



Strategic voting, information, and ethnicity in emerging democracies: Evidence from Kenya



Jeremy Horowitz ^{a,*}, James Long ^b

^a Government Department, Dartmouth College, HB 6108, Hanover, NH 03755, USA

^b Political Science Department, University of Washington, 101 Gowen Hall, Box 353530, Seattle, WA 98195, USA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the conditions under which voters in emerging democracies support non-viable candidates. We argue that cognitive biases and the geographic clustering of minor-party supporters in ethno-political enclaves lead to misperceptions about the electoral prospects of minor-party candidates, weakening strategic defections both among co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic supporters. We explore these arguments using original survey data from Kenya's 2007 presidential election, a contest that featured a minor-party candidate, Kalonzo Musyoka, who stood little chance of electoral victory. Despite this, results show that most of his supporters chose to vote for the candidate, failing to perceive that he was not a viable contender. The findings suggest that theories of political behavior in multi-ethnic settings can be enriched by drawing upon insights from the political psychology literature on belief formation.

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1. Introduction

Why do citizens in emerging democracies support candidates who have no chance of winning elections? A substantial body of research on strategic voting in industrialized democracies demonstrates that voters often seek to avoid ‘wasting’ their vote on non-viable candidates (e.g., Alvarez et al., 2006; Cox, 1997; Ordeshook and Zeng, 1997). Yet in newer democracies where ethnicity informs electoral choices, as it does in many African and Asian countries, identity could trump strategic concerns, causing voters to stand by co-ethnic leaders regardless of their viability. But are the bonds of ethnic affinity so strong as to make voters indifferent to strategic concerns?

This paper investigates the factors that shape whether and under what conditions voters will lend support to, or defect from, a preferred candidate who will likely lose the election. We develop an approach to studying the lack of strategic voting in multi-ethnic societies that focuses on how voters process information, not immutable ties of ethnic identification. Critically, voters must possess reasonably accurate beliefs about their preferred candidate's likelihood of winning to behave strategically. But supporters of non-viable candidates – both co-ethnics and non-co-ethnics –

may engage in wishful thinking about the prospects of their preferred leader, discounting contrary information. Drawing from the literature on motivated reasoning, we argue that such misperceptions will be especially prevalent in emerging democracies because information about candidate viability is often less available or reliable than in older democracies. And we show that misperceptions may persist even when pre-election polling information is widely available to the electorate. Second, we propose that the geographic clustering of voters in ethno-political enclaves – a common feature of many developing democracies – exacerbates the tendency for minor-party supporters to hold misperceptions through a variety of channels linked to everyday social interactions, exposure to local media, and campaign activities. Overall, these cognitive biases and geographic features influence how voters process information and lead them to support non-viable candidates, not because they are indifferent to strategic considerations or beholden to ties of ethnic identity, but because they overestimate their preferred candidate's chance of victory.

We explore these arguments in Kenya's 2007 presidential election, which included a third-place candidate, Kalonzo Musyoka, who stood little chance of winning the race. Nevertheless, his supporters, drawn mainly from his own Kamba ethnic group and other residents concentrated in his home region of Eastern province, voted for him in large numbers. Using original individual-level survey data collected shortly before the election, we examine the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: jeremy.horowitz@dartmouth.edu (J. Horowitz), jdlong@uw.edu (J. Long).

extent of strategic voting among those who held Musyoka as their most-preferred candidate, showing that only about one in five intended to defect from him and vote strategically. We demonstrate that misperceptions of Musyoka's viability were widespread among his supporters and associated with a reduced likelihood of strategic voting. To explain this pattern, we show that among those who favored Musyoka to the front-runners, the likelihood of over-estimating his popularity was linked systematically to the strength of their preferences and residence in his home region.

One particularly striking puzzle is how so many of Musyoka's supporters sustained inaccurate beliefs about his viability. While pre-election polling remains rare in much of Africa, in the run-up to Kenya's 2007 election local and international firms released 40 different polls. The polls left little doubt about Musyoka's ranking: he was the third-place candidate in every poll and his popularity never exceeded 18 percent in any survey. The media extensively covered these horse-race numbers and nearly all Kenyan adults were aware of them. In our survey, 86 percent of those polled, including 90 percent of those who ranked Musyoka as their most-preferred candidate, reported awareness of the polls. However, the vast majority of Musyoka's supporters did not internalize this information. Consistent with our account focusing on cognitive biases, we show that many of his supporters dismissed the polls' credibility to sustain the belief that Musyoka was viable. This stood in contrast to other Kenyans, the vast majority of whom did not. Discounting the polls was made possible by the novelty of pre-election polling (the 2007 election marked the first race in which such polls were widespread) and by elite rhetoric that sought to cast doubt on survey methodology and the political intentions of those who conducted them.

This paper makes three principal contributions to the study of elections in emerging democracies. First, it adds to the literature on strategic voting. While a large body of scholarship examines the contours of strategic voting in mature democracies, less is known about whether and how strategic considerations shape participation in newer democracies, especially where ethnicity is politically salient. Relatedly, we offer insight into the relationship between ethnic identity and voting behavior. Our findings contrast with traditional accounts that assume voters in multi-ethnic settings like Kenya ignore strategic considerations to express ethnic solidarity (Horowitz, 1985) and with more recent claims that voters can readily form accurate beliefs about candidate viability based on their knowledge of the relative size of ethnic communities (Chandra, 2004). Rather, we find that factors related to biases in individuals' information processing, and political and social dynamics stemming from geographic residence help to explain deviations from strategic voting. These effects hold both for co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic supporters of the minor-party candidate. Third, the paper offers a novel account of the micro-level dynamics that contribute to party-system fragmentation. While numerous cross-national studies document an association between social diversity and party-system fragmentation (e.g., Cox and Amorim Neto, 1997; Clark and Golder, 2006), the underlying mechanisms that connect a country's ethnic demography to its party system remain under-explored. Our approach points to factors that affect how voters form beliefs about candidates, rather than the bonds of ethnic affinity.

Last, while our findings obtain from a single case, we believe that our results provide insight into other multi-ethnic emerging democracies where non-viable candidates may attract considerable electoral backing. The main factors we identify – voters' internal biases and the forces arising from living in politically and socially homogenous areas – are likely relevant in many contexts where ethnicity is politically salient. As others note, misperceptions about the viability of candidates should be particularly pronounced where sources of credible information are difficult to obtain or of

limited utility (Moser and Scheiner, 2009). We show that misperceptions may be important even when pre-election polling data is widely available.

We structure the paper as follows. The next section provides a brief overview of relevant literature. The third section develops our argument linking misperceptions about candidate viability to a reduction in strategic voting. The fourth section provides an overview of Kenya's 2007 presidential election. The fifth section demonstrates the relative weakness of strategic voting among respondents who preferred Musyoka. In the subsequent sections we support our information processing account and explore alternative explanations. The final section discusses the implications of the findings.

2. Theoretical motivation

Strategic voting occurs when voters who support non-viable candidates abandon their preferred leader in favor of a second preference who has a greater likelihood of winning. While debate remains about the extent of strategic voting and the factors that incline some individuals to select candidates who have little chance of success, scholars agree that citizens consider candidate viability when making electoral decisions in industrialized democracies (Alvarez et al., 2006; Cox, 1997; Niemi et al., 1992; Ordeshook and Zeng, 1997).

In emerging multi-ethnic democracies, however, voters appear to support non-viable candidates and parties with greater regularity.¹ Two plausible explanations arise from the literature on ethnic voting. First, the expressive voting framework proposes that the preference for co-ethnic leaders stems from a psychological desire to uphold the status of one's ethnic community within the polity (Horowitz, 1985). Accordingly, the act of voting serves as an expression of a person's connection to her ethnic group and affirms her sense of belonging. By this logic, incentives to behave strategically might have little influence on electoral choices if a person's ethnic attachments are sufficiently strong. Second, instrumental accounts of ethnic voting emphasize individuals' desires to secure resources for their ethnic group. Where parties represent the interests of distinct ethnic groups or coalitions, voters may stand to gain little from throwing their lot in with a party associated with a different community (Horowitz, 1985; Van de Walle, 2007). Likewise, if voters in multi-ethnic settings doubt leaders' promises to share resources across group lines (Posner, 2005), politicians' inability to credibly commit to inclusive policies may undermine the willingness to vote strategically. Absent any viable alternatives, voters may thus stand by the candidate that best represents their group's interests even if that aspirant has limited prospects of winning the race or influencing its outcome.

While these explanations may account for the weakness of strategic voting in some contexts, there is reason to question their explanatory power more generally. First, though psychological motivations may be relevant to some voters, there is considerable evidence that citizens also care about material outcomes (e.g., Bates, 1983; Chandra, 2004; Posner, 2005), casting doubt on the idea that expressive desires will incline voters to stand by co-ethnic leaders who are unlikely to win. As Chandra (2004) argues, voters who want to secure access to state-controlled resources for their group should support co-ethnic leaders only when such candidates and their parties can win (see also Posner, 2005). Otherwise, voters

¹ Lublin (2015), for example, provides evidence that ethnic diversity has a greater effect on party-system fragmentation in newer democracies. More broadly, Moser and Scheiner (2012) show that electoral institutions are less constraining in legislative races in newer democracies, and Jones (2004) demonstrates that the first election after the transition to democracy is associated with a higher number of presidential parties.

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