Rescaling Government, the Perils of Polarization, and Violent Politics in Kenya

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Kenya's new 2010 constitution call for the devolution of certain executive and legislative authorities from the national level to 47 counties. However, there is a chance that competition for newly contested county positions could lead to violent conflict. In contrast to a context of demographic diversity or homogeneity, conflict studies research suggests that the risk of violence is highest where two large groups dominate a population. Using two rounds of nationally representative surveys I find that bi-modal population polarization at the district level prior to Kenya's 2007 national poll is a strong predictor of exposure to election violence. Expanding upon this result I identify two mechanisms (low socio-economic status and ethnocentric attitudes) that may explain the link between polarization and violence. Quasi-experimental Average Causal Mediation Effect Estimates indicate that poverty is a more powerful explanatory mechanism than ethnocentric preferences.

Devolution, decentralization, or federated forms of government have long been proposed as a solution for political and economic disputes between groups (Lijphart 1996; Gurr 1970; Brancati 2009). In Kenya, decentralization is being used as a possible solution for grievances that lead to horrific violence following the December 2007 national election where nearly 1,500 were killed and approximately 500,000 displaced from their homes. Decentralization is nevertheless not a panacea for violent conflict. "Vicious cycles of higher redistribution, economic inefficiency, and political instability" (Triesman 1999, 488) can emerge under decentralized government frameworks in divided societies. It is possible, for instance, that a regional majority will instate discriminatory policies toward minorities (Horowitz 1985).

My proposition is that competition for both the executive (governor) and legislature (assembly) at the county level will be highest in the case where parity (or near-parity) exists between ethnic group support bases. Because of the power conferred to the winner of an election is great, there is reason to believe that contentious politics could become violent politics. There is evidence that social polarization, defined as a bimodal distribution between cohesive social groups, may be the driving force behind large scale conflict. Where an opposition minority party reaches nearly parity with a majority, the level of inter-group tension may rise, as others have shown in sub-national analyses of election politics in India (Wilkenson 2006), ethnic cleansing in Bosnia (Weidmann 2012), crime and collective violence in Liberia (Blair, Blattman, & Hartman, 2012) and for the Spanish civil war (Balcells 2010). Driving increasing inter-group tensions is the threat posed by an opposing side: ethnic out-bidding (Horowitz 1985) is possible in a scenario where equal odds of victory exist and this increases the tangibility of group ties. In the case that many groups exists neither of the the two mechanisms is likely: the chances of one group winning are slim (in the

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absence of a coalition, which is unlikely at a local level), and large-scale organization for a single goal can be difficult in the presence of disparate interests among communities.

I use Round 3 (R3) and Round 4 (R4) of the Afrobarometer survey for my analysis (afrobarometer.org). R3 was gathered prior to the 2007/2008 election violence and R4 enumeration took place one year after. As measurements of ethnic polarization, which I consider a treatment in a quasi-experimental design, and the mediating variable, ethnic preference, I pool responses to R3 at the district level. The district level is the closest administrative unit to the new counties. The provincial (N=9) or constituency (N-270) level are not comparable. Observations with missing data in R3 and R4 are dropped, resulting in a sample size of 1189 and 959, respectively. Merging the R3 data with R4 causes the elimination of additional observations because not every district in the surveys was sampled in the other. In the final sample there are 825 respondents. I measure sub-national district level polarization using the formula of Montalvo and Reynol-Querol (2005, 798) and the respondent's self-reported ethnic identity (survey question Q79). The calculation summarizes the degree to which the distribution of ethnic groups deviates from bimodal, or 50-50%, distribution and ranges from 0 to 1.

I use a quasi-experimental approach, called an Average Causal Mediation Effect (ACME) estimation, that includes the identification of "intermediate variables (or mediators) that lie in the causal pathway between the treatment and the outcome" (Imai, Keele & Tingley 2010, 309). I use R3 to build the mediator and the treatment variables, which reduces endogeneity that would appear were these influences to be measured in R4 along with exposure to post-election violence. Units must be independent in the analysis, which is the case by design of the Afrobarometer survey. I adopt for four configurations of controls such as age, education, gender, and other variabls: none (model 1), individual level (model 2), only those significant in a GLM logit baseline model (model 3), and only those that are significant in a GLMM logit with province level random intercepts (model 4). Figure 1 and Figure 2 below illustrate the direct treatment effects of polarization at the district scale, and, respectively, the ACME estimate for increased risk of conflict via ethnocentric preferences and poverty as explanatory mechanisms.
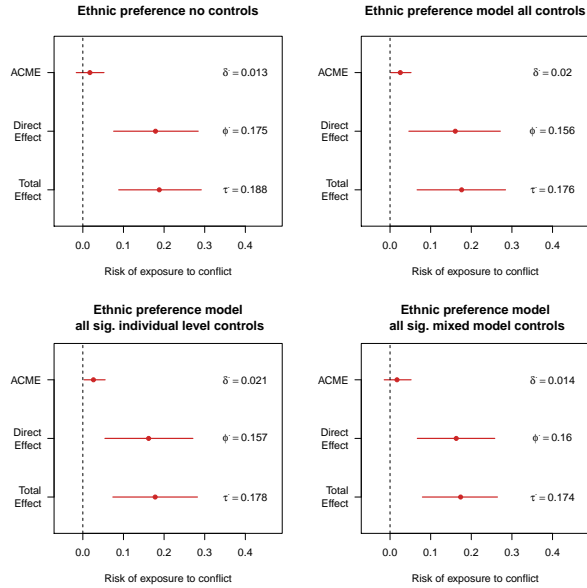
Figure 1: Ethnocentric preferences Average Causal Mediation Effect (ACME, $\delta\cdot$), direct treatment effect ($\phi\cdot$), and total treatment effect ($\tau\cdot$) results of how ethnic group polarization affects exposure to conflict and whether ethnic preferences preceding violence serve as a mechanism. Each panel incorporates a different set of control variables, explained above. Point estimates are bound by 95% confidence intervals; where the lower end crosses zero there is no statistically significant effect.
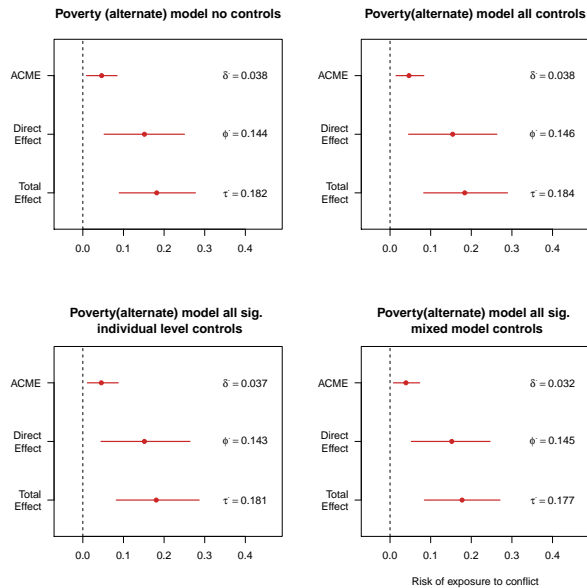

Figure 2: Poverty Average Causal Mediation Effect (ACME, $\delta\cdot$), direct treatment effect ($\phi\cdot$), and total treatment effect ($\tau\cdot$) results of how ethnic group polarization affects exposure to conflict and whether poverty preceding violence serves as a mechanism

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