

# Dangerous Disconnect: How Politicians' Misperceptions About Voters Lead to Violence in Kenya

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## **Abstract**

What accounts for political violence in competitive electoral regimes? Why do elites instigate violence, and how does it affect voting behavior? Most theories of elite-instigated political violence make a crucial yet untested assumption: that if politicians employ violence as a tactic, then it must afford them some objective strategic benefit. Employing experimental and qualitative survey and interview data from Kenya, I argue that, in fact, violence is often the result of strategic miscalculation on the part of elites. In particular, I find that politicians overestimate the electoral benefits of violence and—more crucially—underestimate its costs, particularly with respect to their core voters. The same is true of heated ethnic rhetoric, which I show to be ineffective in garnering coethnic support yet an important predictor of future violence. The results highlight an important yet overlooked explanation for political violence in competitive electoral regimes and raise thought-provoking questions about when and why office-seeking politicians fail to accurately infer voter preferences over salient political issues.

# Introduction

Political violence is a common phenomenon throughout the developing world (Bekoe, 2012; Laakso, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 1995). Not just a feature of authoritarian regimes, such violence is a frequent occurrence in countries that hold competitive elections—countries as diverse as Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Colombia, and India, the world’s largest democracy. Though common, violence in the context of competitive elections is somewhat of a puzzle. Despite the obvious potential for politicians to benefit from the purely coercive aspect of violence—e.g. by preventing supporters of opposing candidates from voting or forcing them to vote in a certain way—there are good reasons to doubt its overall effectiveness as a strategy for winning elections.

Violence can be costly for those politicians who engage in it. In particular, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, we have good reason to believe that voters dislike violence and prefer to vote for peaceful rather than violent politicians. 77 percent of African citizens from 33 countries surveyed in the most recent round of the Afrobarometer, for example, declared that the use of violence is never justified in their country’s politics (Afrobarometer Round 5). As a result, when politicians engage in violence, they are likely to suffer an electoral backlash from a significant portion of the electorate; where elections are truly competitive, this could present a serious challenge to the efficacy of a violent campaign strategy. It is therefore incumbent upon any theory of violence in competitive elections to explain either 1) why the coercive effects of violence outweigh the potential for electoral backlash or 2) why voters do not vote against violent politicians if given the chance.

There are other costs associated with the use of political violence. Its illegality implies the possibility—however remote—that the organizer will have to face local or international justice for their role in orchestrating it. In the absence of legal accountability, there is also the possibility of reputation costs from being associated with violence. Depending on the

individual and the local context, this could create barriers to career mobility, both in and out of politics. Finally, there are human and psychological costs. Violence may have its strategic benefits, but it is also extremely destructive, so it is unlikely to be a choice made as easily as whether to hold a campaign rally, buy votes, or even commit fraud.

Still, despite its many risks, we observe large numbers of politicians in various parts of the world using violence as a tactic to win elections, many of them successful in winning office. As a result, theories of elite-driven political violence tend to assume that violence affords politicians some objective strategic benefit (Acemoglu, Robinson and Santos, 2013; Brass, 1997; Collier and Vicente, 2008; Ellman and Wantchekon, 2000; Harris, 2012; Kasara, 2014; Klopp, 2001; Wilkinson, 2004). Often, they posit that the benefits of violence go beyond direct coercion (Brass, 1997; Klopp, 2001; Vaishnav, 2012; Wilkinson, 2004). Yet such explanations fail to consider an alternative explanation: that political elites are simply wrong. Politicians may employ violence because they *think* it to be an effective tactic for winning elections, even if in reality it is not.

I test this idea with evidence from Kenya, an important and well-studied case in the literature. Using a combination of experimental and qualitative evidence, I first evaluate and reject several leading explanations for the incidence of elite-led political violence. I then show that political violence in Kenya can be explained by politicians' misperceptions about voter preferences over violence and ethnic conflict. In particular, politicians overestimate the electoral benefits of violence and—more crucially—severely underestimate its costs, particularly with respect to their support among their coethnic base. The same is true of heated ethnic rhetoric, which I show to be ineffective in garnering coethnic support yet an important predictor of future violence. The result is that violence can occur even when the elites who instigate it receive no apparent benefit. The findings have important implications not only for our understanding of political violence, but for our understanding of elite behavior in general. Specifically, they raise difficult questions about when and why politicians do or do

not accurately infer the preferences of voters and act accordingly.

A few qualifications are in order. First, it is worth emphasizing that this study seeks to understand the causes of *elite-instigated* violence. This means that it does not attempt to explain spontaneous outbreaks of violence between citizens at the grassroots, nor does it try to explain why regular citizens choose to participate in violent clashes when elites wish for them to do so.<sup>1</sup> The latter question has been addressed by some excellent and—in my view—complementary studies (Claassen, 2014; Klaus, 2015; Scacco, 2011). Second, the paper and its findings focus on violence in the context of competitive elections, i.e. those where 1) leaders are chosen in multiparty elections; 2) given electoral rules, the electoral outcome largely reflects the vote preferences of voters; and 3) more than one party has a meaningful chance of winning power. This means that I am not concerned with, nor are the paper’s findings likely to apply to, political violence in noncompetitive authoritarian regimes where one or more of the above conditions fail to hold.

## Theories of Political Violence

There are several possible explanations for the strategic use of violence by political elites.<sup>2</sup>

Though not addressed directly in this paper, a first set of explanations points to the purely

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, so-called “spontaneous” outbreaks of violence often have a political dimension and are rooted in elite manipulation, but this issue is too complicated to be given adequate treatment here.

<sup>2</sup>Of course, one possibility is that political violence is not strategic at all. Under such a scenario, candidates for office may use violence for a range of objectives that may or may not be related to politics (perhaps they use violence to sustain some criminal enterprise, or perhaps to settle some non-political score). At the same time, such an explanation assumes that either 1) engaging in violence has no political consequences for politicians or 2) politicians treat any electoral advantage or disadvantage from their violent activities as less important than the other consequences of these activities. The latter might be plausible for career criminals or in a limited set of idiosyncratic cases, but seems unlikely to apply to most politicians for whom winning office is their primary motivation. As for the former assumption, this could be the case if, for example, voters are not well informed about politicians’ violent activities or if such activities are so common among the political elite that voters do not believe there is a real alternative. Banerjee et al. (2012), for example, posit that this might explain the prevalence of convicted criminals elected to office in India despite voters’ apparent distaste for criminal politicians. Though this might describe the logic of violence in some circumstances, I find such an explanation implausible in most cases.

coercive power of violence to prevent people from voting or intimidate them into changing their vote. Politicians may use violence to reduce voter turnout, especially among supporters of other political parties, either before or on election day (Bratton, 2008; Collier and Vicente, 2008, 2012). They may use it to persuade voters to change their vote for fear of reprisals (Acemoglu, Robinson and Santos, 2013; Ellman and Wantchekon, 2000; Wantchekon, 1999), or they may use it to displace voters in order to produce a more favorable electorate in a given locality (Harris, 2012; Kasara, 2014). There is no doubt that the ability to coerce voters into not voting or voting differently than they would have otherwise can be a powerful tool for shaping the electorate in one’s favor. The more important question, however, is how significant the coercive element of political violence is relative to the other ways in which violence may affect electoral outcomes. If, as will be shown, violence provokes a backlash from voters, then the negative impact on candidate support among those who turn out to vote could easily outweigh the benefits of reshaping the electorate through violent coercion.

A second explanation for the strategic use of violence—and perhaps the most unsavory—is that some element of a politician’s constituency actually receives some expressive benefit from particular acts of violence, so producing such violence increases the politician’s support among that group of voters. This possibility is perhaps most likely to occur in the context of extreme levels of animosity between different groups in society, such as ethnic groups with a history of intergroup conflict (Kaufmann, 1996). The idea is that, in contexts where group identities are highly salient and intergroup animosity exceptionally high, members of a particular group might obtain some expressive benefit from violence committed against a hated out-group. Thus, a politician responsible for such violence might benefit from increased support among members of the in-group to which he provided the “good” of out-group violence. Though this explanation appears rather implausible under all but the most extreme circumstances, it will be considered in the analysis.

A third alternative is that violence is used to signal certain candidate traits that voters

desire.<sup>3</sup> Especially in low-information, low-credibility environments where voters have limited information about candidates and campaign promises lack credibility, political violence may be one of very few tools that candidates have to visibly and credibly signal what they can and will do once in office. Politicians might use violence to signal, for example, that they are willing and able to defend their coethnics against security threats from other groups. Or they might use it to signal their toughness or ability to get things done. As a result, the paper will analyze how violence shapes voters' perceptions of candidates and their likely behavior once in office.

A fourth possibility is that politicians use sectarian violence to polarize the electorate along ethnic lines and increase the importance voters place on security concerns (Brass, 2003; Fearon and Laitin, 2000; Klopp, 2001; Oberschall, 2000; Wilkinson, 2004). They do so in order to shore up support among members of their group, particularly those that might lean toward other parties on the basis of other issues or identities. The polarization hypothesis is based on two main observations. First, social psychology has found that exposure to violence increases individuals' identification with their cultural in-group and against out-groups (Greenberg et al., 1990). Second, sectarian violence is likely to increase the weight voters put on issues of security, increasing support for politicians—usually coethnics—deemed most likely to provide that security in the face of the perceived threat (Wilkinson, 2012, 367).<sup>4</sup> As such, the paper will analyze the effect of violence on the strength of ethnic identity and the salience of security vis-à-vis other political issues.

Even if violence *per se* is not an explicit strategy of candidates for office, it is possible that, in hopes of consolidating the coethnic vote, politicians use heated ethnic rhetoric that

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<sup>3</sup>See e.g. (Hoffman and McCormick, 2004) on suicide terrorism as a form of strategic signaling.

<sup>4</sup>Increasing the weight attach they attach to security issues might be just one way in which being exposed to violence might make voters more receptive to certain types of appeals and certain types of information more so than others. For example, voters might pay more attention to information about threats (e.g. from other groups) because of an increased sense of loss aversion, or be more receptive to clientelist or particularistic appeals.

increases intergroup animosity to the point that violence breaks out. If so, then violence is not a direct result of politicians' actions but rather an indirect outcome of another tactic—ethnic rhetoric—that candidates may find useful in their campaigns. The paper will therefore test whether 1) ethnic rhetoric is effective in consolidating the coethnic vote and 2) such rhetoric increases the likelihood of violence breaking out.

All of the above explanations rely on the assumption that, if politicians incite violence, it is because they receive some objective benefit from doing so. The alternative, of course, is that politicians simply misperceive the effect of violence on their ability to win elections. If in reality violence hurts their electoral prospects more than it helps but they maintain the belief that the net effect is positive, we would still expect to see violence flare up in the course of electoral competition. This possibility is not far-fetched; previous studies have found commonly used campaign tactics—including negative campaigning and, indeed, violence—to be ineffective or even counterproductive.<sup>5</sup> By comparing voter preferences to politicians' perceptions of them, we can shed light on whether or not this is the case.

Before examining the evidence for and against the various explanations for violence, however, I first describe the history and nature of political violence in Kenya.

## **Political Violence in Kenya**

Kenya has a long history of political violence, including assassinations and state-sponsored repression (Kenya Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission, 2013). But the regular occurrence of large-scale, politically motivated violence has largely been a feature of Kenyan politics only since the reintroduction of multiparty elections in the early 1990s. The first outbreaks of election-related violence—often referred to as “tribal clashes”—occurred in the lead up to the first multiparty elections in 1992, when President Moi and his ruling party

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<sup>5</sup>See Lau and Pomper (2002) and Lau, Sigelman and Rovner (2007) on negative campaigning and Bratton (2008) on electoral violence in Nigeria.

KANU faced competition from other parties for the first time in decades. About 1,500 people were killed and 300,000 displaced as a result of such “clashes” from 1991-1993, mostly in the Rift Valley province (Human Rights Watch, 1995). Violence flared up again around the 1997 elections, with continuing conflict in the Rift Valley and new fighting in the hitherto peaceful Coastal region. In all, approximately 2,000 people were killed and 400,000 displaced in politically motivated ethnic violence throughout the 1990s (Human Rights Watch, 2002), with numerous reports indicating that the violence were largely instigated and organized by both senior and local KANU politicians seeking to maintain their hold on power (Akiwumi, Bosire and Ondeyo, 1999; Klopp, 2001; Human Rights Watch, 1995, 2002). Large-scale violence reoccurred in the aftermath of the contested 2007 election, resulting in more than 1,100 deaths and 350,000 people displaced (Waki Commission, 2008).

The origins of the violence in Kenya cannot be understood without reference to the role of land and ethnicity in Kenyan politics, with its roots in colonial policy and the early independence era. British rule resulted in the alienation of about half the agricultural land in Kenya to European settlers (mostly in the so-called “White Highlands”) and the creation of ethnically exclusive “native” reserves as the homelands of specific indigenous tribes, where Africans not working on European farms or urban areas were required to live (Okoth-Ogendo, 1991; Sorrensen, 1968). These policies solidified the ethnicization of Kenyan society and made access to land a primary concern.

At independence, land and ethnicity created deep internal divisions. The smaller, pastoralist tribes native to the Rift Valley (the Kalenjin, Maasai, Turkana, and Samburu—known as the KAMATUSA) formed the Kenyan African Democratic Party (KADU) and advocated for a *majimbo* or federal structure of government in which regions would be responsible for administering land in their territories, which, presumably, meant that the rich land being vacated by European settlers in the Rift Valley highlands would be returned to the KAMATUSA that had traditionally inhabited the area (Kanyinga, 2009). The Kenyan African

National Union (KANU), on the other hand, which was supported by the large Kikuyu and Luo ethnic groups, preferred a unitary government with respect for established property rights (Kanyinga, 2009). KANU's victory in Kenya's first election and the cooptation of KADU's leadership into KANU led to the establishment of a strong central government (with a *de facto* and later *de jure* one-party state) and a rejection of the sanctity of traditional tribal lands or traditional spheres. Whether by design or by virtue of better access to resources, as a form of patronage or a means of preventing social unrest, the government settlement schemes and land-buying programs in the early independence years that redistributed land from European settlers to indigenous Africans benefitted President Kenyatta's Kikuyu ethnic group more than any other (Boone, 2011; Kanyinga, 2009). Groups such as the Kalenjin and Maasai, who had controlled much of the Rift Valley prior to the colonial takeover, felt particularly aggrieved, as did several groups native to the Coast; as a result, the central issue in Kenyan politics—land—took on a distinctly ethnic dimension. Ethnic relations suffered further damage as a result of the personal and political fallout between Kenyatta and his first Vice President, Oginga Odinga, and the assassination of the popular economy minister Tom Mboya, both ethnic Luos. That Kenyatta was perceived as favoring a small group of Kikuyu elites in land deals and government appointments—the so-called “Kiambu Mafia”—also played a role.

When Vice President Moi—an ethnic Kalenjin and former leader of KADU—took over as president upon Kenyatta's death, he gradually shifted power away from the Kiambu clique to loyalists from his own Tugen sub-tribe. This caused resentment among the formerly dominant Kikuyu elite, while other large groups such as the Luo continued to be cutoff from power. Thus, when agitation for a return to multiparty politics arose, it was largely led by prominent Kikuyu and Luo politicians, and the nascent opposition movement generated strong popular support among these communities. The Kalenjin and their KAMATUSA allies within KANU therefore viewed the agitation as a plot to remove one of their own

from power and restore the dominance of other tribes, the Kikuyu in particular. In the face of substantial domestic and international pressure, however, Moi and KANU allowed multiparty elections to take place in 1992.

Multiparty elections posed a challenge to KANU, especially in ethnically mixed regions and constituencies with a sizeable proportion of ethnic groups associated with the opposition. Not only were powerful MPs—including government ministers—threatened by having to contest constituencies with sizeable populations of groups opposed to KANU rule; President Moi himself faced the constitutional necessity of winning at least 25 percent of the vote in five out of Kenya’s eight provinces, in addition to the popular vote. Thus, most analyses consider the tribal clashes of the 1990s to be part of a deliberate strategy on the part of the KANU political elite to maintain their hold on power by 1) consolidating support among the party’s ethnic base and 2) weakening the opposition and its supporters (Klopp, 2001; Human Rights Watch, 1995, 2002). Violence had the potential to undermine the opposition by threatening and/or punishing members of those ethnic groups understood to support it; displacing voters from these groups and preventing them from registering and/or voting; and creating chaos to increase the cost of opposition demands and support KANU’s assertion that democracy would cause ethnic conflict. Relatedly, violence could be used to mobilize KANU’s core ethnic voters—the Kalenjin and Maasai in particular—by rallying them against perceived threats and injustices on the part of the large tribes opposed to continued KANU rule and giving them the opportunity to reclaim land they thought to be rightfully theirs. While in 1992 the focus was on rallying the Kalenjin and Maasai and disenfranchising the Kikuyu, Luo, and Luhya in the Rift Valley, in 1997 KANU politicians focused on shoring up their position on the Coast.<sup>6</sup>

After President Moi was constitutionally barred from running for reelection, 2002 saw

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<sup>6</sup>Violence occurred around the 1997 election in the Rift Valley as well, concentrated in Laikipia and Nakuru.

a relatively peaceful transfer of power to the opposition alliance's chosen candidate, Mwai Kibaki, in an election where the opposition alliance contained members of all the major ethnic groups and the two main contenders (Kibaki and KANU's Uhuru Kenyatta, the elder Kenyatta's son) were both Kikuyu. However, the grand coalition that elevated Kibaki to power collapsed shortly thereafter, and the 2007 election pitted Kibaki's largely Kikuyu Party of National Unity (PNU) against Raila Odinga's (the son of Oginga Odinga) Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), a broad coalition of ethnic groups and political leaders most closely associated with the Luo and the Kalenjin. The election campaign was characterized by ethnically charged rhetoric from politicians on both sides and the return of *majimboism*, with the ODM supporting a vague notion of devolution that some interpreted as a signal that an ODM-led government would favor the traditional land claims of the Kalenjin and Maasai over those of the mainly Kikuyu Rift Valley migrants (Klopp and Kamungi, 2008). Despite the understandable focus on the severe outbreak of violence in the post-election period, violence began during the campaign period, concentrated in Mt. Elgon in Western Kenya and in Kuresoi and Molo in the Rift Valley (Anderson and Lochery, 2008; Cheeseman, 2008). The main election-related violence, however, occurred after the results were announced. After a lull in the reporting of election results, with the last reports giving Odinga a small lead, Kibaki was abruptly announced the winner and quickly and quietly sworn in. Violence followed, consisting of: 1) spontaneous protests and rioting by ODM supporters against the perceived rigging of the election;<sup>7</sup> 2) violent suppression of protests by state security forces, including the use of live rounds; 3) organized attacks by mainly Kalenjin ODM supporters against mainly Kikuyu supporters of PNU in the Rift Valley; 4) counter-attacks and revenge attacks—some organized, some less so—by Kikuyu youths against the Kalenjin, Luo, and Luhya; and 5) organized attacks and counterattacks by criminal gangs

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<sup>7</sup>The best available evidence suggests that Odinga was, in fact, the rightful winner of the presidential election (Gibson and Long, 2009).

associated with particular ethnic groups, politicians, and business leaders against groups affiliated with the opposition (Waki Commission, 2008). Much of the violence was planned, organized, and financed by national and local politicians and business leaders (Waki Commission, 2008; KNCHR, 2008). The conflict only came to an end when Kibaki and Odinga signed a power-sharing agreement after more than two months of fighting. In explaining the 2007-08 post-election violence, most accounts emphasize—in addition to legitimate anger over rigged election results—the recurring themes of ethnicized political conflict over land and access to power and the potential for violence to reshape electoral demographics in the most competitive constituencies (Anderson and Lochery, 2008; Harris, 2012; Kanyinga, 2009; Kasara, 2014).

For various reasons—including increased international scrutiny, an alliance between the leading Kalenjin and Kikuyu politicians, and the existence of a more credible judicial system to handle election disputes—the 2013 election was relatively peaceful. Still, nearly 500 people were killed and 118,000 displaced in communal clashes in 2012 and early 2013 (Human Rights Watch, 2013), and the newly elected president and deputy president face charges at the International Criminal Court for their alleged role in orchestrating the 2007-08 post-election violence. With ethnic and political tensions still high, the possibility of future violence remains.

Various accounts of the violence of recent years points to the direct complicity of local and national politicians in organizing, financing, directing, or inciting the violence. Much of the violence in the Rift Valley in from 1991-1998 was carried out by organized Kalenjin and Maasai militias that had specifically trained for their missions and were allegedly paid by KANU politicians for each person they killed or home they destroyed (Akiwumi, Bosire and Ondeyo, 1999; Laakso, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 1995). The recruitment and training of Digo youths in the 1997 attacks on the Coast took a similar form (Laakso, 2007). In addition to their direct (though behind-the-scenes) involvement in the clashes, KANU politi-

cians also laid the groundwork for conflict through the use of violent, ethnicized rhetoric. Nicholas Biwott, for example, an MP and government minister, said at a September 1991 rally that “the Kalenjins are not cowards and are not afraid to fight any attempts to relegate them from leadership,” while MP Paul Chepkok urged attendees at the same rally to “take up arms and destroy dissidents on site” (Klopp, 2001, 485). Similar involvement of politicians occurred in more recent outbreaks of violence, including in the aftermath of the 2007 elections, with leaders on both sides of the contest allegedly holding meetings, providing financing, forming alliances with criminal gangs, and inciting their supporters to commit violence against perceived supporters of the opposing party. The Kenya Human National Commission on Human Rights went so far as to say that the 2007-08 violence was “financed and sustained mainly by local politicians and business-people to support costs such as transport of attackers, weapons and other logistics” and that it was “largely instigated by politicians throughout the campaign period and during the violence itself via the use of incitement to hatred” (KNCHR, 2008). The fact that top party leaders—including current President and Deputy President Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto—were implicated by the ICC for organizing and financing the violence shows that, similar to the violence of the 1990s, the involvement of the political class went all the way to the top.

As this discussion makes clear, the prevailing wisdom about political violence in Kenya is that it is the product of strategic maneuvering on the part of political elites. Standard accounts also suggest, at least implicitly, that violence is indeed effective in helping Kenyan politicians achieve their electoral goals. They are thus largely in line with existing theories of the strategic use of violence in electoral competition. The following analysis examines the ability of these theories—and, by extension, conventional accounts of the Kenyan case—to explain the incidence of political violence in the Kenyan context.

## Is Violence Associated with Better Election Outcomes?

Before turning to the main analysis, it is worth exploring the basic relationship between violence and election outcomes in Kenya. Is the use of violence associated with an increased likelihood of winning elections? To answer this question, I examine the relationship between violence and election outcomes in the first multiparty elections held in 1992 and 1997.<sup>8</sup> In these elections, what violence occurred was committed almost exclusively on behalf of the ruling KANU party. Thus, if violence is a useful campaign strategy, we would expect the incidence of violence in these elections to increase local KANU vote share and the likelihood of a KANU win. I therefore analyze the relationship between pre-election outbreaks of violence and KANU election outcomes at the constituency level in the 1992 and 1997 elections. Tables 1 and 2 summarize results from OLS regression with constituency fixed effects, which controls for constituencies' time invariant characteristics that may be correlated with the likelihood of violence and/or election outcomes. They show no statistically significant effect of violence on KANU vote share or the likelihood of a KANU win in either parliamentary or presidential elections. Thus, despite the conventional wisdom, a simple analysis of the relationship between violence and election outcomes in Kenya reveals little *prima facie* support for the idea of violence as a useful campaign strategy.

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<sup>8</sup>This is, as far as I know, the first systematic quantitative analysis of the relationship between violence and election outcomes in Kenya.

Table 1: Effect of violence on KANU parliamentary election outcomes, 1992-1997

|              | (1)                   | (2)                  |
|--------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
|              | Vote Share            | Likelihood of Win    |
| Violence     | 0.0141<br>(0.0406)    | 0.0625<br>(0.0953)   |
| Constant     | 0.450***<br>(0.00697) | 0.514***<br>(0.0164) |
| Observations | 376                   | 376                  |

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table 2: Effect of violence on KANU presidential election outcomes, 1992-1997

|              | (1)                   | (2)                  |
|--------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
|              | Vote Share            | Likelihood of Win    |
| Violence     | 0.0165<br>(0.0345)    | 0.125<br>(0.0853)    |
| Constant     | 0.452***<br>(0.00592) | 0.473***<br>(0.0146) |
| Observations | 376                   | 376                  |

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

## The Effects of Violence on Vote Choice

To more concretely tease out the effects of violence on voting, I analyze the effects of violence on voters' preferences over candidates. If violence provides some objective benefit to candidates beyond pure coercion, then violence should do something to persuade voters to vote for the candidate in question. In particular, I investigate whether violence increases the likelihood of voting for and electing candidates for office, either among the general voting population or specific segments of it. I also examine the effect of violence on voters' perceptions of candidates across a range of relevant characteristics in order to clarify the mechanisms that might link a candidate's history of violence to voter support for that candidate. Finally, I analyze the effect of violence on the salience of voters' ethnic identity and security concerns.

For evidence, I draw on a survey experiment conducted with 483 eligible Kenyan voters.<sup>9</sup> The sample was drawn from the towns and surrounding areas of Nakuru, Kisumu, and Narok and included equal numbers of men and women as well as older and younger and more- and less-educated voters.<sup>10</sup> These locations were chosen mainly to sample from the dominant ethnic groups in the area: the Kikuyu in Nakuru, the Luo in Kisumu, and the Maasai in Narok. These groups were selected so as to ensure sample representation of some of Kenya's most politically salient ethnicities (the Luo and the Kikuyu, bitter rivals in the national political arena) as well as a less salient one (the Maasai, who often split their vote between rival camps). The locations were also chosen because of their position as focal points of violence in recent years in the hope that the findings from these locales might be of special significance for understanding the dynamics of political violence in Kenya. To increase the likelihood of respondents speaking freely and openly and to mitigate the effects of social

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<sup>9</sup>The study—including all voter experiments cited here—were preregistered on the EGAP study registry.

<sup>10</sup>“Older” voters were those 35 and above, while “more educated” voters were those that had completed secondary school. These cutoffs are roughly equal to the median age and educational attainment of the Kenyan population.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for Kenyan voter survey, N=483

| Variable       | Mean/Proportion | Median      |
|----------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Age            | 34              | 34          |
| Education      | Some secondary  | Secondary   |
| Income         | \$164/month     | \$115/month |
| TV*            | 0.72            | Yes         |
| Vehicle*       | 0.24            | No          |
| Mobile phone*  | 0.97            | Yes         |
| Electricity*   | 0.72            | Yes         |
| Running water* | 0.32            | No          |
| Owens home*    | 0.50            | No          |

*Note:* \* denotes a binary variable.

desirability bias, all enumerators came from the same tribe as their respondents and were fluent in their tribal language.<sup>11</sup> Summary statistics for the sample can be found in Table 3.

The experiment was designed to test for the effect of violence and its interaction with ethnicity on voter support for, and perceptions of, candidates for office. It does so by presenting respondents with a vignette about a candidate for county governor that randomly varies the candidate’s ethnicity and history of violence (see Appendix C for wording). With respect to ethnicity, voters were assigned with equal probability to either a coethnic or non-coethnic candidate.<sup>12</sup> With respect to violence, respondents were assigned—again with equal probability—to a candidate with one of the following four histories: 1) allegations of arming youths to *attack* people from other tribes during the last campaign; 2) allegations of arming youth to *defend* against attacks from other tribes during the last campaign; 3) allegations of youths committing violence against other tribes in the candidate’s electoral ward during the last campaign; and 4) no mention of violence. This produced three nested dimensions of theoretically relevant variation in the candidate’s history of violence: 1) whether or not

<sup>11</sup>See the below section on validity concerns for further reasons why social desirability bias is not a major concern in the voter experiment.

<sup>12</sup>Respondents had a 50 percent probability of being assigned a candidate from their own tribe and a 12.5 percent chance of being assigned a candidate from each of four other tribes. Multiple tribes were included in the non-coethnic condition so that comparisons with the coethnic condition purporting to estimate the effect of coethnicity would not be biased by sentiments particular to one tribal out-group or another.

Table 4: Experimental design

|                             |              | <b>Violence Treatments</b>                  |   |  |   |
|-----------------------------|--------------|---|---|--|---|
|                             |              | Violence                                    |   |  | No Violence                                     |
|                             |              | Attributed Violence                         |   | Unattributed Violence                          | No Violence                                     |
| <b>Ethnicity Treatments</b> | Coethnic     | Coethnic candidate + offensive violence     | Coethnic candidate + defensive violence     | Coethnic candidate + unattributed violence     | Coethnic candidate + no mention of violence     |
|                             | Non-coethnic | Non-coethnic candidate + offensive violence | Non-coethnic candidate + defensive violence | Non-coethnic candidate + unattributed violence | Non-coethnic candidate + no mention of violence |

violence occurred during the candidate’s campaign; 2) whether or not what violence did occur was directly attributed to the candidate; and 3) whether violence directly attributed to the candidate was framed as offensive or defensive. Thus, the overall design of the experiment is 2x4, but most of the main treatment effects are to be estimated between collapsed categories (e.g. between “attributed violence”—offensive plus defensive violence—and “no violence;” see Table 4). Balance tests for the main treatment conditions are summarized in Figures A1,A2, and A3 in Appendix A.

The main outcomes of interest in the experiment are answers to a series of questions measuring respondents’ support for, and perceptions of, the candidate for governor described in the vignette (see Appendix D). These outcomes include three measures of support and 17 measures of the candidate’s likely performance, including four measures of the candidate’s likely provision of private goods and 13 measures of the candidate’s likely overall effectiveness.<sup>13</sup> As we are also interested in analyzing the effect of violence on the salience of ethnic identity and security concerns, there are also seven questions measuring the strength of re-

<sup>13</sup>The three measures of support are meant to mitigate the effects of social desirability bias. Respondents might be more willing to say that their neighbors would vote for a violent candidate than themselves, for example.

spondents' ethnic attachment and the importance they place on security relative to other issues.

If the aforementioned theories of political violence are correct—namely, that out-group violence is a good for voters, that violence is a way to signal certain desirable traits, or that violence is a way of increasing the salience of ethnic identity and security concerns—then we should expect the following. First, candidates with a history of orchestrating violence—or at least *coethnic* candidates with a history of orchestrating violence—should score higher on measures of support than candidates without a history of violence. Second, if violence signals certain desirable traits of the candidate to voters, then violent candidates should score higher on at least some of the measures of likely performance. Finally, if violence successfully polarizes voters along ethnic lines and increases the salience of security vis-à-vis other issues, then we should observe voters exposed to descriptions of violence attaching relatively greater importance to their ethnic identity and to security concerns.<sup>14</sup> We therefore have the following hypotheses:

**H1:** *Voters (or at least coethnic voters) will be more likely to vote for candidates with a history of orchestrating violence. They will also assign them a higher likelihood of winning the election than those without a history of violence.*

**H2:** *Voters will expect violent candidates to perform better than candidates without a history of violence on various indicators of private and public goods provision and overall effectiveness.*

**H3:** *Voters will express greater trust in their ethnic group relative to others; report a stronger attachment to their tribal versus national identity; support more particularistic policies; and place greater weight on security vis-à-vis other issues when exposed to a description*

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<sup>14</sup>This is, admittedly, a rather weak treatment for testing for such an effect, as it's unclear that a simple description of violence would be sufficient to activate the psychological response posited to be responsible for the effect of violence on ethnic polarization and the salience of security. A better experimental approach might be to expose certain participants to a graphic news report detailing an outbreak of violence and measure how this affects these outcomes.

*of violence.*

## **Validity Concerns**

Some might be concerned about social desirability bias influencing the results laid out below. There are good reasons to believe, however, that this is not a major concern. First, treatment effects are calculated *across* subjects rather than *within*; each respondent sees a single candidate description, so they are unaware of what the experimental treatments are (violence and ethnicity) or even that candidate descriptions vary at all across respondents. As a result, there is less room for respondents to demonstrate their conformity with a social norm favoring violent over nonviolent candidates. Second, to mitigate potential social desirability bias, the survey instrument includes two additional measures of vote choice—how the respondent believes their neighbors will vote and whether they think the candidate will win election—that should be less subject to bias. A close examination of the results shows that the negative effect of violence on support is, across the board, slightly smaller for the neighbors question, suggesting some bias in the self-report, but the difference is very small and indistinguishable from zero. While none of the available measures can avoid bias completely, this should increase our confidence that each of the three come close to capturing true preferences. Third, even if we expect respondents to profess a lower likelihood of voting for the candidate than the reality, there is less reason to expect bias to affect all of the *other* outcomes related to candidate performance, yet the results laid out below show that they all point in the same direction. Fourth, one of the violence treatments—defensive violence—is likely subject to substantially less bias since such violence—especially for coethnics—can be legitimately justified. Yet the effects of defensive violence are the same (appendix Figure B1). Fifth, in results not reported in this paper, the experiment reveals a strong coethnic bias in respondents' voting preferences, despite their assertion in a pre-treatment question that ethnicity is wholly unimportant to how they vote. This suggests that the experiment helps

significantly in reducing the effects of social desirability bias (since respondents display a coethnic preference in the experiment despite professing, as would be expected given social norms, that they don't care about candidates' ethnicity), and that results on the effects of violence on voter support are valid. Finally, the effects of violence measured in the experiment are so sizeable that any bias would have to be very large in order to alter the basic conclusions.

Some might also be concerned that the candidates described in the vignettes are unnatural, implausible, or exceptional, and that voters either wouldn't believe them or would fail to consider them seriously and sincerely. To gauge this, the survey asked respondents whether the candidate described in the vignette reminded them of any candidates they knew of that had previously run for office. 73.4 percent of respondents answered in the affirmative, suggesting that they perceived the candidates described to be very much in line with reality.<sup>15</sup>

## Results

Results from empirical tests of the aforementioned theories are summarized in Figures 1-5 below.

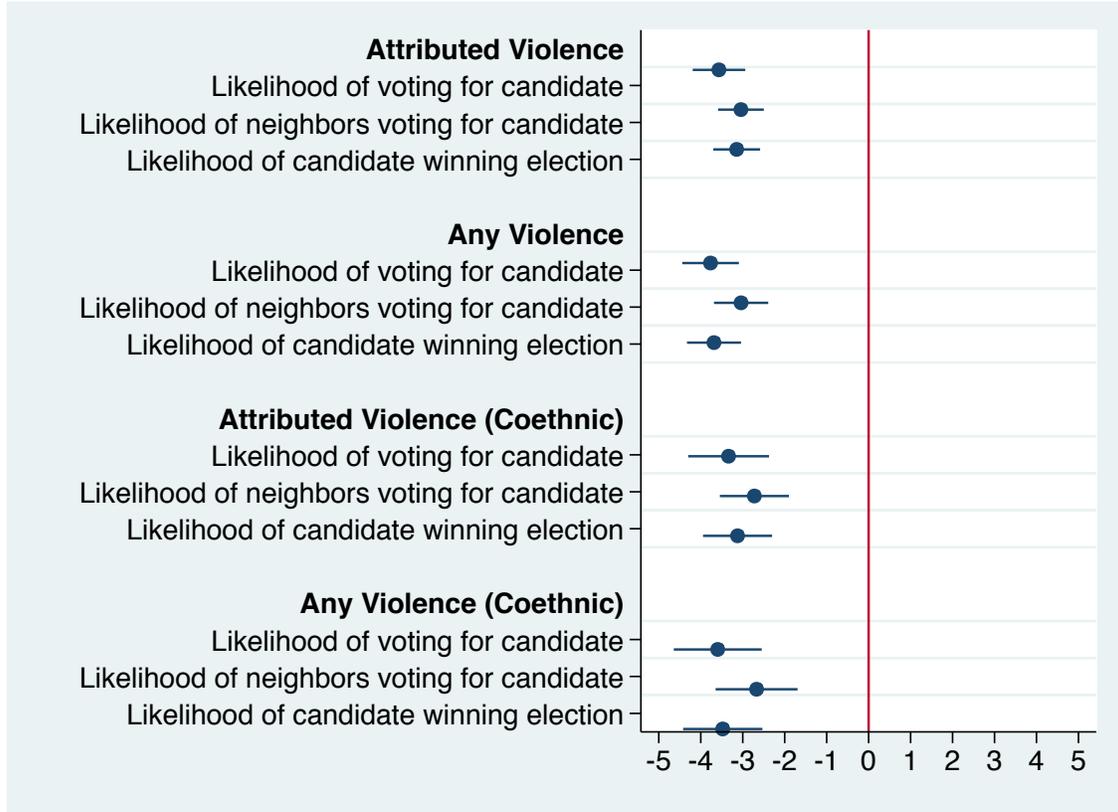
### The Effect of Violence on Vote Choice

The results show no evidence that violence increases candidates' vote share or their likelihood of winning elections. Figure 1) shows that having a history of violence has a strong negative effect on candidate support, including among coethnic voters. This is true regardless of whether or not the violence is directly attributed to the candidate, as well as whether it is framed as defensive or offensive (appendix Figure B1). The result holds for all subsets

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<sup>15</sup>76.2 percent of respondents said the candidate in the rhetoric experiment analyzed below reminded them of previous candidates for office. The percentage of candidates that reminded voters of previous candidates was roughly equal across treatment conditions.

Figure 1: Effect of violence on vote choice



*Note:* Estimates are based on difference in means between treatment (either attributed or any violence) and control and are displayed with 95 percent confidence intervals.

of voters, including young, poorly educated men, perhaps the group for which violence might hold the greatest appeal (results not shown). There is therefore strong evidence that violence, rather than helping candidates to persuade voters to vote for them, actually causes candidates to lose support from all types of voters, even those in their coethnic base.<sup>16</sup>

This result is important and somewhat surprising for at least three reasons. First, there

<sup>16</sup>One might think the setup of this experiment to be unrealistic in that voters are asked to rate likelihood of voting for the candidate without knowing the alternatives. Results from a conjoint experiment in which respondents are asked to choose between two presidential candidates with randomly varied characteristics, however, are the same. In fact, the negative effect of violence is so strong that 80 percent of voters are willing to vote for a peaceful non-coethnic over a violent coethnic candidate. Nonviolence is a strictly dominant strategy; regardless of the opponent's ethnicity or use of violence, pursuing a nonviolent strategy results in higher vote share.

is no evidence that any subset of Kenyan voters has a preference for violence against outside ethnic groups; this makes the idea that out-group violence is a “good” that politicians seek to provide for certain voters highly unlikely. Second, it stacks the deck against any other mechanism—other than pure coercion—that links violence to better electoral outcomes for those candidates who use it. This includes the possibility that violence helps candidates signal certain desirable traits to voters or that it helps them consolidate the coethnic vote by polarizing the electorate and putting security concerns front and center. Since violence appears to *negatively* affect candidate vote share—even among coethnics—it is unlikely that either of these mechanisms are at work. Finally, the strong negative persuasive effect of violence on candidate vote share—including among coethnics—calls into question the overall efficacy of violence even if coercion alone successfully reshapes the electorate in the candidate’s favor. This is because candidates who use violence to prevent non-coethnics from voting will suffer a negative electoral backlash not only from the electorate at large, but from their coethnic base as well. Any benefit they get from preventing opposition sympathizers from voting would therefore have to be large enough to offset their loss of support among those who *do* turn out to vote. But perhaps violence is a useful contingent strategy, used only to show one’s toughness and ability to defend one’s coethnics when others force your hand with violence targeted at your group? The results showing that even the use of *defensive* violence (violence organized to defend against attacks from other groups) reduces the likelihood of winning the coethnic vote indicate otherwise, suggesting that violence can only hurt as a means of persuading voters.

### **Violence as a Signal of Candidate Type**

Though the average effect of violence on voter support is clearly negative, there remains the possibility that candidates might obtain some benefit from violence if it helps them to signal certain traits that are especially important to victory in particular elections. In areas beset

by ethnic tensions, for example, it might be essential to coethnic voters that candidates signal their willingness and ability to engage in violent action to protect them against attacks from other groups. I therefore analyze the effects of a candidate's history of violence on voters' perceptions of that candidate on a range of traits that voters may desire.

I first analyze the effect of a history of violence on voters' perceptions about the likelihood that the candidate will provide common private goods during the campaign and once in office. For both coethnics and voters overall, the general perception is that violent candidates are more likely to buy votes by providing gifts during the campaign period, but less likely to provide personal assistance once in office (Figure 2). However, this would not seem to provide any advantage to candidates, even if voters desire gifts during the campaign. This is because voters know whether or not a candidate *has* in fact provided them with a gift before they go to the polls; using violence to signal that this will occur makes little sense. Instead, it is likely that voters simply associate illicit behaviors such as vote-buying and violence with particular candidates, so that if a candidate is engaged in one activity, he is more likely to be engaged in the other.<sup>17</sup>

The evidence on the effect of violence on expectations about the provision of other private goods is telling. Having a history of violence reduces the perception among voters of the likelihood that candidates will provide gifts once in office, as well the likelihood that they will help pay school fees or health expenses or provide financial assistance in an emergency (Figure 2).<sup>18</sup> Thus, violence provides candidates with no advantage when it comes to voters' beliefs that they are willing and able to provide private goods to them once in office; in fact, it gives them a distinct disadvantage.

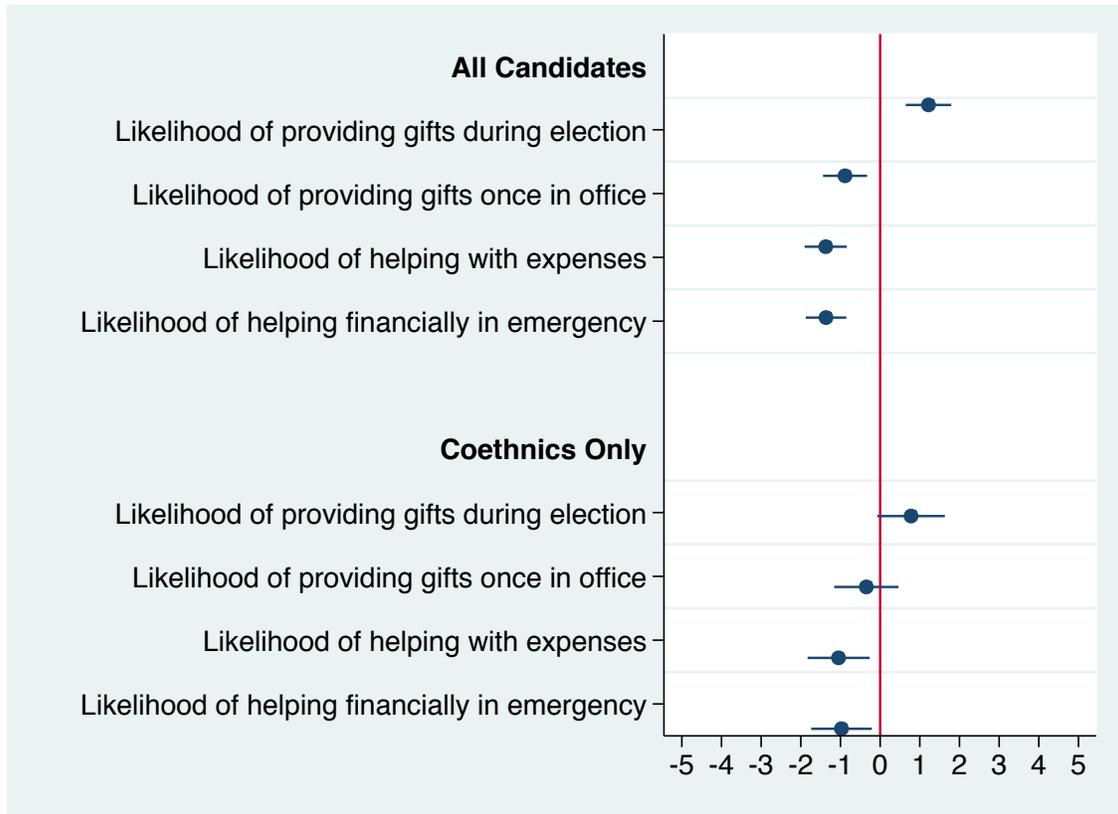
Violence also disadvantages candidates with respect to voters' perceptions about their

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<sup>17</sup>Vote buying is common in Kenya, but it is usually conducted in relative secrecy under the cover of darkness as a result of its illegality.

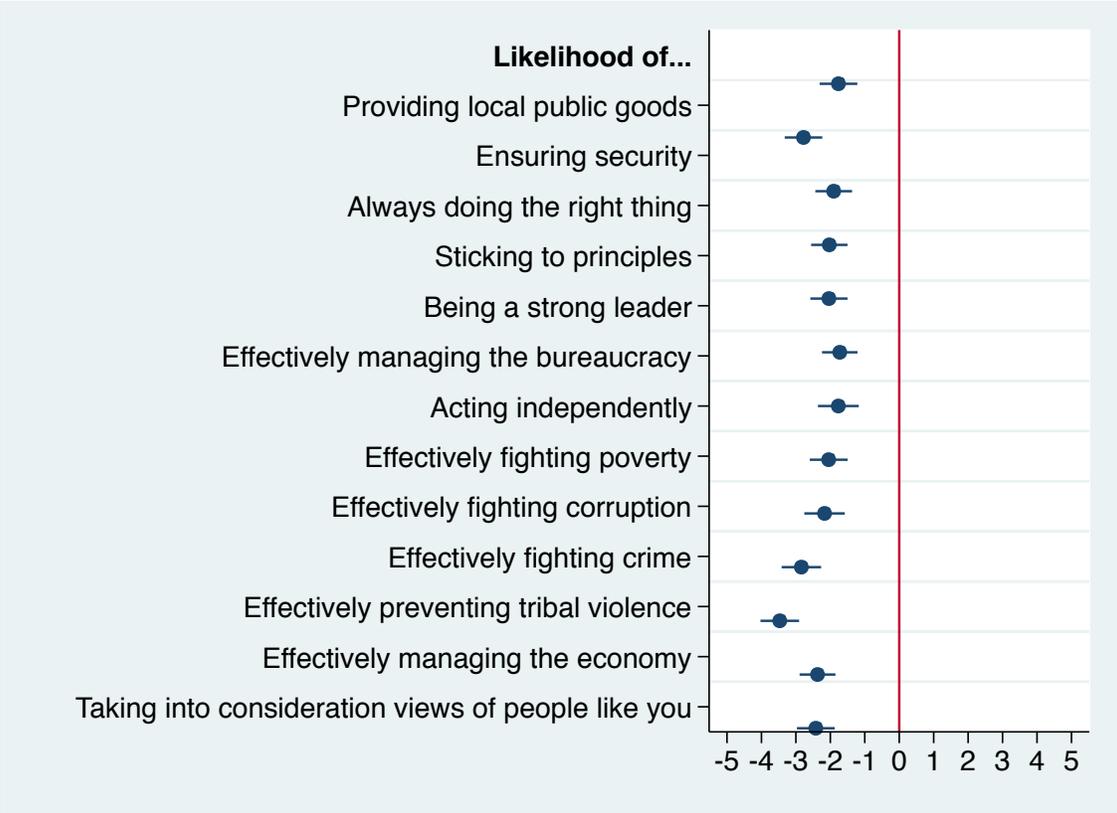
<sup>18</sup>Helping individual constituents financially when they are in need is in some ways the Kenyan version of constituency service. During one interview, a Kenyan MP showed me 3 SMSs he had received from his constituents in just the last hour asking for personal assistance for purposes such as a relative's hospital bill.

Figure 2: Effect of violence on voter perceptions of candidates' private goods provision



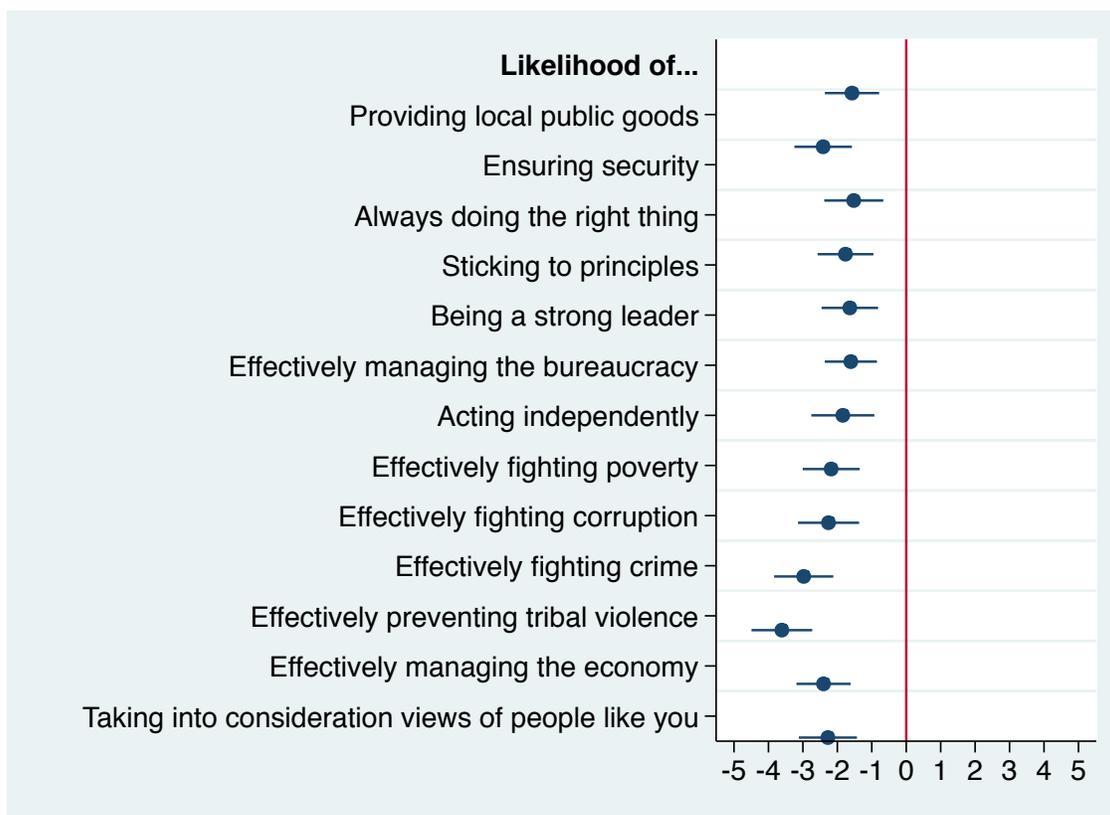
*Note:* Estimates are based on difference in means between the attributed violence treatment and control and are displayed with 95 percent confidence intervals.

Figure 3: Effect of violence on voter perceptions of candidates' ability and effectiveness



*Note:* Estimates are based on difference in means between the attributed violence treatment and control and are displayed with 95 percent confidence intervals.

Figure 4: Effect of violence on voter perceptions of candidates' ability and effectiveness (coethnics only)



Note: Estimates are based on difference in means between the attributed violence treatment and control and are displayed with 95 percent confidence intervals.

ability to provide public goods and be effective leaders overall. Figure 3 shows that violence makes voters less confident that candidates will perform well across a range of indicators, including providing local public goods, ensuring the security of their community, being a strong leader, and taking into consideration the views of people like them. These negative results hold both for the sample as a whole and for coethnics only (Figure 4); it is particularly notable that even coethnic voters believe violent candidates to be less likely to provide security to their community.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup>“Community” (*jamii* in Swahili) has a particular connotation in the Kenyan context, generally referring to one’s tribe.

## Violence as a Means of Increasing the Salience of Ethnicity and Security

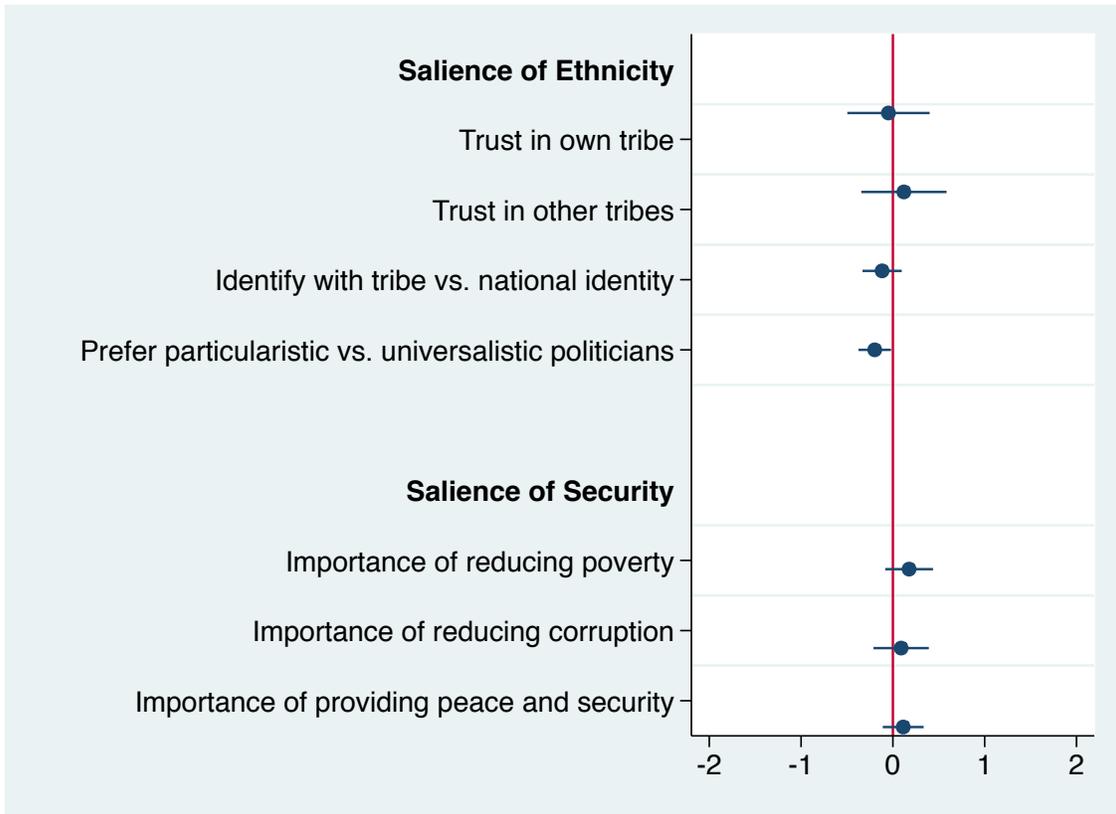
If consolidating support among one's coethnics is the most important consideration in winning an election (if, for example, your group makes up the majority in a constituency but there is the possibility that they might vote for a candidate from another group), then politicians will do what they can to increase the likelihood that their coethnics vote for them as a bloc. Violence may be one means of achieving this goal if it increases the salience of ethnic identities and voters' concerns about their physical security. I therefore estimate the effects of exposure to violence (or, rather, a description of violence) on the strength of respondents' ethnic identity and the relative importance they place on the issue of security. In particular, I estimate the effect of violence on respondents' trust in their own tribe versus others; on their propensity to identify as a member of their tribe rather than as Kenyan; and on their preference for particularistic versus universalistic policies. I also estimate the importance respondents attach to security relative to other major concerns (poverty and corruption).

I find no evidence that violence polarizes voters along ethnic lines. In fact, the one statistically significant result on the outcomes of interest suggests that exposure to violence *reduces* voters' support for policies favoring their own community over the country as a whole (Figure 5). I also find no evidence that exposure to violence increases the importance voters attach to security relative to other issues of concern. The results suggest that violence is not an effective tool for Kenyan politicians seeking to polarize the electorate and consolidate their ethnic base.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>In a separate analysis not reported here, I find that Kenyan voters directly affected by the 2007-08 post-election violence are no more likely than those not directly affected to identify more closely with their ethnic identity or to consider the ethnicity of the candidates when voting.

Figure 5: Effect of violence on the salience of ethnicity and security



*Note:* Estimates are based on difference in means between the violence treatment and control and are displayed with 95 percent confidence intervals.

# The Effects of Ethnic Rhetoric on Vote Choice and Violence

Even if politicians receive no objective benefit from instigating violence *per se*, they may still receive some benefit from heated ethnic campaign rhetoric that is both useful for rallying the coethnic base and a catalyst for violent conflict. Thus, violence could be a byproduct of politicians' campaign tactics rather than an integral part of their strategy. This section therefore seeks answers to two related questions: 1) Does heated ethnic rhetoric help politicians win coethnic votes? and 2) Does such rhetoric increase the likelihood of violent ethnic conflict?

The data used to answer these questions come from a second experiment conducted with the same sample of Kenyan voters. In the experiment, respondents were read a vignette about a coethnic candidate for MP from their constituency that randomly varied the candidate's campaign rhetoric and association with violence. In the control condition, there was no mention of the candidate using ethnic rhetoric or being associated with violence. In a second condition (the "rhetoric" treatment), the candidate cites the candidate's promise to ensure that his coethnics get their fair share of land and government jobs, which he asserts have been stolen by people from other tribes, and there is again no mention of violence.<sup>21</sup> A third condition (the "rhetoric plus violence" treatment) has the candidate making this same ethnic appeal and suggests that similar speeches by the candidate led to ethnic violence in the past. A final treatment condition (the "violence" treatment) leaves out the candidate's use of heated ethnic rhetoric but maintains the suggestion that past speeches he made led to violence. The result is a 2x2 experimental design.

The main purpose of the experiment is to test 1) whether the use of heated ethnic

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<sup>21</sup>Perceived injustices in the distribution of land among tribes is by far the greatest source of conflict between ethnic groups in Kenya. Unequal representation in government employment is a second major source of interethnic tension.

rhetoric increases support among coethnic voters and 2) whether such rhetoric increases the likelihood of violence.<sup>22</sup> The main outcomes of interest are therefore three measures of candidate support (same as above) and two measures of the likelihood of violence. The first measure simply asks respondents to rate the likelihood of violence occurring in the next election the candidate runs in. The second asks respondents whether they agree or disagree with the following statement: “In this country, it is sometimes necessary to use violence in support of a just cause.” The question is based on the observation that, if heated ethnic rhetoric is to increase the likelihood of violent conflict by stirring ethnic animosity and making violence a realistic option, it should make regular citizens more accepting of violence as a tool to achieve certain aims.

If heated ethnic rhetoric increases candidates’ support among coethnic voters, then we would expect candidates in the rhetoric treatment condition to enjoy greater support than those in the control condition. If ethnic rhetoric increases the likelihood of violence, then we would expect respondents to anticipate a greater likelihood of violence in the next election and be more amenable to using violence for a just cause in the rhetoric condition as compared to the control. This yields the following hypotheses:

**H4:** *Voters will be more likely to vote for coethnic candidates that use antagonistic ethnic rhetoric than those who do not. They will also assign them a higher likelihood of winning election.*

**H5:** *Voters will anticipate a higher likelihood of violence in an election in which a candidate uses antagonistic ethnic rhetoric than in one in which they don’t.*

**H6:** *Voters will be more amenable to the use of violence in support of a just cause when exposed to antagonistic ethnic rhetoric than when they are not exposed to such rhetoric.*

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<sup>22</sup>A secondary purpose, if ethnic rhetoric were found to be useful, would be to evaluate whether the benefits of such rhetoric outweigh the costs of being associated with the violence that might arise from it. The results indicating that ethnic rhetoric is not useful in the first place make this analysis irrelevant.

## Results

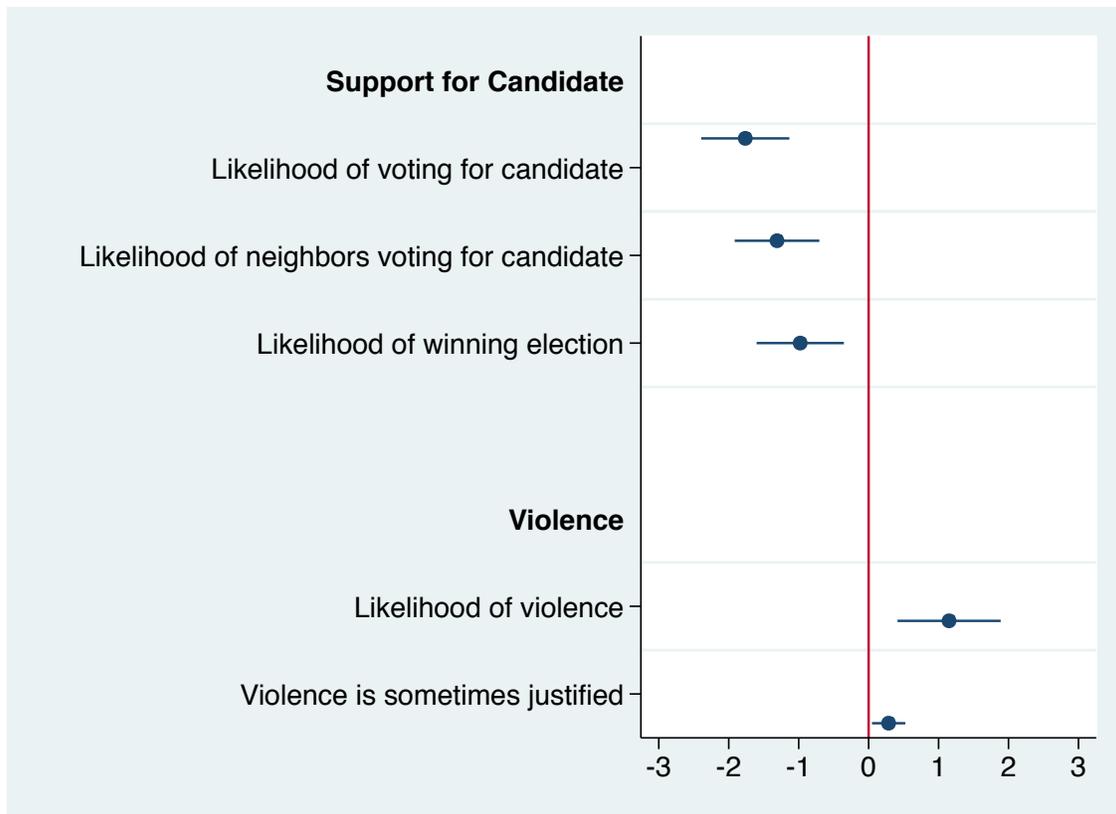
### **The Effect of Ethnic Rhetoric on Coethnic Support**

Figure 6 shows that heated ethnic rhetoric—as captured by a promise to provide coethnics with land and government jobs purportedly “stolen” by members of other tribes—does *not* increase candidate support among coethnic voters. Instead, the use of such rhetoric *reduces* coethnic support. Survey respondents reported that they and their neighbors would be less likely to vote for the candidate in the rhetoric condition than the one in control. They also expressed the belief that such a candidate would be less likely to win the election for MP. There is therefore no evidence that heated ethnic rhetoric helps candidates consolidate support among their coethnics; in fact, it erodes their support.

### **The effect of ethnic rhetoric on violence**

While heated ethnic rhetoric provides no apparent benefit to candidates for office, it does increase the likelihood of violent conflict. Voters in the rhetoric condition were significantly more likely than those in the control to anticipate that the next election the candidate runs in would be characterized by violence. They were also more likely to agree with the statement that violence is sometimes necessary in support of a just cause, suggesting that antagonistic ethnic rhetoric increases the propensity for violence among those exposed to it. We can therefore conclude that, although ethnic rhetoric is not a useful tactic for Kenyan politicians, it does increase the likelihood of violence breaking out. If politicians choose to employ it, such rhetoric could be an important contributor to the outbreak of violence.

Figure 6: Effect of ethnic rhetoric on vote choice and violence



*Note:* Estimates are based on difference in means between the violence treatment and control and are displayed with 95 percent confidence intervals.

# Politicians' Perceptions of the Effects of Violence and Ethnic Rhetoric

In many ways, the results described above only deepen the puzzle of why political violence occurs. If violence and violent rhetoric does not help politicians increase their support among voters—and in fact *reduces* it—why do we observe substantial numbers of them directly instigating violence or employing rhetoric that creates the conditions for it to break out?<sup>23</sup>

The answer lies in Kenyan politicians' perceptions—or, rather, misperceptions—of voter preferences over violence and ethnic conflict. The experimental and qualitative data in this section will show that, despite clear voter preferences against violence and conflictual ethnic rhetoric, Kenyan politicians believe their use of violence and hostile ethnic rhetoric to be at worst irrelevant—and at best helpful—in their efforts to consolidate coethnic support and win elections. These beliefs help explain why substantial political violence occurs in Kenya despite the apparent ineffectiveness of the strategies that produce it.

The experimental data in this section come from a modified version of the survey experiments conducted with voters.<sup>24</sup> In the elite version, the violence treatment in the first experiment is simplified to be binary (violence/no violence).<sup>25</sup> In the elite version of the second experiment, the violence-only treatment is dropped while the control, rhetoric, and rhetoric plus violence conditions remain. Following both experiments, politicians were asked

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<sup>23</sup>As noted above, even if violent politicians receive some electoral payoff from direct coercion of opposition supporters, the results suggest that in order for a violent strategy to be a net benefit, that payoff has to offset the electoral backlash from those voters—including coethnics—who are able to vote.

<sup>24</sup>The experiments with elites are ongoing, but the current sample includes 38 Kenyan political elites, including 24 MCAs (Members of County Assembly) 12 MPs, 1 Senator, and one former candidate for MP. The goal is to have a convenience sample of at least 50, with a mix of national-level and county-level politicians.

<sup>25</sup>This eliminates the offensive/defensive violence distinction as well as the attributed/unattributed violence dimension. Also, since politicians are asked to comment on how they believe *voters* will act, the ethnic match between candidate and respondent is irrelevant. Instead, I randomly vary whether the constituency the candidate runs in is dominated by his tribe or ethnically mixed in order to determine whether ethnic demographics matter for politicians' beliefs about the efficacy of a violent strategy (results not reported due to small sample size).

about the likelihood that coethnics and non-coethnics would vote for the candidate described and that the candidate would win the election for MP. The interview protocol also asked respondents to comment on the rationale underlying their answers, offering a rich source of data on how Kenyan elites view the rewards and drawbacks of violent and ethnically-charged campaign strategies. More than two dozen in-depth interviews conducted prior to the survey contributed further knowledge about the role of political violence in Kenyan electoral competition.

## **Politicians' Perceptions About the Effect of Violence on Vote Choice**

A combination of experimental and qualitative evidence from interviews with political elites strongly suggests that Kenyan politicians misperceive voter preferences over violence. The data show that these elites overestimate the electoral benefits—and, more crucially, underestimate the costs—of a violent campaign strategy, particularly with respect to their support among their coethnic base.

### **Experimental Evidence**

Though currently based on small sample results, evidence from the elite survey experiment suggests that Kenyan politicians perceive there to be no effect of violence on their likelihood of winning the coethnic votes or elections overall. Figure 7—which displays p-values from randomization inference using Fisher's exact test of the sharp null hypothesis—shows that politicians believe violence to have no effect on the likelihood of a candidate winning the coethnic vote but a possibly *positive* effect on the likelihood of winning the election overall.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>I use randomization inference to analyze the politician survey experiment because of the small sample size. The point estimate for the effect of violence on winning the coethnic vote is nearly zero while positive and significant for winning the election overall.

## Qualitative Evidence

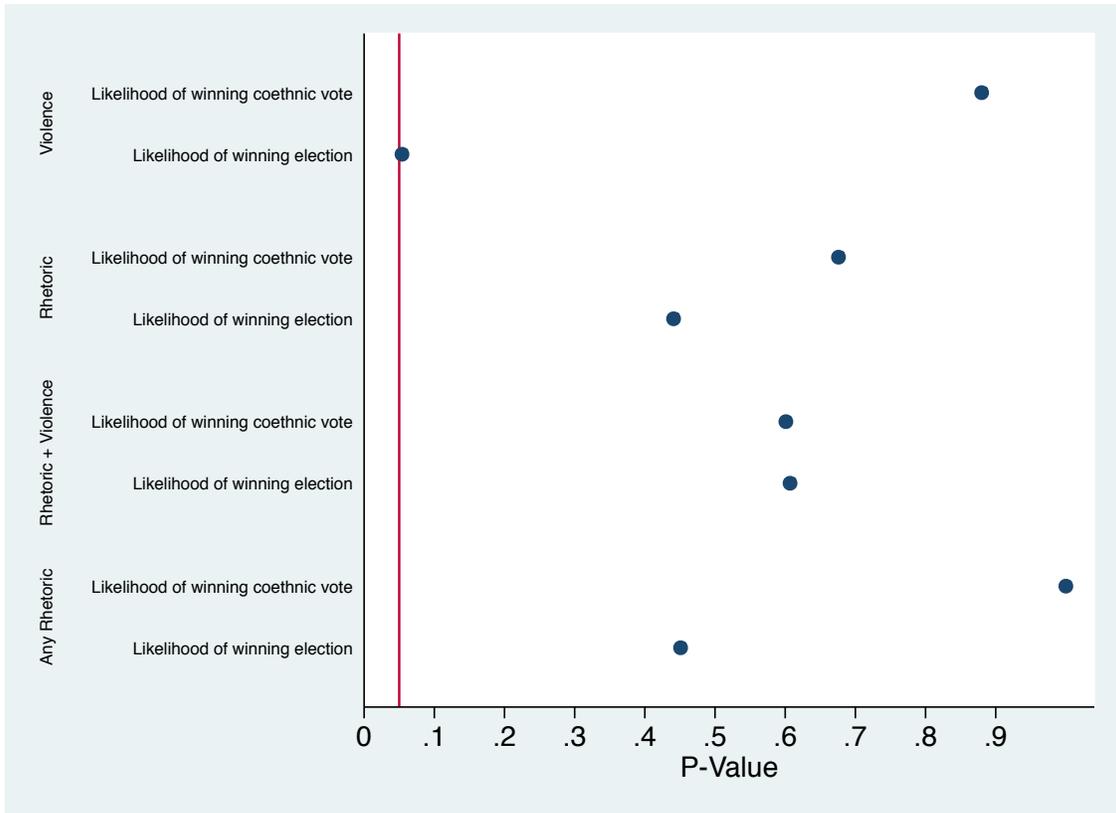
Qualitative data from interviews with politicians in the survey sample offers additional evidence that Kenyan politicians perceive no electoral disadvantage from a violent campaign strategy, and, in some cases, perceive it to be an advantage. Most strikingly, *not a single politician* out of the 18 presented with a description of a violent candidate mentioned the candidate's history of violence as a potential detriment to their ability to win the coethnic vote or the election overall. With respect to their ability to win the support of coethnics, many respondents ignored the candidate's history of violence altogether, apparently deeming it irrelevant in a political context where, they believe, ethnic solidarity trumps all else. A common explanation for why coethnics would vote for the candidate was simply "Because he's from their tribe" or "He's from the same tribe. People will always rally behind their own."<sup>27</sup> Others cited what they saw as the potential benefits of a violent strategy for consolidating coethnic support. One MCA suggested that coethnic voters would support the violent candidate because "[h]e is considered a fighter for their interests. He cares for them. He's willing to eliminate the intruders as they see them." Another asserted that coethnics would vote for the candidate because "he can protect them in violence, being one of their own," while an MP noted that "he is providing security for his people." Another MCA said of the candidate's coethnics: "They own him - that's their man. They have a natural bond with him and can trust him more than any other person. They believe he'll see things the same way [as them]."

Similarly, respondents failed to mention the candidate's history of violence as a relevant factor in their ability to win office, with ethnic demographics and other factors playing the most important role. For candidates described as running in constituencies in which their tribe dominates, respondents felt they would win because "his tribe is dominant," "he has the numbers [of people from his tribe]," or "he has demonstrated locally that he can

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<sup>27</sup>Interview with Kenyan MP; Interview with Kenyan MCA.

Figure 7: Politicians' perceptions of the effect of violence and ethnic rhetoric on vote choice



*Note:* This figure reports p-values from randomization inference using Fisher’s exact test of the sharp null hypothesis. The “violence” results are from a comparison between the violence and no violence conditions in the first elite experiment; the “rhetoric,” “rhetoric + violence,” and “any rhetoric” results are from a comparison of the rhetoric/rhetoric+violence/combination of the two conditions against the control condition in the second elite experiment. Estimates are based on 1,000 Monte Carlo simulations of the treatment assignment process.

deliver. And he's the right tribe."<sup>28</sup> For those running in ethnically-mixed constituencies, the outcome would depend "on how predominant Kalenjins [the candidate's coethnics] are in the area," "on turnout from each community [tribe] and the number of candidates from each community [tribe]," or "on how much money he has and the quality of his campaign."<sup>29</sup>

The mismatch between Kenyan politicians' perceptions about voters' preferences and reality is stark. While Kenyan voters of all stripes indicated a strong distaste for and willingness to vote against violent candidates—even those from their own group—Kenyan politicians clearly have not gotten the message. Instead, they see violence as at worst irrelevant—and at best helpful—in their efforts to consolidate the coethnic vote and win elections. This disconnect provides a powerful yet overlooked explanation for the persistence of violence as a feature of electoral competition in Kenya.

### **Politicians' Perceptions About the Effect of Ethnic Rhetoric on Vote Choice**

Earlier it was shown that heated ethnic rhetoric, though ineffective in garnering coethnic support, *does* have the ability to incite violence. It is therefore important to assess politicians' perceptions about the efficacy of such rhetoric. If, despite evidence to the contrary, they see it as a useful tactic, then they are likely to use it. And, as the evidence shows, its use heightens the risk of violent conflict.

The evidence is clear in showing that Kenyan politicians misperceive not just the effect of violence on their electoral prospects, but the effect of ethnic rhetoric, as well. Experimental and qualitative data demonstrate that elites believe ethnic rhetoric to be at worst inconsequential—or at best an effective tactic—in consolidating coethnic support and winning elections, providing an additional explanation for the persistence of political violence in Kenya.

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<sup>28</sup>Interview with Kenyan MCA; Interview with Kenyan MCA; Interview with Kenyan MP.

<sup>29</sup>Interview with Kenyan MCA; Interview with Kenyan MCA; Interview with Kenyan MCA.

## Experimental Evidence

Results from the survey experiment with elites suggest that Kenyan politicians do not generally consider ethnic rhetoric to be very consequential, one way or the other, in their efforts to solidify their coethnic base and win elections. Figure 7 indicates that elites believe ethnic rhetoric has no significant effect, on average, on candidates' chances of winning the coethnic vote and the election overall.<sup>30</sup>

## Qualitative Evidence

Qualitative data from interviews with politicians who participated in the survey suggests that Kenyan politicians perceive heated ethnic rhetoric to be at worst irrelevant—and at best an important tool—in their efforts to consolidate the coethnic vote and win elections. A few respondents ignored the candidate's rhetoric, mentioning tribal solidarity and ethnic demographics as the most relevant factors. Meanwhile, those running in areas dominated by their tribe will win because they're "the majority of people are from his tribe,"<sup>31</sup> while victory for those running in more ethnically-mixed locales will "depend [on] which tribe has the majority."<sup>32</sup>

Many politicians, however, mentioned what they saw as the potential benefits of an ethnically-charged campaign strategy. Remarking on why a candidate that employed ethnic rhetoric would win the coethnic vote, one MP said that "He is talking political language that Kenyans love, which is fighting for the Kikuyu share, fighting for their rights," while another noted that "He's running in an area dominated by his tribe, and he's talking about relevant issues to his constituency." Similarly, an MCA suggested that "He is talking about the rights of this people, protecting what is theirs, protecting the dignity of his tribe" and another

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<sup>30</sup>Point estimates for the effects are small and of mixed sign for winning the coethnic vote and slightly positive for winning the election overall.

<sup>31</sup>Interview with Kenyan MCA.

<sup>32</sup>Interview with Kenyan MCA.

that “He’s championing their rights and raising their emotions about other communities and promising to get them jobs from others.” Respondents gave similar answers in their explanations for why such candidates would win their elections, pointing to the importance of ethnic demographics above all else.

In short, Kenyan politicians appear to believe that favorable ethnic demographics put you in the position to win an election, while aggressive ethnic appeals have the potential to make victory more likely. Thus, not only do they misperceive the effects of violence, they misperceive the effects of ethnic rhetoric as well. Together, these findings provide a new and important explanation for the political violence that Kenya has frequently endured.

## Discussion

This paper presents results that highlight an important yet overlooked explanation for political violence: elite misperception of voter preferences and of the costs and benefits of a violent or ethnically-charged campaign strategy. It also explicitly examines an assumption underlying most theories of political violence—that if political elites use violence, they do so because it provides them an objective strategic benefit—and finds it to be lacking. In short, the findings presented here suggest a fundamental reassessment of our knowledge about the causes of elite-instigated political violence and point us toward new directions of potential inquiry.

One implication of the paper’s findings is that we should be cautious in inferring the effects of elite behavior from the strategic choices they make. If political elites misjudge the effects of their actions, then we obviously cannot assume that these actions achieve their intended purpose. Thus, theories that trace the connections between elite motivations, elite behavior, and important political outcomes must be careful to consider the possibility that the effects of elite behavior cannot be straightforwardly derived from the motives that

prompted it in the first place.

Perhaps most interesting, however, are the questions the findings raise about when and why politicians fail to accurately infer voter preferences, and, as a result, pursue misguided campaign strategies. Is it due to a lack of good information about the relative efficacy of different campaign tactics? Is there some cognitive bias, such as overconfidence, naïve herding or confirmation bias, that causes politicians to misinterpret the information they have? Pursuing these questions can inform our understanding not just of political violence, but of political strategy and the relationship between elites and voters more generally.

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# A Balance Tests

Figure A1: Balance on attributed violence treatment

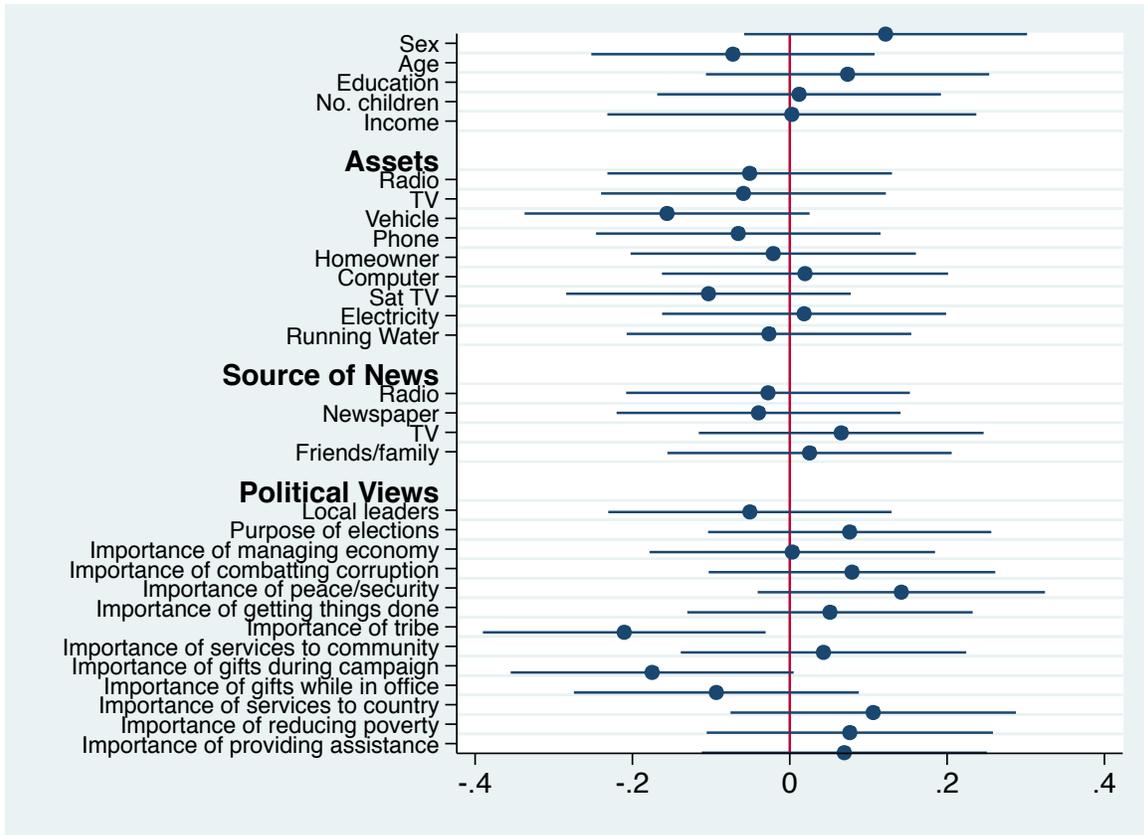


Figure A2: Balance on coethnic vs. non-coethnic treatment

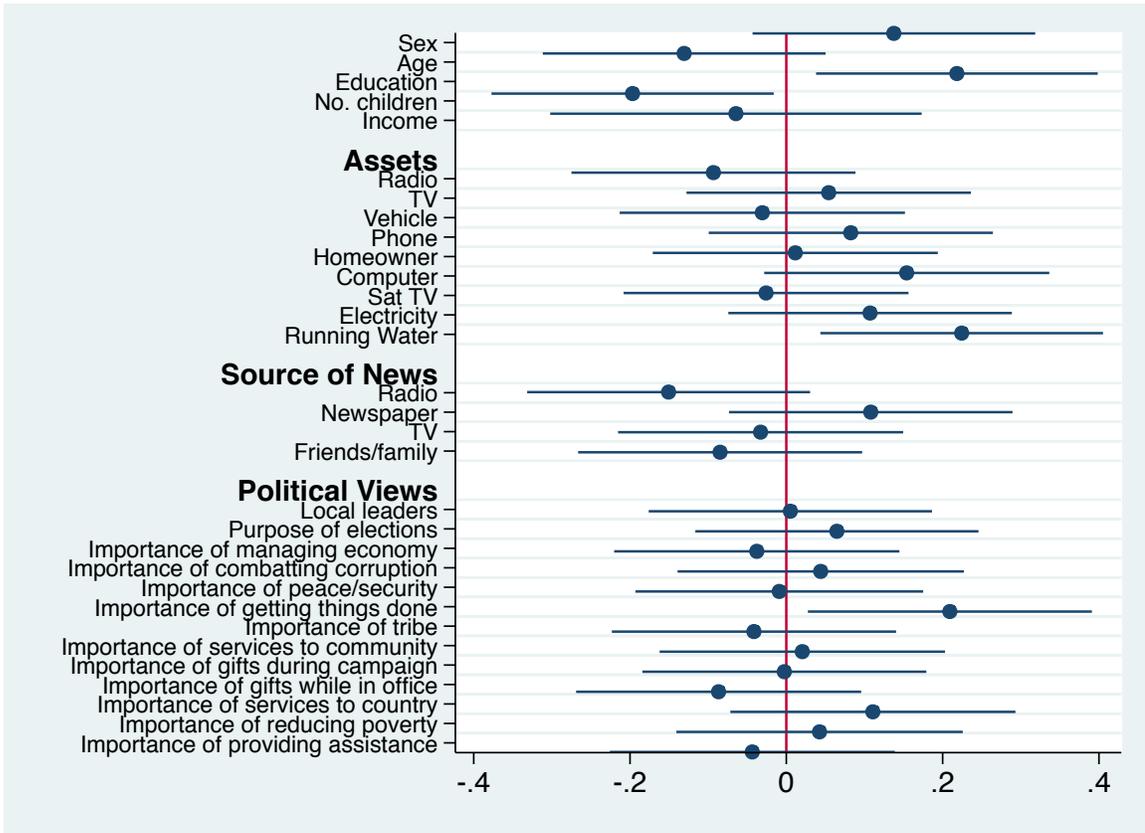
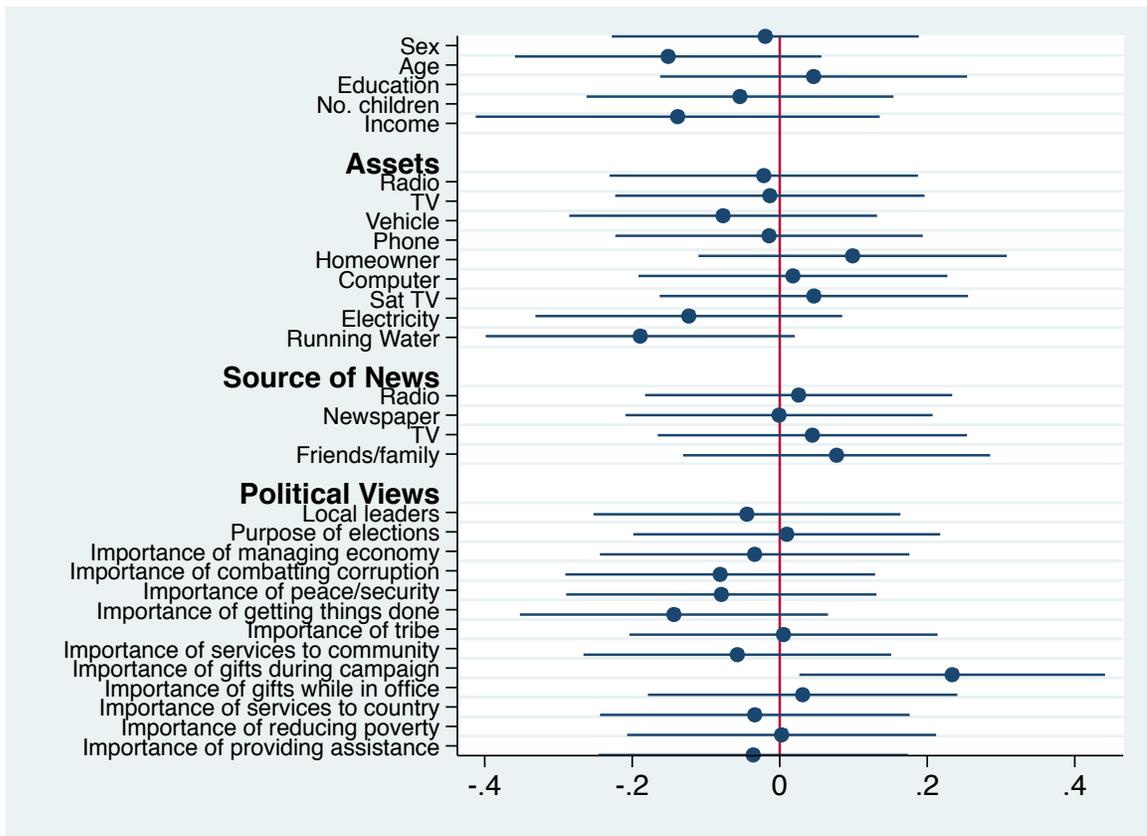
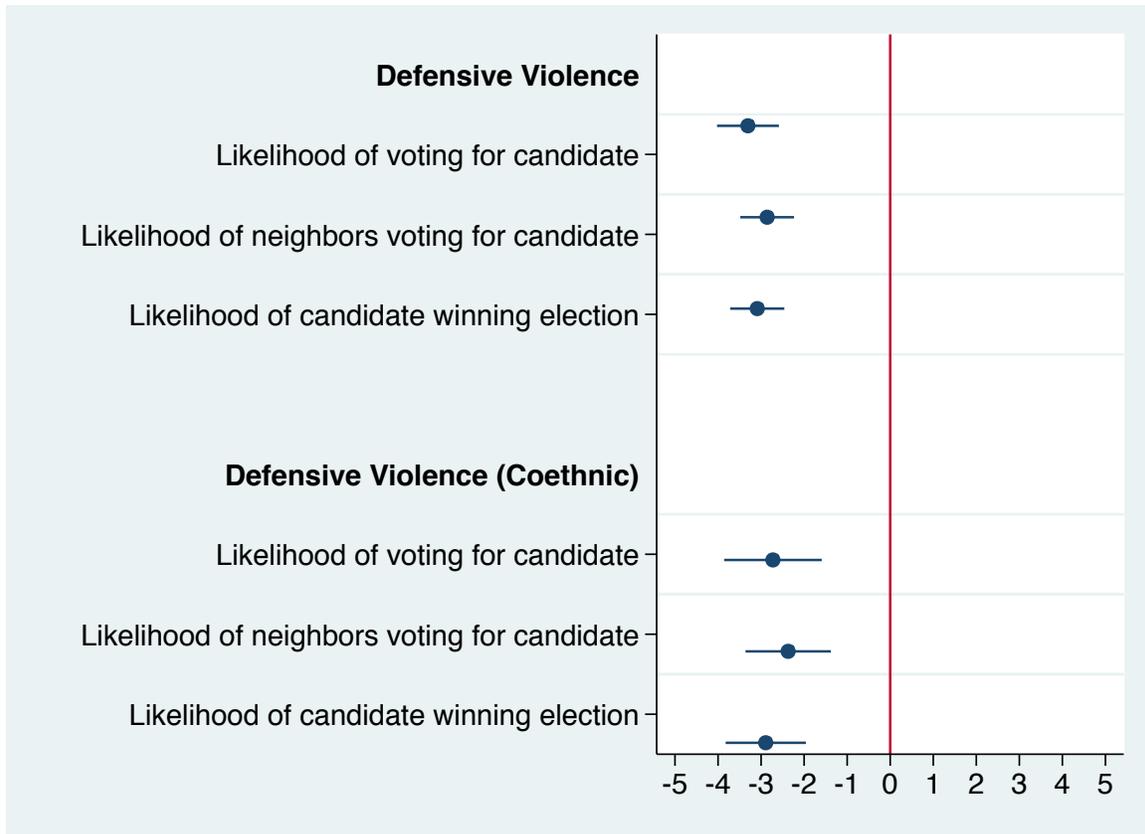


Figure A3: Balance on ethnic rhetoric treatment (voter survey)



## B Supplementary Analyses

Figure B1: Effect of defensive violence on vote choice



## C Candidate Vignettes

### Voter Experiment 1:

*[Mr. Peter Chege/Mr. Peter Onyango/Mr. Peter ole Sankale/Mr. Peter Kipkosgei /Mr. Peter Bosire] plans to run for Governor in the next elections in 2017. [Mr. Chege/Mr. Onyango/Mr. ole Sankale/Mr. Kipkosgei/Mr. Bosire]is 51 years old and a member of the [Kikuyu/Luo/Maasai/Kalenjin/Kisii] tribe. He is currently serving as a County Assembly Member, having previously served one term as a District Councillor. While in office, he focused on issues in the health sector. If elected, he promises to create jobs, reduce corruption, and improve the quality of primary education. [In the last election campaign, [youths in his ward were said to have used pangas to battle members of other tribes] [he was said to have provided youths with pangas to attack members other tribes] [he was said to have provided youths with pangas to defend against attacks from members of other tribes].*

**Note:** Each respondent had a 50 percent chance of seeing a candidate from their own tribe, and a 12.5 percent chance of seeing a candidate from one of four others. For example, a Kikuyu respondent had a 50 percent of seeing a Mr. Chege, and a 50 percent chance of seeing either Mr. Onyango, Mr. ole Sankale, Mr. Kipkosgei, or Mr. Bosire, with an equal chance of seeing each of the latter.

### Voter Experiment 2:

*Mr. Joseph Nderitu/Odhiambo/ole Tonkei plans to run for MP in this constituency in the next elections in 2017. Mr. Nderitu/Odhiambo/ole Tonkei is 48 years old and a member of the Kikuyu/Luo/Maasai tribe. He is an advocate of the High Court of Kenya and currently serves as a County Assembly Member. If elected, he promises to improve the quality of the roads in the constituency and help women and the youth to start businesses. [He has also pledged to ensure that Kikuyu/Luo/Maasai people get access to their fair share of the county's land and government jobs, which he says have been stolen by people from other tribes.] [Some observers have suggested that speeches he gave during his last campaign accusing people from other tribes of stealing land and jobs led to violence against those tribes during the campaign.] [Some observers have suggested that speeches he gave during the last campaign led to violence against other tribes.]*

**Note:** Kikuyu respondents only saw Mr. Nderitu, Luo ones only Mr. Odhiambo, and Maasai ones only Mr. ole Tonkei.

### Political Elite Experiment 1:

*[Mr. Chege/Mr. Onyango/Mr. Kipkosgei/Mr. Bosire] plans to run for MP in a [Kikuyu-dominated/ethnically-mixed/Luo-dominated/ethnically-mixed/Kalenjin-dominated/ethnically-mixed/Kisii-dominated/ethnically-mixed] constituency in the next elections in 2017. [Mr. Chege/Mr. Onyango/Mr. Kipkosgei/Mr. Bosire] is 51 years old and a member of the [Kikuyu/Luo/Kalenjin/Kisii] tribe. He is currently serving as a County Assembly Member, having previously served one term as a District Councillor. While in office, he focused on issues in the health sector. If elected, he promises to create*

*jobs, reduce corruption, and improve the quality of primary education. [In the last election campaign, [he was said to have provided youths with pangas used in tribal clashes].*

**Political Elite Experiment 2:**

*Mr. Nderitu/Odhiambo/ole Tonkei/Cherono plans to run for MP in his home constituency in the next elections in 2017. Mr. Nderitu/Odhiambo/ole Tonkei/Cherono is 48 years old and a member of the Kikuyu/Luo/Maasai/Kalenjin tribe. He is an advocate of the High Court of Kenya and currently serves as a County Assembly Member. If elected, he promises to improve the quality of the roads in the constituency and help women and the youth to start businesses. [He has also pledged to ensure that Kikuyu/Luo/Maasai people get access to their fair share of the county's land and government jobs, which he says have been stolen by people from other tribes.] [He has also pledged to ensure that Kikuyu/Luo/Maasai people get access to their fair share of the county's land and government jobs, which he says have been stolen by people from other tribes. Some observers have suggested that speeches he gave during the last campaign led to violence against other tribes.]*

## D Outcome Questions

### Voter Experiment 1:

Measures of voter support:

On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 indicates that you would never vote for this candidate and 10 indicates that you would definitely vote for this candidate, how likely would you be to vote for the candidate described above?

On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 indicates that they would never vote for this candidate and 10 indicates that they would definitely vote for this candidate, what would you say is the likelihood that others in your neighborhood would vote for the candidate described above?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that this candidate would win the election for Governor?

Measures of likely performance:

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that this candidate will provide gifts (like money or food) to people like you during the electoral campaign?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that, if elected, this candidate would provide gifts (like money or food) to people like you once in office?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that, if elected, this candidate would help people like you to pay school fees or cover health expenses?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that, if elected, this candidate would help people like you financially in case of an emergency?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that, if elected, this candidate would provide public goods (like roads, schools, or health clinics) to your community?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that, if elected, this candidate would ensure the security of your community?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that this candidate would always do the right thing, no matter how hard?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that this candidate would always stick to their principles, rather than compromising their beliefs?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that this candidate would be a strong leader?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that, if elected, this candidate would be able to effectively manage the government bureaucracy?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that, if elected, this candidate would act independently, rather than serving powerful interests?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that, if elected, this candidate would effectively fight poverty?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that, if elected, this candidate would effectively fight corruption?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that, if elected, this candidate would effectively fight crime?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that, if elected, this candidate would effectively prevent tribal violence?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that, if elected, this candidate would effectively manage the local economy?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that, if elected, this candidate would take into consideration the concerns of people like you?

Measures of the salience of ethnicity and security:

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating no trust at all and 10 indicating complete trust, how much would you say that you trust other people from your tribe?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating no trust at all and 10 indicating complete trust, how much would you say that you trust people from other tribes?

Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Kenyan and being a [Respondent's tribe]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?

- a) I feel only Kenyan
- b) I feel more Kenyan than [insert Respondent's tribe]
- c) I feel equally Kenyan and [insert Respondent's tribe]
- d) I feel more [insert Respondent's tribe] than Kenyan
- e) I feel only [insert Respondent's tribe]
- f) Don't know

Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Please choose Statement 1 or Statement 2. [Probe for strength of opinion: Do you agree or agree very strongly?] Statement 1: Once in office, elected leaders are obliged to help their home community or group first. Statement 2: Since elected leaders should represent everyone, they should not do anything that favors their own group over others.

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating not important at all and 10 indicating very important, how important is the issue of reducing poverty in this country?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating not important at all and 10 indicating very important, how important is the issue of reducing corruption in this country?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating not important at all and 10 indicating very important, how important is the issue of providing peace and security in this country?

### **Voter Experiment 2:**

Measures of voter support:

On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 indicates that you would never vote for this candidate and 10 indicates that you would definitely vote for this candidate, how likely would you be to vote for the candidate described above?

On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 indicates that they would never vote for this candidate and 10 indicates that they would definitely vote for this candidate, what would you say is the likelihood that others in your neighborhood would vote for the candidate described above?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that this candidate would win the election for MP?

Measures of the likelihood of violence:

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that the next election this candidate runs in would be characterized by violence?

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: In this country, it is sometimes necessary to use violence in support of a just cause. [Probe for strength of opinion.]

### **Political Elite Experiments:**

On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 indicates that they would never vote for this candidate and 10 indicates that they would definitely vote for this candidate, how likely would voters from the candidate's tribe be to vote for the candidate described above?

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very unlikely and 10 indicating very likely, what would you say is the likelihood that this candidate would win the election for MP?