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**SUPPORT YOU CAN COUNT ON?  
ETHNICITY, PARTISANSHIP, AND  
RETROSPECTIVE VOTING IN AFRICA**

*by Daniel J. Young*

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## **Support You Can Count On? Ethnicity, Partisanship, and Retrospective Voting in Africa**

### **Abstract**

In this paper we investigate voting behavior in Africa to ask what base of support presidents can count on. The most prevalent notion about electoral politics in Africa is that voters simply vote for co-ethnics. We find that assumption to be faulty. While voters tend to support a co-ethnic president, their support is not inevitable, and non co-ethnics can be swayed in a president's favor in essentially the same fashion as co-ethnics. We show that, despite political parties lack of differentiable policy programs, party identification is what gives presidents their strongest support base. However, there are also substantial numbers of "swing" voters that judge the president based on merit. This encouraging result suggests higher than expected levels of voter sophistication and electoral competitiveness in Africa.

## Introduction

Among the most pervasive assumptions about African<sup>1</sup> politics is that ethnicity plays a fundamental role. As African presidents gave way to multiparty competition in the early 1990s, the assumption was ethnicity would determine voting patterns, and thus, presidents could count on co-ethnics as their support base but would face an uphill battle winning votes from non co-ethnics. What we will show in this paper is that voting patterns in Africa look more like those of advanced democracies than the assumptions about ethnicity would lead us to expect. We will show that voters' party identifications, and their evaluations of the president's job performance, are both more powerful determinants than ethnic backgrounds. Our findings do not dismiss the importance ethnicity, yet we will conclude that our conceptualization of the African voter merits reconsideration.

While liberal democracy is far from uniform in Africa, the process of holding regular, multiparty elections is now the norm (Posner and Young 2007). As a result, because most countries in the region use a presidential form of government, Africa is home to more presidential elections in a given year than any other world region. These elections carry significant weight as African presidents wield considerable powers; in addition to their role as head of state, African president set budgets, determine spending allocations, and some even control the legislative agenda. We think it worthwhile, then, to investigate where African presidents draw their support? Do co-ethnics form the base of support? Do partisan attachments predispose voters to vote for or against a candidate? Alternatively, do presidents need to *earn* their support through performance? These are the questions we address in this study.

We proceed as follows. First we discuss the various ways in which scholars of African politics have engaged ethnicity to explain voting behavior. Next we offer an argument about why party identification should shape voting patterns in Africa. We round out the theoretical discussion by considering the place of evaluative voting, whereby African voters would make decisions based on their retrospective assessments. Following that we offer a test of these various hypotheses, drawing on data from the Afrobarometer surveys. After discussing the implications of these results for the competitiveness of presidential elections in Africa, we conclude with a broader discussion of our findings.

## Ethnic Voting in Africa

Essentially every study of elections and political parties in Africa engages ethnicity as an important factor, though scholars disagree about the reasons for its importance. In earlier conceptions, ethnicity was argued to determine voting patterns because voters supported co-ethnics as an expression of identity. Horowitz (1985) worried about the "ethnic census," where through ethnically-based parties election results would mirror the distribution of ethnic groups in a country. In a debate that has followed about what electoral systems are most appropriate in multi-ethnic, developing democracies (e.g. Lijphardt 1991, Horowitz 1993, Reynolds 1995, Reilly 2001), ethnicity is often assumed to structure voting. The question for these scholars is, given that ethnicity is do determinative, what electoral rules are most likely to reduce conflict.

Recently scholars have taken a more nuanced approach to understanding ethnicity's role in elections. In a study of why South African elections look to be a "racial census," Ferree (2008) considers the identity expression hypothesis along with two competing hypotheses to explain why members of the same race vote the same way. Drawing on the insights of the constructivist approach to ethnicity,<sup>2</sup> Chandra (2004)<sup>3</sup> and Posner (2005) have considered that voters will draw on different dimensions of ethnicity (and politicians and parties will emphasize different dimensions of ethnicity) in different circumstances. Using data from both the single-party and multiparty era in Zambia, Posner shows that political institutions shape the electoral arena by making some dimensions of ethnicity more relevant than others.

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<sup>1</sup> We use "Africa" to refer to sub-Saharan Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Constructivist approaches to ethnicity view individuals as having multiple ethnic identities, and see ethnicity as fluid (where ethnic identities can become more or less salient depending on the circumstances) rather than fixed.

<sup>3</sup> Chandra's study is about India, though it is widely cited among scholars of African politics for its relevance.

Another set of studies has taken an empirical approach, simply asking whether or not ethnicity is a significant predictor of the vote. Using the first round of the Afrobarometer (henceforth AB) surveys, and thus a cross-national sample, Norris and Mattes (2003) find that ethnicity (as measured by language group and race) is a significant predictor of party identification. In discussing this as their measure of “support for the governing party,” they note the absence of direct measures for voting behavior. However, the third (and fourth) round of AB surveys included a question on voting intentions. In what is to date the most comprehensive article on voting behavior in Africa, Bratton and Bhavnani (2008) take advantage of this, and use the third round of the AB to examine the link between five different ethnically related factors and voting intentions. While a full summary is too voluminous to give here,<sup>4</sup> the most relevant finding to this discussion is that being a member of the ethnic group (measured by tribe) in power is a consistently a significant predictor of intention to vote for the ruling party. Lindberg and Morrison (2008) used their own survey in Ghana to investigate the relationship between ethnicity (as measured by “local affinities of family or ethnic considerations”) and voting in two parliamentary elections. In a surprising finding, ethnic considerations were much less widespread than evaluations of past performance and consideration of future promises for Ghanaian voters.

The terrain of ethnicity’s role in African elections is fairly well tread, and our approach shares some similarities with the studies just discussed. Like the latter group of studies, we do not argue or assume that ethnicity will or will not matter, instead asking the empirical question: Can presidents, in fact, count on co-ethnics for electoral support? We recognize the simple, yet often overlooked fact that high levels of ethnic diversity require most presidents to build a multi-ethnic support base. This leads to the question of how African presidents are able to win support from non co-ethnics. We also consider whether or not co-ethnics and non co-ethnics evaluate the president in the same fashion.

Like Norris and Mattes, and Bratton and Bhavnani, draw on AB surveys and take a cross-national approach to illuminate and explain patterns “in Africa.” However, as our interest is in *presidential* support bases, we do not use the full AB sample. Unlike Bratton and Bhavnani, we do not include parliamentary countries, nor countries where the incumbent was not going to be running for re-election. We also selected countries based on the relative timing of AB surveys and upcoming elections to maximize the reliability of our findings. That relative timing, and the countries used in our analysis, is discussed in the “data and tests” section below.

### **Party ID in Africa**

Political parties in Africa hardly differ in terms of policy programs. It would be difficult to distinguish between them not just on a left-right, liberal-conservative spectrum, but also on any sort of policy spectrum. Put another way, valence issues<sup>5</sup> dominate the dialogue of party competition. On this point van de Walle says “programmatically homogeneous” is a “striking feature” where “party platforms diverge little and campaign speeches rarely discuss policy issues” (van de Walle 2003: 304). Similarly, Manning says that “the role of ideology in party formation and competition tends to be weak in African third-wave democracies” (Manning 2005: 715), and Berman refers to the “relative unimportance, if not irrelevance, of ideology, principle, or policy” in African politics (Berman 1998: 338). Certainly there are exceptions,<sup>6</sup> but in most countries voters would be hard pressed to identify policy differences between political parties. This might lead us to suspect that party identification (party ID) would be weak in Africa, as party labels do not provide the same useful cues about what government policies to expect as they do in western democracies. Voters could hardly vote “spatially” (Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984) or “directionally” (Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989), and thus they lack a key component to how partisan attachments are formed in the west. So why would African voters identify with political parties to the point of these attachments shaping their vote choice?

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<sup>4</sup>The five ethnic variables were included in twelve different model specifications.

<sup>5</sup> Valence issues are those that everyone either wants more of (e.g. development), or less of (e.g. corruption). That is, they do not divide public opinion. See Stokes (1963) for the original definition and use of valence issues in political research.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, in Ghana there has been disagreement over the value of structural adjustment programs. Also, there has been disagreement over federalism in Nigeria (whether to remain federal) and Kenya (whether to adopt federalism).

To answer this question we need to consider the utility of voting in Africa. If we assume that the central utility of voting is to elect a politician who will deliver development back to the voter's home area, then voters ought to consider two factors when evaluating candidates and making their decision: electability and reputation. First, on electability, does the candidate in question stand a chance of winning, which of course provides the ability to draw on public coffers? Second, is there a reputation tied to the candidate in question for being beholden to certain constituencies? Party labels provide information about both electability and reputation, and should therefore be useful to voters. In this was party ID is not as much an attachment, but a cue or shortcut whereby voters will rely on party labels when there is a party who passes both the electability and reputation test. The roots of party ID in this conception are comparatively weak. Unlike the classic conception of party ID in the United States (Campbell et al. 1966), here voters with party ID do not have a psychological attachment, nor are party IDs necessarily going to be passed down across generations in a family. Party ID in Africa may be lasting, if voters can consistently identify a party that is electable and is the most likely to deliver back to their area, but it is not fixed. If a party repeated fails to win, the reputation is not enough for voters to continue identifying with that party.

The early rounds of multiparty competition tend to establish what parties are viable contenders. While there tends to be a proliferation of new parties, and high levels of uncertainty, around first elections, by the third and fourth rounds (the period under investigation in this study), voters can survey the landscape to see who stands a reasonable chance of winning. Duverger (1967) wrote about the "psychological effect" at work in the single-member plurality/two party system relationship, wherein voters would not want to waste their vote on a candidate who stands no reasonable chance of winning. Because the party that wins is the party that can distribute public goods, African voters should use party labels to determine which candidates are viable.

Implicit in this argument is that a party supersedes its individual politicians in voters' minds. That is, if a party is known to be a major contender then any politician running with that party becomes a contender regardless of his personal credentials. Similarly, even a politician with strong personal credentials will not be seen as a contender if he is running on the ticket of a minor party. An example from Malawi nicely illustrates this point. The current president, Bingu wa Mutharika, polled a meager one half of one percent of the vote in 1999 when he ran with the little known United Party. Five years later he won the presidency, and was just re-elected in May 2009 with two thirds of the vote. His personal credentials did not change drastically from 1999 to 2004, nor, of course, did his ethnic background. What changed was his party; Mutharika joined the United Democratic Front, a party known from the first two elections to be a major contender.

In the early rounds of multiparty competition in Africa political parties tended to be pegged with reputations for favoring certain constituencies. For the ruling parties from the authoritarian era, these reputations were often already set, e.g. the Kenya African National Union (KANU) was thought to favor the Kikuyu tribe and Central and Rift Valley provinces from Jomo Kenyatta's era as president. New parties' reputations were typically based on the ethno-regional background of their first presidential candidate. The environment surrounding founding multiparty elections were, almost by definition, short on reliable information about how parties would perform once in office. As mentioned above there was a dearth of policy being discussed on campaign trails, and opportunistic politicians helped to create these reputations; in their home areas presidential candidates who could claim local roots would do so, and brand their competitors as being beholden to other regions and tribes.

Just as the electability of a party supersedes individual candidates, the ethno-regional reputation of a party is imposed on its candidates. Posner (2005) gives a compelling example of this in Zambia. In 1993 a prominent by-election took place in a Northern Province constituency that was mostly populated by the Bemba tribe. Emmanuel Kasonde (whose floor-crossing triggered the by-election) had a personal background that would have indicated a strong link to the local voters; he was a relative to the Bemba paramount chief. However, Kasonde lost the election because the party he defected to was seen as a Lozi (tribe), and Western, party.

This argument about why African voters would form party IDs that are useful for voting bears resemblance to other arguments in the literature on voting behavior in the developing world. Posner (2005) argued that both individual politicians and political parties have ethnic labels, and that in certain institutional situations voters will use party labels as an informational shortcut. We look at ethnic identifications and party ID as separate predictors, asking which is a more useful cue for voters. In an article explaining the “racial census” in South Africa, Ferree (2008) considers three hypotheses about the importance of race to voting. Of those three, the argument offered here about the importance of party ID resembles the “racial heuristics” hypothesis. According to the that hypothesis, black voters vote for the African National Congress, and white voters the Democratic Alliance (for example), not as an expression of identity, but because there is convergence along racial lines in the beliefs about how each party will behave once in office. Thus both arguments see party labels as providing a cue about what is to come.

### **Building Support in Office**

Thus far we have discussed two potential support bases for African presidents – voters sharing ethnic affiliation, and voters sharing party affiliation. Both would predispose voters to vote a certain way. However, it may be that voters make decisions according to what has actually transpired while a president has been in office, i.e. they vote retrospectively. The question addressed here, then, is whether presidents can *build* a support base while in office. We consider three potential retrospective considerations that could cause voters to support the president: 1) changes to their personal well-being; 2) national economic changes; and 3) evaluations of the president’s job performance.

The first two retrospective considerations – changes to a voter’s personal well-being and changes to the national economy – have received great attention in studies of American and West European politics, being referred to as “pocketbook” and “sociotropic” voting respectively.<sup>7</sup> Generally speaking, scholars have found that sociotropic assessments better predict the vote than do pocketbook assessments. Would we expect the same in Africa? In their study of American voters, MacKuen et al. present two caricatures, a “peasant” and a “banker.” The peasant, because of his poverty and immediate needs asks, “what have you done for me lately?”; that is, he votes his pocketbook. Most voters in most African countries are poor, face immediate needs, and thus may be more inclined to vote their pocketbook. Furthermore, both pocketbook and sociotropic evaluations, if they are to be used in practice, require the ability to *detect* changes. It stands to reason that for poor, low educated, rural voters involved in small scale farming (a profile of the modal type of voter included in the sample we use below), changes to the national economy could be difficult to detect. Therefore, for both reasons of basic needs and detectability, we expect pocketbook voting to be more prevalent in Africa than sociotropic voting.

What about performance evaluation? Certainly it is not difficult to form an opinion of the president, as information is broadcast about presidents on a daily basis and through a variety of media.<sup>8</sup> Indeed more than 95% of those polled in the sample of countries used below report an opinion of the president’s job performance, as opposed to answering that they “don’t know, or haven’t heard enough to say.” The relevant question here is whether or not these evaluations influence voting behavior. Given the recentness of multiparty democracy in Africa, we might expect against this sort of “mature” decision-making process. Those who view ethnicity as primary would doubt that assessments of job performance would drive voting behavior, or rather expect that ethnic affiliation would pre-determine those assessments. In this scenario, voters would evaluate a co-ethnic president favorably, and co-ethnics unfavorably, and thus we could not parse out the effect of one from the other. Alternatively, if party affiliations rather than ethnic ties drive voting behavior, we would expect that party ID would also condition performance evaluations. In this case, voters who do not identify with a party (henceforth referred to as “swing voters”) would be most likely to be swayed by a president’s job performance, where as those with party ID are pre-disposed to support their

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<sup>7</sup> e.g. Kiewiet and Rivers (1984), MacKuen et al. (1992), Lewis-Beck (1986, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, radio and television broadcasts report daily on the president. Also, it is common in Africa to see the president’s picture on billboards advertising a development initiative, on posters in marketplaces, in framed pictures in businesses and chiefs’ homes, and on clothing.



party's candidate. Because of these nuances we will consider the interactions between both ethnic affiliation and party ID with performance evaluation.

### Data and Tests

We draw on data from rounds three and four of the Afrobarometer surveys to test these various assumptions and arguments about who will support African presidents. Unlike AB rounds one and two, these latest two rounds include a question about voting intentions for the presidency, and this allows us to match respondents' opinions, affiliations, and background characteristics with voting. The dependent variable comes from answers to the question, "If a presidential election were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?" We code *Vote for Incumbent* as 1 if the respondent intends to vote for the incumbent, and 0 if they intend to vote for an opposition party candidate. As mentioned above, we did not include the full sample of AB countries, instead selecting only presidential countries where the incumbent was running for re-election, and only countries where the surveys were administered in close enough proximity to the election that the candidates would reasonably be known. This amounted to our dataset being built from seven countries: Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania, and Zambia. We think this sample gives the fairest test to the arguments in question, and while our findings are discussed in terms of "Africa," we recognize that our sample falls well short of representing the entire region of sub-Saharan Africa.

The independent variables are constructed as follows. Ethnicity is measured from the question "What is your tribe? You know, your ethnic or cultural group." If the respondent's tribe matched the president's tribe,<sup>9</sup> *Tribe Match* is coded as 1, and 0 otherwise. To measure party ID we draw on two questions. Respondents were asked whether they feel close to a particular political party, and if the answer was "yes" then they were asked which one. We code *Party ID* as -1 for respondents that feel close to an opposition party, 0 for respondents who do not feel close to a political party, and 1 for respondents who feel close to the president's party.

To test for the pocketbook-type of retrospective voting, we draw on the following question: "Looking back, how do you rate your living conditions compared to twelve months ago?" The answer choices are "much worse," "worse," "same," "better," "much better," and accordingly *Change in Personal Conditions* is coded 1 through 5. The question used to test for the sociotropic-type of retrospective voting is worded the same way, only substituting "economic conditions in this country" for "your living conditions." The answer choices are the same, and so *Change in Economy* is also coded 1 through 5. To test for retrospective voting in terms of performance evaluation, we draw on the following question: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [insert president's name] has performed his/her job over the past twelve months, or haven't you heard enough about him/her to say?" The answer choices are "strongly disapprove," "disapprove," "approve," and "strongly approve," and accordingly *Job Approval* is coded 1 through 4. The coding scheme is such that all variables are expected to be positive. We also consider the interactive effects of *Job Approval* with *Party ID*, and *Job Approval* with *Tribe Match*. Finally, the model includes country fixed effects. Table 1 shows this model of voting intentions with coefficient estimates of a logistic regression in the first column, and changes in predicted probabilities in the second column.

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<sup>9</sup> Liberia's President Johnson-Sirleaf comes from the Gola and Kru tribes; Madagascar's President Ravalomanana comes from the Merina tribe; Malawi's President Mutharika comes from the Lomwe tribe; Mozambique's President Guebuza comes from the Changana tribe; Namibia's President Pohamba comes from the Ovambo tribe; Tanzania's President Kikwete comes from the Mkwere tribe; and Zambia's President Mwanawasa comes from the Lenje tribe.

<b>Table 1: Retrospective Voting in Africa (Pooled Sample)</b>			
<i>Dependent Variable: Intention to Vote for Incumbent President</i>			
	<u>Coefficient Estimate</u>	<u>Chg in Predicted Probability</u>	
Tribe Match	.55** (.15)	.05	
Party ID	2.91** (.09)	.85	
Change in Personal Conditions	.19** (.06)	.08	
Change in Economy	-.05 (.06)	-.02	
Job Approval	.85** (.06)	.39	
Country Fixed Effects	yes		
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.62		
N = 5614			
Note: This table shows the results of a logistic regression model. The first column shows the coefficient estimates with robust standard errors in parentheses underneath the coefficients. The second column shows the change in predicted probability of intention to vote for incumbent for each variable in question given min to max change, holding all other variables from the model at their mean.			
*p < .05			
** p < .01			

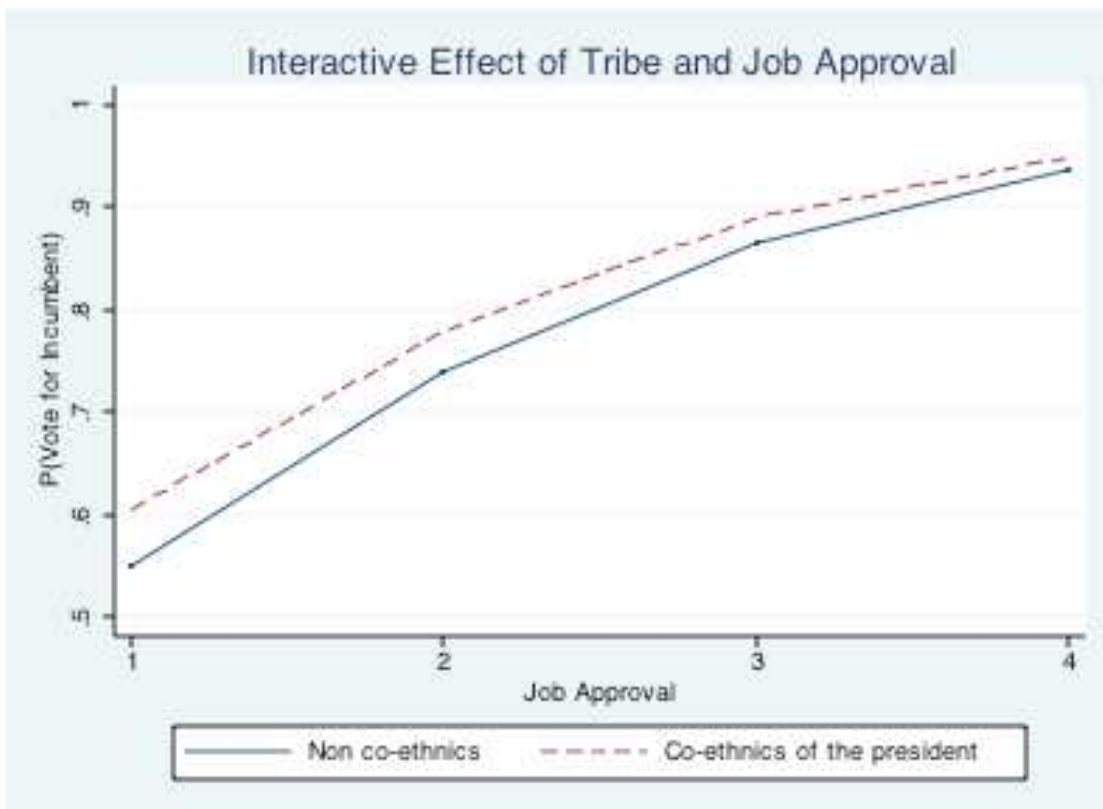
The results show that several factors have a statistically significant effect, however, there is wide variation in their substantive impact. Sharing the same tribal background as the president makes voters more inclined to re-elect him as shown by the positive and significant estimate. However, the effect is not large; co-ethnics are only 5% more likely than non co-ethnics, controlling for their party ID and retrospective assessments. On the other hand, voters whose party ID matches the president are 85% more likely to re-elect him than those who identify with the opposition (the coefficient estimate is, of course, highly significant). This factor has the largest impact of any in the model.

The model also shows that Africans do employ retrospective analyses, though to varying degrees depending on the issue. The estimate on change in personal conditions is positive and significant, suggesting that there is pocketbook voting. Looking at the substantive impact, however, shows that the effect is modest. Those who assess their personal conditions to be much better than a year ago are just 8% more likely to re-elect the incumbent than those who feel their conditions to be much worse. While this indicates some moderate

evidence of pocketbook voting, there is no evidence of sociotropic voting. The estimate on voters' assessment of changes to the national economy is not statistically different from zero. Of the three, the most relevant retrospective analysis for voting is voters' assessment about the job the president has done. The estimate is highly significant, and those who strongly approve are 39% more likely than those who strongly disapprove.<sup>10</sup>

It stands to reason that either ethnic or partisan affiliations would condition the way that voters evaluate the president (an evaluation that, as we just saw, has a major impact on voting).<sup>11</sup> Co-ethnics may evaluate a president differently than non co-ethnics, be it because they have built-in biases (presumably positive in nature), or because they are actually impacted differently by the president's performance. Similarly, co-partisans may make different assessments than non co-partisans. So while the model above considered the *independent* impact of ethnicity, partisanship, and job approval, we now consider interactive effects.

**Figure 1: Interactive Effect of Tribe and Job Approval**



<sup>10</sup> We ran this model on every individual country in the sample, and found that our results were fairly robust. Using .05 as the cutoff for statistical significance, we summarize the individual country model results as follows: *Party ID* was positive and significant in every country, as was *Job Approval*. *Change in Economy* was only significant in Liberia. *Tribe Match* was not significant in Mozambique or Zambia, and was even negative and significant in Liberia. This further shows the weakness of ethnicity as a predictor of the vote. *Change in Personal Conditions* is the one variable whose significance in the pooled model seems to have been a relic of pooling the data. It was only significant in Namibia.

<sup>11</sup> Neither ethnicity nor partisanship affect voters' assessments of changes to their personal conditions or the national economy, and thus we omit displaying or discussing those results further.

Figure 1 shows a null result on the possibility that ethnicity is conditioning job approval.<sup>12</sup> We include the figure because it visually illuminates two interesting and important points. First, *the president cannot count on inevitable support from co-ethnics*. Co-ethnics who strongly disapprove are only 60% likely to vote re-elect, and thus 40% likely to vote for the opposition. Among co-ethnics who disapprove, the likelihood of voting re-elect was still below 80%.<sup>13</sup> This is a high level of support among disapprovers, but importantly, it shows that co-ethnic support is not a foregone conclusion. The second point illuminated by Figure 1 is that *co-ethnics and non co-ethnics are essentially equally swayed by presidential job performance*. At the low end of approval, co-ethnics of the president are slightly more likely to re-elect him than non co-ethnics, but even this slight difference essentially goes away at the high end of approval. If voters strongly approve of the job their president is doing, ethnicity does not matter. Remembering that in most African countries (and in every country in this sample, excepting Namibia) ethnic diversity is quite high and no group constitutes a majority, this result underscores the points that African presidents both need to, and can, build a large support base among the non co-ethnic majority.

**Figure 2: Interactive Effect of Party ID and Job Approval**

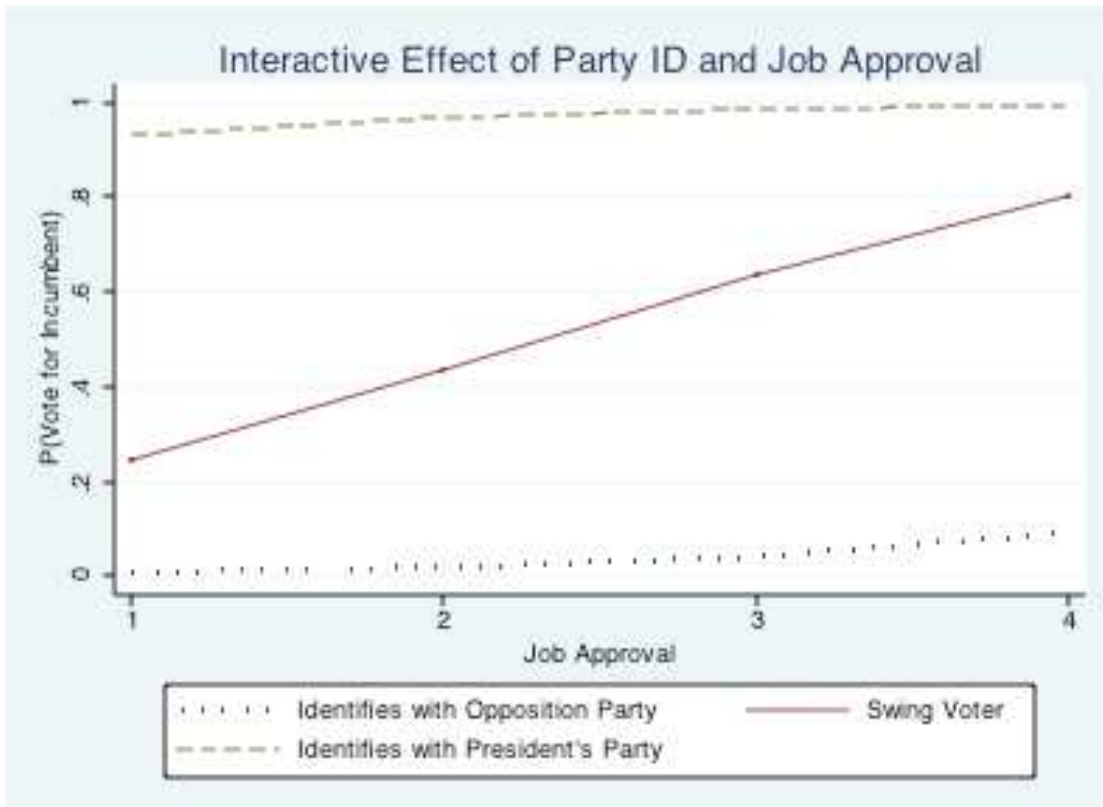


Figure 2, which shows the interactive effect of party ID and job approval on intention to vote for the incumbent president,<sup>14</sup> illuminates several important results. Beyond being an important independent determinant of the vote in Africa, party ID clearly conditions the effect of job approval on voting intentions. For those who identify with a party, assessments of the president’s job performance have only a small effect. Those who identify with the president’s party are more than 90% likely to re-elect him even when they

<sup>12</sup> Note that adding the interaction term for ethnicity and job approval to the model in Table 1 did not meaningfully alter the results, and so we do not show the regression table.

<sup>13</sup> Approximately 13% of co-ethnics expressed some level of disapproval.

<sup>14</sup> Note that adding the interaction term for party ID and job approval to the model in Table 1 did not meaningfully alter the results, and so again we do not show the regression table.

strongly disapprove of the job he has done,<sup>15</sup> and the likelihood of voting re-elect goes to nearly 100% for co-partisans who strongly approve. Those identifying with the opposition are similarly unmoved. Non co-partisans who strongly disapprove have virtually zero probability of voting for the incumbent, but even those who strongly approve are only 10% likely to vote for re-election. Clearly partisans are not heavily swayed by presidential job performance, at least when deciding their vote. Swing voters stand in stark contrast. For swing voters, who make up approximately 42% of the overall sample, assessments of the president's job performance are a very important determinant of voting intentions. Those who strongly disapprove are only some 20% likely to vote for re-election and those who "disapprove" just over 40% likely to vote for re-election. These probabilities steadily rise, surpassing 60% for voters who approve, and reaching 80% likelihood of voting for re-election for those who strongly approve.

### **Implications for Election Outcomes**

What do these results mean for actual election outcomes in Africa? Do they translate into more competitive elections than existing literature (e.g. van de Walle 2003, Bogaards 2004) might lead us to expect? Before we map our findings onto actual election results, we first need to consider whether voting intentions (what our dependent variable captured) are likely to translate into actual votes. That is, are there any decipherable patterns as to who is most likely to turnout on election day?

While we cannot know for certain what respondents will do, the voting intentions question (which candidate would you vote for?) used as our dependent variable above included an answer choice whereby respondents could declare that they do not intend to vote at all. Above such responses were coded as missing, but now we examine the relationship between our predictors of interest and intention to cast a vote.<sup>16</sup> There is a very weak relationship between partisanship and intention to cast a vote, non co-partisans being 3% more likely to say that they do not intend to vote. Co-ethnics are no more or less likely than non co-ethnics to say that they would cast a ballot. The only relationship of any notable substance is on job approval. Those who "strongly disapprove" are 18% more likely to say that they intend not to vote than those who "strongly approve." This benefits incumbents, as the more likely voters are those with favorable assessments.

Returning to the central issue – the support bases that president's can count on – we now map the proportions of voters that are co-partisans vs. swing voters to ask how much presidential job performance can (or might in the future) affect election outcomes. Put another way, are presidents' party affiliations enough to win them re-election?

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<sup>15</sup> This overwhelming support from co-partisans at low end of job approval pulled up both of the lines in Figure 1.

<sup>16</sup> Approximately 9% of respondents did not intend to vote.

<b>Table 2: Partisanship, Swing Voters, and Election Outcomes</b>					
<u>Country</u>	<u>President</u>	<u>Pre-AB Winning %</u>	<u>% Partisan Match</u>	<u>% Swing</u>	<u>Post-AB Winning %</u>
Liberia	Johnson-Sirleaf	59.4 <sup>^</sup> [2005]	19.8	55.7	Election due in 2011
Madagascar	Ravalomanana	51.46 [2001]	22.92	67.17	54.79 [2006]
Malawi	Mutharika	35.9 [2004]	49.49	33.11	66.0 [2009]
Mozambique	Guebuza	63.74 [2004]	65.47	30.1	Election due in 2009
Namibia	Pohamba	76.44 [2004]	45.79	35.79	Election due in 2009
Tanzania	Kikwete	80.28 [2005]	72.87	18.6	Election due in 2010
Zambia	Mwanawasa	29.15 [2001]	19.8	48.36	42.98 [2006]
Note: Partisanship Match and Swing %'s obtained from the Afrobarometer Surveys used through this study. Winning %'s obtained from the African Elections Database [ <a href="http://africanelections.tripod.com/">http://africanelections.tripod.com/</a> ]					
<sup>^</sup> This was President Johnson-Sirleaf's winning % in the 2nd round of a run-off system. She received 19.8% in the first round.					

Table 2 shows the outcome of the elections before and after the AB survey that we used for each country was administered, the percentage of voters whose party ID matches the president's party, and the percentage of swing voters.<sup>17</sup> We show the previous election outcome only to provide a baseline, as we measured partisanship and voting intentions after these elections happened. In the countries where we drew on AB round 3 data, and in Malawi (where we used round 4), we know the outcome of the following election, while in the other countries where we used round 4 data the post-AB election has yet to happen. We recognize both the ecological fallacy problem at work when inferring individual voting behavior from aggregate figures, and also that we cannot say anything definitive without a more complete analysis that includes the number of presidential candidates. That said, the table suggests a previously overlooked possibility: swing voters can and do play a decisive role in African elections.

Looking first at the three countries where we know the outcome, swing voters are likely to have comprised at least half of the president's winning coalition. When the AB surveyed in 2005, only 23% of respondents in Madagascar identified closely with the president's party while 67% were swing voters. President Ravalomanana was re-elected the next year with 55% of the vote. Recognizing that election outcomes are often not a perfect reflection of popularity, Ravalomanana's victory was likely driven by his strong job approval among swing voters. 69% of swing voters approved, and another 13% strongly approved, of the job he had been doing. In Zambia an even smaller proportion (20%) identified with the president's party, and President Mwanawasa had lower approval ratings (41% approved or strongly approved) when AB surveyed in 2005. Mwanawasa undoubtedly owes some of his narrow 2006 re-election to a split vote between the biggest existing opposition party's (the United Party for National Development) candidate, and the new, Progressive Front party's candidate. Nevertheless, even united support from voters who felt close to Mwanawasa's Movement for Multiparty Democracy party would not have been enough to assure him of victory. The opposition vote was hardly split in Malawi as the two major opposition parties (the Malawi Congress Party and United Democratic Front) endorsed a common candidate. President Mutharika could possibly have won re-election with united support from voters identifying closely with his Democratic

<sup>17</sup> The remaining proportion of voters identify with an opposition party.

Progressive Party. But his victory, which came by the largest margin in Malawi's young multiparty history, was assured by high levels of job approval among swing voters. Among the third of Malawians that did not feel close to a political party, 57% strongly approved, and another 25% approved, of the job he was doing. In each of these examples the president had an insufficient support base to "count on" for electoral victory.

The remaining four countries have yet to convene the elections about which the AB was asking respondents their voting intentions. Among them are two countries where one party has dominated multiparty electoral competition (Namibia and Tanzania) with no threatening competitor, and another country where the same party has won the presidential and parliamentary majorities, though with a major opposition rival (Mozambique). In Tanzania and Mozambique, Presidents Kikwete and Guebuza have enough partisanship in favor of their parties that, even with widespread disapproval of their job performance, they are likely to win re-election. Winning their party's nomination alone was probably sufficient to put each in office for two terms.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly in Namibia, where the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) party and its candidates have dominated all four multiparty presidential and parliamentary elections (winning with upwards of 75% of the vote), less than half of Namibians identify close with SWAPO. But while President Pohamba is not guaranteed a majority simply by SWAPO partisanship, his approval among swing voters (88% approve or strongly approve of the job he is doing) coupled with the lack of coordination between opposition parties makes his victory almost inevitable. Liberia, the youngest democracy (at least in terms of convening consecutive elections) in the group, is certainly the most unpredictable. With the proliferation of new parties in the lead up to the 2005 election, there are no stable patterns of partisanship that could dictate voting patterns in next year's election. Less than one in five Liberians identify with President Johnson-Sirleaf's Unity Party, giving her a small base to count on. Certainly Johnson-Sirleaf will need to make broad appeals and draw on her strong approval ratings. One advantage she has, because there has hardly been time for partisan identities to solidify, is that she may be able to poach Liberians who in 2008 said they identified with another party. Indeed, 54% of such respondents also approved of the job that she is doing.

This last point made in the Liberian case about the solidification of partisan identities, is generalizable. All of the countries in this sample, and in most in the region, are new democracies. So while we used our findings about the importance of partisanship and job performance to discuss actual election results, it is important to note that partisanship has not had time to calcify. Swing voters could develop party IDs, and partisans could drop, or change, their IDs. That caution noted, we found a full spectrum of competitiveness. While in a place like Tanzania partisanship is strong enough to assure victory for whoever wins the Chama Cha Mapinduzi party nomination, in Liberia and Madagascar, swing voters constitute majorities. If there is a pattern to this diverse group it is that co-partisans, who we know from previous results to be the most reliable support base, tend not to be big enough in number to assure African presidents of victory.

## Discussion

In asking what support bases African presidents can count on, this study investigated several determinants of voting behavior in Africa. In a surprising result given the substantial attention devoted to ethnicity, we found that co-ethnics of the president do not differ greatly from non co-ethnics. While the former are, all else equal, more likely to vote for the incumbent, there was only a 5% difference between the two groups. Perhaps more revealing was that ethnicity does not condition the impact of the assessments that voters make. Both co-ethnics and non co-ethnics become much more likely to vote for the incumbent when they approve of the job he is doing. At low ends of job approval, neither group can be counted on as assured votes, whereas at high ends, both are quite likely to vote for re-election.

Instead of ethnicity, it was party affiliation that provides African presidents their most reliable support base. We argued that party labels are useful because they often provide information about where politicians are more or less likely to deliver development resources, and found that party ID is a major determinant of the vote. Co-partisans are some 85% more likely than non co-partisans to support an incumbent president.

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<sup>18</sup> Both country's constitutions contain a two-term limit on the presidency, and there is a precedent in both places of the president stepping down without an attempt to amend the constitution.

While such a finding would not be surprising in the context of American or West European politics, it was much less clear in Africa, where political parties hardly differ in their policies, that party ID would structure voting patterns. An important note on ethnicity and party ID is that, while the latter was a much stronger predictor of the vote, this does not dismiss the importance of ethnicity in politics. Indeed, the reputations that parties take on, which we argued shapes patterns of party IDs, often have ethnic (as well as regional) roots.

Apart from factors that predispose vote choice, we also considered the importance of retrospective evaluations. Among the three retrospective analyses voters might use to decide their vote – how their personal conditions have changed, how the economy has changed, and how the president has performed his job – we found modest evidence for the first, no evidence of the second, and strong evidence of the third. Consistent with the pocketbook voting hypothesis, voters who feel they are doing better off than one year ago tended to reward the incumbent, though the difference between those better off and those worse off was not particularly large. The null findings on sociotropic voting can perhaps be explained by detectability. We speculated that it might be difficult for voters in poor countries to notice changes to the national economy, and the data show that at least in some cases that was true. For instance when the AB asked respondents in Mozambique in December 2008 about the economy relative to the year before, as many answered that it was “worse off” or “the same” as did those saying it was “better off.” Growth in Mozambique in was a robust 9.74% in 2008.

We found more convincing evidence of retrospective voting in terms of assessments of the president’s job performance. While this sort of independent assessment might be unexpected among fairly poor and undereducated populations, we found that African presidents can *build* a support base in office by generating positive job approval. In the context of Ghana’s 1996 and 2000 elections, Lindberg and Morrison (2005) found that there was a significant group of swing voters who were influenced by government performance. Similarly Mattes and Piombo (2001) found that assessments of the governing African National Congress party and its leaders were important predictors of voting in South Africa. Bratton and Bhavnani (2009) also found performance approval to be a significant predictor in the full round 3 AB sample. These parallel results, including two studies of countries that were not included in this study’s sample, lend support to our findings as generalizable for the region.

While voters’ assessment of the president was an important independent predictor, a novel finding of this study is that party ID strongly conditions the impact of retrospective assessments. Those who feel close to the opposition are unlikely to vote for the incumbent even at high levels of approval, and those identifying with the president’s party are highly likely to vote for the incumbent even at high levels of disapproval. For those with no party ID, i.e. swing voters, evaluations of the president’s job performance are quite influential. Importantly, when we mapped the data from our study onto election outcomes in the seven countries in question, we found that swing voters are large enough in number to decide elections. In sum, these findings suggest reconsidering the profile of Africans as simply ethnic voters. A more accurate view would consider partisanship as a fundamental aspect of the profile. And we should recognize the evaluative tendency of those without partisan ties.

There are some notable limitations to our study. First, we drew our dependent variable from a question that reads, “If a presidential election were held tomorrow, which party’s candidate would you vote for?” This wording leaves open the possibility that respondents could have been primed to think more about party than they otherwise would when deciding their vote. The AB could not have dropped the word “party” and presented voters with the actual list of candidates, because in some cases those lists were not known when AB was in the field. Nevertheless, this raises the concern that party ID may not be a completely “independent” predictor. As the results suggest, the two variables are strongly correlated, but by no means is the correlation perfect. We also note that AB is the best available data that allows analysts to link party ID and voting, and unfortunately there was no appropriate instrument for party ID in the questionnaire. A second limitation is that we used a cross-section of countries but not a panel, and an ideal test of presidential support bases would also look over time. While it was not possible to use a panel given that the voting intentions question



did not appear until round 3 of the AB, the potentially dynamic nature of party attachments in new democracies calls for future analyses that consider changing patterns of partisanship.

We conclude by noting additional questions which our study raises that merit investigation. We found there are significant numbers of African voters whose votes are heavily influenced by the president's job performance. However, what is the basis for these performance evaluations?<sup>19</sup> Do some aspects of the president's job matter more than others to voters? We offered an argument about why voters would use party labels, and found that partisanship is an important determinant of the vote. However, it would be valuable to look at party ID at the individual level. Who will, and who will not, form party IDs? What will make these party IDs lasting attachments? Our argument has testable implications for these questions, but an investigation of them would contribute to a more complete understanding of the African voter.

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<sup>19</sup> See Bratton and Bhavnani (2009) for consideration of a more decentralized set of performance evaluations.

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