Political Mobilization of Layered Ethnic Identities[1]

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Abstract

The ethnic identities of many communities in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa are layered: larger-scale superordinate ethnic groups consist of smaller-scale subordinate ethnic (sub)groups. This underappreciated feature of ethnicity has far-reaching political ramifications. In settings where ethnic identities are layered, politicians can access the considerable benefits of coethnic voting by mobilizing the electoral support of fellow members of any ethnic layer. Presented with such choices, election candidates adapt their identity mobilization strategies to the ethnic composition of electorates in order to target and coordinate with suitable coethnic electorate segments, form winning coalitions, and fragment the voting blocs assembled by their electoral rivals. The multiplicity and malleability of available layered identities facilitates both the construction and fragmentation of cross-segment alliances as well as individual segments. Evidence from fifty-four electoral contests in Marsabit in Northern Kenya provides support for this argument.

Introduction

Politicians commonly rely on ethnic ties to attract electoral support (Bates, 1974; Koter, 2013; Posner, 2005). Shared identities, languages, and cultural practices, in-group and out-group biases, and intra-ethnic networks all help election candidates to identify, target, coordinate with, and secure the votes of constituents (Bassi et al., 2011; Birnir, 2007). Politicians' efforts to tap into these benefits of coethnicity affect the political salience of ethnic identities, interethnic relationships, coalition formation and persistence, and goods provision (Beiser-McGrath &

Metternich, 2020; Chandra, 2007; Horowitz, 1985; Wantchekon, 2003). A rich literature documents this electoral importance of ethnicity, but scholars of ethnic politics, notably in Political Science, have rarely recognized that many election contestants have more than one ethnic identity that they can mobilize. The ethnic allegiances of numerous communities in Central Asia (Schatz, 2004), the Middle East (Khoury & Kostiner, 1991; Lindholm, 1986), and Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Kaufert, 1977; Lynch, 2011a, 2011b; Nugent, 2001) are hierarchically layered: larger-scale upper-layer *superordinate* ethnic groups consist of smaller-scale lower-layer *subordinate* ethnic (sub)groups such as moieties, phratries, clans, and lineages. Politicians can access the advantages of coethnic voting by mobilizing the support of fellow members of any such layer of ethnicity. This article explains election candidates' decisions to prioritize specific layer allegiances and the consequences of the adoption of these strategies.

I argue that politicians strategically adapt their layer mobilization choices to the ethnic composition of electorates in order to target and coordinate with suitable coethnic electorate segments, form winning coalitions, and fragment those of their opponents. During election campaigns candidates emphasize—and thereby increase the political salience of—those of the multiple ethnic identities at their disposal that enable them to target electorate segments most conducive to the creation of winning coalitions. Depending on the size of the targeted segments, to secure victory candidates exclusively rely on their coethnics or form alliances with politicians representing other segments. These coalitions fragment easily amid the multiplicity and plasticity of available ethnic identities, corresponding electorate segments, and alliance configurations, although norms, networks, and organizations that facilitate intra-segment coordination account

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for the relative durability of individual segments, while institutional constraints on member behavior make longterm survival of cross-segment alliances possible.

To substantiate this argument, I take advantage of frequent (re)districting in Marsabit, Kenya's largest county, which is inhabited by members of several layered ethnic communities. Their repeated reassignment to new electoral districts allows me to document the effects of changes in electorate ethnic composition on layer mobilization strategies and coalition formation and persistence. To this end, I analyze original archival, interview, and news media data on fifty-four gubernatorial and parliamentary electoral contests held in Marsabit between 1963 and 2017.

I find that, determined to maximize the prospects of electoral victory by targeting advantageous coethnic segments, election candidates consistently emphasize superordinate identities in electoral districts shared by multiple superordinate ethnic groups and subordinate allegiances in constituencies dominated by single superordinate ethnic groups. Politicians' layer mobilization choices invariably change following boundary adjustments that alter electoral district type. Community leaders use both preexisting and purposefully created intra-segment institutions to coordinate electoral campaigns, although segments fragment periodically. Because no targeted segments constitute the majority of respective electorates, successful candidates form cross-segment alliances, which are typically fragile—not least due to adversaries' fragmentation efforts—although skillful use of the benefits of incumbency and integration of power-sharing arrangements can lead to longterm coalition persistence. The adoption of these strategies elevates the political salience of mobilized ethnic identities.

These findings allow me to make several contributions to the literature. First, I highlight the political importance of the layered composition of many ethnic groups. In doing so, I connect

the active Political Science research agenda on ethnic politics with the work of scholars from other disciplines. Second, my examination of ethnic coalition formation, durability, and disintegration helps to fill a notable gap in the literature. Third, by explaining the effects of electorate ethnic composition on politicians' strategic choices and demonstrating the malleability of ethnic allegiances and alliances I advance the scholarship on ethnic geography, ethnic voting, and the political salience of collective identities.

Literature

Scholars of ethnic politics have gathered extensive evidence of the frequency and effectiveness of coethnic appeals for political, and especially electoral, support. This literature tends to take the choice of mobilized ethnic identities for granted, in large part because major contributions rely on catalogues, notably the Afrobarometer, *Atlas narodov mira*, and Ethnologue, that only list one ethnic affiliation per community, creating the impression that ethnic groups are unitary, internally undifferentiated entities. This impression belies the layered composition of many ethnic communities, readily acknowledged by anthropologists (Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Nagata, 1974; Okamura, 1981), psychologists (Kramer & Brewer, 1984; Wenzel et al., 2007), and some economists (Moscona et al., 2020) and sociologists (Wimmer, 2017), but rarely recognized by political scientists, a few works on the 'levels of ethnopolitical aggregation' notwithstanding (Ferree, 2010; Mozaffar et al., 2003).

Segmentary lineage societies represent the most extensively studied instances of such aggregation: superordinate maximal segments such as Arabs, Kazakhs, Nuer, Somalis and, in Marsabit, Borana, Gabbra, and Rendille are divided into series of subordinate major, minor, and

minimal segments (e.g. Khoury & Kostiner 1991; Schatz 2004; Schlee & Shongolo, 2012). Analogous arrangements result from the formation of new identities layered atop preexisting ethnic affiliations. Notable examples include the Akan in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana; the Kalenjin, Luhya, and Sabaot in Kenya; and the 'panethnic' Asian and Latino American identities in the United States (Hoffman & Long, 2012; Lynch, 2011a, 2011b; Nugent, 2001; Okamoto & Mora, 2014). The ethnicity catalogues typically list only such ethnic communities' superordinate allegiances, which are not always politically salient. Indeed, the literature on layered ethnic identities documents substantial contextual and temporal variation in layer salience. For instance, the superordinate Akan identity is prominent in Ivorian politics, while Ghana experiences intense political contestation between the subordinate Asante and Fante groups.

Despite its inattention to layered identities, the ethnic politics scholarship illuminates the causes of this variation. It shows that political institutions such as group size (Posner, 2004, 2017), cross-cutting cleavages (Bormann, 2019; Dunning & Harrison, 2010), electoral system (Huber, 2012), political regime (Posner, 2005), and the presence and strength of intermediaries (Kasara, 2007; Koter, 2013) create incentives for individuals to mobilize and, thereby, increase the political salience of specific (caste, ethnic, linguistic, racial, or religious) collective identities (Eifert et al., 2010; Koter, 2013). Well-documented identity switching in response to institutional changes indicates that such choices are instrumental and situational (Chandra, 2005; McCauley, 2014; McLaughlin, 2007; Posner 2005).

Mobilization of the selected identities offers both politicians and their constituents considerable benefits, most extensively investigated by scholarship on coethnic voting, which shows that coethnicity facilitates voter identification and targeting, candidate selection (Bassi et

al., 2011; Birnir, 2007), campaign coordination (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007), patronage distribution (Bates, 1974; Chandra, 2007; Wantchekon, 2003), and accountability (Miguel & Gugerty, 2005). Such coordination is more difficult in cross-ethnic coalitions, but a small literature on the subject shows that their emergence is possible where politicians can make credible commitments or offer rewards to allies (Beiser-McGrath & Metternich, 2020; Francois et al., 2015; Gadjanova, 2021).

Much like identity choices and mobilization strategies, alliance formation is thus a function of politicians' adaptations to prevailing political conditions. The growing body of work on ethnic geography in Political Science indicates that these conditions include the spatial distribution of ethnic groups, which shapes the ethnic composition of electorates (Ejdemyr et al., 2018; Harris & Posner, 2019; Hassan, 2017; Kasara, 2007; Robinson, 2017).

Political mobilization of layered ethnic identities

The existing literature shows that election candidates' identity mobilization efforts reflect and shape the political environments in which they operate, but it has not investigated their adaptations to the particular opportunities and constraints present in the many settings where ethnic identities are hierarchically layered. In this section of the article, I draw and elaborate on this scholarship to articulate a theory that explains layer mobilization and its political ramifications.

The theory, which applies to settings with competitive elections and hierarchically layered and politically salient ethnic identities, premises that election candidates mobilize ethnic layers that correspond to coethnic electorate segments conducive to the construction of winning coalitions. Mobilization refers to politicians' efforts to enhance the political salience of specific

layers of hierarchically layered ethnic communities. In such communities, ethnic groups are layered atop—and superordinate and subordinate in relation to—one another. Layers are asymmetrical in that larger-scale superordinate layers comprise multiple smaller-scale subordinate layers (Kramer & Brewer, 1984; Wenzel et al., 2007). Layer mobilization enables election candidates to target coethnic electorate segments, or discrete sub-groups of the electorate to which they belong and can appeal for electoral support, of desired size.

Coethnic segments serve as convenient bases for, and facilitate, the construction of winning coalitions because they allow election candidates to use their ethnic affiliations—identities, languages, cultural practices, norms of behavior, community organizations, and interpersonal networks—to identify, target, coordinate with, and secure the support of substantial numbers of voters who can likewise access the benefits of coethnicity to express preferences and hold elected representatives accountable. To this end, politicians mobilize the identities that they share with segment members: they appeal to in-group solidarity and common interests, play up out-group threats, encourage voters to prioritize ethnic allegiances, and assert their suitability as community representatives. Consequent intensification of the mobilized identities' political salience helps contenders for political office to not only target coethnic segments, but also define and strengthen segment boundaries.[2]

Membership in layered ethnic communities provides politicians with a range of targetable segments to choose from. Because all layers offer distinct identities, customs, and social networks and structures, they present equivalent mobilization opportunities. However, layer asymmetry produces segments of varying size. This variation allows election candidates to strategical-

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[2] In some settings, cross-cutting cleavages offer comparable electoral advantages (Dunning & Harrison, 2010).

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ly target segments most conducive to winning coalition formation (Posner, 2005).[3] Proportional

representation systems reward the selection of smaller segments (Reilly & Reynolds, 1999), but

they also reduce the political salience of ethnicity (Huber, 2012). In district systems, on which I

focus in this article because they both politicize ethnicity and are more common in countries

where ethnicity is politically salient,[4] optimal segment size depends on the electorate ethnic

composition. Figure 1 illustrates candidates' adaptations to different electorate configurations.

Figure 1. Electorate ethnic composition and layer mobilization choices (bold and underlined)

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Layers	Identifier and segment size							
Superordinat	A 35%			B 30%		C 20%		D 10%	E 5%
Subordinate	*A1*	*A2*	*A3*	*B1*	*B2*	*C1*	*C2*	*D1*	*E1 5%*

II

Layers	Identifier and segment size							
Superordinate	A 40%			B 30%			C 20%		D 10%
Subordinate	*A1 20%*	*A2 10%*	*A3 10%*	*B1 10%*	*B2 10%*	*B3 10%*	*C1 10%*	*C2 10%*	*D1 10%*

III

Layers	Identifier and segment size				
Superordinate	A 70%			B 20%		C 10%
Subordinate	*A1 30%*	*A2 30%*	*A3 10%*	*B1 10%*	*B2 10%*	*C1 10%*

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[3] Posner compares the mobilization of ethnic and non-ethnic (linguistic) identities. I extend his seminal work by discussing the electoral strategies of politicians who can choose between multiple distinct ethnic allegiances.

[4] In Sub-Saharan Africa, twenty-one countries use district systems, thirteen PR, and six hybrid. India, where ethnic politics has also been extensively studied, has a first-past-the-post system.

	Layers	Identifier and segment size						
I V	Superordinate	A 85%					B 10%	C 5%
	Subordinate	*A1 25%*	*A2 15%*	*A3 15%*	*A4 15%*	*A5 15%*	*B1 10%*	*C1 5%*

In electoral districts shared by multiple superordinate ethnic groups—such as districts I and II in Figure 1—large segments that correspond to superordinate layers can deliver electoral victory outright or in alliance with a handful of other segments, while subordinate layer mobilization yields itself to segments too small to produce winning coalitions except as part of multiplex cross-segment alliances. Both layer mobilization strategies not only provide access to the benefits of coethnicity, but also allow election candidates to use their ethnic identities to differentiate themselves from competitors amid contestation between distinct ethnic groups. In electoral districts dominated by individual superordinate groups—including districts III and IV—subordinate layer mobilization is similarly conducive to cross-segment competition and candidate differentiation. In contrast, superordinate layer mobilization in such districts precludes meaningful cross-segment competition and impedes candidate differentiation. Accordingly, election candidates benefit from mobilizing their superordinate identities in districts shared by multiple superordinate groups and from subordinate layer mobilization in districts dominated by individual superordinate groups.

These strategic adaptations to the electorate ethnic composition elevate the political salience of selected identities, but politicians—and their constituents—retain access to other layers, which remain available for mobilization in contests in electoral districts with different elec-

torate ethnic composition, including where it changes following (re)districting. Therefore, layer mobilization choices and relative layer salience can vary both over time and across districts.

The plasticity of layered allegiances also presents election candidates with arrays of potential winning coalitions.[5] Coalition formation and survival are both conditional on members' ability to enforce commitments, reconcile competing interests, organize election campaigns, get out the vote, apportion spoils of victory, and resolve internal disputes.

Intra-segment norms, networks, and organizations facilitate such coordination within individual segments and account for the particular attractiveness of single-segment winning coalitions. Such coalitions' creation is, however, only possible in districts with targeted segments large enough to singlehandedly deliver electoral victory. Although relatively durable, segments can also fragment where internal coordination mechanisms prove insufficient to ensure equitable representation and satisfactory resource access, and/or settle disputes as well as following (re)districting.

In districts where the electorate ethnic composition necessitates formation of cross-segment winning coalitions, the relative difficulty of cross-segment coordination incentivizes exclusion of dominant groups capable of marginalizing smaller segments,[6] creation of oversized coalitions,[7] and, because coordination challenges increase with ethnic distance—even where internalization of cross-cutting cleavages is possible (Bormann, 2019)—cooperation between related

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[5] The availability of numerous coalitions that all offer access to the benefits of coethnicity disincentivizes mobilization of non-ethnic identities, which is more attractive in settings where ethnicity is less malleable (Posner, 2005).

[6] Such as 2+3+4(+5) in district III or A2+A3+A4+A5 in IV.

[7] Such as 2+3+4+5 in district I, 1+3+4 in II, A1+A2 in III, or A2+A3+A4+A5 in IV.

segments.[8] Formal alliance organizations such as political parties can provide fora for cross-segment negotiations in addition to overseeing electoral campaign operations, but enforcement of pre-election agreements depends on the existence of institutional constraints on member behavior in the form of small segment size differences, power-sharing arrangements such as seat rotation, or, where electoral systems encourage the formation of multi-district alliances, distribution of candidacies across segments (Beiser-McGrath & Metternich, 2020).[9] In the absence of such constraints, elected coalition representatives can readily renege on commitments to cross-segment allies, including to satisfy coethnic demands for preferential treatment. Unless officeholders use their influence over government bodies and resource allocation to preclude successful electoral challenges and, therefore, disincentivize defection, internal disaffection and its exploitation by opponents amid the availability of numerous alternative coalition configurations makes for unstable and short-lived cross-segment alliances.

Research design and data

My empirical investigation of the political mobilization of layered ethnic identities leverages the characteristics, and periodic transformations, of Marsabit's political institutions, which allow me to control for multiple potential predictors of political behavior and attribute layer selection and alliance creation and durability to election candidates' strategic adaptations to electorate ethnic composition. This section introduces the case of Marsabit and outlines my empirical strategy.

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[8] Such as A1+A2, rather than A2+B1+B2+C, in district III, or A2+A3+A4+A5, rather than A3+A4+A5+B+C, in IV in Figure 1.

[9] Due to cross-district variation in electorate ethnic composition, members of such coalitions may mobilize different ethnic layers in concurrent electoral contests.

Marsabit (Map 1) is the largest (by area) and, due to its (semi)arid physical environment, least densely populated of Kenya's forty-seven counties. Most of its 460,000 (KNBS, 2020) inhabitants belong to layered ethnic communities, which occupy distinct territories. The Borana, of whom approximately 150,000 live in Marsabit, are divided into two moieties and multiple clans, subclans, and lineages (Bassi, 2005). The Gabbra, with a similar population, comprise some forty clans grouped into five phratries and two moieties (Schlee, 1989). The Rendille, segmented into nine clans, eight of which form two moieties, number around 100,000, including members of the bicultural Ariaal community (Sato, 1984; Smith, 1998). Other layered ethnic groups—the Burji, Sakuye, Samburu, Somali, and Turkana—account for most of the remainder of the county's population. I detail the politically salient layers of the Marsabit ethnic communities, only some of which are listed in the ethnicity catalogues—and then as single-layer groups—in Appendix 1.

Map 1. Marsabit: location and parliamentary constituencies

Local politicians rely on their ethnic affiliations to attract support in the fiercely competitive elections, held in first-past-the-post single-member districts, for seats in the bicameral Parliament of Kenya—comprised of the National Assembly and, since 2013, the Senate—and for positions in the Marsabit County Government, established following the adoption of Kenya's 2010 constitution, which devolved much of the national government's power and resources to county administrations. County-wide electoral districts elect Marsabit's governor and deputy governor, senator, and woman member of parliament (MP). These districts' creation ahead of the 2013 elections bucked the trend of ethnic homogenization followed by the constituencies that elect Marsabit's other MPs. Borana-plurality Marsabit-Moyale constituency established in 1963 was in 1966 split into Gabbra-plurality Marsabit North and Borana-dominated Moyale; in 1988 Marsabit North gave way to Gabbra-dominated North Horr and Borana-plurality Saku. Only Rendille-dominated Laisamis (previously Marsabit South and Rendille) has retained its original boundaries.[10] Overall, between 1963 and 2017 six distinct electorate ethnic configurations, detailed in Appendix 2, decided fifty-four contests for ten different elected positions, a considerable sample size for such a geographically focused study.

(Re)districting has alternately produced electoral districts shared by multiple superordinate ethnic groups and dominated by individual superordinate groups, but it has had no discernible effect on group characteristics such as customary governance systems, livelihood strategies, and class and religious identities; individual characteristics of politicians and their constituents; or other plausible Marsabit-specific predictors of political behavior. By holding these variables constant, I can attribute political strategy modification following (re)districting to

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[10] The Marsabit electoral districts roughly correspond to the district types from Figure 1. See Figure 2.

changes in the electorate ethnic composition insofar that shocks exogenous to local politics have not influenced politicians' choices.

Two such alternative explanations can be identified. Kenya's democratization in the 1990s certainly increased the competitiveness—already high under authoritarian rule—of Marsabit elections. However, it does not correspond to any changes in electoral district boundaries or local politicians' mobilization choices; as such, the incidence of (re)districting allows me to control for democratization. Political strategies remained similarly unchanged after devolution, but their ramifications played out more completely because constitutional reforms raised the stakes of political contestation, including in the newly-created county-wide electoral districts and especially over the powerful office of the governor, who controls the county government and its substantial budget (KES 47.7 billion, or approximately USD 415 million, between 2013 and 2021).

Accordingly, although the research design outlined above provides considerable explanatory power by leveraging the frequency of (re)districting and controlling for most predictors of political behavior in Marsabit other than electorate ethnic composition, it cannot fully account for the impacts of devolution. This design also precludes examination of layer mobilization in settings with majority-segment electoral districts, electoral systems other than Kenya's first-past-the-post single-member-district setup, and no spatial segregation of ethnic groups. However, while the generalizability of findings drawn from single cases is necessarily limited, insofar that my argument's scope conditions accurately define the universe of cases, the political strategies adopted in Marsabit can be expected to be representative of other cases that

satisfy those conditions. In this respect, Marsabit constitutes a typical case in Seawright and Gerring's (2008) typology.

I complement my research design's inherent inferential advantages with a causal narrative (Patterson and Monroe, 1998; Steinberg, 2007) that traces the spatial and temporal relationships between electorate ethnic composition and political behavior in Marsabit to explain identity mobilization and coalition dynamics in settings with layered ethnic identities. The narrative relies on fine-grained data from the Kenya National Archives in Nairobi, some 300 news media sources, and, most importantly, interviews that I conducted with over forty Marsabit political figures—parliamentarians and members of the county assembly (MCAs), high-ranking county government officials, and customary leaders—and other well-informed individuals listed in Appendix 2. In accordance with the data anonymization requirements of the study's institutional review board approval,[11] I only disclose non-identifying respondent characteristics. I attribute direct quotations reproduced in the article to individual research participants, but multiple respondents and/or other sources have corroborated all findings. I used this information to compile a comprehensive set of data, presented in Appendix 3, on the 166 candidacies[12] for gubernatorial and parliamentary office in Marsabit's fifty-four electoral contests.

Political mobilization of layered ethnic identities in Marsabit

Marsabit politicians have consistently taken advantage of the multiplicity and plasticity of their layered identities and adjusted their electoral strategies to the frequent changes in electorate

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[11] University of Toronto Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board Protocol #32509.

[12] Several candidates ran in multiple elections.

composition. To secure victory, election candidates have appealed to voters' ethnic allegiances, targeted coethnic segments corresponding to specific ethnic layers, formed and sought to preserve coalitions, and fragmented those of their competitors. Figure 2 summarizes and enumerates key aspects of the politics of ethnicity in Marsabit that I examine in this section.

Figure 2. Ethnic politics in Marsabit[13]

Electoral district	Laisamis	Marsabit North	Moyale	North Horr	Saku	Marsabit County
Years of existence	1966-	1969-1988	1969-	1988-	1988-	2013-
District type	Dominated	Shared	Dominated	Dominated	Shared	Shared
Approximate Figure 1 district type	III	II	III	IV	II	I
Largest superordinate group	Rendille	Gabbra	Borana	Gabbra	Borana	Borana or Gabbra
That group's largest subordinate clan/phratry	Dubsahay or Saale	Algana	Karrayyuu	Algana	Karrayyuu	Karrayyuu or Algana
Number of electoral contests	12	4	12	8	8	6
Number of candidacies	29	15	53	22	37	28
Superordinate mobilization (resulting in electoral victory)	4 (3)	8 (3)	5 (0)	0 (0)	25 (7)	17 (6)
Subordinate mobilization (resulting in electoral victory)	25 (9)	5 (1)	42 (12)	17 (8)	2 (1)	0 (0)
Incumbent victory	6	0	1	5	4	1
Large winning coalition	7	3	6	6	6	6
Small winning coalition	2	1	4	0	0	0
Election winner membership in the largest targeted segment	4	2	6	3	7	2
Segment fragmentation	0	1	10	0	7	4

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[13] I classify winning coalitions as large if their margin of victory is greater than ten percent.

Layer mobilization and segment targeting

Appeals for coethnic support are ubiquitous in Marsabit's election campaigns (Carrier & Kochore, 2014).[14] The emotive, explicitly ethnic language of the slogans, songs, and speeches used to formulate such appeals serves a strategic purpose, explains an influential Borana election songwriter who participated in the 2017 reelection campaign of the Saku MP Ali Rasso Dido:

> He really played the ethnicity card. He used the card so smartly. […] The Borana thought he doesn't want the seat for himself, but for the Borana. He didn't need to buy votes. […] People voted for him because he's a Borana. It's a tribally polarized area. These politicians are funny. They know how to play this card. (KO177)

Rasso encouraged and capitalized on the popular perception of his *Borantiti* (Borana-ness), contributing to the high salience of the Borana identity in Saku. Rasso chose to mobilize his superordinate ethnic allegiance instead of his affiliation with the subordinate Warrajiddaa clan because the former was more conducive to winning coalition creation: as Saku's largest ethnic segment, the Borana can readily deliver electoral victory to their representative, while the much less numerous Warrajiddaa could only do so in cooperation with multiple other Borana clans and/or non-Borana communities.

Other Marsabit politicians have made layer mobilization choices analogous to Rasso's. In electoral districts shared by multiple superordinate groups—the Marsabit North and Saku parliamentary constituencies and the county-wide districts that elect the governor, senator, and woman MP—election contestants have emphasized their superordinate identities. Of the fifty-seven candidacies in such districts for which information on layer mobilization choices is

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[14] In contrast, cross-cutting cleavages, such as class or religion, have no political salience in Marsabit.

available, fifty election campaigns have emphasized candidates' Borana, Burji, Gabbra, Rendille, Somali, and Wayyu superordinate allegiances. Superordinate layer mobilization accounts for sixteen of the eighteen electoral victories in these districts. Conversely, eighty-eight out of ninety-seven candidacies in Laisamis, Moyale, and North Horr, the three constituencies dominated by single superordinate groups, have relied on subordinate layer mobilization, responsible for all but three of the thirty-two electoral victories in these districts.

The rare deviations from this pattern are instructive. All nine instances of superordinate layer mobilization in Laisamis and Moyale have been electoral bids by Ariaal/Samburu and Burji candidates whose choices signaled to potential cross-segment coalition partners these small communities' unity and relative electoral strength. On three occasions, Joseph Lamasolai Lekuton, an Ariaal, used such alliances to take advantage of divisions among the dominant Rendille and win parliamentary elections in Laisamis. Segment fragmentation also accounts for subordinate layer mobilization in electoral districts shared by multiple superordinate ethnic groups. For example, in 1974 cross-phratry contestation split Marsabit North's Gabbra electorate segment, paving the way for a Burji contender's victory.

Every district type change in Marsabit has led to the mobilization of layers corresponding to electorate segments conducive to winning coalition construction in the altered political conditions. Having learned from their 1974 mistake, would-be Gabbra MPs mobilized their superordinate identities until Gabbra-majority North Horr was carved out of Marsabit North; since then, they have played up their phratry affiliations. In particular, Abdikadir Yatani Boru, who in 1983 campaigned as a Gabbra to become the last Marsabit North MP, relied on his Algana phratry allegiance in the first North Horr contest five years later. A converse transition

has followed the introduction of countywide elections. As a contender for the North Horr seat in the 2006 and 2007 elections, Ukur Yatani Kanacho mobilized his Gar phratry identity, while Mohammed Ali, known as Abshiro, and Abdalla Chachu Tadicha drew voters' attention to their Karrayyuu and Warrajiddaa clan affiliations in the 2007 election in Borana-dominated Moyale. In contrast, in the 2013 gubernatorial contest Abdalla, Abshiro, and Ukur all relied on their superordinate ethnic identities.

Marsabit politicians have even mobilized multiple ethnic layers in concurrent election campaigns. A Moyale MCA offers an illuminating account of layer mobilization in the run-up to the 2017 gubernatorial and parliamentary elections:

> We Borana are now having only one candidate for the governor: Mohammed Ali [Abshiro]. In Saku there is no problem, no issue of clans. But in Moyale, they are not even calling themselves Borana, but they are dividing themselves into clans. (KO75)

Intra-segment coordination

Simultaneous mobilization of the superordinate Borana identity in the gubernatorial and Saku contests and of the subordinate clan allegiances in Moyale required careful campaign coordination across election districts. Indeed, politicians from across Marsabit communities have generally worked with their coethnics to reconcile competing interests, select segment representatives, discourage spoilers, organize campaign events, transport voters to polling stations, and distribute patronage. As a result, candidates have faced no coethnic competitors in two-thirds of elections. Of the twenty-one recorded instances of the mobilization of the same

identity by multiple candidates, victors have received at least twice as many votes as their coethnic competitors in thirteen cases.

Occasional electoral defeats resulting from segment fragmentation have provided Marsabit politicians with ample evidence of the necessity of intra-segment coordination. In particular, the Borana calibrated their layer mobilization strategies so carefully in 2017 because four years earlier Abdalla and Abshiro had inadvertently split the segment. Both candidates had mobilized their superordinate identity but failed to build cross-clan support and lost to Ukur, who had overcame substantial cross-phratry divisions by convincing Gabbra customary leaders to bless his candidacy. In response, the Borana established the neocustomary Borana Council of Elders (BCE), intended specifically to manage intra-segment contestation and negotiate candidate selection. In the words of another Borana MCA:

> We agreed on a process to nominate candidates for the community. […] Individuals were invited to contest. There were three candidates. Mohammed Ali had the connections and experience as a former MP, also economic muscle, the resources, in order to reach every corner of the county. So that's how Abshiro became the sole flag-bearer. (KO74)

Marsabit communities' customary governance systems—responsible for regulating member behavior and invested in protecting community interests but separate from the state-based political arena on which electoral contestation takes place (Bassi, 2005; Sato, 1984; Schlee, 1989)—provide valuable fora for deliberation and bargaining moderated and arbitrated by customary leaders, whose decisions most candidates consider binding. Especially since devolution increased the intensity of political contestation in Marsabit, local politicians have

frequently turned to customary leaders to coordinate candidate selection, in the process reinvigorating and refashioning customary institutions, including through the creation of bodies such as the BCE. In addition to mediating between prospective candidates and selecting segment representatives, customary leaders have apportioned elected offices between subordinate segment sections. For instance, in the run-up to the 2017 elections Rendille elders anointed Arbelle Marselino Malimo, who hails from the Rongumo clan in the western moiety, as the segment representative in the Laisamis parliamentary contest to balance out their support for the reelection campaign of Senator Abubakar Godana Hargura, a Saale from the eastern moiety. Likewise, in exchange for cross-clan approval of their gubernatorial candidate Abshiro, the Karrayyuu agreed to back Ali Rasso and Qalicha Gufu Wario, the Warrajidda contenders for the Saku and Moyale parliamentary seats.

Cross-segment alliance-making

Successful intra-segment coordination does not in itself assure electoral victory in Marsabit because local politicians' layer mobilization strategies lead them to target minority electorate segments. The largest targeted segments have at most commanded pluralities of votes in their respective electoral districts. For this reason, successful candidates for elected office have relied on cross-segment coalitions.

The dearth of preexisting cross-segment coordination mechanisms and commitment devices available in other settings has limited these alliances' cohesion. Like elsewhere in Kenya, the weakly-institutionalized political parties[15] represented by Marsabit election candidates have

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[15] Usually national, but sometimes local. In particular, in 2013 Ukur Yatani joined the countrywide Orange Democratic Movement, which he left to create his own Frontier Alliance Party four years later.

served as little more than electoral vehicles of ethnic communities or their coalitions (Ajulu, 2002). Party capacity to enforce coalition agreements was already low prior to the country's democratization, when all parliamentary aspirants joined the ruling Kenya African National Union. Since the end of one-party rule, Marsabit politicians have used—and readily discarded—partisan affiliations but neglected to invest in party organizations. Furthermore, the demographic distribution of cross-cutting cleavages such as class or religion, which straddle ethnic boundaries in Marsabit, has precluded their internalization within alliances (Bormann, 2019).

In these conditions, wary of member defection, Marsabit politicians have preferred to form alliances capable of delivering large pluralities. Only seven of the forty-one contests for which precise vote counts are available have featured margins of victory smaller than ten percent. The construction of oversized coalitions has often required agreements between several different segments, since fears of marginalization by dominant groups amid the lack of shared coordination mechanisms have tended to produce alliances comprised of relatively small communities of similar size. In contrast, members of the largest targeted segments have only won twenty-four of Marsabit's fifty-four electoral contests.

Given the unreliability of cross-segment commitments, the early Marsabit coalitions were ad hoc arrangements for the exchange of segment votes for material inducements. Few of them were intended to last beyond the election day until local members of the influential Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) demonstrated to Marsabit politicians the possibility and desirability of successful cross-segment alliance-making. Rendille, Gabbra, and Burji teachers formed the ReGaBu coalition after Moyale District was carved out of the larger Marsabit District (coterminous with contemporary Marsabit County) in 1988. Consequent modification of the

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ethnic composition of KNUT's Marsabit branch gave ReGaBu teachers an opportunity to end longstanding Borana dominance over the organization's local structures. A powerful Rendille politician recalls that "when Moyale was in Marsabit, the Borana were the largest group. Every time we go for election, the Borana would win, because all communities would go as individuals. So, at one point they made the decision to form a coalition against the Borana. The main seats in the teacher federation have been rotated with the coalition" (KO7).

This decision proved momentous. When devolution simultaneously increased the benefits of officeholding and the number of elected positions, the ambitious former North Horr MP Ukur Yatani had a readymade example of successful cross-segment cooperation that he could emulate. According to a Burji KNUT leader, "Ukur used an existing body, made it more political, and galvanized the three tribes as the ladder to power" (KO81). The Rendille politician, a key figure in Ukur's ReGaBu, explains the decision-making process that led to the coalition's creation ahead of the 2013 elections:

> When planning for the election we knew that nobody could win in Marsabit alone. For Senate and county elections, you need an alliance [that] requires at least three of the major communities. The Gabbra had the foresight to go for the governor. They talked to the Burji and Garre. The Borana and Gabbra couldn't come together [...] because they were contesting the governorship both. [There were] two Borana candidates, so they couldn't attract others. We talked to them; many of the Rendille wanted us to join with the Borana, but they were divided. We couldn't join the divided team. This is why the Borana ended up out, because they couldn't make up their mind. We joined the Gabbra in ReGaBu. [...] We were working from a background of how teachers had done it. It was very easy because of that. (KO7)

The communities that ReGaBu brought together collectively comprised the majority of the county electorate, which delivered victory to Ukur, elected Marsabit's first governor, and his

allies, to whom other important positions were allocated. The Rendille leader Hargura claimed the senatorial seat, while Omar Abdi Ali, a Burji, became the deputy governor and Nasra Ibrahim Ibren, a Garre Somali, was elected the county's first woman MP.

Borana politicians soon learned from their 2013 mistakes and replicated Ukur's recipe for success in constructing their own cross-segment winning coalition, Team Kayo. In 2017, the Borana flag-bearer Abshiro teamed up with Hargura, who retained his senatorial seat, and attracted the support of many Burji and Garre, whose representatives, Solomon Gubbo and Safia Sheikh Adan, were rewarded with the positions previously occupied by their coethnics.

These alliances extended beyond the countywide electoral contests. To secure both coethnic and cross-ethnic support, coalition members coordinated candidacies for multiple elected offices in Marsabit.[16] A 2017 MCA election in Moyale provides an especially illuminating example of within-coalition seat apportionment. When Team Kayo was formed, the locally-dominant Borana agreed that John Kilo Dawe, a Burji, would fill an elected county assembly seat in exchange for Burji support for a Borana candidate for a nominated MCA position. Kilo, the only Burji MCA in Marsabit, would later be elected the assembly's deputy speaker, but not until after some last-minute cross-segment wrangling, summarized by a Burji participant:

> A deal had to be made. We agreed: Kilo gets elected, and we'll support a Borana for the nominated seat. The Borana supported Kilo. But a Garre man got the nominated seat. The Borana who was promised a seat protested. The Garre was removed, and Borana got the nominated seat in the end. […] The Burji also clinched the post of

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[16] Because of the variation in the ethnic composition of Marsabit electorates, coethnic allies have mobilized different ethnic layers in individual contests. For instance, while Abshiro and Hargura emphasized the superordinate Borana and Rendille identities in their countywide contests, their Team Kayo coethnics Qalicha and Marselino relied on subordinate Warrajiddaa and Rongumo clan identities in the concurrent Moyale and Laisamis campaigns.

the county deputy speaker. […] This was after a heated debate, with the Borana and Rendille faction allied to the governor defending their stand. (KO180)

The Burji about-face in 2017 was reminiscent of a Gabbra decision to renege on a similar agreement to support a Burji candidate for an MCA seat in Saku four years earlier. Both incidents necessitated renegotiation of previous deals and showed the difficulty of keeping cross-segment alliances together.

Coalition durability and disintegration

Inherently unstable, the Marsabit cross-segment coalitions have generally proved short-lived. Notably, the ambitious teachers' ReGaBu-inspired LATTU (Let All The Tribes Unite) alliance spearheaded in the early 2000s by the Saku MP Abdi Tari Sasura—which would have seen the constituency seat's rotation between the Borana, Burji, and Rendille—never launched a campaign, because, after Abdi's death, along with all other incumbent Marsabit MPs, in a helicopter crash in 2005, the Borana violated his agreement with the other communities and supported his brother Hussein in the by-election held the following year. Electoral success provides no guarantee of alliance durability either. Especially in pre-devolution parliamentary elections, victorious candidates could easily renege on their promises to cross-segment allies. Following devolution, coalition partners' formal representation has increased with the number of elected positions, but the distribution of power remains inequitable: it is the governor who controls the powerful county government with its large budget and workforce; other, less influential, officeholders, including parliamentarians, have little ability to check the governor's decisions and limited funds at their disposal. Power imbalance and resource allocation choices

contrary to allies' wishes threaten coalition survival, notes a key Rendille figure in Ukur's ReGaBu:

> The main issue is how you can keep that alliance together. It's not like the teachers' union. There, it's only individuals. In government, you have resources to control. When you're a governor, you hold the resources, which devolution is all about. You have to prove that alliance, distribute to others. […] People have been complaining about resource allocation. […] The governor's people get [resources]. The fairness is not there. (KO7)

This expression of the Rendille politician's dissatisfaction with ReGaBu reflects his segment's marginalization following the 2013 elections. A concentric pattern of Ukur's obligations governed his administration's allocation of county government resources. The governor consistently favored his ethnic kin, whose expectations of compensation for electoral support he could ill-afford to ignore. His phratry exerted the strongest pressure and its members enjoyed preferential access to employment in new post-devolution administrative bodies, county government procurement, and public service provision, which expanded substantially in Gar settlements. The governor was less beholden to the other Gabbra phratries, especially the Algana, but their demands of club and private goods also required accommodation. Accordingly, many non-Gar Gabbra received county government positions and contracts and service provision increased across North Horr. Coethnic pressure limited Ukur's ability to meet his non-Gabbra allies' wishes, which due to the weakness of cross-ethnic ties were also easier to sidestep.

Ahead of the 2017 elections, disaffected ReGaBu members defected, primarily to Abshiro's Team Kayo, but the former Moyale MP's consequent victory over Ukur did little to alter the logic of resource allocation. County government officials hired by the former governor

found themselves replaced by Borana recruits, many of them Karrayyuu, especially from Abshiro's support base in Sololo and Uran in Moyale. The new governor also set out to reward his coethnic supporters with county government contracts and expanded public services in Saku and, especially, Moyale. The benefits that non-Borana partners in Team Kayo derived from their election victory were correspondingly more limited.

Given the strength of the centrifugal pressures exerted by the concentric pattern of obligations that determines within-coalition resource distribution, some Marsabit alliances' longterm survival is remarkable. Teachers' ReGaBu, which has retained control over KNUT's Marsabit branch for three decades, periodically rotating positions between representatives of the three communities, has been the most durable cross-segment coalition in the area. Ukur's subversion of the norms of reciprocity and trust that teachers' had created prior to devolution shows the difficulty of replicating their success in formal electoral politics. Nevertheless, a few MPs have leveraged incumbency advantages to establish long-lasting control over cross-segment coalitions.

Incumbent coethnic favoritism and consequent inequitable resource allocation generate disaffection among cross-segment allies, but they only benefit from defection if viable competition exists. Ukur's Burji and Rendille partners decamped to Team Kayo because Abshiro offered an alternative coalition that bested the incumbent. The junior partners of some Laisamis and North Horr MPs have had no access to such opportunities. Through skillful manipulation of resource distribution and disruption of opposition organization, Bonaya Adhi Gorana, the Gar Gabbra MP for North Horr, and his Marsabit South colleague Mohamed Kholkholle Adichareh, a Galdeeylan Rendille, each won four electoral contests despite challenges from members of larger

Gabbra and Rendille subordinate ethnic groups. Bonaya retained his office even after the disaffected Algana, the largest phratry, briefly seceded from the Gabbra society (Soga, 2001). His immediate successor Ukur's tenure in parliament proved short, but Francis Chachu Ganya, the next North Horr MP, has successfully replicated Bonaya's divide-and-rule tactics. Similarly, while most of the Laisamis MPs who followed Kholkholle also only served one or two terms, well-cultivated alliances—both within and outside the constituency (most notably with Ukur)—and generous cash handouts to voters helped Joseph Lekuton, who as an Ariaal faced particularly steep odds, to win three elections. An MCA explains the advantages that incumbents enjoy over their opponents:

> The incumbent is likely to have a lot of resources at his disposal to influence the masses who are impoverished, poverty-stricken. Politics is never idea-based. It's tribal and money-based. That's the edge he has. (KO74)

The MCA identifies the two key drivers of Marsabit politics: money and ethnicity. Incumbents continuously use available government and other funds to accommodate coethnic demands. Some have also leveraged their positions to address cross-segment pressures. None of the incumbent-dominated alliances have been, however, as stable and durable as teachers' ReGaBu. Kholkholle and Lekuton eventually lost their seats; Bonaya died in office, but had previously faced periodic cross-segment challenges such as the Algana secession. Such relative successes have also been rare. Despite the resources at their disposal, only ten of Marsabit's twenty-nine MPs have been reelected (on sixteen occasions). Marsabit North, Moyale, and Saku in particular have experienced frequent officeholder rotation. For example, only one Moyale MP,

Guracha Boru Galgalo, has served two consecutive terms. Similarly, except for Senator Hargura, all holders of the post-devolution countywide elected offices—as well as most MCAs—lost their positions in 2017.

The fate of Ukur's electoral coalitions is especially instructive. In the 2006 by-election in North Horr that followed Bonaya's death, the future governor secured the support of the Odola and Sharbana phratries as well as a section of the Galbo, but his preferential treatment of the Gar quickly alienated his cross-phratry allies, who decamped to a new coalition brought together by Chachu Ganya, the Algana victor of the 2007 contest. This experience showed Ukur the dangers of disappointing cross-segment supporters, but the incentives that he faced as the governor did not change; ReGaBu disintegrated prior to the 2017 elections as his erstwhile allies, including fellow Gabbra, flocked to rival coalitions.

Segment fragmentation

Electorate segments had fragmented in Marsabit before. The Gabbra political dominance in Marsabit North had been interrupted by the cross-phratry split in 1974. and the Borana segment had divided in the 2013 gubernatorial contest. In 2017, such periodic incidents gave way to the fragmentation of most segments.

The preceding four years had demonstrated the value of controlling the county government's resources and generated widespread discontent with their distribution. According to a Gabbra MCA, "in 2017 everyone was battling for the resources. There was conflict between individual and communal interests. It's all about resources and interests. Because of individual interests the Gabbra couldn't speak with one voice" (KO176). Ukur's coethnics dissatisfied with

favoritism towards the Gar coalesced around Umuro Sora Adano, an Algana whose rival gubernatorial bid divided the Gabbra vote. The Burji segment split into three factions associated with Ukur's deputy Omar Abdi Ali, the first governor's 2017 running mate Hassan Marsa, and Abshiro's ally Solomon Gubbo. Among the Rendille, would-be senator John Loto Segelan's rejection of elders' support for Hargura fragmented the segment. Similarly, the Noonituu Borana incumbent Moyale MP Roba Duba refused to surrender his seat to his BCE-designated Warrajiddaa successor Qalicha Gufu Wario, whose Saku clansman Rasso faced a novel challenge to the cohesion of the Borana community.

Rasso's primary rival in 2017 was Nuria Golbo Halake, a Wayyu. Historically known as Waata and considered a lower-status subgroup of the Borana, starting in the 1980s the Wayyu had begun to assert their ethnic distinctiveness (Kassam, 2000). The new ethnic identity, which Nuria's candidacy brought to the forefront of local politics, threatened to permanently splinter the Borana segment. Outside involvement escalated this risk—and contributed to multiple segments' fragmentation.

Cognizant of their need for cross-segment votes, Abshiro and Ukur formed alliances—Team Kayo and the Frontier Alliance Party, or Team Balozi, respectively—with non-coethnics engaged in intra-segment contestation. The assistance extended to the two coalitions' senatorial candidates, Hargura and Segelan, and to Abshiro and Ukur's running mates Solomon and Hassan reinforced Rendille and Burji divisions. Furthermore, Ukur deliberately worked to splinter the Borana segment by supporting Wayyu claims. Ahead of the 2017 elections, the incumbent governor invited Nuria—as well as Roba—to Team Balozi and aided their unsuccessful

campaigns. Following his own electoral defeat in 2017, Ukur used his clout as a cabinet member in the national government to grant the new ethnic group official recognition.

The emergence of the separate Wayyu voting bloc underscores the limited cohesion of electorate segments in settings where ethnic identities are layered. Although more resilient than cross-ethnic alliances, individual segments remain vulnerable to fragmentation where existing coordination mechanisms prove insufficient to address internal disaffection. The plasticity of layered identities and corresponding segments ensures the continuous availability of alternative coalitions that ambitious politicians can leverage to enhance their political standing by mobilizing favorable layer identities.

Conclusion

Membership in hierarchically layered ethnic communities incentivizes candidates in competitive elections to adopt strategies that enhance identity salience and produce unstable and often short-lived coalitions. Access to arrays of identities and alliance configurations made possible by layered identities' inherent malleability allows politicians to adapt their layer mobilization and coalition formation choices to their electorates' ethnic composition and target individual or—in cooperation with cross-segment allies—multiple electorate segments that command enough votes to deliver electoral victory. Successful construction of such single- and cross-segment winning coalitions, facilitated by preexisting coordination mechanisms and mollification of weaker allies' fears of marginalization, does little to check officeholders' self-interest and vulnerability to coethnic pressure, which limit alliance durability except where members credibly commit to power-sharing or incumbents render opposition infeasible. Often encouraged by

political opponents, coalition breakdown and segment fragmentation further elevate the salience of mobilized identities.

The consistency of Marsabit politicians' strategic adaptations to the political conditions in which they operate is indicative of the strong influence exerted on political behavior by the particular opportunities and constraints present in settings where identities are layered. The exogenous shocks of democratization and devolution notwithstanding, election candidates in the area have continuously mobilized identities corresponding to coethnic segments most conducive to winning coalition formation, readily adjusted their layer mobilization choices to the regular changes in the electorate ethnic composition caused by (re)districting, frequently reconfigured the cross-segment alliances necessary to assure electoral victory, and, at times, fragmented individual segments, which despite the strength of intra-segment coordination mechanisms in the form of the local ethnic communities' (neo)customary governance systems have proved vulnerable to the manipulation of layered allegiances responsible for the volatility of Marsabit politics.

My exploration of these strategies and their political ramifications attests to the instrumentality of identity mobilization and the electoral importance of ethnic groups' spatial distribution documented in the ethnic politics literature. It also shows the distinctiveness of the settings where identities are layered and the necessity of further research on this important but understudied topic, including studies that provide evidence from a wider range of cases.

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