



Can Politicians Exploit Ethnic Grievances? An Experimental Study of Land Appeals in Kenya

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Abstract

Studies of conflict-prone settings claim that political leaders can increase electoral support by appealing to perceived ethnic grievances. Yet there is little empirical research on how appeals to group-based grievances work and the types of voters most likely to respond to such appeals. To explore the political effects of ethnic grievance appeals, we conduct a survey experiment in Kenya's Rift Valley, a region where a long history of conflict over land has sharpened ethnic tensions. We find that appeals to grievances have surprisingly little effect among most voters. We observe a positive effect only among ethnic "insiders" who feel land insecure, a small share of the sample population. Further, though imprecisely estimated, we show that exposure to prior violence may condition how some individuals respond to the appeals, decreasing support for candidates who employ divisive rhetoric. Finally, the results show that appeals to an ethnic-based land grievance are no more effective than a generic land appeal, indicating that group injustice frames have little effect. From a normative perspective these results are encouraging: they suggest that voters in conflict-prone settings may be less easily swayed by divisive ethnic rhetoric than much of the literature presumes.

Keywords Ethnic appeals · Ethnic politics · African elections · Kenya

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Introduction

Do politicians benefit from appealing to ethnic grievances? A large literature points to the utility of ethnic identity as a tool for mobilizing the political support of co-ethnic voters in diverse societies (Bates 1983; Horowitz 1985; Posner 2004; Wilkinson 2004; Chandra 2004). Some suggest that it is precisely because ethnicity provides such an easy and effective tool that it is also a dangerous one, helping to explain outbreaks of communal violence during electoral contests (Brass 1997; Wilkinson 2004; Dunning 2011). Similarly, conflict scholars often assume that politicians can mobilize participation in violence by appealing to ethnic or communal grievances (Horowitz 1985; Cederman et al. 2013; Bormann et al. 2017). In the U.S. context too, scholars have shown that appealing to racial and ethnic sentiments is an effective campaign strategy (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino et al. 2002, 2018; White 2007; Huber and Lapinski 2006). And with the recent rise in nativist populism across Europe and the U.S., it is particularly important to understand when and how appeals to identity-based grievances might succeed or fail.

Despite the widespread view that pandering to ethnic grievances is an effective political strategy, central hypotheses in the existing literature have not been subjected to careful empirical scrutiny. As a result, scholars still know relatively little about when and how office-seeking elites are able to exploit communal grievances for electoral purposes, and how the effects of such appeals may vary across different segments of the target audience. This article explores the effects of ethnic-based campaign appeals in Kenya's Rift Valley, an area where competition over land has shaped the dynamics of electoral competition for decades. We focus on one type of ethnic appeal: those related to *ethnic grievances regarding land access and distribution* that seek to exploit perceived injustices perpetrated by rival communities. We draw on evidence from a survey experiment conducted in August 2015 to explore how these appeals affect electoral preferences.

The sensitivity of land and ethnicity in Kenya's Rift Valley meant that ethical concerns were paramount to the design of the study. Above all, we sought to avoid priming ethnic antipathies through the experimental manipulations. We therefore designed the interventions, described below, with five specific considerations in mind. First, we crafted the campaign appeals to be typical of messages that respondents would encounter during actual campaigns in order to ensure that the interventions would only test the effects of messages that individuals encountered routinely, rather than providing new information or exposure to messages that might be unusual in the political environment. Second, we used messages that were relatively mild, avoiding overt references to particular ethnic communities or calls for violence or policies that might negatively affect specific groups. This means that we cannot rule out the possibility that more extreme messages might produce larger effects. Third, we employed hypothetical candidates rather than actual, local politicians. While this has the potential to limit the external validity of the findings (discussed more below), we sought to ensure that the candidates in the recordings would not be confused for real politicians from the

research area. Fourth, as is standard in experimental research, we debriefed participants at the end of the survey. Specifically, respondents were told that the candidate was not a real politician and that we made up the candidate “to examine how voters evaluate a typical candidate they might see on a the ballot for a parliamentary seat in Kenya.” Finally, in our pilot test we examined whether the treatments had any discernible effect on out-group sentiments, beliefs that members of out-groups should not be allowed to own land in the area, or support for the use of violence. The pilot results provided no evidence of even a short-term effect on these indicators.¹

We report four main results. First, appeals to ethnic grievance related to land prove to be surprisingly ineffective. For most respondents these appeals have no effect or reduce support for the hypothetical candidate. Second, in contrast to much existing literature, we find that grievance appeals are no more effective among ethnic insiders than outsiders who migrated to the region more recently. Third, we find suggestive evidence that land insecurity and exposure to past violence moderate the effects and that these moderators work differently among insiders and outsiders. While these interactive effects are imprecisely estimated due to smaller sub-group samples, results show that the positive effect of land-based ethnic appeals is limited to insiders who are land insecure while prior exposure to violence produces a backlash among ethnic outsiders. Finally, the results show that framing land deprivations as a communal injustice does not increase the effectiveness of the appeals.

The limited effects of the treatments may stem in part from contextual factors and design choices. First, we conducted the survey experiment roughly at the mid-point between election years in Kenya. It is possible that grievance appeals may be more effective at election time, when ethnic and partisan attachments are stronger (Eifert et al. 2010; Michelitch and Utych 2018). Second, as described below, we used a single actor who spoke without a discernible accent in the treatment recordings. This enabled us to compare results across ethnic groups. However, it is possible that respondents might view an accented speaker as more authentic, heightening the potential effects of the appeals. Third, and most importantly, we opted for a mild treatment relative to the fiery ethnic language that has been employed during prior campaigns in the area. We note, however, that compared to prior research on racial priming in the U.S., which has shown that even implicit images and appeals can have observable effects, our treatments do not appear to be atypically weak. We also note that the treatments did have an effect among respondents whom we would expect to be relatively more responsive (those who perceive their landholdings to be less secure). Nonetheless, we cannot rule out the possibility that the more strident appeals used on the campaign trail might produce an effect that we are unable to capture here. Given these limitations, we do not view our results as the final word but as one piece of evidence, a useful one given the dearth of quantitative research on appeals to ethnic grievances.

¹ In the pilot test (August 8–9, 2015; $n=59$), we found no evidence that the treatments affected trust toward out-groups, beliefs that outsiders “do not deserve to own land in the area”, or support for the use of violence toward out-groups.

This article makes several contributions to existing research on ethnic political mobilization. First and foremost, the weakness of the overall effects found here contrasts with the dominant view in the literature on ethnic mobilization in conflict-prone settings (e.g., Horowitz 1985; Snyder 2000; Chua 2003). From a normative perspective, this finding is encouraging. It suggests that citizens in ethnically diverse settings are not easily manipulated by elite rhetoric that plays on purported group injustices. Our findings suggest that existing studies may overstate the effectiveness of grievance appeals, likely because they focus on the most violent cases of ethnic conflict or draw on anecdotal evidence. Second, the findings here demonstrate the heterogeneity of preferences within ethnic communities. The scholarship on ethnic mobilization, which tends to treat ethnic communities as monolithic, would do well to consider this insight. Third, with regard to the mechanisms at work, the results suggest that psychological approaches that highlight communal solidarities may overstate the extent to which individuals respond to group-based appeals. We find that the positive effects of the ethnic grievance appeal are confined to individuals who stand to benefit directly from the actions and policies proposed by the politician and that such appeals have limited effect on other members of the group. Fourth, we offer suggestive evidence that prior exposure to inter-group violence may weaken the effectiveness of ethnic grievance appeals. This finding contrasts with the dominant view that conflict hardens ethnic identities, making individuals more responsive to elite efforts at communal mobilization (e.g., Fearon and Laitin 2000). Finally, we contribute to the “sons of the soil” literature by probing the potential effects of ethnic appeals not only among insiders, generally assumed to be the target of land-based appeals, but also among outsiders, who may also hold land-related grievances (Boone 2017; Bhavnani and Lacina 2015; Fearon and Laitin 2011; Weiner 1978).

Appealing to Ethnic Grievances

This section draws on existing literature to develop a series of testable propositions about the effects of appeals to ethnic grievance. Despite the widespread assumption that communal appeals serve as an effective electoral strategy and can contribute to inter-group polarization and violence, few studies systematically examine the types of appeals leaders employ in emerging, multiethnic democracies or the effects of these appeals.² This study focuses narrowly on appeals to ethnic grievances related to land, which we conceptualize as messages that attribute group-level deprivations to an out-group. Such appeals are distinct from more generic ethnic appeals like patronage promises (e.g., Wantchekon 2003). They are also distinct from fear-based appeals emphasized in some of the ethnic conflict literature (e.g., Posen 1993; de Figueiredo and Weingast 1999; Lake and Rothchild 1996; McDoom 2012). Grievance appeals reference alleged past injustices, whereas fear-based appeals emphasize

² Most research on elite rhetoric in Africa has focused on non-ethnic messages (Bleck and van de Walle 2012; Taylor 2017). Exceptions include McCauley (2014), who explores the effectiveness of alternative communal framing strategies, and Gadjanova (2017), who examines ethnic wedge issues.

future threats to the community. While in practice politicians may intertwine both types of messages, we limit our focus here to grievance-based messages for both ethical and practical reasons.³

In exploring the potential effects of appeals to ethnic grievances, we draw on the broader ethnic politics literature, from which we distinguish two main approaches: materialist and psychological. Works in the materialist tradition propose that distributional considerations lie at the heart of electoral decision-making in multi-ethnic countries in Africa and Asia (e.g., Chandra 2004; Posner 2005; Carlson 2015; Wantchekon 2003). This tradition suggests that campaign appeals that promise targeted benefits (e.g., land or employment) to co-ethnic voters should be an effective strategy for raising support within an aspirant's own ethnic community.

By contrast, psychological approaches suggest that appeals to ethnic interests are effective when candidates frame group deprivations as communal injustices. This approach, most closely associated with work by Donald Horowitz, argues that ethnicity matters not only because of material considerations but also because of the desire to affirm or elevate the status and worth of one's ethnic community vis-à-vis other groups in society. Drawing on social identification theory (e.g., Tajfel 1974), Horowitz (1985) argues that in diverse settings individuals derive a sense of self-worth in part from where their community lies in the country's social hierarchy, particularly in countries where ethnic groups differ in their access to education, wealth, and political power. This approach suggests that the motivation to support co-ethnic leaders comes from a desire to elect members of one's own community to positions of national prominence and that the benefits of doing so stem from the psychic rewards that come from advancing in the social hierarchy. The implication is that political leaders should be able to increase co-ethnic support by framing political appeals in ways that emphasize group-level considerations related to status and deprivation (Mutz 2018).

Drawing on these traditions, we suggest that appeals to ethnic grievances can encompass multiple logics, connecting to feelings of economic and political powerlessness stemming from the inability to secure land, alongside the belief that the victory of an ethnic patron will produce material benefits related to land, employment, or security. Appeals to ethnic grievances may heighten concerns about individual and collective well-being while also raising the salience of perceived group injustices, increasing support for a co-ethnic leader who promises to enact policies that will address group-level deprivations (Brass 1997).

We focus on the two main ethnic communities that have been at the center of land and election-related conflict in the Rift Valley, Kalenjins and Kikuyus. Following the broader literature on autochthony, we refer to Kalenjins as "insiders"

³ From an ethical perspective, it would be inappropriate to expose subjects to messages that emphasize potential threats posed by out-groups. Practically, in the area where we conducted this research, there is a long history of contestation over land dating back to the colonial period. Appeals to past events, therefore, should have particular resonance. Further, Kenya contrasts other cases emphasized in the literature, where collapsing central authorities may have made appeals to fear about group security especially salient—e.g., Yugoslavia in the early 1990s (Posen 1993; de Figueiredo and Weingast 1999) or Rwanda prior to the genocide in 1994 (McDoom 2012).

and Kikuyus as “outsiders” who have migrated to the region more recently (e.g., Fearon and Laitin 2011). Needless to say, in using this language we do not endorse the insider–outsider distinction nor imply that the legitimacy of one’s land holding should depend on whether an individual belongs to the group that claims to have first settled an area.

Beyond exploring the overall effects of appeals to ethnic grievance, we also seek to examine the types of individuals likely to be most responsive. We emphasize three sources of heterogeneity relevant to our study area. First, we ask whether those who stand to benefit individually from the proposed policy are more likely to be responsive to the appeal. In the context of Kenya’s Rift Valley, where competition for land is central to ethnic politics, we ask whether those whose land tenure is less secure will be more responsive to appeals that tap perceived communal injustices, relative to those whose land tenure is more secure. While it might seem obvious that the land-insecure would be more responsive, we note that the materialist and psychological traditions offer differing predictions. The materialist viewpoint stresses the importance of individual benefits, suggesting that those who stand to benefit directly should be most responsive. The psychological approach, on the other hand, implies that group solidarities might be as relevant as individual benefits, leading individuals who have little to gain directly to respond to group-based appeals.

Second, we investigate whether ethnic insiders—members of groups that claim to have settled the area earlier than others—are more responsive to ethnic grievance appeals than ethnic outsiders. The sons of the soil literature typically assumes that appeals to ethnic grievances should be more effective among ethnic insiders because they are more likely to see their group as having ancestral rights to a region’s territory and resources (Weiner 1978; Bhavnani and Lacina 2015). We note, however, that in our research area such appeals may also resonate with ethnic outsiders for three reasons. First, there are areas in the Rift Valley where Kikuyus claim to have settled before Kalenjins. In such places, Kikuyus may believe that their community has an historical claim to the area.⁴ Second, in the years following independence in 1963 many Kikuyu migrants acquired land through government-run redistribution schemes that operated on a “willing buyer, willing seller” basis (Kanyinga 2000). Kikuyus who purchased land through this mechanism may view their land claims as legitimate because it was obtained through formal channels, even though other groups may view them as outsiders in the Rift Valley. Third, in the period since the reintroduction of multiparty elections in 1992, many Kikuyu farmers have been violently displaced from their land in clashes surrounding the 1992, 1997, and 2007 elections (HRW 2002; KHRC 2008; GOK 2008). As the target of violent displacement, Kikuyus may be particularly motivated to elect leaders who will defend communal land access. For these reasons, we expect that in the particular context of Kenya’s Central Rift Valley appeals to land grievances may resonate among Kikuyu respondents even though the group does not claim ancestral ties to the region and are typically seen as ethnic outsiders by other groups in the region.

⁴ These claims are likely stronger where Kikuyu residents acquired “unoccupied” land prior to the settlement of Kalenjins or other groups.

Third, we examine the effects of prior exposure to ethnic violence. One of the distinguishing features of many sons of the soil conflicts is the persistence of low-level violence over relatively long periods of time (Fearon and Laitin 2011). There is, however, little agreement on how exposure to violence in such settings affects individual attitudes and behaviors over time. Existing studies typically conclude that violence sharpens inter-group hostilities in ways that make citizens more responsive to calls for group mobilization (Petersen 2002; Fearon and Laitin 2000). Yet given the heavy toll of violence on individuals' lives, exposure to violence may provoke a desire for peace and stability (Bayer et al. 2007). Consistent with this idea, some recent experimental studies show that exposure to violence can lead to pro-social behaviors (e.g., Voors et al. 2012; Gilligan et al. 2014). If exposure to violence heightens one's desire for peace and stability or increases the desire to bridge social divisions, we might expect victims of political violence to punish candidates who seek to exploit communal antagonisms.

From this discussion of the existing literature, we distill five specific hypotheses regarding the effects of appeals to ethnic grievances:

Hypothesis 1 Appeals to ethnic grievances will increase candidate support.

Hypothesis 2 Appeals that explicitly frame ethnic grievance in terms of communal injustice will increase candidate support more than “neutral appeals” that make no reference to communal injustice.

Hypothesis 3 Appeals to ethnic grievances will be more effective in increasing candidate support among ethnic insiders than among outsiders.

Hypothesis 4 Appeals to ethnic grievances will be more effective in increasing candidate support among those who perceive their land holdings to be insecure.

Hypothesis 5 Appeals to ethnic grievances will be less effective among those who have experienced prior inter-group violence.

Background: Land, Ethnicity, and Violence in Kenya

Communal grievances related to land—and attempts to exploit grievances for political gain—have been central to Kenyan politics since independence (Boone 2014; Kanyinga 2009). Conflicts over land can be traced in part to colonial-era policies that set the stage for conflicts between “natives” and “migrants” in the period after independence (Okoth-Ogendo 1991). The colonial administration claimed a sizeable portion of Kenya's most fertile land for British settlers, rendering most of the population in the Rift Valley landless. The colonial period also altered the dynamics of internal migration. The effects of these dynamics were most acute in the Rift Valley, where large numbers of migrants, primarily Kikuyu, sought land and employment

away from the densely-populated native reserves of their “ethnic homeland” in Central Province.⁵

In the decades after independence, two factors shaped group tensions over land. First, competition between the two main independence-era parties reflected and reinforced grievances over land policies. In the run-up to independence, the main opposition party, the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU), pressed for a constitution that would devolve power and authority over local resources to regional-level governments, protecting the local land interests of smaller ethnic communities (Anderson 2005). Advocates of this plan—known in Swahili as *majimbo*—mobilized supporters by invoking fears of Kikuyu invasions in the “ancestral lands” of KADU members.⁶ While the period of single-party rule, which started in the late-1960s, largely silenced the *majimbo* debate, *majimboism* would re-emerge as among the most polarizing issues of the multiparty era after the return to competitive politics in 1992.

A second key factor in shaping communal land grievances was the government’s implementation of a land resettlement policy based on ostensibly free-market principles. The policy is thought to have advantaged members of the Kikuyu community, who, as co-ethnics of Kenya’s first president, Jomo Kenyatta, tended to have greater access to capital and the patronage networks of the country’s political elite (Kanyinga 2000). The belief that Kikuyus secured land through ethnic favoritism at the expense of other groups endures among many Kenyans (Klopp 2002; Lynch 2011). Among the most salient and enduring land grievances in the Rift Valley is the belief that outsiders (especially Kikuyus) have benefited from state support to invade “native land” (Kanyinga 2009; Klaus and Mitchell 2015).

During the decades of single-party rule in the 1970s and 1980s, overt appeals to land grievances were rare. However, following the return to multi-party politics in 1992, land re-emerged as a central flash point in electoral campaigns, particularly in the Rift Valley, where political elites revived a version of *majimboism* that called for ethnically-exclusive regions, which many interpreted as a call for the expulsion of “non-natives” from the region. In the 1992 and 1997 elections, thousands of people were killed and hundreds of thousands displaced, primarily as a way of intimidating or removing opposition supporters from competitive zones.⁷ Kenya experienced its most devastating episode of electoral violence following the 2007 election, when at least 1300 people were killed and nearly 700,000 were displaced (Waki Commission Report 2008). During this election, calls for a *majimbo* government again provided a divisive and powerful appeal to aggrieved citizens who felt politically marginalized and cheated by the land distribution process (Lynch 2008; HRW 2008).

While Kalenjins’ status as insiders throughout the Rift Valley region may make them a more natural target for land grievance appeals, there are also contexts where Kikuyus may be responsive to such messages. As noted above, Kikuyus were the

⁵ By 1962, about 40% of Kikuyus were living outside their “ancestral region” of Central Province.

⁶ *Majimboism* translates as “regionalism” but can be interpreted as “ethno-regionalism.”

⁷ In the 1991–1993 electoral period there were 1500 recorded deaths and 300,000 displacements. In 1997 between 300 and 1000 people were killed and 10,000 were displaced (HRW 2002).

first settlers in some areas and have borne the brunt of violent displacements since the early 1990s. While existing literature typically focuses on the mobilization of insiders, one innovation of this study is to test whether and how outsiders at the regional level respond to appeals to grievances.

Research Design

Given the well-known challenges in studying the effects of elite rhetoric with observational data (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995), we used an experimental design—a survey experiment in which respondents were exposed to a recording of a campaign speech made by a hypothetical parliamentary candidate—to explore how individuals respond to appeals to ethnic land grievances.

Our sample includes respondents from the two main groups that have been at the center of political contention in the Central Rift: Kalenjins and Kikuyus. As noted, Kenya's Rift Valley provides a context in which politicians use ethnic-based land appeals to draw support from both insider (Kalenjin) and outsider (Kikuyu) communities (Klaus 2015; Lonsdale 2008). Our goal, therefore, was to explore the potential effects across both communities. To make the results comparable across groups, we developed a single script relevant to both groups. Building on other recent studies that have employed hypothetical candidates in survey experiments (especially Dunning and Harrison 2010), we developed a script in which the candidate describes his personal background and emphasizes his understanding of the challenges that ordinary citizens face in the survey area. The base script (shown in Fig. 1), which we treat as the control condition, makes no reference to communal grievances or land. Treatment 1 (T1), which we describe as the “neutral” land appeal because it does not explicitly reference identity-based land claims, adds the following promise: “As your leader, my top priority will be to make sure that people in this area have enough land for farming.” Treatment 2 (T2), the ethnic grievance appeal, adds an additional line that frames land issues as a communal deprivation: “Too many of our people remain landless or without enough land to feed their families because migrants and land grabbers have stolen our land. To address this injustice, we must return the land to its rightful owners.”

In crafting T2, we chose language that would be relevant to Kalenjin and Kikuyu respondents, highlighting a concern (landlessness and land shortage) shared by members of both communities. We expect that respondents from both groups would understand the reference to “migrants and land grabbers” as a reference to the other group. The claim that land should be returned to “rightful owners” was purposely ambiguous, allowing for the possibility that both Kalenjin and Kikuyu respondents would understand this as a reference to their own community, though potentially for different reasons. For Kalenjins, “rightful owners” may tap beliefs that indigeneity constitutes a legitimate claim to land ownership, while for Kikuyus this language might connect to beliefs that legitimate claims accrue to those who have purchased land through established legal channels.

If framing deprivation as a communal injustice (real or perceived) is effective, we expect that T2 will increase support for the hypothetical candidate relative to

the control. We include T1 as a check to verify that the possible effects of T2 can be attributed to the communal framing, not merely the promise to address land issues. Thus, we expect that if the communal framing hypothesis is correct, the effects of T2 should be greater than those for T1.

We sought, to the extent possible, to model T2 on actual campaign messages. While it is difficult to observe land-based appeals directly, anecdotal evidence suggests that land appeals in various forms have been common during elections in the Central Rift Valley in recent decades. Media and human rights reports provide examples of both fear-based and grievance-based appeals. For example, at a rally in 1991, William Ole Ntimama, a Maasai leader and government minister at the time, claimed that Kikuyus were land grabbers and must “lie low” [by voting for KANU] “to avoid being preyed on [by KANU].”⁸ In 1995, Simeon Nyachae, the Minister for Agriculture at the time, declared that, “all these areas bearing Maasai names [were] your land, and if you relax now, you will be pushed out and you will be doomed.”⁹ Nyachae’s speech warned supporters to remain vigilant or risk Kikuyu-led eviction. Similar appeals were made during the 2007 elections. For example, during the International Criminal Court’s investigation of the post-election violence, one witness claimed that William Ruto, Deputy President since 2013, promised “that if the ODM won the elections, they would uproot the tree stumps [a euphemism for Kikuyus] that are among the people” and they would “get rid of and send back to where they came from all the people who had taken over local farms and businesses.”¹⁰

Kikuyu leaders also appeal to ethnic grievances, especially in areas where Kikuyus see themselves as first-comers. For example, in part of Molo District Kikuyu candidates have appealed to the idea of removing the “Kalenjin threat” from the land. The effectiveness of this appeal is evident in an interview that one of the authors conducted in Nakuru in 2012. In the interview, a Kalenjin farmer gives his impressions of the parliamentary candidate for Molo district, whose campaign strategy involved promises to evict nearby Kalenjin.

In 2007, they voted in Mr. Kiuna, a retired army officer who is said to have been involved in 1997–1998 massacre of 59 Kalenjins in Naishi. During his campaigns he used to tell [Kikuyus] that if voted in, he was going to do to the Kalenjins in Mau Forest what he did to those Kalenjin in Naishi.¹¹ And so he was voted in.¹²

Finally, we draw on prior survey research by Klaus (2015), which indicates that a majority of Kalenjin and Kikuyu residents in the Central Rift Valley have heard appeals that draw on grievances related to land and promises to defend land rights

⁸ *Weekly Review* March 1, 1999. Ntimama later claimed in the Akiwumi Report (1999) that he meant that Kikuyus should “lie low to avoid being preyed by the leopard.”

⁹ Simeon Nyachae, *Standard*, June 18, 1995, p. 3.

¹⁰ ICC Pre-Trial Brief, September 9, 2013, ICC-01/09-01/11. William Ruto was MP of Eldoret North in 2007.

¹¹ The Naishi massacre followed the 1997 elections. Clashes began when Kalenjin raiders attacked Kikuyus. In reprisal attacks, over 35 Kalenjins were killed and 106 homes destroyed (Rutten 2001).

¹² Interview, Mauche (3-1), Nakuru County, October 4, 2012 (Klaus 2015).

INTRODUCTION (read by the enumerator):

Now I will ask you to listen to a speech made by a candidate named John [SURNAME] who is planning to run for parliament in a nearby constituency in 2017. After you listen to the recording, I will ask you for your views about the speech.

In this speech, [SURNAME] will discuss the policies and programs he would support if elected.

CANDIDATE SPEECH (audio recording):

Hello. I am asking for your support in the upcoming parliamentary election. I am from this area and know the problems people here face on a daily basis. I was born in Rift Valley and went to school in Nakuru before going to Nairobi for university. I now work as a lawyer in this county, where I live with my wife and four children.

People in this area struggle to find good jobs. There is too much insecurity. And too often the government fails to provide adequate funding for development. This area is a diverse place where people from many different parts of the country live together. Why is it that some people have access to education, while some people are left out? Why is it that some people have good jobs while others do not? Why do so many people continue to struggle today?

If you elect me to parliament, I will dedicate myself to uplifting the lives of people in this area. [T2: Too many of our people remain landless or without enough land to feed their families because migrants and land grabbers have stolen our land. To address this injustice, we must return the land to its rightful owners.] [T1 & T2: As your leader, my top priority will be to make sure that people in this area have enough land for farming.]

Thank you for your support. God bless you.

Fig. 1 Scripts

(see Table A1 in Supplemental Information, SI). While our main treatment (T2) is mild relative to some of these appeals, it represents a typical appeal type that respondents might encounter during actual campaigns.¹³

The survey experiment presents the hypothetical candidate as a co-ethnic leader for all respondents, signaling the candidate's ethnicity by surname. For this, we chose a list of common Kalenjin and Kikuyu surnames (SI Table A11), excluding names that might call to mind well-known political leaders from the area. A manipulation check found that the ethnic signal worked reasonably well: overall, about three-quarters of respondents identified the candidate as a co-ethnic, with about 15% guessing incorrectly and another 9% saying they were uncertain of his ethnic identity (SI Table A12). The effectiveness of the ethnicity signal, however,

¹³ Studies of racial priming in the U.S. show that less extreme types of messages, including implicit appeals that do not directly mention racial prejudices or sentiments, affect a range of voter dispositions (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino et al. 2002, 2018; White 2007; Huber and Lapinski 2006). Inspired by these works, we think there is much to be gained from studying various types of ethnic messages, even if we are precluded ethically from examining some of the more extreme variants.

varied across ethnic groups, with Kikuyu respondents being more likely to identify the candidate as a co-ethnic than Kalenjins (83 vs. 66%). Given the possibility that treatment assignment could affect responses to the manipulation check, we include all respondents in the analysis rather than excluding observations based on post-treatment criteria (Montgomery et al. 2018).¹⁴ We also show that the main results reported below are robust to excluding respondents who reported that the candidate was not a co-ethnic (Figure A3 in the SI).

We used a single actor to record the speeches (recorded in Swahili, Kenya's *lingua franca*), rather than using actors from each of the two target communities. We did this to ensure that our results would not be confounded by personal qualities of the actors' voices that might signal likeability, competence, or other traits. However, to create a single recording that would work for both groups we had to use an actor who spoke without an identifiable ethnic accent.¹⁵ This strategy meant that we were not able to use the actor's accent or other signals—such as speaking in vernacular—to convey co-ethnicity, increasing the risk that the recordings might be seen as artificial, given that shared accents and language are a common marker of co-ethnicity in the survey area. However, we were assured by discussions held during the pre-test that indicated that it is not uncommon for individuals from Kenya's urban areas (where accents are less pronounced) to run for political office in rural areas.

Our primary outcome of interest is support for the hypothetical candidate, which we measured with a question that asked, "how likely would you be to support this candidate," with answers recorded on a five-point scale (question wording for all variables is shown in the SI). To measure past violence exposure, we asked respondents whether they or members of their families were affected by the violence that followed the 2007 election or prior elections in 1992 and 1997. We included multiple questions that asked about land access, ownership, prior eviction, and fear of eviction. Given the content of the hypothetical campaign speeches, we worried about possible priming effects from these land questions. Following standard practice in single-shot survey experiments, we randomized the placement of these questions such that they fell before the treatments for half of all respondents.¹⁶

The sample included 834 respondents, divided roughly between Kalenjins and Kikuyus, drawn from six rural constituencies in Nakuru County, one of the main areas affected by the post-election violence that followed Kenya's 2007 election (a map of the survey area is provided in the SI). Co-ethnic enumerators interviewed

¹⁴ While we find no statistically significant evidence that treatment assignment affected responses to the manipulation check (Table A17 in the SI), we prefer the conservative approach of including respondents who "failed" the manipulation question. Robustness tests (Figure A3 in the SI) show that the main results are not sensitive to this choice.

¹⁵ The actor was a Luo who grew up on Kenya's coast, a diverse area where Swahili tends to be less accented. In pre-testing, we found that respondents were generally unable to guess the actor's ethnicity based on the recordings. In the full sample, only 11 respondents (1.3%) said they thought the candidate was Luo.

¹⁶ Table A18 in the SI shows no evidence that the placement of the land questions affected candidate evaluations. Table A14 shows that among those who received the land questions after the treatment, treatment assignment had negligible effects on our main indicators of perceived land access, land security, or fear of eviction.

all respondents to reduce the potential for social desirability bias.¹⁷ Interviews were conducted in respondents' homes using tablet computers. We provide additional details on the sampling procedures and a discussion of possible sources of bias in the SI.

Table 1 provides a profile of the sample population along several relevant dimensions.¹⁸ Across both communities, most households (92%) have access to land for farming; the typical plot size is small (median 1–2 acres); and a majority of households (59%) own some or all of the land they use for farming. At the same time, a large share (60%) report that the size of their land is insufficient to support their family's needs. Major differences are observed between Kikuyus and Kalenjins with regard to land security, prior eviction, and exposure to violence. Kikuyu respondents are three times more likely to report that their family has been evicted from its land (33 vs. 9%) and are nearly three times more likely to report that they or family members were affected by the 2007–2008 post-election violence (60 vs. 21%) or election violence in the 1990s (46 vs. 19%). Given this history of violent evictions during elections, which disproportionately affected the Kikuyu population, it is not surprising that many more Kikuyu respondents (70%) fear eviction from their land than Kalenjins (36%). Further, Kikuyus are about 8 percentage points more likely to view their land holdings as “not secure” (17 vs. 9%).

Do Appeals to Ethnic Grievance Work?

This section presents our findings in three steps.¹⁹ First, we present the primary results, testing for average treatment effects for the pooled sample, differences across insider and outsider groups, and whether framing the appeal as a communal injustice increases the effects. Second, we explore the two conditional hypotheses, which propose that land insecurity and/or prior violence exposure may condition how respondents react to the appeals.²⁰ We treat these interactive effects as suggestive both because the treatment-by-covariate results may be confounded by unmeasured factors and because the sample sizes for sub-group analysis are smaller (power calculations are presented in the SI). We note limitations related to power where

¹⁷ It is well established that interviewer ethnicity can affect answers to politically-sensitive questions (Adida et al. 2016). Dionne (2014), however, notes that respondents may sometimes prefer non-co-ethnic interviewers (e.g., in the case of deviant sexual behavior).

¹⁸ Balance statistics (Table A4 in the SI) show that the treatments are well balanced across pre-treatment covariates.

¹⁹ In addition to the tests reported here, we also examined a number of other hypotheses suggested by prior literature, focusing specifically on whether the following factors moderate the effects of the appeals: education, strength of ethnic identification, wealth, age, and gender. Results are presented in Table A16 in the SI.

²⁰ We are unable to test for conditional affects related to local ethnic composition or perceptions about which ethnic group settled an area first. We are limited both by a lack of information about local conditions as well as a research design that produced little variation across these dimensions (see sampling details in the SI).

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

	Kikuyu (47%)	Kalenjin (53%)	Total
Household has access to land for farming (%)	89	98	93
Land size (acres, median)	1–2	3–5	1–2
Own land used for farming (%)	56	62	59
Household not able to access enough land to support family (%)	63	56	60
Family has been evicted from land (%)	33	9	21
Fear of eviction high (%)	70	36	54
Perceived land security low (%)	17	9	13
Affected by post-2007 election violence (%)	60	21	41
Affected by violence during 1992 a/o 1997 election (%)	46	19	33
Female (%)	62	47	55
Age (in years, median)	39	33	36
Wealth (asset index, median)	0.15	–0.53	–0.11
Education (median)	Some secondary	Secondary completed	Some secondary

relevant. Third, we examine whether the appeals exacerbate inter-group tensions by exploring a range of non-electoral outcomes.

All analysis is based on OLS regression models. We present the findings graphically, and report the full regression results in the SI. Most sub-group analysis is based on models that use split samples (Kalenjin or Kikuyu), though we also present results from fully interacted models for those tests that estimate the differential effects of the treatments across ethnic groups in the SI.²¹ Table A4 in the SI shows that treatments are well balanced across covariates. Table A7 in the SI shows that the results reported below are similar when we include controls for standard demographic factors (age, education, gender) and the strength of ethnic attachments. At the conclusion of this section we address concerns related to social desirability bias, the use of surnames to signal candidate ethnicity, and external validity.

Primary Results

The first set of results (Fig. 2) shows the effect of each of the land appeals relative to the control condition. The results do not support H1: neither the neutral land appeal (T1) nor the ethnic injustice appeal (T2) affect support for the candidate in the pooled sample. The results also do not support hypothesis (H3) which proposed that the appeals should be more effective among ethnic insiders (Kalenjin respondents) than outsiders (Kikuyus). While the estimated effects of both appeals are positive among Kalenjins and negative among Kikuyus, the size of the effects is relatively small and cannot be distinguished from zero for either group, nor is the difference between the two groups significant for either treatment.²² While we are confident in the pooled results and those for the Kalenjin sample, we are more cautious with regard to the Kikuyu results, where the negative effects particularly for T1 are somewhat larger but imprecisely estimated.²³ Nonetheless, we note that the estimated effects for Kikuyus is in the opposite direction from our expectation. We are therefore confident that the appeals do not *increase* support for the candidate among either group, though we cannot fully rule out the possibility that T1 may reduce support among Kikuyus. The results do not support the theory that explicitly framing land appeal as a communal injustice is more effective than a neutral land appeal (H2). We find that the injustice frame (T2) was no more effective than T1 for the pooled sample or for either of the sub-groups. Psycho-social benefits that might unite group members around shared group injustices appear to have little pull in this context.

²¹ Tables A11 and A12 in the SI show that the results are not dependent on model specification. Alternative models that account for possible censoring (tobit) and the discrete nature of the outcome options (ordered logit) produce substantively similar results.

²² Results from an interacted model in SI Table A8 show that the difference between Kalenjins and Kikuyus is not significant for T1 (diff. = 0.24; $p = 0.30$) nor for T2 (diff. = 14; $p = 0.54$).

²³ The minimum detectable effect (MDE) for the Kikuyu sample is 0.43 on the 5-point scale used to measure candidate support. Power calculations indicate that we would need a prohibitively large sample of over 1600 respondents to determine whether the effects for T1 (-0.18) are statistically significant.

Several considerations are relevant to these null findings. First, with regard to possible ceiling effects, while slightly more than half (53%) of respondents in the control condition chose the highest category on the dependent variable (“very likely” to support the candidate), the mean response was “somewhat likely” (4.08 on a five-point scale), and we observe variation across the range of answer options. Moreover, we found that other factors, such as age and education, were associated with significant variation in candidate support, indicating that ceiling effects are likely not a concern. Second, as noted, we think it unlikely that these null findings can be attributed to weak treatments. We designed the script so that the messages related to land and ethnicity were at the end of the speech, such that this content would be forefront in respondents’ minds after the recording. Moreover, the text of the treatments is relatively long: T1 is 11% of the total speech (21 of 194 words) and T2 is 16% of the speech (37 of 232 words). Third, we doubt that the null findings stem from lack of interest or comprehension. In the pilot phase, we found respondents to be highly engaged with the recording, and in the full survey, subjective assessments by enumerators show that 97% of respondents were perceived to be interested in the survey. Comprehension was also excellent, with 86% of respondents experiencing no difficulty answering any questions, according to ratings by the enumerators. Moreover, the sample size ($n=834$ for the pooled analysis) is sufficiently large to capture even relatively small effects in the combined sample, though, as noted, we are more cautious with the sub-group analysis, particularly for the Kikuyu sample.

Land Insecurity

We next explore H4, which proposed that the effects of the appeals might be greater among land-insecure respondents, given that these respondents stand to gain materially if the candidate is elected. For this, we interact the treatments with a dummy variable for respondents who perceive their land as “not secure,” the lowest option on the three-point scale used to measure perceived land security. The results are shown in Fig. 3. We find mixed support for H4: land insecurity conditions the effect of the appeals in the way we expected for Kalenjins but not for Kikuyus. Among Kalenjins who feel land insecure, both land appeals have a large and substantively meaningful effect, increasing support for the candidate by about 1.5 points on a 5-point scale.²⁴ However, as the large confidence intervals around these estimates suggest, there are relatively few Kalenjin respondents who perceive their land tenure to be “not secure” (only 9.3% in our sample). It is noteworthy, moreover, that even among this sub-population for whom the treatments increase support for the hypothetical candidate, framing land as a group injustice (T2) proves no more effective than the neutral land appeal (T1). These findings bolster our conclusion that the efficacy of communal framing has been overstated in the literature.

²⁴ Fully interacted models in Table A9 in the SI confirm that land-insecure Kalenjins and Kikuyus react differently to the treatments, as indicated by the triple interaction between the treatments, ethnic group, and perceived land insecurity.

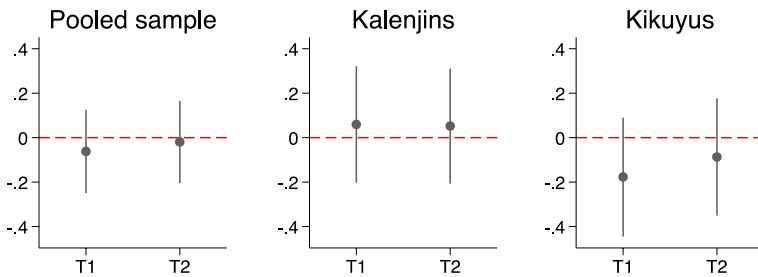


Fig. 2 Effects on candidate support. Figure shows the estimated effect of each treatment on the likelihood of supporting the candidate, relative to the control condition. OLS regression results are shown in Table A6 in the SI. Error bars show 90% confidence intervals

To probe these findings further, we explore the determinants of perceived land insecurity. Results (not shown) indicate that objective measures of land size or subjective measures of land sufficiency only weakly correlate with perceived land insecurity. However, we find a stronger correlation with prior land eviction, suggesting that the positive effects of the treatments among Kalenjin respondents who rate their land holdings as insecure likely does not stem from being land poor, but rather from fears of being evicted from one's land.²⁵

Among Kikuyus, the appeals are ineffective even among those who rate their land holdings as “not secure” (roughly 17% of the sample). The results also show that the neutral land appeal in which the candidate promises to ensure that all people in the area have access to land has a *negative* and significant effect, though T2, which frames land in terms of communal grievance, has no effect. It is unclear why only the more moderate land appeal (T1) would produce a negative effect.

Violence Exposure

We hypothesized that given the repeated incidence of violence in Kenya, citizens from vulnerable communities may reject politicians whose rhetoric and policies might exacerbate inter-ethnic tension and increase the risk of future conflict (H5). To explore this possibility, we interact the treatments with a measure of prior exposure to violence, an indicator variable that takes on a value of 1 for individuals who were affected by violence associated with the 1992, 1997, or 2007 elections (overall, 51% of respondents were affected by violence in one or more of these elections).

Figure 4 shows the estimated effects of the land appeals by violence exposure. Again, the results differ by ethnic group. Among Kalenjins, past violence does not condition individual responses, while for Kikuyus, both appeals reduce support for the candidate among those who have been affected by prior violence. We treat

²⁵ We also show in SI Figure A2 that neither land size nor perceived land inadequacy condition responses to the treatments, whereas the interaction with prior eviction is positive for both treatments (though significant only for T2).

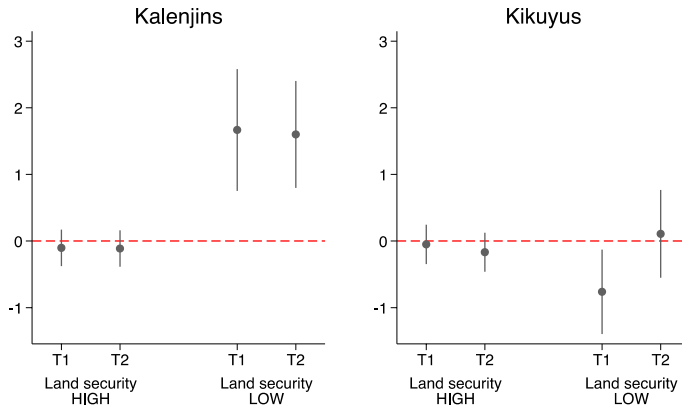


Fig. 3 Interaction with perceived land security by ethnic group. Figure shows the estimated marginal effect of each treatment on the likelihood of supporting the candidate, relative to the control condition. Treatment variables are interacted with a dummy variable for perceived land security (high/low). OLS regression results are shown in Table A6 in the SI. Error bars show 90% confidence intervals

these results as suggestive given that for Kikuyus only T1 is significant at conventional levels (the p -values for T1 and T2 are 0.04 and 0.19 respectively). Moreover, because of the imprecision in the estimated effects for this test, we cannot be sure that the treatments reduce support for the candidate among Kikuyus only and not among Kalenjins.²⁶ We also cannot rule out the possibility that the appeals may increase support among Kikuyus who have not experienced past violence: while the treatments produce consistently positive effects, the estimates are imprecise.

While the evidence is only suggestive, we ask why exposure to past violence appears to affect Kikuyu responses to the treatments, but not Kalenjin responses. This difference likely reflects the greater vulnerability of Kikuyu residents to electoral violence in the Central Rift Valley. As noted, Kikuyus have been victimized at higher rates during past episodes of electoral violence. Our data (Table A3 in the SI) show that nearly 7 out of every 10 Kikuyus in our sample (69%) report having been affected, almost three times the rate for Kalenjins (21%). Equally, Kikuyus are much more likely to have been displaced by the most recent 2007–2008 post-election violence: 53% of Kikuyus in our sample reported that they or members of their families were forced to leave the area where they were living at the time of the election, relative to 10% of Kalenjins. As a result, Kikuyus are more likely than Kalenjins to see themselves and their families as vulnerable to future conflicts. Support for this supposition comes from a survey question asking respondents how much they feared being evicted from their land: 70% of Kikuyus chose the highest option on the scale (“a lot”), relative to 36% of Kalenjins. The result, we propose, is that Kikuyus who have experienced past violence (and fear its repeat) punish leaders whose actions or rhetoric might spur future conflict.

²⁶ The interacted model in Table A10 in the SI indicates that the triple interactions between each treatment, ethnic group, and past violence are not significant.

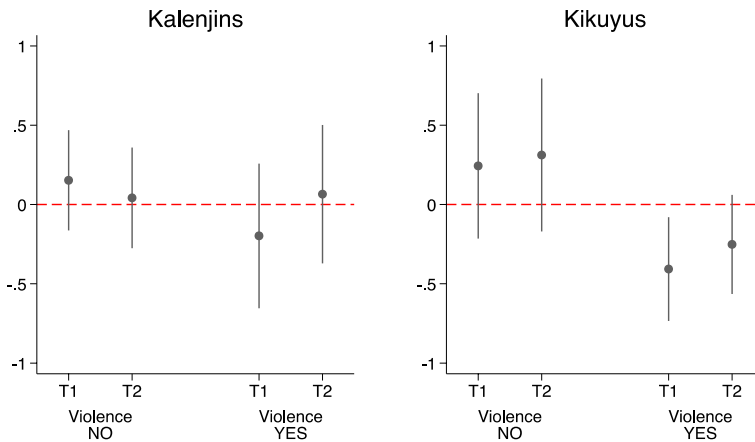


Fig. 4 Interaction with exposure to past violence by ethnic group. Figure shows the estimated marginal effect of each treatment on the likelihood of supporting the candidate, relative to the control condition. Treatment variables are interacted with an indicator variable for prior violence exposure. OLS regression results are shown in Table A6 in the SI. Error bars show 90% confidence intervals

In sum, the results presented in this section show that politicians derive relatively little benefit (in terms of increasing voter support) from appealing to ethnic grievances related to land in Kenya's Central Rift Valley. For most individuals, such appeals are ineffective or produce a negative reaction. And while we observe positive effects among one sub-group—land-insecure Kalenjins—these respondents comprise a small proportion of the sample.

Effects on Other Outcomes

The final set of analyses asks whether ethnic land appeals affect non-electoral attitudes. As noted, there is widespread concern that emotive appeals to ethnic injustice may exacerbate communal antipathies, contribute to violence, and increase support for nativist policies that exclude outsiders. To gain some purchase on these potential effects, we included a secondary battery of questions that were posed after the main outcome questions. We focus first on trust in the “other” ethnic community (Kalenjins for Kikuyu respondents, and Kikuyus for Kalenjin respondents). Second, we probe views on land policies, asking whether respondents believe that outsiders “deserve” to be able own land in the area. This is a particularly relevant measure in the Kenyan context, given the high-profile debates about land access and control in recent years. Finally, we ask whether respondents support the use of violence for “defending land.”

The results in Fig. 5 are reassuring. They show that the land appeals do not reduce inter-group trust or increase support for the use of violence among members of either ethnic community. And while the appeals in some cases do produce a modest increase in support for nativist policies that restrict land ownership, these effects are not significant.

Potential Concerns

We briefly address four potential concerns. First, given the sensitive nature of ethnicity and land in the survey area, social desirability bias may limit respondents' willingness to express support for the hypothetical candidate, particularly in Treatment 2. Anticipating this, we adopted two strategies. As noted, all interviews were conducted by co-ethnic enumerators. We also had respondents listen to the recordings with headphones to reduce the influence of others who might be present during the interview, including the interviewer. We also show (Table A11 in the SI) that education—a factor that we would expect to be related to social desirability concerns—does not condition responses to the appeals.

Second, we noted that the strategy used to signal the candidate's ethnicity by surname was less effective than expected. This raises the concern that the effects of the land appeals may have been weakened because some respondents did not believe the candidate to be a co-ethnic. However, we show in Figure A3 in the SI that the main findings hold when we limit the analysis only to those who believed the candidate to be a co-ethnic.

Third, given the inherent artificiality of survey experiments, some question whether the findings can shed light on the real-world phenomena being studied (see Barabas and Jerit 2010). We note, however, that the typical concern with regard to survey experiments is the potential for *stronger* effects than would occur in the real world (Kinder and Palfrey 1993; Gaines et al. 2007). Given that our main finding is the absence of an effect for most respondents, concerns that the artificial context might exaggerate the treatment effect are not relevant. What about the alternative possibility, namely that our treatments are too weak to produce an effect? As we discussed, the types of messages we seek to study—appeals to ethnic grievances—are typically embedded in inflammatory public speeches at campaign rallies, conditions that we obviously do not want to replicate in a controlled setting. We therefore cannot rule out the possibility that more extreme appeals may have effects that we cannot detect here. At the same time, we note that the *direction* of the effects observed for sub-groups—land-insecure Kalenjins and violence-affected Kikuyus—should also hold for more extreme treatments.

Fourth, it is important to note that the political context at the time of the study may have weakened the effects of the treatments. Though Kalenjins and Kikuyus have often been on opposing sides of the electoral divide since the return of multiparty elections in the early 1990s, the formation of the Jubilee Alliance prior to the 2013 election brought together many Kalenjin and Kikuyu voters as supporters of the same electoral coalition. The party, which served as the vehicle for the election of Uhuru Kenyatta (Kikuyu) as president and William Ruto (Kalenjin) as vice president, is commonly viewed as a Kikuyu-Kalenjin alliance, reflecting the ethnic identities of its top leaders (Lynch 2014). While the formation of a shared coalition may to some extent blunt the effects of appeals to inter-communal grievances, we expect that local tensions related to land persist in spite of this national-level alliance. Interviews conducted by one of the authors (Klaus 2015) in the Rift Valley after the formation of Jubilee demonstrate that grievances related to land remained a widespread concern among both Kalenjin and Kikuyu participants.

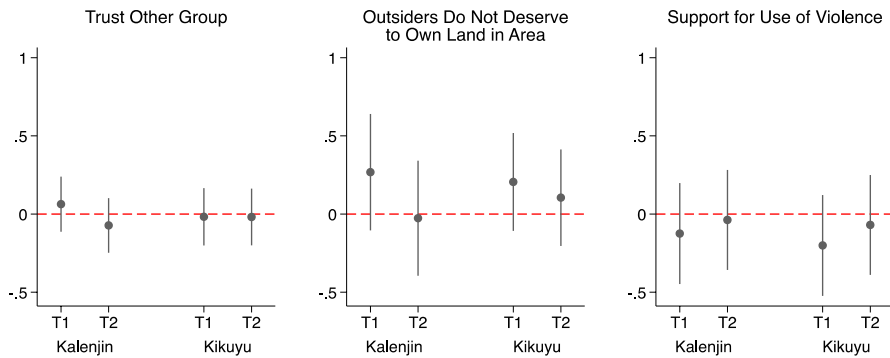


Fig. 5 Other outcomes. Figure shows the estimated marginal effect of each treatment relative to the control condition. Question wording for the dependent variables is found in the SI. OLS regression results are shown in Table A10 in the SI. Error bars show 90% confidence intervals

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper explores the political effects of ethnic grievance appeals in a context where land has been a source of inter-group tension and conflict. The results of the survey experiment show that the appeals have surprisingly little effect: most respondents from so-called insider and outsider communities are either unmoved by such appeals or respond by punishing the candidate who employs them. Positive effects are confined to one narrow sub-group, land-insecure Kalenjins. Framing land as a communal injustice is no more effective than merely promising to address land insecurity. We find suggestive evidence that prior exposure to violence may weaken support for candidates using ethnic grievance appeals. Beyond these possible electoral effects, we find that the appeals do not exacerbate mistrust between groups, nor increase support for ethnically-exclusive policies or violent programs of action. These results are encouraging: they suggest that politicians are better off eschewing appeals to ethnic grievances.

How should we reconcile these findings with the widespread perception that divisive ethnic appeals are an effective tool for politicians to rally co-ethnic voters? While a more definitive answer to this question awaits further research, we offer five potential explanations. First, we believe that the reliance on anecdotal data sources and a focus on the most extreme cases has led existing research to overstate the effects of divisive ethnic rhetoric. The findings presented here suggest that a useful avenue for future research would be to examine more systematically when such appeals are likely to succeed and when they will fail. Second, we suspect that repeated use may blunt the effects of divisive ethnic appeals, reducing their effectiveness over time. The absence of an effect among most respondents in this study may reflect weariness toward political leaders who have played the “ethnic card” over multiple election rounds. Third, outbreaks of violence may make citizens unresponsive to potentially divisive appeals, a possibility not recognized in the existing literature. The backlash effect observed among Kikuyus who have been victimized in the past suggests the plausibility of this interpretation. The null effects for those

who have not been affected by violence—both Kikuyu and Kalenjin—may also reflect a generalized weariness from repeated bouts of ethnic conflict in the Central Rift Valley. Fourth, politicians may employ divisive even if such appeals only affect a narrow slice of the electorate. In competitive races the movement of even a small number of voters can have consequential effects. Further, these appeals may serve other goals beyond increasing electoral support (e.g., driving up turn-out, mobilizing violent action, or intimidating opposition supporters) that we do not study in this paper. Finally, as noted throughout the paper, we cannot rule out the possibility that other types of appeals may be more effective (e.g., more extreme messages or those that refer to issues other than land). And it may be that the cumulative effect of repeated messages or messages that tap multiple sources of grievance would be more effective. Nonetheless, the results presented here suggest that most citizens have little appetite for chauvinistic leaders who seek to rally their community against a purported ethnic rival.

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