

ABSTRACT

ETHNICITY AND VOTING BEHAVIOUR IN AFRICA: SURVEY EVIDENCE FROM EIGHT AFRICAN COUNTRIES

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The competition of political parties in free and fair elections is the core component of all widely acknowledged definitions of modern democracy. Thus, it is crucial to democratization research to understand the people's electoral choice. Conventional wisdom holds that ethnicity provides a major social cleavage for voting behaviour and party affiliation in Africa. Except for some first Afrobarometer studies, this is usually due to inference from aggregate data of national election results, which might prove to be an ecological fallacy.

The paper will address two questions: Based on an analysis of individual data from opinion surveys in eight African countries, some of them democracies others hybrid regimes (Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Ghana, Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia), the first question will be whether this general proposition holds true. First statistical evidence suggests that in some cases ethnicity matters for voter alignment, but even in these cases it is only one factor among others that can explain voting behaviour. Overall the statistical analysis indicates that ethnicity matters to very different degrees in different countries and even so for the different parties within the same country.

This raises the second question, which are possible other social structural factors to explain voting intentions? Hence, we ask for the importance of other features which could produce particular interests – if only chasing a bad government out of office – such as economic dissatisfaction, a higher level of education, age, gender or urban living conditions. Finally, we also examine the importance of living in a particular geographic region (regardless of its ethnic composition) which – in the light of programmatically weak parties – could indicate the existence of pragmatic patronage relations beyond ethnic networks.