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# Political Competition and Ethnic Identification in Africa

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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 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 obtain access to political power, then they are likely to be rendered most salient when political power is at stake—that is, during the periods around national elections. 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 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 twenty-two Afrobarometer survey rounds across ten 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 to which they feel they belong 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 that winner's 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 him- or herself 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."

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 1 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.

Apart from these empirical findings, this chapter also makes three important methodological contributions. First, along with Michael Bratton and colleagues (2005) and in keeping with the literature that stresses the multidimensional nature of social identities (Chandra 2004; Horowitz 1985; McLaughlin 2008; Posner 2005; Scarritt and Mozaffar 1999), we define our main dependent variable in terms of the social group to which respondents feel they belong 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-level 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 (Collier 2001; Bates 2000), its colonial heritage, 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. While it is fairly straightforward to control for many of these factors, others are either very difficult to operationalize (for example, "leadership") or are colinear with the country-level political variables whose impact on ethnic identification we seek to estimate. A major advantage of the data we employ in this study is that it has been collected not just across multiple countries but also 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 the proximity of the survey to the nearest presidential election and the competitiveness of that contest.

Finally, the measure of ethnic salience we adopt in this chapter represents a significant advance over measures employed in earlier studies, almost none of which quantify ethnic salience directly. 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 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, which were administered between 1999 and 2004. These are the only rounds that included the key question from which we construct our dependent variable. Nationally representative samples were drawn through a multistage stratified, clustered sampling procedure, with sample sizes sufficient to yield a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level. Our data consist of 35,505 responses from twenty-two separate survey rounds conducted in ten 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 of data is available.

The main dependent variable we employ comes from a question designed to gauge the salience for respondents of different group identifications. The question wording is: "We have spoken to many [people in this country] 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 national of this country], 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."

Before we turn to the findings, several methodological issues bear mentioning. 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 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 interviewer (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, and the like.



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 interviewers 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 interviewers 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 interviewer, 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.

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. 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-ranked) group memberships. To conclude on the basis of our data that ethnicity is more salient in one country compared to another because a larger share of survey respondents in the former country ranked ethnicity first is therefore not quite right. It is conceivable, though we think unlikely, that ethnicity might be more salient in absolute terms to people in the latter country, even though a larger share of them ranked some other category of identity as even more important than ethnicity.

Finally, legitimate questions can be raised about the generalizability of our findings. Although broadly representative of Africa as a whole, the ten countries included in our study are not a substitute for a continentwide sample. Our sample includes just one francophone country (Mali), no countries that have failed to introduce at least some democratic or market reforms (a precondition for an Afrobarometer survey) over the past decade, and, with the exception of Uganda, no countries involved in civil wars at the time the survey data were collected. As Table 4.1 indicates, per capita income in the ten countries is about 75 percent 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 uncompetitive in our ten 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 Thomas Bossuroy (2011) reports results similar 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.



**Table 4.1 Economic and Political Characteristics of Sample Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1999–2004**

| | Economic Characteristics | | | Political Characteristics | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Country and Survey Round | Per Capita Income (US$) | Under-Five Mortality | Percentage Urban | Political Rights Rating | 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 |
| Average for sample countries | 3,185 | 142 | 34 | 3.5 | 14.1[a] | 0.32 |
| Average for sub-Saharan Africa, 2004 | 1,803 | 168 | 35 | 4.3 | [b] | 0.34 |

*Sources:* World Bank 2008; Freedom House 2006; African Elections DataBase 2006.

*Notes:* Per capita incomes are adjusted for purchasing power parity. Under-five mortality is the number of infant deaths per 1,000 live births. 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 in the vote share between the winner and the runner-up in the most recent presidential election; if no presidential elections were held within five years (e.g., if the president is elected by the legislature), then the most recent legislative election is used.

a. Average electoral proximity for Afrobarometer countries corresponds to the average of the absolute values.

b. Average for sub-Saharan Africa is not meaningful, as not all countries hold regular elections.

## The Salience of Ethnic (and Other) Identities

Table 4.2 reports the frequency distribution of responses to the identity question ("which specific group do you feel you belong to first and foremost?") for all twenty-two surveys in our sample. Contrary to the stereotype that Africans are unidimensionally ethnic in their self-identifications, a minority of 31 percent of respondents identify themselves first and foremost in ethnic terms. Indeed, fewer respondents choose ethnic identities than class/occupation identities, which are chosen by 36 percent 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

**Table 4.2 Social Identities Ranked "First and Foremost" in Sample Countries, 1999–2004**

| 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 |
| Average | 0.31 | 0.36 | 0.14 | 0.04 | 0.12 | 0.04 |

*Source:* Afrobarometer surveys, 1999–2004.
*Note:* Average values for each column weight each survey round equally, so respondents from countries with larger sample sizes are weighted less.



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. 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. 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 interview 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 later.

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 to 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 implementation might have generated changes in reported levels of ethnic identification across survey rounds, by including fixed effects in our regressions for each survey round (1, 1.5, 2) as well as a linear time trend.

## 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 the

salience that each individual respondent attaches to his or her ethnic identity as a function of his or her observable individual characteristics and his or her country's political environment (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). The particular country characteristics in which we are most interested are the proximity in months between the nearest presidential election and the administration of the given survey (as captured by –1 multiplied by the absolute value of months) and the competitiveness of the same election (as measured by –1 multiplied by the vote-share margin between the winner and the runner-up). Country-level values for these variables are provided for each survey round in Table 4.1.

Table 4.3 presents the results of four regressions of ethnic identification on our main independent variables: proximity, competitiveness, and proximity multiplied by competitiveness. All four specifications include country fixed-effects and weight each observation by 1 divided by the number of observations

**Table 4.3 Political Determinants of Ethnic Identification in Sample Countries, 1999–2004**

| | Logit | | | Ordinary Least Squares (country level) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| Electoral proximity | 0.003 | 0.018 | 0.018 | 0.018 |
| | (0.003) | (0.003)*** | (0.002)*** | (0.008)** |
| Electoral competitiveness | –0.387 | –0.285 | –0.304 | 0.246 |
| | (1.490) | (0.553) | (0.721) | (1.290) |
| Proximity × competitiveness | — | 0.044 | 0.045 | 0.041 |
| | — | (0.007)*** | (0.007)*** | (0.014)*** |
| Individual-level covariates | No | No | Yes | n/a |
| Number of country rounds | 22 | 22 | 22 | 22 |
| Observations | 35,505 | 35,505 | 35,505 | 22 |
| $R^2$ | 0.09 | 0.09 | 0.10 | 0.53 |

*Source:* Afrobarometer surveys, 1999–2004.

*Notes:* Coefficients reported are marginal effects dP(ethnic)/dX. Standard errors (clustered at the country level) appear in parentheses. All logit specifications include country fixed effects and trend and survey-round controls; ordinary least squares country-level regression includes country fixed effects only. Observations are weighted by 1 divided by the number of observations from that country, in order to weight each country survey round equally.

***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.10$.

n/a = not applicable.



from that country in order to weight each country survey equally. The first three columns are logit models with standard errors clustered at the country level to account for the hierarchical nature of the data. These three regressions also include the survey-round controls and time trend discussed earlier. 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. Nonetheless, as a robustness check, in the fourth column of the table we revisit the analysis in an ordinary least squares 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 who identified in ethnic terms, as in Table 4.2). The fact that all three versions of our main specification (the second, third, and fourth columns) 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 the first column of Table 4.3 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 4.1). Indeed, in four of our ten 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 or electoral fraud or both as of true changes in the underlying competitiveness of the contests. Given these considerations, we do not put much weight on our rather imprecise estimates on the "competitiveness" variable.

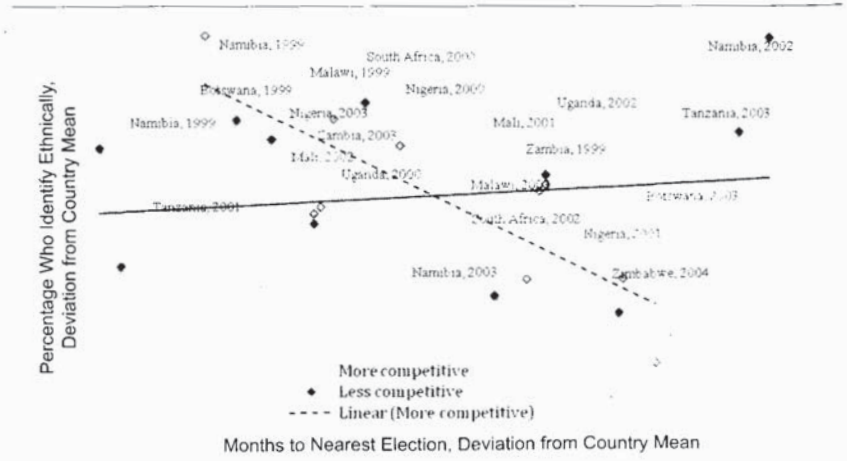
Rather, we focus on the interaction term between proximity and competitiveness, and it is the substantial cross-country variation in electoral competitiveness that allows us to estimate this effect. When we add such an interaction term to our initial specification (the second column of Table 4.3), we find that the coefficients on proximity and the interaction term are statistically significant. Taken together, the interpretation of the point estimates in the second column is that the likelihood that a person will identify him- or herself in ethnic terms increases by 1.8 percentage points (standard error of 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 or he self-identifies would be nearly 22 percentage points (standard error of 3.6 percentage points) 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 percent, a predicted change of 22 percentage points over the course of twelve months is a very large effect indeed.

These results are confirmed in the third column of Table 4.3, 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 the fourth column, which replicates the analysis at the country level. The fact that the findings are highly statistically significant using the conservative country-round level approach in the fourth column, with only twenty-two observations, indicates that the results in the first through third columns are not simply an artifact of using large samples of individual-level data. The findings are nearly identical across all three specifications; moreover, as noted, all results are robust to dropping countries one at a time.

The main results are presented graphically in Figure 4.1, where the proximity to the closest country election is presented on the horizontal axis (de-meaned by

**Figure 4.1 Ethnic Identification and Electoral Proximity in Sub-Saharan Africa by Competitiveness of National Elections, 1999–2004**




*Sources:* Afrobarometer surveys, 1990–2005.
*Note:* "More competitive" elections are defined as those in which the electoral margin is less than 29.5 percent, the median in our sample.



country, which is equivalent to our country fixed-effects regression specification), and the extent of ethnic identification is on the vertical axis (also de-meaned 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 further 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 question: "which group do you feel you belong to first and foremost") 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 just to their ethnic identity, we now conceive of individuals as having multiple dimensions to their identities—ethnic, religious, occupation/class-based, gender, and so forth—and attach a different salience to each of these identity dimensions. When asked to report the group with which they identify first and foremost, respondents choose the identity dimension with the highest salience.

Two important aspects of this analysis bear mentioning. First, the choices we observe only contain information about *relative* preferences. We therefore cannot estimate the impact of electoral proximity or competitiveness on the absolute level of identity strength, only on the degree to which they make a respondent more or less likely to say that one identity is the one they identify with first and foremost.

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 interview. In particular, the marginal effects must mechanically sum to 0, because probabilities must always sum to 1. 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 Table 4.4, we present our estimates for the impact of proximity, competitiveness, and proximity multiplied by competitiveness on the salience respondents attach to their ethnic, class/occupational, religious, gender, and other identities. The results in the first column (ethnicity) are nearly identical to those reported in Table 4.3: 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 4.4 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 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 multiplied by competitiveness coefficients in the second

**Table 4.4 Determinants of Ethnic and Other Social Identities in Sample Countries, 1999–2004**

| | Ethnicity | Class/ Occupation | Religion | Gender | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Electoral proximity | 0.020 | –0.012 | 0.001 | –0.003 | –0.006 |
| | (0.002)*** | (0.005)** | (0.003) | (0.001)** | (0.002)** |
| Electoral | 0.117 | 2.154 | –2.025 | 0.073 | –0.173 |
| competitiveness | (0.548) | (0.907)** | (0.475)*** | (0.178) | (0.449) |
| Proximity × | 0.049 | –0.044 | –0.001 | –0.008 | 0.004 |
| competitiveness | (0.007)*** | (0.009)*** | (0.010) | (0.002)*** | (0.004) |

*Sources:* Afrobarometer surveys, 1999–2004.

*Notes:* Multinomial logit. Coefficients reported are marginal effects dP(identity)/dX. Standard errors (clustered at the country level) appear in parentheses. All specifications include country fixed effects, individual-level covariates, and trend and survey-round controls. Observations are weighted by 1 divided by the number of observations from that country, to weight each country survey round equally.

$^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.10$.



(class/occupation) and fourth (gender) columns of Table 4.4 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.

## 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). 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.

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 are difficult to gather systematically in a single country, let alone in ten). 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 that, in turn, reinforce voters' expectations of ethnic favoritism. 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.

## 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 have hitherto been lacking—provides strong confirmation for situational understandings of ethnicity and for theories that link the salience of particular social identities to instrumental political mobilization. Beyond their relevance for this academic literature, these results also have important implications for policymakers 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 2008b) 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 Edward 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 percent.