

The Ghanaian Voter: Challenging Ethnic Bloc Voting in the 2008 Elections
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Introduction

Recent flawed elections in Kenya, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe, as well as recent coups in Guinea and Madagascar have yet again caused observers of sub-Saharan Africa to wonder if democracy is viable in the region. Ghana's 2008 presidential election demonstrates the answer is a resounding yes. The contest caught the world's attention. In a close run-off, the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) defeated the incumbent New Patriotic Party (NPP) by less than one-half of a percentage point after the NPP won the first round of elections by just over one percent, 49 percent to 48 percent, respectively.² International and domestic observers praised the Electoral Commission of Ghana for its professionalism in counting the ballots in a very close set of races, and the parties for their adherence to democratic procedures during the campaign. In his speech to the Ghanaian parliament in July 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama remarked that "[t]he people of Ghana have worked hard to put democracy on a firmer footing, with peaceful transfers of power even in the wake of closely contested elections."

Analysts have focused less attention on why voters chose the party they did. Standard theories about elections in Africa suggest that they are little more than ethnic headcounts and that parties typically are a thin cover for ethnicity. Data from a survey I conducted with Karen Ferree, Clark Gibson, and James Long from the University of California, San Diego, shortly before the first round of elections in 2008 seriously challenges this view. Our results demonstrate that the NDC and the NPP drew support from a range of ethnic groups, and we found little evidence of ethnic block voting. Moreover, while supporters of each party do not fit a clear ethnic profile, they possess strong beliefs about the parties. Finally, in the closing weeks of the election, a sizable proportion of the electorate remained undecided and was amenable to voting for either party. For these reasons we contend that, as in consolidated democracies, the perceptions of the NDC and the NPP shaped the outcome of Ghana's 2008 election far more than the ethnic identity of its candidates.

Data

The data we employ to examine the factors that determined for whom voters cast their ballot come from a pre-election survey we conducted approximately three weeks prior to the election. The poll we conducted was a nation-wide random sample of 2,033 eligible voters.

Raw Data on Party Support

Overall, in the pre-election survey 49 percent, 32 percent, and 19 percent of the respondents said they supported NPP, NDC, and other/undecided, respectively. After votes from the run-off were

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² In Ghana, if no party wins at least 50% of the vote in the first round, the two top parties compete in a second round runoff.

counted, the NPP received only 49.7 percent of the vote to the NDC's 50.2 percent. Thus, almost all other/undecided voters from our survey chose the NDC.³ The table below examines party support (NDC, NPP, or undecided) by ethnic group. A number of interesting patterns emerge. First, while the Asante overwhelmingly support the NPP, a non-trivial amount was undecided (13 percent). Second, approximately 19 percent of Ewe supported the NPP. Third, even though the NDC candidate was a Fante, 51 percent of this group supported the NPP. Fourth, both parties are diverse ethnic coalitions. These data present strong evidence against ethnic bloc-voting. Rather, the NPP and the NDC received support from sizable amounts of almost all ethnic groups, and about 20 percent of each ethnic group remained undecided just a few weeks before the election.

Party Support by Ethnic Group			
	NPP	NDC	Undecided
Akan	67%	16%	17%
Asante	83%	4%	13%
Fante	51%	28%	22%
Other	67%	17%	17%
Ewe	19%	59%	22%
Ga	32%	48%	20%
Mole	34%	49%	17%
Other	35%	37%	26%

What Explains Party Support?

The variables we examined fall into two categories, ethnicity and party attributes.

- *Ethnicity.* We did not ask directly if ethnicity was the motivating factor for party support since respondents often do not answer this question honestly. Rather, we asked them to self-identify their ethnic group.
- *Party attributes.* We asked a number of questions to ascertain Ghanaians' views of the main political parties, such as: do you trust the party? Do you feel close to it? And does it keep its promises? We also asked about the performance of the government (the incumbent party) and the importance of the electoral process.

³ While it is possible that an equal number of NPP and NDC supporters in our survey changed their minds and party-hopped, such an outcome is unlikely given the intensity of the party preferences these voters demonstrated, as the results will show.

Results

While ethnic variables did have some explanatory power, party attributes were far stronger predictors of party support. These results make clear that voters' perceptions of political parties were far more relevant factors in the election than shared ethnicity.

- *NPP Supporters.* NPP supporters were more likely to hold strongly positive views of the NPP and negative ones of the NDC. They also viewed the performance of the existing (NPP) government very favorably.
- *NDC Supporters.* NDC supporters were close to the mirror image of NPP. The most interesting result, however was that many NDC supporters suggest that they prefer the NDC candidate to win rather than have a fair election. Since many NDC supporters believe the NPP fraudulently won the 2004 elections, this preference may result from their concerns over the fairness of Ghana's electoral process.
- *Undecided Voters.* Party perceptions of undecided voters shed a substantial amount of light as to why they chose the NDC over the NPP. First, they felt close to neither party. Second, while they had no strong opinions about the NDC, they did not trust the NPP. These factors suggest that undecided voters chose the NDC because they viewed it as the less inferior of the two parties.

Analysis

Standard theories about elections in sub-Saharan Africa presume that ethnic block voting is pervasive in the region's elections and that parties serve as little more than a cover for ethnicity. Our results seriously challenge these views. First, supporters of the NDC and NPP formed a diverse range of ethnicities, and a number of ethnic groups split their votes across parties. Second, attributes of parties possess substantially more explanatory power for party choice than ethnic group. Third, approximately 20 percent of the population from a range of ethnic groups remained undecided just weeks before the election.

These findings cast serious doubt on the sufficiency of ethnicity to predict vote choice in Ghana's 2008 election. While there is no question that ethnicity was important for many voters, especially the Asante and the Ewe, it is an insufficient explanation for the electorate as a whole. Rather than a simple ethnic headcount, party competition for persuadable voters was a central theme of Ghana's 2008 election. The contest was far closer to political competition in a consolidated democracy than an ethnic census.

Ghana's ethnic composition is typical for sub-Saharan Africa. Most countries in the region possess a large number of small ethnic groups, thus rendering multi-ethnic coalitions the norm. Before accepting ethnic bloc voting as a sufficient explanation for vote choice in the region's electoral contests, we need to examine voters' motivations more thoroughly.

Finally, research we have conducted since the election suggests that the way the parties campaigned affected people's perceptions of the parties and hence their vote choice. While the

NPP spent lavishly on the campaign and held highly orchestrated rallies, the NDC campaign was much more of a grass roots effort. Interestingly, evidence we have gathered since the election suggests that voters were impressed with the NDC's efforts to connect with people during the campaign, while they were turned off by the NPP's ostentatious events. This also undermines conventional wisdom about African elections which suggests that lavish campaign styles attract votes because it suggests that the people who run the party are wealthy and powerful, while modest campaigns suggests weakness. Further investigation of the effects of campaign styles on the vote choice is thus an important area for further research.