surveys conducted in Africa. We therefore expect that respondents were probably less guarded in their responses about their ethnic identities than might otherwise have been the case. In addition, to the extent that social norms against confessing the strength of one’s ethnic identification vary by country, the country fixed-effect framework that we employ should control for these differences. Similarly, to the extent that a respondent’s willingness to speak freely about his or her ethnic identity depends on the characteristics of the person who is asking the questions, the robustness of our findings to the inclusion of controls for the age, gender, urban/rural background, and education of the enumerator, as well as for the presence of other people at the survey location at the time of the survey, should minimize concerns about this possible source of bias.

identities to become momentarily more salient. In any case, such idiosyncratic situational factors should make it harder for us to find statistically significant relationships, and would only introduce bias into our estimated effects if the timing of these other factors was systematically correlated with proximity to and competitiveness of elections, or if they happened to affect outcomes in a particularly influential survey round. The fact that our results are robust to dropping any single country suggests that this latter concern is unwarranted.

Two additional potential concerns stem from the way the survey question was structured. A first issue is that the question explicitly bars respondents from describing themselves in terms of nationality: it asks, “*Besides being [your nationality (e.g., Namibian, Zambian, etc.)], which specific group do you feel you belong to first and foremost?*” We therefore cannot rule out the possibility that respondents might consider national identity as more important to them than all of the identity categories recorded in our data.¹⁰ This said, to the extent that the patterns of ethnic identification we observe are due to unobserved variation in levels of national identification, these levels plausibly vary across countries more than within them over time and, as such, should be controlled for by our inclusion of country fixed effects.

A related issue is that the survey question provides information about the salience of the reported group membership in relative, not absolute, terms. All we are able to infer from respondents’ answers is the identity that they rank first from among those identity categories explicitly mentioned in the question (and, as noted, excluding national identity). We have no way of knowing how much absolute importance respondents attach to their first-ranked (or second- or third-) group memberships. Thus to conclude on the basis of our data that ethnicity is more salient in Country A than Country B because a larger share of survey respondents in Country A ranked ethnicity first is not quite right. It is conceivable, though we think unlikely, that ethnicity might be more salient in absolute terms to people in Country B, even though a larger share of them rank some other category of identity as even more important than ethnicity.¹¹

Finally, legitimate questions can be raised about the generalizability of our findings. Although broadly representative of Africa as a whole, the 10 countries included in our study are not a substitute for a continent-wide sample. Our sample includes just one Francophone country (Mali), no countries that have failed to introduce at least some democratic or market reforms over the last decade (a precondition for an Afrobarometer survey),

¹⁰Results from a Kenyan survey of 1,207 eligible voters conducted just prior to that country’s December 2007 presidential elections (summarized in Afrobarometer 2008) suggest that this is indeed a possibility. In response to a question about how they ranked the relative importance of their national and ethnic identities, just 10% said they put their ethnic identity above being Kenyan (35% ranked them equally). Although strong social pressure against publicly expressing a preference for one’s ethnic identity over one’s national identity may account for these results, the close proximity of the survey to the election should have made this a particularly likely moment for respondents to have ranked their ethnic identities first.

¹¹We return to the econometric implications of this issue below.

TABLE 1 Economic and Political Characteristics of Sample Countries

Country and Survey Round	Economic Characteristics			Political Characteristics		
	Per Capita Income, \$ (PPP)	Under-5 Mortality	% Urban	Political Rights	Months to Election	Vote Margin
Botswana, 1999	7,122	101	52	2	-1	0.30
Botswana, 2003	8,725	116	56	2	16	0.26
Malawi, 1999	594	188	15	3	-5	0.07
Malawi, 2003	569	175	16	3	12.5	0.09
Mali, 2001	894	224	27	2	15.5	0.07
Mali, 2002	913	224	28	2	-6.5	0.07
Namibia, 1999	6,074	69	32	2	-2	0.66
Namibia, 2002	6,389	65	33	2	-28	0.66
Namibia, 2003	6,274	64	34	2	14.5	0.69
Nigeria, 2000	882	207	44	4	-11	0.26
Nigeria, 2001	875	205	45	4	19.5	0.30
Nigeria, 2003	1,000	199	46	4	-6	0.30
South Africa, 2000	9,488	63	57	1	-13.5	0.57
South Africa, 2002	9,819	65	58	1	18.5	0.57
Tanzania, 2001	541	137	22	4	-5	0.55
Tanzania, 2003	593	129	23	4	29	0.69
Uganda, 2000	1,249	145	12	6	9.5	0.42
Uganda, 2002	1,301	141	12	6	-18.5	0.42
Zambia, 1999	764	182	35	5	25	0.02
Zambia, 2003	823	182	35	5	-16.5	0.02
Zimbabwe, 1999	2,759	117	35	6	8.5	0.02
Zimbabwe, 2004	1,832	129	36	7	-26	0.14
<i>Average, sample countries</i>	3,185	142	34	3.5	14.1*	0.32
<i>Average, SSA (2004)</i>	1,803	168	35	4.3	*	0.34

Notes: Political rights from Freedom House. Months to election is the number of months to the nearest national election, with negative numbers signaling that the nearest election is in the past. Electoral margin is defined as the gap between the vote share of the winner and the runner-up in the most recent presidential election; if no presidential elections were held within five years (e.g., if president is elected by the legislature), then most recent legislative election is used.

*Average electoral proximity for Afrobarometer countries corresponds to the average of the absolute values. Average for SSA is not meaningful as not all countries hold regular elections.

and, with the exception of Uganda, no countries involved in civil wars at the time the survey data were collected. As Table 1 indicates, per capita income in the 10 countries is about 75% higher than the African average (though this is mainly driven by the southern African cases of Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa—the other seven countries are actually poorer than the Sub-Saharan Africa average) and rates of under-five child mortality in our sample are slightly lower than in Africa as a whole. Rates of urbanization are roughly comparable to the regional average. Presidential elections appear to be similarly (un)competitive in our 10 sample countries as in Africa as a whole (the average margin of victory in presidential contests is 32 and 34 percentage points, respectively), but citizens in our sample enjoy slightly more extensive political rights than

in the average African country (note that on the Freedom House scale, which runs from 1 to 7, lower numbers indicate greater rights).

Our findings therefore must be interpreted with the caveat that they may not be entirely representative of Africa as a whole. This said, the fact that Bossuroy (2008) reports similar results to ours in a parallel study using comprehensive survey data from a quite different set of African countries lends confidence to the generalizability of our findings.¹²

¹²Bossuroy's analysis of ethnic identification is based on a cross-section of surveys of 32,492 urban respondents in seven Francophone West African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo.

TABLE 2 Social Identities Ranked “First and Foremost” in the 22 Survey Rounds

Country and Survey Round	Ethnic	Occupation/Class	Religion	Gender	Other	No Answer
Botswana, 1999	0.44	0.09	0.05	0.00	0.35	0.07
Botswana, 2003	0.28	0.12	0.08	0.02	0.45	0.06
Malawi, 1999	0.37	0.25	0.24	0.00	0.07	0.08
Malawi, 2003	0.20	0.58	0.08	0.04	0.08	0.02
Mali, 2001	0.40	0.23	0.23	0.04	0.11	0.00
Mali, 2002	0.37	0.36	0.24	0.03	0.01	0.00
Namibia, 1999	0.52	0.32	0.05	0.00	0.01	0.10
Namibia, 2002	0.62	0.17	0.06	0.02	0.09	0.04
Namibia, 2003	0.25	0.24	0.03	0.29	0.17	0.03
Nigeria, 2000	0.48	0.29	0.21	0.00	0.02	0.00
Nigeria, 2001	0.31	0.41	0.21	0.04	0.03	0.00
Nigeria, 2003	0.49	0.20	0.19	0.03	0.07	0.01
South Africa, 2000	0.42	0.15	0.18	0.00	0.24	0.02
South Africa, 2002	0.22	0.42	0.06	0.05	0.23	0.01
Tanzania, 2001	0.03	0.79	0.05	0.09	0.04	0.00
Tanzania, 2003	0.17	0.38	0.07	0.02	0.27	0.08
Uganda, 2000	0.13	0.66	0.09	0.06	0.05	0.01
Uganda, 2002	0.18	0.59	0.08	0.06	0.07	0.01
Zambia, 1999	0.12	0.46	0.34	0.00	0.04	0.04
Zambia, 2003	0.11	0.44	0.18	0.02	0.04	0.23
Zimbabwe, 1999	0.47	0.37	0.08	0.00	0.06	0.02
Zimbabwe, 2004	0.19	0.29	0.20	0.12	0.25	0.02
<i>Average</i>	<i>0.31</i>	<i>0.36</i>	<i>0.14</i>	<i>0.04</i>	<i>0.12</i>	<i>0.04</i>

Notes: Average values for each column weight each survey round equally, so respondents from countries with larger sample sizes are weighted less.

The Salience of Ethnic (and Other) Identities

Table 2 reports the frequency distribution of responses to the “which specific group do you feel you belong to first and foremost?” question for all 22 survey rounds in our sample. Contrary to the stereotype that Africans are unidimensionally ethnic in their self-identifications, a minority of 31% of respondents identify themselves first and foremost in ethnic terms.¹³ Indeed, fewer respondents choose ethnic identities than class/occupation identities, which are chosen by 36% of respondents. In addition, responses vary tremendously across countries and, perhaps even more strikingly, within countries over time—a finding consistent with theories of ethnic identification that stress contextual variability. The variation we

observe across countries confirms the necessity of adopting an estimation framework that controls for country-specific factors. The variation within countries over time is, of course, central to our identification strategy: our main interest is in ascertaining whether (or what share of) that variation can be explained by the proximity and competitiveness of the nearest presidential election.

Since the surveys are repeated cross-sections rather than panels of individuals, we cannot reject completely the possibility that sampling variation is behind some of the changes that we observe within countries across survey rounds. However, since the Afrobarometer employs the same sampling methodology in all survey rounds, and given the large, nationally representative sample of individuals included in each survey, we can be fairly certain that sampling variation is not primarily behind these shifts. The robustness of our findings to dropping countries one at a time also allays fears that sampling variation in a single country might be driving our results.

A crucial, and slightly different, question relates to the timing of the Afrobarometer surveys, which provides the source of variation in our key proximity variable.

¹³Note that the “average” row weights each survey round equally, so that respondents from countries with larger sample sizes are weighted less. The raw (unweighted) share of respondents identifying in ethnic terms is 29.2% and the share when weighting each survey round by country population is 26.7%.

One concern is that surveys might have been deliberately scheduled close to exciting, hotly contested elections (perhaps because they represent moments when political attitudes are particularly interesting and worth surveying) but not close to less hotly contested elections. Fortunately, there is little evidence that the timing of surveys was in any way related to electoral cycles, in part because the enormous logistical task of selecting enumeration sites and setting up field teams requires that preparations be made many months or even years in advance. Moreover, this timing would not account for the strong interaction effects between election proximity and competitiveness that we document below.

To the extent that survey timing was in any way endogenous to election timing, it was through what appears to have been a conscious decision by the Afrobarometer organizers after round 1 not to schedule surveys right near elections. While this would have been a uniform (and thus unproblematic) policy change, the worry is that such a change in the timing of surveys (away from elections) might have combined with a downward secular trend in the salience of ethnic identities. This could produce a spurious correlation between electoral proximity and ethnic identity salience. We deal with this possible confounding story, as well as the possibility that changes in survey implementation¹⁴ across survey rounds might have generated changes in reported levels of ethnic identification, by including fixed effects in our regressions for each survey round (1, 1.5, 2) as well as a linear time trend.¹⁵

The Political Sources of Ethnic Identification

What, then, accounts for the variation we observe in the tendency of survey respondents to identify in ethnic terms? To answer this question, we model each individual respondent i living in country c taking part in survey round t as attaching a salience S_{ict} to his or her ethnic identity (recall that “salience” is operationalized as the likelihood that a respondent answers the “with which group do you identify first and foremost?” question in terms of his or her membership in a tribe or

language group). Using this framework, we can examine empirically the extent to which a respondent’s identity function S_{ict} is systematically related to his or her observable characteristics and his or her country’s political environment. Combining observable and unobservable heterogeneity, we express the salience of ethnic identity for individual i in country c during survey round t as

$$S_{ict} = \mathbf{Z}'_{ct}\boldsymbol{\gamma} + \mathbf{X}'_{ict}\boldsymbol{\beta} + \mu_{ict} \quad (1)$$

where the vector \mathbf{X}_{ict} contains individual-level variables including gender, age, education, occupation, media exposure, and socioeconomic status; the vector \mathbf{Z}_{ct} contains country-level factors; and μ_{ict} is individual i ’s idiosyncratic level of attachment to ethnic identity—that is, the part of S_{ict} that is unrelated to observables. Our particular focus is on the proximity in months between a presidential election in country c and the administration of survey round t , as captured by minus one times the absolute value of months (proximity_{ct}), as well as on the competitiveness of the same election, as measured by minus one times the vote share margin between the winner and the runner-up ($\text{competitiveness}_{ct}$).¹⁶ This is represented as $\mathbf{Z}'_{ct}\boldsymbol{\gamma} = \gamma_1 \text{proximity}_{ct} + \gamma_2 \text{competitiveness}_{ct} + \gamma_3 (\text{proximity}_{ct} \times \text{competitiveness}_{ct})$. Thus the hypothesized change in the strength of ethnic identity as elections draw nearer is allowed to depend on the competitiveness of those elections.¹⁷

Table 3 presents the results of four regressions of ethnic identification on our main independent variables: proximity_{ct} , $\text{competitiveness}_{ct}$, and $\text{proximity}_{ct} \times$

¹⁴For example, modifications in enumerator training and/or the protocols used for the postcoding of data.

¹⁵Regression results (not shown) indicate that respondents in round 1 were, in fact, more likely to identify ethnically than respondents in rounds 1.5 or 2. Because we include survey round dummies, the findings reported in the article control for this tendency.

¹⁶Country-level values for these variables are provided for each survey round in Table 1. In Botswana and Zimbabwe, the electoral proximity variable is calculated in terms of the number of months before/after the most proximate *parliamentary* election, and the margin of victory variable is calculated as the difference in votes for the two most vote-winning parliamentary parties. In the case of Botswana, this is because the country does not hold presidential contests; in the case of Zimbabwe, it is because presidential and parliamentary elections are not held concurrently and the most proximate national election to both of the Afrobarometer surveys we use was the parliamentary contest of June 2000. For ease of interpretation, we code proximity as $-1 * |(\text{months to/from nearest election})|$ so that larger numbers imply increasing proximity. Note that by taking the absolute value of the distance to/from the nearest election we assume that the salience of ethnicity changes symmetrically on either side of the election. In analyses (not shown), we tested for asymmetrical effects (i.e., the possibility that ethnic salience gradually increases as election day approaches but then declines quickly after the polls close) but found no evidence for such a pattern. For ease of interpretation, we code competitiveness as $-1 * (\text{Vote share of winner} - \text{Vote share of runner-up})$ so that larger numbers imply increasing competitiveness.

¹⁷In particular, $\partial S_{ict} / \partial \text{proximity}_{ct} = \gamma_1 + \gamma_3 \text{competitiveness}_{ct}$ and $\partial S_{ict} / \partial \text{competitiveness}_{ct} = \gamma_2 + \gamma_3 \text{proximity}_{ct}$.

TABLE 3 Political Determinants of Ethnic Identification

	Logit			OLS (Country-Level)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Electoral proximity	0.003 (0.003)	0.018 (0.003)***	0.018 (0.002)***	0.018 (0.008)**
Electoral competitiveness	-0.387 (1.49)	-0.285 (0.553)	-0.304 (0.721)	0.246 (1.29)
Proximity * competitiveness		0.044 (0.007)***	0.045 (0.007)***	0.041 (0.014)***
Individual-level covariates	No	No	Yes	N/A
Country-rounds	22	22	22	22
Observations	35,505	35,505	35,505	22
R ²	0.09	0.09	0.10	0.53

Notes: Coefficients reported are marginal effects $dP(\text{ethnic})/dX$. Standard errors (clustered at the country level) in parentheses. Significantly different than zero at 90% (*), 95% (**), 99% (***) confidence. All logit specifications include country fixed effects and trend and survey round controls; OLS country-level regression includes country fixed effects only. Observations are weighted by $1/(\text{number of observations from that country})$ to weight each country survey round equally.

competitiveness_{ct}. All four specifications include country fixed effects and weight each observation by $1/(\text{number of observations from that country})$ in order to weight each country survey round equally.¹⁸ The first three columns are logit models with standard errors clustered at the country level to account for the hierarchical nature of the data.¹⁹ These three regressions also include the survey round controls and time trend discussed above. Clustering error terms at the country level should deal appropriately with the dependence of the key independent variables for individuals in the same country and the same survey round.²⁰ Nonetheless, as a robustness check we revisit the analysis in the fourth column in an OLS regression with data aggregated to the country-round level

($N = 22$; here the dependent variable is the share of respondents in the country survey round that identified in ethnic terms, as in Table 2). The fact that all three versions of our main specification (columns 2–4) generate almost identical results speaks to the robustness of the relationship between ethnic identification and the political factors we are investigating.

The results reported in column 1 suggest that, on average, neither the proximity of the survey to a presidential election (in months, absolute value) nor the competitiveness of that election (the margin of victory, in percentage points) has any independent impact on the likelihood that a survey respondent will identify him- or herself in ethnic terms. Some caution must be taken, however, in interpreting the “electoral competitiveness” term given the relatively small degree of within-country variation we observe in our data on this variable (see the “vote margin” column in Table 1). Indeed, in four of our 10 countries, the same election serves as the most proximate contest to the two country surveys we use, so there is no variation on this term. Since all of the explanatory leverage in our specification comes from within-country comparisons, the coefficient estimates on the “competitiveness” variable are being produced by only a subset of our (already small) set of country cases. This problem is compounded by the fact that the within-country variation we do observe is based on relatively small differences in the margin of victory between the winning presidential candidate and the runner-up—differences that are likely a product as much of measurement error and/or electoral fraud as of true changes in the underlying competitiveness of the contests. Given these considerations, we do

¹⁸The results are robust to the exclusion of these country population weights.

¹⁹A potential alternative to our approach is hierarchical linear modeling (HLM). The advantages of HLM lie in the explicit structure placed on the error and hence the ability to estimate directly the correlations in the error terms across “related” observations. However, HLM is not suitable for our purposes because it makes the strong assumption that model random effects are uncorrelated with the independent variables of interest, and the likelihood of this assumption being violated is precisely the motivation for our empirical approach. In addition, we are studying a discrete choice (of primary identity) from a menu of options, which makes the nonlinear, maximum-likelihood logit a natural modeling framework. Linear models like HLM are less suitable for discrete choice settings.

²⁰As mentioned below, the results are robust to a nonparametric bootstrap of the standard errors using resampling at the country level, which is theoretically more appropriate given the relatively small number of countries.

not put much weight on our rather imprecise estimates on the “competitiveness” variable.²¹

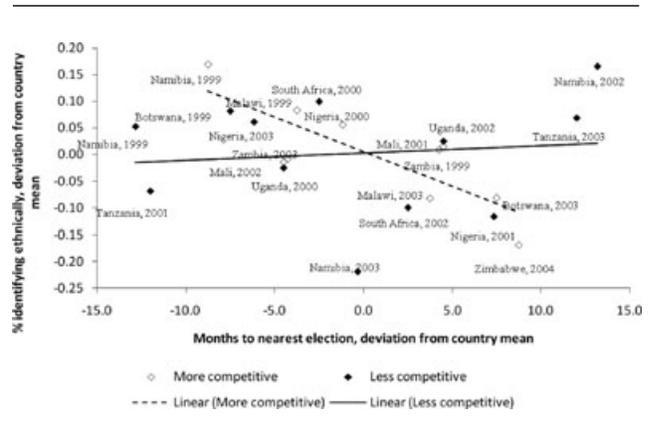
Rather, we focus on the interaction term between proximity and competitiveness, and it is the substantial cross-country variation in electoral competitiveness that allows us to estimate this effect. When we add such an interaction term to our initial specification (column 2), we find that the coefficients on proximity and the interaction term are statistically significant. Taken together, the interpretation of the point estimates in column 2 is that the likelihood that a person will identify him- or herself in ethnic terms increases by 1.8 percentage points (s.e. 0.3 percentage points) for each month closer to an election the survey is administered, *but* that this effect falls as the competitiveness of the election decreases, dropping all the way to zero for landslide elections with a margin between the winner and runner-up of roughly 40 percentage points. Thus a survey respondent asked within a month of a closely fought presidential election how she identifies herself would be nearly 22 percentage points (s.e. 3.6) more likely to respond in ethnic terms than if she were asked a year earlier or a year later. However, if the election was won in a landslide, her answer would be unaffected by the proximity of the election. Given that the baseline likelihood of ethnic identification in our sample is 31%, a 22 percentage point predicted change over the course of 12 months is a very large effect indeed.

These results are confirmed in column 3, which adds a host of individual-level controls for respondents’ age, gender, occupation, education, media exposure, and urban or rural residence (coefficients not shown), and column 4, which replicates the analysis at the country level.²² The fact that the findings are highly statistically significant using the conservative country-round level approach in column 4, with only 22 observations, indicates that the results in columns 1 through 3 are not simply an artifact of using large samples of individual-level data. The findings are nearly identical across all three specifications; more-

²¹ Bootstrapped standard errors for the lower-order electoral competitiveness coefficient estimates in Tables 3 and 4 were significantly larger than the asymptotic standard errors we report (not shown), lending credence to the claim that the estimates may not be reliable. Bootstrapped standard errors for the electoral proximity and interaction terms were somewhat larger than those reported but still within conventionally accepted limits of statistical significance. For those interested, the bivariate correlation between competitiveness and ethnic salience (conditional on country fixed effects) is not statistically significant (results not shown); we thank a referee for this suggestion.

²² The results reported in column 3 are also robust to the inclusion of extensive additional controls for interview and enumerator characteristics.

FIGURE 1 Ethnic Identification and Electoral Proximity, by Competitiveness of National Elections



Notes: More competitive elections are defined as those where electoral margin is < 29.5%, the median in our sample.

over, as noted, all results are robust to dropping countries one at a time.

The main results are presented graphically in Figure 1, where the proximity to the closest country election is presented on the x-axis (demeaned by country, which is equivalent to our country fixed-effects regression specification) and the extent of ethnic identification is on the y-axis (also demeaned by country). Two plots are presented: one pattern for relatively competitive elections (cases where the electoral margin is less than the sample median of 29.5 percentage points), and one for landslide elections (when the margin is greater than the median), although the results are nearly unchanged using a lower competitive election threshold of 10 percentage points (not shown). The relationships come through clearly: the plot is strongly negative for competitive elections (meaning that ethnic identification falls sharply when surveys are conducted farther away in time from competitive elections) but is nearly flat for landslide elections. All of this is consistent with a story whereby the salience of ethnic identities is correlated with the electoral cycle, but only in settings where elections constitute meaningful contests for political power.

Political Competition and Other Social Identities

Our main dependent variable (based on the “with which group do you feel you belong to first and foremost?” question) permitted multiple responses. This makes it a

natural fit for a multinomial discrete choice empirical framework, which can be used to explore the social identities that individuals switch out of when, in proximity to competitive elections, they embrace their ethnic identities above others. To model this process, we modify slightly the framework we introduced earlier. Instead of attaching salience to their ethnic identity S_{ict} , we now conceive of individuals as having multiple dimensions $j \in J$ to their identities (where in practice the set J includes ethnic, religious, occupation/class-based, and gender identities, as well as other less common identities) and attaching a salience S_{jict} to each identity dimension j . Thus respondents who attach high salience to their ethnic identity have large values of $S_{\text{Ethnic},ict}$; those who attach low salience to their gender identity have small values of $S_{\text{Gender},ict}$; and so on. When asked to report the group that they feel they belong to first and foremost, respondents choose the identity dimension j with the highest salience:

$$\text{Identity}_{ict} = \{j : S_{jict} \geq S_{kict} \forall k \neq j\} \quad (2)$$

Using this framework, we can examine the extent to which the identity functions S_{jict} are systematically related to \mathbf{X}_{ict} and \mathbf{Z}_{ct} . We can thus express the strength of social identity category j for individual i in country c during survey round t as

$$S_{jict} = \mathbf{Z}'_{ct} \boldsymbol{\gamma}_j + \mathbf{X}'_{ict} \boldsymbol{\beta}_j + \mu_{jict}. \quad (3)$$

Note that the coefficients $\boldsymbol{\beta}_j$ and $\boldsymbol{\gamma}_j$ now have j subscripts as the independent variables could have different impacts across different social identity dimensions.²³

Two important aspects of this econometric specification bear mention. First, the multinomial logit model cannot estimate the level of the coefficients $\boldsymbol{\gamma}_j$ directly because, as noted above, the choices we observe only contain information about *relative* preferences. We therefore cannot distinguish absolute effects on the level of the identity strengths S_{jict} , only the degree to which explanatory variables make a respondent more or less likely to say that identity j is the one that they feel they belong to

²³The assumption that μ_{jict} has an i.i.d. extreme value (Type 1) distribution generates a standard multinomial logit model for the choice of social identity in the key survey question (Wooldridge 2002). This model can be estimated under the usual assumption that $E[\mu_{jict} | \mathbf{X}_{ict}, \mathbf{Z}_{ct}] = 0 \forall j$. Note, however, that this assumption is potentially problematic for country-level political variables \mathbf{Z}_{ct} if there are omitted variables (for example, unobserved country characteristics) that are correlated with both political characteristics and individuals' identity choices. This is particularly worrisome if the unobserved characteristics are correlated with either (or both) of our key independent variables, electoral competitiveness, and proximity to elections. In such a situation, the estimated $\boldsymbol{\gamma}_j$ coefficients will be biased. However, our use of country fixed effects allows us to, at least partly, address this problem for time-invariant country characteristics.

first and foremost. The logit model identifies coefficients of the form $\boldsymbol{\gamma}_j - \boldsymbol{\gamma}_k$, or effects on identity j relative to a reference identity k . These coefficients give rise to an equivalent set of *marginal effects*, or impacts of the independent variables on the probabilities of choosing each of the five primary identity categories.²⁴ The marginal effects are the results we report in Table 4 below.

Second, the probabilities that particular social identities are chosen are not independent of one another. As the probability rises that a particular social identity is chosen, the probability of others being chosen necessarily falls since only one identity can be indicated in the survey. In particular, the marginal effects must mechanically sum to zero, because probabilities must always add to one. As we have stressed, a major advantage of our multinomial approach is that, if the salience of one dimension of social identification increases in response to a particular explanatory variable, we can simultaneously estimate which identity dimensions are becoming less salient. That is, our method estimates substitution patterns among social identities in response to changes in the characteristics of individuals and in their political environment.

In the top half of Table 4, we present our estimates for the impact of proximity_{ct} , $\text{competitiveness}_{ct}$, and $\text{proximity}_{ct} \times \text{competitiveness}_{ct}$ on the salience respondents attach to their ethnic, class/occupational, religious, gender, and other identities.²⁵ The results in the first (ethnicity) column are nearly identical to those reported in Table 3: the salience of ethnicity increases by 2 percentage points for every month closer a respondent is to a presidential election, with the effect declining as the election becomes less competitive. Reading across the first row of Table 4 allows us to discover which identity dimensions lose salience as elections come closer. More than half of the increased salience of ethnicity comes from substitution away from class/occupation identities, though some of it appears to come from the gender and "other" categories. The interpretation of the estimated electoral proximity coefficient in the class/occupation column is that the likelihood that a respondent will identify him- or herself in class/occupational terms decreases by 1.2 percentage points for every month closer he or she is to a presidential election. Effects for gender identity are also

²⁴That is, marginal effects are the partial derivatives with respect to each of the explanatory variables.

²⁵As in the third column of Table 3, the analyses include individual-level covariates, country fixed effects, controls for the survey round, and a time trend. Disturbance terms are clustered at the country level and observations are weighted by $1/(\text{number of observations from that country})$. Additional analyses (not shown) also include controls for the characteristics of the interview and enumerator, with nearly identical results.

TABLE 4 Determinants of Ethnic and Other Social Identities

	Ethnicity	Class/Occupation	Religion	Gender	Other
<i>4a. Political determinants</i>					
Electoral proximity	0.020 (0.002)***	-0.012 (0.005)**	0.001 (0.003)	-0.003 (0.001)**	-0.006 (0.002)**
Electoral competitiveness	0.117 (0.548)	2.154 (0.907)**	-2.025 (0.475)***	0.073 (0.178)	-0.173 (0.449)
Proximity * competitiveness	0.049 (0.007)***	-0.044 (0.009)***	-0.001 (0.010)	-0.008 (0.002)***	0.004 (0.004)
<i>4b. Individual-level determinants</i>					
Farmer/fisherman	-0.039 (0.014)**	0.105 (0.018)**	-0.029 (0.008)***	-0.004 (0.002)**	-0.032 (0.007)***
Member of ethnic group > 10%	0.001 (0.027)	-0.025 (0.028)	0.015 (0.015)	-0.001 (0.002)	0.010 (0.016)
Ruling party supporter	0.013 (0.017)	-0.018 (0.016)	-0.000 (0.010)	0.001 (0.002)	0.004 (0.008)
Young male (18–25)	-0.002 (0.009)	0.017 (0.013)	-0.004 (0.006)	-0.006 (0.003)**	-0.006 (0.010)
Observations			35,505		
Country-rounds			22		
R ²			0.14		

Notes: Multinomial logit. Marginal effects $dP(\text{identity})/dX$ reported. Standard errors (clustered at the country level) in parentheses. Significantly different than zero at 90% (*), 95% (**), 99% (***) confidence. All specifications include country fixed effects, individual-level covariates, and trend and survey round controls. Observations are weighted by $1/(\text{number of observations from that country})$ to weight each country survey round equally.

statistically significant and go in the same direction (i.e., substituting for ethnic identity), but are less than a third as large.

For reasons described earlier, while we do not read too much into the lower-order coefficient estimates on the competitiveness variable, the interactive effect of competitiveness and electoral proximity is informative. The negative signs on the proximity \times competitiveness coefficients in the second (class/occupation) and fourth (gender) columns of Table 4 suggest that the movement out of class/occupational (and, to a lesser extent, gender) identities is heightened when elections are not just proximate but also highly competitive—a finding consistent with the increased likelihood of ethnic identification as competitiveness increases.

Beyond Aggregate Effects

Thus far, we have focused on general trends among all survey respondents; our coefficient estimates can be interpreted as applying to the “average” person. However, both the theoretical literature on ethnicity and the cov-

erage of Africa in the popular media generate strong expectations about the kinds of respondents that should be more (or less) likely to identify themselves in ethnic terms (and, to a lesser extent, in terms of their class/occupation, religion, and gender). We test four of these expectations in the bottom panel of Table 4.

A first hypothesis derives from the classic literature on modernization. Early modernization theorists such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Parsons all viewed ethnic identities as “traditional” and predicted that modernization would lead to their displacement by class/occupational identifications. If these theorists were right, we would expect to find the strongest ethnic identification (and also the weakest class/occupational identification) among people located in the traditional sector of the economy, since they have been least exposed to modern currents and, to borrow a phrase from colonial-era anthropology, have been the least “detribalized.” Later researchers like Young (1965, 1976), Melson and Wolpe (1970), and Bates (1983) argued, conversely, that the processes of urbanization, industrialization, education, political mobilization, and competition for jobs would *deepen* ethnic identities as individuals exploited their ethnic group memberships as tools for political, economic,

and social advancement (we refer to these latter researchers as “second generation” modernization theorists). These second-generation theorists would therefore expect us to find the strongest ethnic attachments among those in the modern sector, since it is there that competition for scarce resources is most intense, and thus there that the incentives for people to use their ethnic identities as tools to acquire those resources should be most strong.

To test these competing expectations, we created an indicator variable for respondents who were farmers or fishermen (27% of our sample), which we use as a rough proxy for being located in the traditional sector of the economy. In keeping with the predictions of the second-generation modernization theorists, we find a robust negative relationship between being a farmer/fisherman and identifying in ethnic terms. Farmers and fishermen are, on average, about 4 percentage points less likely than people in the modern sector to identify themselves first and foremost in terms of their language or tribe (column 1).²⁶ They are also more than 10 percentage points more likely than people in the modern sector to identify in class/occupational terms (column 2) and roughly 3 percentage points less likely to identify in religious terms (column 3).

We also investigate the impact of group size on ethnic identification. Arguments developed by Posner (2005) and others lead to the expectation that respondents will be more likely to identify themselves in ethnic terms to the extent that they belong to ethnic groups that are large enough to constitute viable political coalitions. Members of small ethnic groups should have incentives either to redefine themselves as members of broader ethnic coalitions or to embrace identities along other nonethnic cleavage dimensions, such as class/occupation or religion. An alternative perspective, however, would lead us to expect members of smaller ethnic groups to be more likely to identify in ethnic terms because fears of being dominated by members of other groups will heighten their ethnic identities (Horowitz 1985; Rabushka and Shepsle 1972). To test these expectations, we created an indicator variable for membership in an ethnic group that comprises 10% or more of the national population.²⁷ As Table 4

²⁶We also explored an alternative specification in which we distinguished between “traditional” and “modern” respondents by virtue of their location in a rural versus urban enumeration area but found no significant differences between the two subpopulations with respect to ethnic identification. We speculate that this may be because rural location is only a rough proxy for participation in nontraditional economic sectors. Teachers, factory workers, government officials, and people with a range of educational attainment are well represented in both rural and urban areas in our data.

²⁷The Afrobarometer survey did not ask direct questions about ethnic group membership in rounds 1, 1.5, or 2. Hence, ethnic group

indicates, we find no evidence that the size of the ethnic group to which a respondent belongs affects the likelihood of identification with ethnicity—or, for that matter, with any other category of social identity.

We next investigate the impact of partisanship. Several scholars have identified a pattern in contemporary Africa whereby multiethnic ruling parties occupy the center of the political space, where they are surrounded by ethnically defined opposition parties seeking their overthrow (e.g., Cheeseman and Ford 2007; Scarritt 2006; van de Walle 2007). To the extent that this is an accurate portrayal of African politics, we might expect to find respondents who report supporting the ruling party to have lower levels of ethnic identification than those who report supporting opposition parties. As the results presented in Table 4 indicate, however, we find no support for this conjecture. Nor does support for the ruling party appear to be associated with a greater tendency toward any other type of social identification.

Finally, media portrayals of African ethnic conflicts as being carried out by armies of unemployed young men might lead us to expect young men to have higher than average rates of ethnic identification.²⁸ Popular perceptions notwithstanding, we find no evidence that young men are in fact any more likely to identify in ethnic terms than other respondents.

Thus far we have focused on “main” effects: the tendency for farmers/fishermen, members of large ethnic groups, ruling party supporters, and young men to have higher (or lower) levels of ethnic identification in general. However, the literature also generates expectations about the kinds of respondents that are likely to be more (or less) susceptible to ethnic mobilization—that is, more (or less) likely to identify themselves in ethnic terms in proximity to competitive elections. Indeed, given the focus of this article, the issue of whether young men, opposition party supporters, or members of large ethnic groups are more likely to identify themselves in ethnic terms *generally* is less relevant than whether members of such categories are more easily mobilized along ethnic lines in the

affiliations are coded based on respondents’ first language of communication. The nested nature of language groups in Africa makes coding group size less than straightforward for some groups. Our main specification codes a respondent’s ethnic group memberships based on the size of the group to which he or she reports belonging, based on data from Ethnologue (n.d.). An alternative specification codes group sizes based on the aggregated, politically relevant ethnolinguistic groups within which the respondents’ reported groups are nested (as in Posner 2004). The results are robust to using either coding rule (not shown).

²⁸We were unable to identify *unemployed* young men due to limitations in the way the Afrobarometer surveys collect data on unemployment. Many respondents who are effectively unemployed indicate that they are traders, hawkers, or vendors.

context of a heated election campaign. Although our estimation framework is ideally suited to addressing these questions, data limitations make it impossible for us to do so in a meaningful way. We are already constrained in our main analyses by the fact that we are exploiting variation over time within just 10 countries. Using triple interactions to test the joint impact of proximity and competitiveness on particular subpopulations—*young men, ruling party supporters, etc.*—makes our sample limitations even more binding and, unfortunately, renders it impossible to generate meaningful results. In analyses (not shown) we did run the triple interactions between proximity, competitiveness, and the indicator variables for each of these respondent categories, and none of these effects is statistically significant at traditional confidence levels. However, limited statistical precision means we are unable to rule out even quite substantial effects.

Discussion

The robust relationship we find between ethnic salience and exposure to political competition provides strong support for instrumental understandings of ethnicity. The fact that ethnic identities become systematically more important to people at the time that competitive elections are being held suggests that ethnicity plays a role in the struggle for political power. But exactly what role does ethnicity play? And for whom?

One prominent answer in the African politics literature emphasizes the role of political elites. By this account, politicians find it advantageous to “play the ethnic card” as a means of mobilizing supporters to acquire or retain political power (e.g., Bates 1983; Ferree 2006; Posner 2005; Young 1965, 1976).²⁹ Since elections provide the principal occasion for political power to change hands, politicians’ efforts at ethnic mobilization are especially likely to take place during the period immediately preceding elections. These efforts are also likely to be particularly vigorous when the elections are close and the advantage to be gained by mobilizing supporters will be greatest. Thus, to the extent that politicians’ ethnic appeals make ethnicity more salient for voters, and to the extent that, once made salient, ethnic identities take some time to return to baseline levels, we would expect to find exactly the pattern that we do: stronger ethnic attachments during the periods preceding and following competitive national elections than at other times.

²⁹The use of ethnicity as a tool for mobilizing voters is not unique to Africa. For examples from other regions, see Chandra (2004), Gagnon (2004), Horowitz (1985), Mendelberg (2001), and Wilkinson (2004).

An alternative explanation for the link between political competition and ethnic identification focuses not on elites but on regular citizens—specifically, on their beliefs that jobs, favors, and public goods will be channeled disproportionately to coethnics of the person who is in a position to allocate them (Barkan 1979; Posner 2005; Throup and Hornsby 1998; van de Walle 2007; Wantchekon 2003). Since elections are the moment when the people who will control the allocation of resources are chosen, they are also the occasion when people should be most mindful of their ethnic identities and of the match between their own identity and that of the candidates vying for power. The association we find between ethnic identification and the electoral cycle is, again, consistent with this story.

Unfortunately, our data do not permit us to adjudicate between these two explanations. To do so would require systematic information collected at different points in each country’s electoral cycle about the kinds of ethnic appeals politicians make—data that the Afrobarometer surveys do not collect (and that is difficult to gather systematically in a single country, let alone in 10).³⁰ Yet even if we had such data it is not clear that it would make sense to test one explanation against the other, for the two accounts are less competing than complementary. When politicians in the run-up to Sierra Leone’s 2007 presidential election promised that “if you help your kinsmen you will survive; we will give you jobs, opportunities and education” (Manson 2007), were they manipulating voters or simply playing to their expectations? When voters in recent elections in Kenya (Gibson and Long 2008), Malawi (Posner 1995), or South Africa (Ferree 2006) overwhelmingly supported presidential candidates from their own ethnic or racial groups, were they responding to the candidates’ ethnic appeals or simply channeling their votes to the politicians who they thought would best look out for their interests? The answer is almost certainly “both.” Politicians will only invoke the need for voters to support members of their ethnic groups if they believe that such appeals will resonate, which in turn will depend on voters’ beliefs about how patronage is channeled in Africa. Similarly, although most citizens do not need to be reminded that their ethnic connection with the election’s winner is likely to affect the level of resources they will receive in the election’s aftermath, politicians’ ethnic appeals almost certainly reinforce such expectations. The result is an equilibrium in which expectations of ethnic favoritism by voters generate ethnic appeals by politicians which, in

³⁰The Afrobarometer does gather some information on respondents’ perceptions of ethnic favoritism but not on politicians’ appeals.

turn, reinforce voters' expectations of ethnic favoritism.³¹ Because this mutually reinforcing process is driven by the competition for political power, it makes perfect sense that it should cause ethnicity to become more salient in proximity to competitive elections, since this is the time when political power is most clearly at stake.

The link between political competition and ethnic identification is characterized by a second sort of equilibrium as well. Rational politicians should target their ethnic appeals to the voters they believe will be most receptive to them. Thus if we can identify the kinds of voters that politicians should be seeking to mobilize, we should expect to find higher levels of ethnic identification among these voters than others. This was the intuition behind our test for higher levels of ethnic identification among members of large ethnic groups (since these are the groups that constitute sufficiently large voting blocs to be able to affect the outcome of the election) and among opposition party supporters (since one of the surest ways to mobilize opposition to a ruling party in Africa is to claim that the party discriminates against members of ethnic groups that are underrepresented in its leadership). The fact that we find no differences between members of these groups and others with respect to their likelihood of identifying in ethnic terms suggests either that such targeting is not taking place (which we believe is unlikely) or that, consistent with a pattern long noted by scholars of ethnic politics (e.g., Horowitz 1985), the targeting of some groups for ethnic mobilization generates a defensive countermobilization by others.³² Electoral competition would appear to give rise to a process of ethnic mobilization and countermobilization that causes ethnicity to become more important for everyone in the political system.

Conclusion

Our central result is that exposure to political competition powerfully affects whether or not survey respondents identify themselves in ethnic terms. The finding—based on precisely the kind of cross-national data that has hitherto been lacking—provides strong confirmation for situational understandings of ethnicity and for theories that link the salience of particular social identities to instru-

³¹Chandra (2004) and Wantchekon (2003) make similar arguments.

³²The only category of respondent that we find to be systematically different from others in their ethnic identification is farmers and fishermen. However, this is not a group that African politicians have traditionally sought to mobilize, ethnically or otherwise (Bates 1981).

mental political mobilization. Beyond their relevance for this academic literature, the article's results also have important implications for policy makers and researchers interested in elections and ethnicity.

It might be tempting to interpret our findings as suggesting that, by heightening the salience of ethnic identities, the reintroduction of multiparty elections in Africa in the 1990s—widely celebrated as a positive development—may have a conflict-inducing downside. Kenya's 2007 presidential contest, which triggered weeks of violence that left more than 1,000 people dead and 300,000 displaced (International Crisis Group 2008), would seem to provide strong support for this thesis. Yet it would be wrong to construe our results as endorsing this position. While we do find strong evidence that ethnic identities are heightened by exposure to political mobilization, our findings do not support the proposition that political competition accounts for the baseline levels of ethnic salience that make mobilizing ethnicity so politically useful in many African countries—indeed, our fixed-effect estimation strategy makes it impossible for us to test such a claim. Nor do our results suggest that the increasing competitiveness of African elections (Diamond 2008) will necessarily instigate ethnic violence. Our findings suggest that countries with periodic competitive elections should experience *fluctuations* in ethnic salience that are correlated with their electoral cycle, not that they will exhibit higher levels of ethnic identification, on average, than countries without competitive elections. The relationships we uncover would be consistent with such a pattern, but establishing such a relationship would require a different research design than the one we adopt here.

Yet the fact that elections make ethnicity (even momentarily) more salient does suggest the need for African governments to develop policies and institutional mechanisms that are capable of dealing with ethnic divisions. Policies and institutions such as those in place in Tanzania—a country known for its efforts at nation building through the promotion of Swahili as a national language, civic education, and institutional reforms like the abolition of chiefs, as described by Miguel (2004)—might serve as a model for how Kenya and other African countries might dampen destructive ethnic divisions. Perhaps due in part to these policies, Tanzania has among the lowest degree of ethnic identity salience in one of the Afrobarometer survey rounds, at just 3%.³³

³³Tanzania's outlier status in this regard is reflected in Table 1 and in Figure 1, where it is clear that the close proximity between the country's 2001 Afrobarometer survey and its 2000 presidential election has little impact on the share of the population that identifies itself in ethnic terms.

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