

Grievances, Policies or Clientelism? The Different Logics behind Ethnic Voting in Democracies and Autocracies

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In this article, we examine the reasons why some ethnic groups tend to vote along ethnic lines while others do not. We argue that existing explanations for ethnic voting can be grouped into three main approaches: policy-based, grievance-based, and clientelism. However, we posit that inconsistencies in previous empirical research stem from a lack of consideration for the political context in which ethnic voting occurs. Specifically, we argue that ethnic voting in democracies operates on a different logic than in non-democratic regimes. Our argument posits that policy- and grievance-based factors are the primary determinants of ethnic voting in democracies, whereas clientelist networks play a crucial role in understanding ethnic voting in autocratic regimes. To test our hypotheses, we use a sample of 428 ethnic groups from 33 African countries between 2005 and 2018, as well as a novel survey-based measurement of voting preferences among ethnic group members. Our findings support our hypotheses: in democratic regimes, grievance-based and policy-based explanations have explanatory power, whereas clientelism is the primary driver of ethnic bloc voting in autocracies. We conclude that both regime type and the different underlying mechanisms of clientelism require greater consideration in the research on ethnic voting.

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1 Introduction

In the United States, a majority of Afro-Americans vote for the Democratic Party; in Cameroon, members of the Beti community vote overwhelmingly for the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement, and a majority of ethnic Makonde in Mozambique opt for the Frelimo party. Also, in other multi-ethnic societies such as Afghanistan (Bhatia, 2019), Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hadzic, Carlson, and Tavits, 2020), India (Huber and Suryanarayan, 2016), Bolivia (Hirsland and Strijbis, 2019), or Northern Ireland (Garry, 2014) we observe that some ethnic group members show surprisingly coherent voting behavior. In multi-ethnic countries, salient ethnic divisions generate relatively stable electorates, which motivates ethnic entrepreneurs to mobilize politically significant ethnic groups (Posner, 2004). Even though the reasons for such voting patterns have been intensively studied (Horowitz, 1985; Houle, 2018; Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972; Dunning and Harrison, 2010; Enamorado and Kosterina, 2022), empirical findings on *why* some individuals vote along ethnic lines while others do not remain often inconsistent or even ambiguous.

Three main approaches have been proposed to explain the voting behavior of specific ethnic groups. The first approach argues that this behavior is driven by shared political and ideological goals, with voters supporting politicians or parties whose policies align with their preferences. This policy-based approach is based on the traditional concept of issue-voting (Downs, 1957; Bornschier, 2010; Carmines and Stimson, 1980). In other words, ethnic group members support political parties because they expect certain policies from them that will favor them personally and/or their own ethnic group. For instance, in Bolivia the highland indigenous peoples’ preference for leftist parties can be attributed to the pro-highland indigenous policies of the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) in the 1950s (Hirsland and Strijbis, 2019).

The second strand of explanations emphasizes the role of collective identity and highlights the expressive role of ethnic voting (Ferree, 2006; Cammett et al., 2022). In this perspective, ethnic voters choose parties or candidates that align with their ethnic identity to reinforce their own sense

of identity. Parties and candidates, in turn, emphasize this identity and use it to appeal to their constituencies (Hirsland and Strijbis, 2019). This approach usually links electoral behavior to group marginalization, discrimination, and horizontal inequalities (Houle, Park, and Kenny, 2019; Stewart and McGauvran, 2019). While there are overlaps to the policy approach, because shared grievances often result in shared policy preferences (Ishiyama, 2012), ethnic voting in this view entails more than just a decision based on individual policy preferences.

A third perspective on ethnic voting posits that these voting patterns are the result of clientelistic networks. This approach maintains that individuals within an ethnic group choose their votes by weighing their personal advantages and disadvantages. Specifically, members of an ethnic group may support a particular political party due to the expectation of receiving direct and tangible or intangible benefits in return for their electoral support (Chandra, 2004; Hirsland and Strijbis, 2019; Lindberg and Morrison, 2008; Long, 2012; Nathan, 2019; Scott, 1969; Wantchekon, 2003). Ethnic group members vote for political parties from which they expect the greatest likelihood of gaining positions, favors, or material compensation for themselves, not because of ideological proximity or a high level of groupthink. While electoral clientelism, or “vote buying”, has been linked to ethnic voting by some authors (e.g. Long, 2012; Chandra, 2004; Ishiyama, 2012; Ichino and Nathan, 2013; Hirsland and Strijbis, 2019), this explanatory approach has received somewhat less attention than policy-based or grievance-based explanations. We argue that the clientelist explanation of ethnic bloc voting is particularly relevant in the context of autocratic regimes. While clientelism is a prevalent phenomenon in many low-income nations around the world, democratic regimes’ political competition and electoral uncertainty decrease the significance of such networks for political actors as noted by van de Walle, Grzymala-Busse and others (Van De Walle, 2007; Grzymala-Busse, 2007). In democracies, political competition and electoral uncertainty decrease the significance of clientelist networks as political actors have to appeal to a broad range of voters and are uncertain about their future in office. Additionally,

democratic regimes have institutional checks and balances that make it harder for politicians to engage in clientelism.

Autocratic rulers, in contrast, employ electoral clientelism to co-opt, monitor, or boost voter turnout. (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, 2018; Stokes, 2005; Jones West, 2020). From the perspective of the clients, clientelistic networks in autocratic settings are a more-or-less enforced precondition for individual well-being, access to social services, patronage employment, or other tangible benefits, that individuals might not be able to access otherwise. Despite the fact that “delivering the vote” isn’t always regarded as morally righteous behavior (Kao, Lust, and Rakner, 2022), it is the primary route to material resources, opportunities, and personal safety for ordinary voters in authoritarian regimes (Magaloni, 2006; McLellan, 2022). Voters whose access to state-provided resources is linked – or perceived to be linked – to the ethnicity of their elected officials are more likely to band together and support candidates or parties from the same ethnic group. Ethnic identity provides a source of information that helps both voters and politicians build expectations about each other’s behavior. In other words, promises made by co-ethnics are likely to be deemed more credible than those made by non-co-ethnics (Chandra, 2004; Long, 2019). In consequence, voters use ethnicity to predict the actions of politicians, while politicians use ethnicity to identify voters, employing tactics such as vote-buying and resource distribution promises to mobilize voters.

In line with recent research, we acknowledge that the phenomenon of ethnic bloc voting is highly contingent upon the specific context in which it occurs. However, we make the case for a more conditional and equifinal explanation. Specifically, we argue that the dynamics driving ethnic voting in democratic contexts differ from those in autocratic contexts. Approaches that focus on policy preferences and grievances provide convincing explanations for ethnic voting in democratic contexts where individuals have the ability to choose between competing political parties and candidates. However, these approaches may not be entirely sufficient in explaining the occurrence of ethnic bloc voting in autocratic settings where electoral competition and uncertainty are limited.

In undemocratic environments, we expect clientelistic networks to be the main driver of ethnic voting. The main reason for this, as stated above, is that individuals in authoritarian systems are typically highly dependent on the state and its institutions, fearing repercussions for dissenting (Bratton, Bhavnani, and Chen, 2012).

To test the various logics behind ethnic voting and the role of clientelism in particular, we study a sample of 428 ethnic groups in 33 African countries between 2005 and 2018.¹ We develop a novel survey-based measurement for ethnic voting, our dependent variable, as well as for ethnic clientelism, one of our key independent variables. By segmenting the sample into different types of political regimes, the expected findings are obtained: our proxies to measure clientelism have strong explanatory power for the phenomenon of ethnic voting in autocratic contexts. Additionally, while the grievance-based perspective on the subject also proves to be relevant, our proxies employed to evaluate the policy-based approach variable do not exhibit statistically significant effects. For the democracy subset, we find a reverse pattern. Our statistical analyses reveal a stronger influence of both policy-related and grievance-related variables, but no significant effects of clientelism in regimes characterized by comprehensive voting rights in free and fair elections and protected freedoms of association and expression. These findings are consistent across different model specifications and robustness tests. Our findings suggest that the dynamics of ethnic voting vary between autocratic and democratic regimes, highlighting the importance of accounting for different political contexts in future research on ethnic bloc voting.

This paper makes three significant contributions to the literature. First, it brings the understudied mechanism of clientelism back into the study of group-based bloc voting, arguing that ethnic bloc voting is frequently the result of autocratic politics rather than simply a consequence of relative deprivation or policy preferences. Second, given the inconsistencies in previous empirical findings, it emphasizes the importance of political contexts and makes the case for more conditional

¹In total we analyse 943 group-years. We provide a full list of all cases in the Online Appendix. See the supplementary file for the levels of ethnic voting per country (Figure 1).

explanations. Finally, from a methodological perspective, a novel measure of ethnic voting and clientelism based on individual-level survey data for a large number of cases is presented.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first step, we present our theoretical argument and derive two central hypotheses from the discussion of the three approaches mentioned above. In the second step, we outline our research design, case selection, and, in particular, the measurement of ethnic voting and clientelism. Section three discusses the findings of our statistical analyses. We then run several robustness tests. In the final section, we discuss the limitations of our study and suggest some avenues for further research.

2 Theory

Ethnic voting as a form of bloc voting is prevalent, when a substantial part of members of a specific ethnic, tribal, indigenous, or religious group vote for the *same* ethnic or non-ethnic political party or candidate (Huber, 2012; Stewart and McGauvran, 2019; Ishiyama, 2012). The manifold explanations for the phenomenon of ethnic voting can be grouped into three broad camps. While these are not necessarily exclusive explanations, they build upon distinct explanatory logics.

In line with prominent cleavage theories, the (a) policy-based approach contends that ethnic voting results from individual ideological preferences shared by a significant portion of ethnic group members. Voters opt for those politicians or parties whose agendas best match their policy preferences (Downs, 1957; Bornschieer, 2010; Carmines and Stimson, 1980). In societies, in which ethnic identification is highly salient, policy preferences closely intertwine with ethnic and group identities. Studies have demonstrated that individuals strongly identifying with their ethnic group exhibit a preference for representatives from the same ethnic background (Stokes-Brown, 2006; Manzano and Sanchez, 2010; Schildkraut, 2013). Ethnic parties are characterized precisely by the fact that they hold specific policy positions but also serve this identity-driven "demand". Ethnic appeals are, by definition, central to the mobilization strategies of ethnic parties (Chandra,

2011a; Zuber, 2013; Debus and Schulte, 2022). In other cases, we find multicultural parties that see themselves as the political voice for different minority groups, and in accordance with their non-exclusive ethnic appeal, generally advocate pro-minority positions.² Against this background, the empirical implication of this explanatory approach is that group members vote en bloc if ethnic or multicultural parties advocate for their group interests.

The (b) grievance-based approach highlights the expressive character of ethnic voting. Members of a group vote for co-ethnic candidates or ethnic parties to affirm their group identity and to gain psychological benefits (Horowitz, 1985; Ferree, 2006). Most theories link such electoral behavior to identity threats following group marginalization and discrimination or shared experiences of repression and violence (Hadzic, Carlson, and Tavits, 2020; Wood, 2008; Glaurdić, Mochtak, and Lesschaeve, 2021). According to this perspective, ethnic group members have similar needs and preferences as a result of their shared identity, shared experiences of marginalization, or mutual grievances that bond individuals and cause them to vote in unison. Studies provide evidence that high levels of horizontal inequalities are associated with high levels of ethnic voting, which is, however, conditional on the level of vertical, i.e., within-group inequalities (Houle, Park, and Kenny, 2019; Stewart and McGauvran, 2019). The empirical implication is that marginalized ethnic groups should show higher levels of ethnic voting than non-marginalized ethnic groups.

According to the third set of explanations, the (c) clientelism approach, individuals vote for a particular candidate or party because they expect personal benefits from it. Clientelistic networks, and thus patronage-driven voting behavior, constitute a crucial link between political parties and ethnic voters. By clientelism, we refer to an instrumental political exchange built on a reciprocal patron-client relationship (Hicken, 2011; Scott, 1969). In such supply-and-demand relationships, voters as clients demand the targeted provision of valuable material or non-material resources in return for their electoral support, and politicians or political parties as patrons trade

²Examples include the The South Schleswig Voters' Association in Germany (SSW) and the South Tyrolean People's Party (SVP) in Italy.

private and particularistic benefits in exchange for this support (Chandra, 2004; Hirseland and Strijbis, 2019; Lindberg and Morrison, 2008; Long, 2012; Nathan, 2019; Scott, 1969; Wantchekon, 2003). The defining feature of clientelism is thus its *quid pro quo* nature (Berenschot and Aspinall, 2020). According to this explanatory logic, ethnic voting is less an expression of group-based policy preferences, salient identity, and shared grievances but more of an individual cost-benefit calculation among ethnic group members.

Clientelism is a prevalent practice that is observed across diverse cultural and political contexts. However, the political environment in which clientelism is practiced has a significant impact on the importance and function of clientelist networks. In democratic regimes, clientelism is a tool for building a loyal network of supporters. However, electoral decisions based on clientelist motives are generally associated with lower democratic quality (Lindberg and Morrison, 2008). A common argument is that clientelism creates a form of "perverse accountability": elections no longer allow voters to punish politicians, but politicians use elections to punish voters by denying them access to benefits (Stokes, 2005).

In contrast to democratic regimes, autocratic regimes use clientelism to establish political, social, and economic dependencies. Clientelism serves as a crucial instrument in a dictator's toolkit for repression. The literature on ruling parties illustrates that this dependency on the state can sustain authoritarian regimes, even in the absence of overt coercion and widespread fraud (Saikkonen, 2017; Magaloni, 2006). The ability of authoritarian regimes to exert greater control over resource distribution is a fundamental aspect of clientelism. Politicians in autocratic regimes are able to use state resources to reward voters, which requires the abolition, circumvention, or manipulation of formal methods of distribution (Berenschot and Aspinall, 2020). The presence of greater control over the economy and a lack of legal constraints on distribution in autocracies enables politicians to make more credible promises to voters. This, coupled with the ease with which politicians can wield control in autocratic contexts, renders clientelism a highly effective

tactic. Additionally, from the perspective of the clients, clientelism is seen as a necessary means for attaining individual well-being as it offers the most viable path to obtaining material gains, employment, personal security, and other vital tangible and intangible resources (Magaloni, 2006; McLellan, 2022). What drives these differences between autocratic and democratic regimes and shapes the incentives to pursue clientelist strategies, is the robustness of political competition (Hicken, 2011; Van De Walle, 2007). Political competition and electoral uncertainty increase the costs and lessen the significance of clientelist networks for political actors (Grzymala-Busse, 2007; Van De Walle, 2007; Corstange, 2018).

Based on the observation that clientelism is more pervasive and effective in autocratic than democratic settings, it is hypothesized that it plays a more significant role as a driver of ethnic voting in autocracies than in democracies. In the absence of clientelism, voters rely primarily on other channels, such as ideological considerations or identity-related considerations, to make their voting decisions. Therefore, the three explanatory rationales for ethnic voting discussed previously, are more relevant in some political contexts than others. While the political environment is deemed to be a crucial condition, it is not believed that clientelism is the sole explanation for ethnic bloc voting in authoritarian contexts. Other factors, such as ideological preferences, issue voting, and grievances, may also play a role but are expected to be overshadowed by personal exchange relationships.

Our conditional and equifinal argument contributes to a growing literature that pays closer attention to the structural and institutional contexts of ethnic voting (Ichino and Nathan, 2013; Fraga, 2018; Bluhm, Hodler, and Schaudt, 2021; Stojanovic and Strijbis, 2019). We contend, however, that previous research on this topic has overlooked the fact that electoral mobilization differs between democratic and autocratic regimes (Saikkonen, 2017). To summarize, our main argument posits that the type of political regime plays a decisive role in explaining why certain ethnic groups exhibit bloc voting while others do not. This leads us to the following two

hypotheses:

H₁: Clientelism is a more dominant driver of ethnic voting behaviour in authoritarian regimes in comparison to policy-based and grievance-based factors.

H₂: Clientelism is a less dominant driver of ethnic voting behaviour in democratic regimes in comparison to policy-based and grievance-based factors.

3 Research Design

We employ a research design, which allows us to study the effect of policy-based, grievance-based as well as clientelist networks on bloc voting behavior by ethnic groups. By the term "ethnic groups" we refer to various types of cultural identity collectives, including ethnic, religious, tribal, or indigenous groups. Ethnic groups, such as the Fulani in Nigeria or the Makonde in Mozambique are bound together by group loyalties, that is, affective commitments that tend to persist. Because of their relatively high stability over time and the stabilizing effects they have on individuals' experiences of life's contingency, collective identities arising from overlapping or superimposed differences in religion, language, or descent are relatively fixed and not freely eligible (Hale, 2004; Chandra, 2011b). The relatively consistent and malleable nature of cultural identity collectives makes them a stable electorate and a readily mobilized voting base. This influences the available alternatives for politicians in multi-ethnic countries to secure votes and mobilize voters.

We limit our study to ethnic groups in African countries for three main reasons. First, the cases examined show a wide range of different regime types and democratic qualities, which is a scope condition for our study. Our sample includes electoral democracies (e.g., Namibia or South Africa) as well as authoritarian regimes (e.g., Guinea or Uganda). Second, in all countries included in the sample, ethnic divisions are prominent and to some extent politicized, fulfilling the necessary

precondition for ethnic voting. Third, survey data from the Afrobarometer dataset provide unique information on ethnic affiliation, individual voting decisions, and self-reported grievances. As will be discussed in the following section, this allows for the construction of group-level variables based on individual-level data, thereby enabling the testing of our arguments.

3.1 Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable is ethnic voting. The concept of ethnic voting encompasses all instances in which a sizable proportion of members of a specific ethnic or religious group vote for the same political party (Huber, 2012; Stewart and McGauvran, 2019; Ishiyama, 2012). This definition of bloc voting is more appropriate than a narrow definition focusing on the "direct" match of ethnicity between an ethnic voter and a political party or candidate for two reasons (Nathan, 2019). First, empirical evidence suggests that ethnic groups in some places vote en bloc, but not necessarily for an ethnic party. For instance, in the United States Afro-Americans vote overwhelmingly for the Democrats, which is not a self-described ethnic party and most candidates are not Afro-American (Houle, Park, and Kenny, 2019). Second, a restrictive definition would be an unnecessary limitation for our study, resulting in selection bias and impeding the examination of various concurrent theoretical approaches. For example, as previously discussed, one implication that can be inferred from these theoretical frameworks is that group members tend to vote en bloc when they perceive representation by ethnic or multicultural parties advocating for their interests. To fully evaluate these explanations, it is essential to include instances where there is a limited or absent cultural connection between the ethnic electorate and a political party or candidate, i.e., the "zeros" in the empirical analysis.

We propose that a specific number of ethnic respondents per group can be utilized to approximate the extent of group-level voting. Our measurement is derived from the Afrobarometer item that asks which party's candidate the respondent would support if presidential or national

elections were to be held the following day (Afrobarometer, 2022). This item, included in all participating countries, allows us to utilize data from five rounds (round 3 to round 7) of the Afrobarometer, spanning the years 2005 to 2018. To avoid bias, we exclude all ethnic groups for which we have less than 25 respondents per year. Our dependent variable *percentpergroup* provides information on the proportion of respondents who report they belong to the same ethnic group and will vote for the same party in a given year. We include only the party with the highest level of ethnic voting per ethnic group.³ For instance, in 2016 (Round 7), 317 respondents self-identified as members of the Fon ethnic group in Benin. Among them, 198 (62.5 %) expressed their intention to vote for the Nouveau Départ party in the upcoming election.

3.2 Independent Variables

In our statistical models, we incorporate variables that measure the three explanatory logics discussed previously. The key empirical implication of the policy-based approach is that when ethnic or multicultural parties advocate for the interests of a particular ethnic group, a significant segment of that group is likely to vote for them. Therefore, we assess, on a yearly basis, for each party that has received a plurality of support from a given group in our sample, whether this party advocates for ethnic interests or not. We utilize novel data from the Varieties of Party Identity and Organization (V-Party) Dataset to achieve this (Lindberg, Düpont, et al., 2022). Our *Ethnic_party* variable indicates whether religious or cultural issues are relevant to a party's effort to gain and keep voters.⁴ To account for ideological differences, we code the *party_rile* variable, which gives information on the parties positioning on an economic left-right scale.⁵

As discussed above, the key empirical implication of the grievance-based approach is that

³All other parties which receive lower levels of support are not included. See codebook and section on robustness for details and further checks.

⁴We use the sum of the V-Party variables *v2paculsup_ord* and *v2parelig_ord* to code this variable. See the codebook for details.

⁵We use *v2pariglef_ord* from the V-Party Dataset to code this variable. See the codebook for details.

marginalized ethnic groups should show higher levels of ethnic voting than non-marginalized ethnic group. To test the explanatory power of this logic, we construct a group-level grievance variable (*avrg_comcondition*). Given the underlying comparative nature of deprivation and the importance of perceived grievances for ethnic mobilization, we categorize how group members rank their living situations in comparison to other members of society (Gurr, 1970; Asingo, 2018). We utilize average values per group-year of respondents' answers to the Afrobarometer question "In general how do you rate your living conditions compared to those of others of the same nationality" (Afrobarometer, 2022).

Clientelism is an elusive, difficult-to-measure phenomenon. For instance, clientelism is often under-reported in surveys due to social desirability bias, and vote trafficking is nearly always prohibited (Corstange, 2018). This makes testing the third explanatory logic especially challenging. Given that party networks are most commonly used to distribute goods in autocratic states, we use the level of party activism among ethnic group members as a proxy for the level of clientelism. Research on clientelism emphasizes the function of brokers as intermediaries between clients and patrons (Berenschot and Aspinall, 2020; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, 2018). We propose that in contemporary autocracies, these brokers are typically situated within political parties. Local party elites, taking the role of brokers, identify potential recipients of patronage, deliver the services, mobilize in elections and mediate between voters and politicians. Our third key independent variable, *avrg_freq_partywork*, thus provides information on the proportion of those who worked for a candidate or party in the context of the last election. This variable thus captures those group members who are directly involved in the party network and who, it is assumed, benefit personally from this network. We use the question "Thinking about the last national election in [20xx], did you: Work for a candidate or party?" which is included in Afrobarometer Rounds 5, 6, and 7. As we discuss on page 23, the advantage of this indirect measurement is that the risk of bias is significantly reduced.

We include a limited number of additional variables to avoid overfitting of our models. Previous studies have stressed the significance of institutions in understanding ethnic mobilization, with some scholars asserting that majoritarian systems enable cross-ethnic appeals. In contrast to proportional systems, in plurality or majority electoral systems, "catch-all" campaigns are often essential for any party or candidate seeking to construct a large constituency and win office (Stojanovic and Strijbis, 2019; Reilly, 2020). Despite the lack of compelling evidence in the literature for a direct relationship between PR electoral systems and ethnic bloc voting, we consider the electoral system to be an important control variable (Huber, 2012; Brown, 2005). To test the three explanatory logics against this institutional explanation, we include a variable (*electoral_system_majority*), that indicates whether the electoral system for the national legislature belongs to the family of majority voting systems or not. This variable is coded on basis of the IDEA electoral systems database on country-year level (IDEA, 2022).

It has been suggested that factors such as violence and the fear of oppression may play a more significant role in shaping ethnic voting behavior than political ideologies, shared grievances, or clientelism. A recent study by Enamorado and Kosterina, for example, shows that the level of political intimidation is a factor that influences the degree to which individuals choose to vote along ethnic lines for expressive reasons (Enamorado and Kosterina, 2022). To account for this alternative explanation, we include the variable *avrg_freq_electviolence*. We code this variable on basis of the following question of the Afrobarometer: "During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?", which is included in Rounds 4-7 (Afrobarometer, 2022). The variable represents the average value per group-year, where a higher value means that a larger proportion of respondents feel intimidated.

We include a measurement for the political relevance of the ethnic groups in their respective countries (*relevant*). We classify an ethnic group as politically relevant if it is included in the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset (Vogt et al., 2015). Our variable *group_size* represents

the group’s population share in relation to the total population of the country. We collected group size qualitatively case by case due to the lack of data for the ethnic groups included in our sample. We use data from the EPR, the (All) Minorities at Risk (MAR) project, minorityrights.org, as well as secondary sources for the closest possible year of the respective Afrobarometer round (Afrobarometer, 2022; Birnir et al., 2018; Vogt et al., 2015). If absolute numbers were provided in a data source, we divided the number by the absolute population size of the country in that year as provided by the World Bank (WorldBank, 2022).

To divide the sample into a democratic and autocratic sub-sample, it is evaluated how V-DEM rates the respective country in a given year. The variable *democ* takes the value 1 if the country is considered as a liberal or electoral democracy and the value 0 if it is an electoral or closed autocracy (Coppedge et al., 2021).⁶

We use five different specifications of linear regression models to test our hypotheses: (1) a pooled linear model with no fixed effects and which includes both democratic and autocratic countries, (2) separate models for democratic and autocratic countries with country-fixed effects, (3) pooled models and (4) models with two-way fixed effects with separate models for democratic and autocratic countries (see the section on robustness tests). We re-run our analyses with alternative codings for our key variables.

4 Findings

4.1 Descriptive Findings

Our collected data shows a high variance of ethnic voting levels between ethnic groups, within countries as well as across countries.⁷ In most countries, there are several ethnic groups that vote relatively strongly en bloc and along ethnic lines. Among the groups with the highest average

⁶We use the V-DEM variable *v2x_regime* to code this variable. See the codebook for details.

⁷See Figure 2 in the Appendix

ethnic voting levels are the Beti in Cameroon, the Makonde in Mozambique, and the Sotho people in South Africa. In line with our expectations, we find an interesting pattern when comparing voting patterns across different regime types. Figure 2 (Appendix) illustrates that ethnic voting is, on average, higher in (different types of) autocratic regimes than in electoral democracies. While this does not provide an explanation for differences per se, the descriptive analyses indicate that the regime type plays a pivotal role in understanding the phenomenon of ethnic voting. This raises the question of how much of the variance can be explained by the three explanatory logics and primary independent variables (*avrg_comconditions*, *ethnic_party* and *avrg_freq_partywork*).

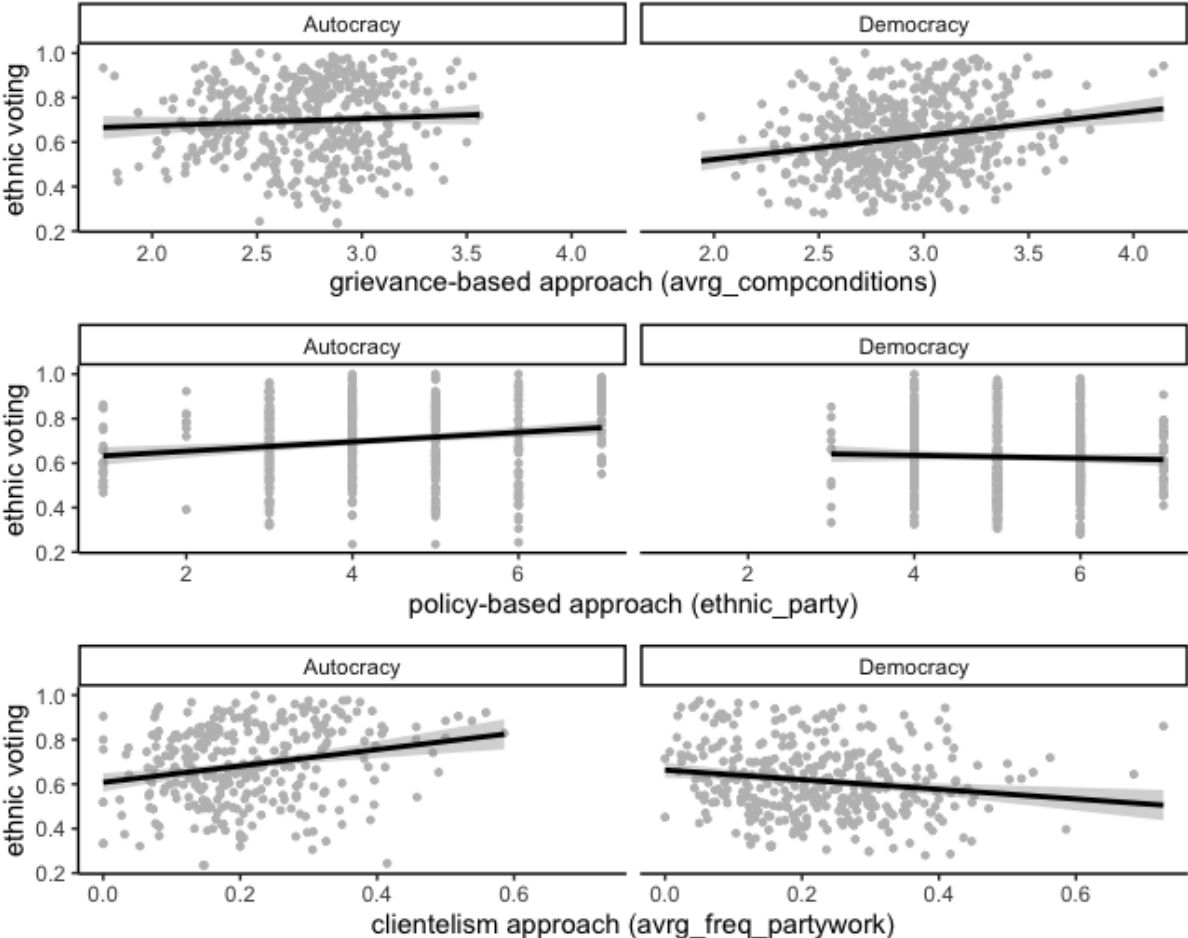


Figure 1: Distribution of values for ethnic voting across the three independent variables between regime types

Figure 1 depicts the group-year relationship of our dependent variable, i.e., ethnic voting, on the three independent factors (group grievances measured with the *avrg_compcondition* variable, policies measured with the *ethnic_party* variable and clientelism measured with the *avrg_freq_partywork* variable). As expected, with higher grievance values, the values for ethnic voting increase for the group-years in democracies, with the pattern being much less clear in autocracies. For the clientelism variable, the opposite pattern emerges, with democracies even showing a negative trend here. For the policy variable, rising levels of ethnic voting are found with lower levels of ethnic mobilization, while the opposite seems to be true in democracies.

4.2 Statistical Analysis

In the first step, we include all group-years in both democratic and autocratic countries in linear regression models with Model 1 including all three independent variables; Model 2 including only clientelism, Model 3 including only the ethnic party variable, and Model 4 including only our proxy for group grievances (Table 1). The pooled linear regression models show positive substantial and statistically significant effects (0.123 and 0.113) for our grievance variable (*avrg_compconditions*). Deprived groups are thus more likely to vote en bloc. At first glance, this appears to be consistent with a prominent strand of the research, which contends that group grievances are the pivotal factor in explaining ethnic voting (e.g. Houle, 2018; Stewart and McGauvran, 2019). In contrast, our variables reflecting the policy-based explanation (*ethnic_party*) and clientelism (*avrg_freq_partywork*) do not show any significant effects. This is not to say that these variables can be disregarded, though. In line with our expectations, the regime type of the respective country (*democ*) appears to be a significant confounder in all four models. This implies, in addition to the descriptive findings discussed above, that it matters whether we seek to explain ethnic voting in democratic or in non-democratic contexts. To investigate this further, we split the sample into a democracy and autocracy sub-sample.

Table 1: Regression Results Full Sample (Pooled)

| | Ethnic Voting | | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| clientelism | 0.015 (0.066) | -0.023 (0.067) | | |
| ethnic_party | -0.003 (0.006) | | 0.003 (0.006) | |
| grievances | 0.123*** (0.024) | | | 0.113*** (0.022) |
| relevance | 0.067*** (0.016) | 0.062*** (0.016) | 0.047*** (0.015) | 0.050*** (0.015) |
| groupsize | 0.002 (0.058) | 0.023 (0.059) | 0.046 (0.055) | 0.025 (0.053) |
| electoral_violence | -0.009 (0.017) | -0.010 (0.018) | -0.025 (0.016) | -0.028* (0.016) |
| democracy | -0.051*** (0.018) | -0.036** (0.018) | -0.042** (0.017) | -0.053*** (0.016) |
| electoral_system | -0.019 (0.018) | -0.014 (0.018) | -0.031* (0.017) | -0.036** (0.016) |
| party_rile | 0.018** (0.008) | 0.014* (0.008) | 0.009 (0.008) | 0.014* (0.008) |
| Constant | 0.262*** (0.093) | 0.620*** (0.053) | 0.661*** (0.056) | 0.353*** (0.078) |
| <i>N</i> | 492 | 492 | 602 | 602 |
| R ² | 0.102 | 0.053 | 0.051 | 0.090 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.085 | 0.040 | 0.040 | 0.079 |
| Residual Std. Error | 0.164 (df = 482) | 0.168 (df = 484) | 0.171 (df = 594) | 0.167 (df = 594) |
| F Statistic | 6.055*** (df = 9; 482) | 3.891*** (df = 7; 484) | 4.538*** (df = 7; 594) | 3.413*** (df = 7; 594) |

Notes:

***Significant at the 1 percent level.

**Significant at the 5 percent level.

*Significant at the 10 percent level.

We choose all countries classified by V-DEM as electoral or liberal democracies for the democracy sub-sample (Coppedge et al., 2021). This gives us a sample of 516 group-years in 22 countries.⁸

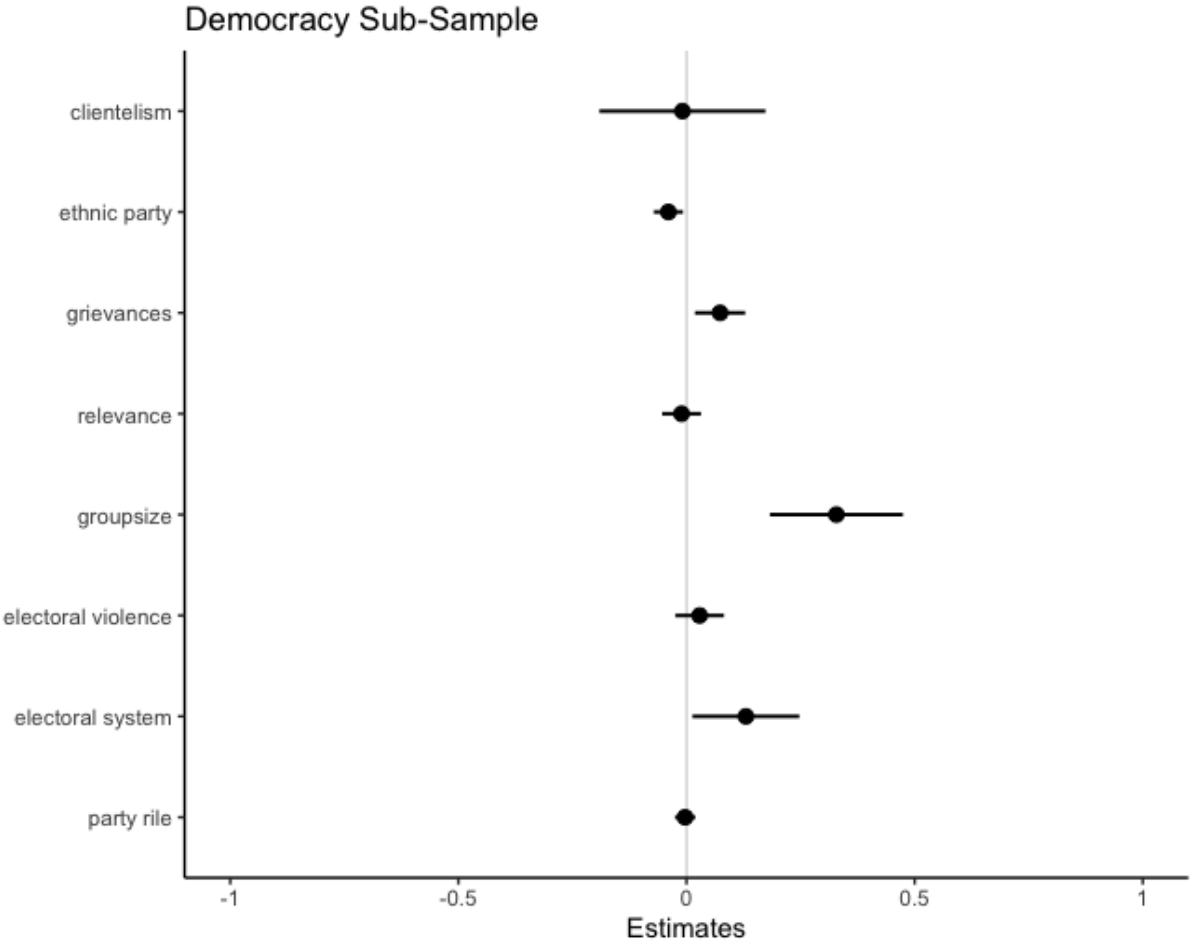


Figure 2: Regression Results Democracy Sample (Country-Fixed Effects)

Our fixed-effects models, as depicted in Figure 2, yield a negative and statistically significant effect for the ethnic party variable. As lower values of the *ethnic_party* variable indicate that a party promotes cultural and religious issues, this negative sign is in line with our expectations.

⁸This includes the following countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Botswana, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mauritius, Malawi, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, Niger, South Africa, Senegal, Sierra Leone, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Zambia

Furthermore, consistent with our hypotheses, we find a positive and statistically significant effect for the grievance variable (see Model 1 and Model 4 in table 1 in the appendix). In other words, the policy-based and grievance-based approaches have explanatory power in democratic settings. We find no evidence that clientelism drives ethnic bloc voting behaviour here. The variable used in these models (*avrg_freq_partywork*) does not show any substantial effect on the dependent variable. We tentatively interpret this finding as evidence for H2.

For the autocracies sub-sample, we selected all group-years in countries classified by V-DEM as being electoral or closed autocracies.⁹ We use the same models with identical specifications (linear regression with country-fixed effects) for this autocracies sub-sample as we did for the democracies sub-sample. Our models (Figure 3 and Table 3 in the appendix) reveal significant effects for our clientelism variable (Model 1 and Model 2), which is in line with our hypotheses: Compared to democracies, clientelism is a significant factor in explaining ethnic voting in autocracies.

⁹This includes the following countries: Algeria, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, Guinea, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Nigeria, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe

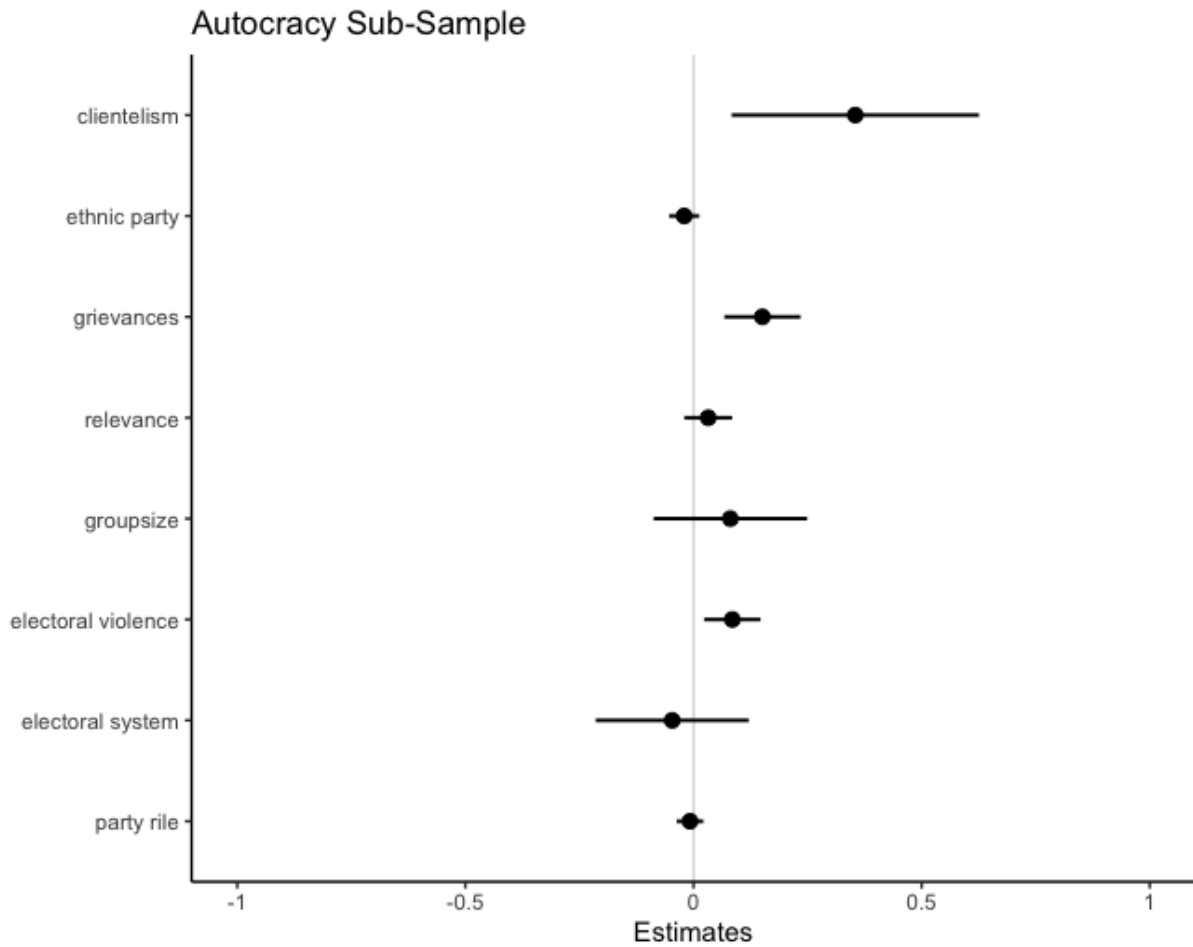


Figure 3: Regression Results Autocracy Sample (Country-Fixed Effects)

As expected, the ethnic party variable shows no substantial effect on ethnic voting in the autocracy sub-sample, indicating that the policy-based argument has limited explanatory value. In both models, the grievance variable is positive and significant (see Model 1 and Model 4 in the appendix). This means that, in addition to clientelism, grievances are a second important motivating force for ethnic bloc voting in autocracies. Although the effect of clientelism appears to be more pronounced and is likely the primary driving force behind ethnic voting in non-democratic contexts, we cannot completely reject the null hypothesis for H1. However, all the models with different specifications show that this factor is highly significant in explaining ethnic voting in

non-democratic settings, providing evidence for our argument.

5 Robustness

We run several tests to probe the robustness of our findings. First, we re-run the sub-sample analyses with the same set of control variables but without any fixed-effects. Figure 4 in the appendix shows a non-substantial effect for the ethnic party variable, positive effects for the grievance variable in both autocracies and democracies and a positive and significant effect for clientelism in autocracies. In these models, the effect of clientelism in democracies is even negative, indicating that a high level of group members working for a party or candidate decreases the level of en bloc voting. In other words, politically active groups reflect political competition and the diverse political landscape in democracies. Second, we include a two-way fixed-effects model including both country and year fixed effects and the same set of control variables. Our findings are supported by these analyses. The clientelism variable has no effect on ethnic voting in democratic societies, but it has a strong and significant effect in autocratic regimes. Grievances drive ethnic bloc voting in both political regimes, but policy-based explanations are more relevant in democratic contexts (see Tables 3 and 4 in the appendix).

In the third step of our robustness test, we subject our hypotheses to a rigorous test by using different codings for our dependent variable and key independent variables, as well as including a different set of control variables in our statistical models. To further test our hypotheses, we replace our dependent variable with a dummy variable (*ev_50*) which is coded 1 if the percentage of ethnic group members who voted for a specific party in a given year is higher than 50 percent. As this variable is dichotomous, we use logistic regression.

Instead of the aggregated *ethnic_party* variable, we use the policy-variable *issue_cultsuperiority* in these models. This variable gives information to what extent the leadership of the respective party promotes the cultural superiority of a specific social group. We code this

variable on the basis of the V-Party Dataset (Lindberg, Düpont, et al., 2022), again coding the party which has received the plurality of support from an ethnic group. Finally, we replace our grievance variable with the variable *avrg_treatedunfair*. This variable reflects the question in the Afrobarometer asking respondents how often they have been treated unfairly by the government (Afrobarometer, 2022). While this reflects only one possible source of deprivation, we consider this variable to be an adequate measurement of group-based grievances.¹⁰

While the results are somewhat less clear-cut, they confirm the main findings: In democracies, group voting can be explained primarily by group grievances, while in autocracies clientelistic networks play a role alongside grievances (see Table 2 and Table 5 in the appendix).

In the final step of our robustness checks, we include a direct measurement of clientelism (*avrg_clientelism*). This variable gives information on the proportion of respondents per ethnic group who report having received a bribe or a gift once or twice, a few times, or frequently. For this direct measurement of clientelism, we make use of Q57F / Q61F included in Rounds 3 and 5 of the Afrobarometer (“And during the [20xx] election, how often (if ever) did a candidate or someone from a political party offer you something, like food or a gift, in return for your vote?”) (Afrobarometer, 2022). Pooled models with the same specifications as in our main analysis basically confirm our findings (see Figure 5 in the appendix). While the negative coefficient for the democracy sub-sample and the positive coefficient for the autocracy sub-sample are as expected, we only find statistically significant effects for the democracy sub-sample. While these findings provide valuable insights, it is important to approach them with caution for two main reasons. First, this direct question on clientelism was only included in two rounds of the Afrobarometer, which results in a large number of missing values in our sample for this variable. Second, and more importantly, answers to this question are likely to be biased. Respondents may be unwilling to admit to being corruptible, especially in oppressive environments, out of fear of being

¹⁰see the Codebook for more details

Table 2: Regression Results Autocracies (c-f)

| | Ethnic Voting | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| clientelism | 0.478 (0.344) | 0.559* (0.337) | | |
| ethnic_party (issue_cultsuperiority) | -0.007 (0.091) | | 0.003 (0.087) | |
| grievances (avrg_treatedunfair) | -0.099 (0.080) | | | -0.132* (0.070) |
| relevance | 0.108 (0.068) | 0.081 (0.064) | 0.009 (0.062) | 0.042 (0.063) |
| groupsize | 0.024 (0.221) | 0.120 (0.207) | 0.138 (0.203) | 0.024 (0.206) |
| electoral violence | 0.092 (0.079) | 0.109 (0.077) | 0.062 (0.074) | 0.037 (0.075) |
| electoral_system | -0.505** (0.215) | -0.503** (0.197) | -0.266 (0.209) | -0.253 (0.184) |
| party_rile | -0.015 (0.038) | -0.008 (0.036) | 0.021 (0.037) | 0.009 (0.037) |
| Constant | 0.090 (0.346) | -0.062 (0.293) | 0.088 (0.338) | 0.271 (0.306) |
| <i>N</i> | 195 | 195 | 239 | 239 |
| Log Likelihood | -65.773 | -66.689 | -93.842 | -91.880 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 179.546 | 177.377 | 235.685 | 231.760 |

Notes:

***Significant at the 1 percent level.

**Significant at the 5 percent level.

*Significant at the 10 percent level.

excluded from patronage networks and the benefits they provide (Bratton, Bhavnani, and Chen, 2012; Tannenbergh, 2017). Additionally, even in autocratic settings, such behavior may not be seen as morally acceptable (Kao, Lust, and Rakner, 2022). Therefore, we consider our indirect measurement included in the main analysis to be a more valid measurement.

6 Conclusion

Ethnic bloc voting is a widespread phenomenon. Some ethnic groups show a strong inclination towards voting en bloc while others do not. Research into this topic has shifted towards understanding not just the effects of ethnic voting in divided societies, but also its underlying causes. Existing theories can be grouped into three major explanatory logics: Large segments of a group vote for a particular party because they expect it to deliver certain beneficial policies for them as a group (policy-based logic); because parties are particularly good at mobilizing deprived groups (grievance-based logic); or because a party and its ethnic constituency have strong patron-client relationships and patronage networks (clientelism-based logic).

Although existing studies show the plausibility of all three approaches, their underlying logics differ, and empirical studies so far have produced inconsistent results. Therefore, this article puts forth a more conditional explanation, arguing that the political context matters why some ethnic groups vote en bloc while others don't. Our article demonstrates that ethnic voting follows different logics in democracies and autocracies. Specifically, our analyses yield two primary findings. First, the policy-based and grievance-based approaches demonstrate the most explanatory power in democratic societies, but not in autocratic regimes. In contrast, clientelism has little impact on ethnic bloc voting in countries that are at least electoral democracies. Second, as expected, clientelism is a crucial determinant of ethnic voting in autocratic settings. Additionally, grievances appear to be a significant factor in non-democratic societies as well, however, the ethnic character of a political party does not have a notable effect in political regimes that lack a

minimum level of democratic qualities. These findings hold against different model specifications and robustness tests.

However, there are several shortcomings that need to be mentioned. First, the values of our dependent variable, ethnic voting, are determined by a relatively small number of ethnic group members' declared voting intentions, which we use to infer the group's overall voting preferences. Furthermore, our evaluation of clientelism in the main analysis is based on indirect measurement due to the difficulty of accurately capturing this phenomenon and the lack of available suitable data. This also raises the possibility of an omitted variable bias, as data for regional elections, candidates' ethnic backgrounds, cultural links between parties and constituencies, or ethnic settlement areas are not available for the ethnic groups in our sample. Additionally, the study is confined to ethnic groups in Africa. While we demonstrate that clientelistic networks play a key role in the electoral behavior of ethnic groups in autocracies, we can only speculate about the underlying mechanism. We leave that open for future research on this topic.

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