

**ARTICLE**

# Cross-ethnic appeals in plural democracies

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**Abstract**

Whether and how parties reach across ethnic lines matters for the quality of democracy, the state of interethnic relations and substantive minority representation in plural societies. Existing explanations have focused on how politicians facing electoral incentives to seek broader support attempt to either redefine or transcend ethnic identities, but have overlooked the various ways, in which candidates from one ethnic community often directly address the ethno-political interests, concerns and demands of other communities whose votes are being courted. To address this gap, we introduce the concept and develop a typology of cross-ethnic appeals in plural democracies. Drawing on primary research in India and Kenya—two countries with salient ethnic divisions and ethnic party systems—we show that cross-ethnic appeals are common, follow the logic of our typology, and can result in increased resources and representation for some electorally pivotal minorities, even going beyond what coethnic politicians have offered. The article contributes to the emerging academic literature on how parties foster cross-ethnic linkages in plural societies. Our argument has implications for ethnic boundaries, the structure of political cleavages and the substantive representation of minorities in multiethnic states.

**KEYWORDS**

campaign appeals, elections/referenda, ethnic parties, India, Kenya

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Plural democracies—or those in which ethnic divisions structure political competition almost exclusively<sup>1</sup>—often face challenges related to fostering moderation, avoiding polarization and ensuring equitable minority representation. A large literature blames the presence of ethnic parties, often ubiquitous in these settings and known for their tendency to “champion the interests of their [own] ethnic groups,” frequently at the expense of other ethnic communities (Chandra, 2011, p. 151).<sup>2</sup> Competitive core voter mobilization, or “ethnic outbidding,” results in the adoption of progressively extreme positions because there are “virtually no uncommitted voters to be had on the other side of the ethnic boundary” and cross-ethnic outreach is seen as risky and futile (D. L. Horowitz, 1985, p. 332). This exclusivist tendency of politics in plural societies has been blamed for a number of ills in the developing world in particular: decision-making gridlock, economic underdevelopment and communal conflict (Brass, 1991; Easterly & Levine, 1997; D. L. Horowitz, 1985).

Yet, a growing number of studies have cast doubt on the ubiquity of ethnic block voting, even in deeply divided societies (Devasher, 2019; Ichino & Nathan, 2013; Reilly, 2020). Scholars have recognized that ethnic parties often do need to build cross-ethnic links and reach out beyond their established ethnic bases in order to win elections in ethnically diverse states. Existing studies of how parties go about achieving this have focused on the provision of patronage both during and outside of elections (Arriola, 2013a; Ichino & Nathan, 2013), the use of cross-ethnic endorsements and various proxies to deliver votes (Adida, Combes, Lo, & Verink, 2016; Baldwin, 2016; Koter, 2016), and electoral appeals to interests and identities spanning or transcending ethnic divides (Bleck & Van de Walle, 2013; Cheeseman & Larmer, 2015; Resnick, 2014).

These explanations have significantly advanced our understanding of how parties assemble winning majorities in plural societies, beyond a singular focus on core voter mobilization. However, they remain incomplete: because scholars have mostly focused on how those pursuing cross-ethnic coalitions through campaign appeals seek to shift, broaden or transcend ethnic divides, they have missed the ways, in which politicians appeal to noncoethnic voters' existing ethnic identities and interests even while seeking to build cross-ethnic alliances. Such appeals are very common across plural societies but have received little serious attention in the existing literature to date.

To address this gap, we introduce the concept and develop a typology of cross-ethnic appeals, distinguishing them from other ways to build broad electoral coalitions. We define cross-ethnic appeals as *campaign appeals offering material resources, political representation, or symbolic recognition to communities beyond parties' existing ethnic bases*. We argue that delineating cross-ethnic appeals is important because they have implications for substantive minority group representation, the state of interethnic relations and the structure of ethnic cleavages in plural democracies.

Cross-ethnic outreach carries a number of substantial challenges of course. Politicians face credibility disadvantages when addressing noncore voters and risk alienating core supporters and are vulnerable to being outbid by competitors. For example, Jakarta's Christian governor Ahok was accused of blasphemy in 2016 for suggesting that Muslims can be represented by non-Muslims (Reilly, 2020). In Bosnia, presidential candidate Zeljko Komsic—an ethnic Croat—has repeatedly come under fire for courting Bosniak voters and has had his legitimacy questioned by his own community (Kasapović, 2016).

Nevertheless, we show that parties can successfully pursue a range of strategies to alleviate these challenges. Credibility is easier to demonstrate when politicians provide immediate rewards or build a record of honouring promises to noncoethnics. The risks of alienating core voters or other potential supporters are minimized by advocating benefits or issues, which do not threaten core voters' material or symbolic interests and framing cross-ethnic offers in neutral or valence terms. We focus on the credibility and riskiness of cross-ethnic appeals because these dimensions are key to whether parties could achieve substantive representation for noncore ethnic groups by making credible commitments to these voters while simultaneously being confident enough in their own ethnic bases' support to dare to escape the ethnic outbidding trap in plural societies.

We argue that credible cross-ethnic appeals can address the needs of underrepresented groups and provide parties that make such appeals a path to victory. This suggests that we need to distinguish between descriptive and substantive representation in multiethnic democracies and recognize that substantive representation can also be accomplished by noncoethnic politicians. And because such appeals promise to address communities' highly salient ethno-political interests, building cross-ethnic alliances can sometimes paradoxically reaffirm, rather than transcend, existing ethnic boundaries. Finally, this article adds an additional explanation for the presence of cross-ethnic voting in plural societies and thus contributes to the broader literature on citizen–politician linkages in democracies (Kitschelt, 2000).

Drawing on research in India and Kenya, we apply our typology and show that ethnic parties' cross-ethnic appeals are central to their mobilization strategies and electoral success. As some scholars have noted, ethnic parties do not transform into multiethnic or nonethnic ones in the process (Devasher, 2019; Elischer 2008), nor do we expect that the salience of ethnic identity will decline as a result of such appeals. However, we show that when credible, parties' cross-ethnic appeals can succeed in obtaining noncore voter support, which can in turn result in substantive gains for minority groups. This has important implications for the nature of ethnic representation, the stability of ethnic coalitions and the structure of political cleavages in plural societies.

## 2 | CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES UNDER GROWING UNCERTAINTY IN PLURAL SOCIETIES

Much of the classic literature on politics in plural societies sees these societies as dominated by ethnic parties and treats cross-ethnic outreach as risky, token and futile. Posner (2005) argued that cross-ethnic coalitions are unlikely in Africa because of credible commitment problems related to sharing resources. In Chandra's model of ethnic politics in India, parties rely heavily on coethnic "heads"—placing prominent coethnic politicians in leadership positions to gain votes from a particular group (Chandra, 2007). For Donald Horowitz, pursuing noncoethnic support makes sense "only insofar as it is low cost and does not threaten the more valuable principal source of support" (D. L. Horowitz, 1985, p. 292).

More recent work has drawn attention to conditions and strategies, which can foster cross-ethnic ties between parties and voters through patronage and public goods provision (Ichino & Nathan, 2013), social service provision (Cammett, 2014; Thachil, 2014) or the use of various intermediaries or proxies such as local kingpins (Arriola, 2013b), village chiefs (Koter, 2013), traditional chiefs (Baldwin, 2016) or spouses (Adida, Combes, Lo, & Verink, 2016).

These studies tend to assume that political competition takes place against the backdrop of strong ethnic attachments in limited information environments where shared ethnicity is a clear, visible signal of future benefits. Thus, voters look to party leadership, membership or various proxies to gauge how favourable to different groups elected politicians will be and campaign appeals are insignificant or secondary to coethnic signalling.

However, in Africa in particular, not all communities have coethnics on the ballot. Or, coethnic politicians may be spread among the main parties so voters are unable to reliably "count the heads" of their kin in each. Proxies may also defect in search of a better deal or quite simply fail to deliver the voting blocs promised.<sup>3</sup> This has implications for how electoral campaigns are fought and leads to a focus on persuasion through direct appeals. Even in Kenya, where politics has long been dominated by ethnic "big men," J. Horowitz (2016) demonstrated that rather than outsourcing campaigning to allied kingpins, presidential candidates spend the majority of their time actively courting noncoethnic voters.

Further, over consecutive elections and with rising literacy rates and media penetration, voters are likely to be much better informed regarding their electoral choices. Recent research shows that when provided with more information on performance, voters are likely to abandon corrupt or criminal politicians, even if the latter are coethnics (Carlson, 2015). Poor past performance is a key motivation for swing voters in Ghana as well

(Weghorst & Lindberg, 2013), even in what had previously been considered low-information environments (Gadjanova, 2017a).

In sum, citizens may have trouble reliably identifying their ethnic spokesmen, or coethnic loyalty may fade over time if coethnics fail to deliver. Recent research convincingly demonstrates the existence of cross-ethnic links between voters and parties in plural societies. However, this literature largely views these links as the result of either coethnic proxies or voters' strategic defections in pursuit of better access to resources, rather than politicians' direct outreach. If past performance matters and voters are willing to abandon underperforming coethnics, campaign appeals to noncore voters could pay off. In the presence of strong incentives to actively court noncoethnics, how would parties do so?

### 3 | DEFINING CROSS-ETHNIC APPEALS

Politicians seeking broader support can reach across ethnic lines in a number of ways. They can speak to class, gender, youth, sectoral interests and urban or rural identities (Cheeseman & Larmer, 2015; Resnick, 2014), highlight "valence issues" of universal agreement, such as security, peace, democracy, development and good leadership (Bleck & Van de Walle, 2013) or evoke a larger shared ethnic category such as language in Zambia (Posner, 2005), race in South Africa (Ferre, 2010), region in Ghana or Benin or religion in India. Candidates can also appeal to national unity, the overcoming of divisions and attempt to construct a common and national identity (Miguel, 2004).

What the above strategies have in common is that they seek to transcend or redefine the ethnic identities of the communities being appealed to. While this may be a viable strategy when nonethnic identities are politically salient, it also means that communities' ethno-political interests and demands may remain unacknowledged and unresolved. For example, the BJP's effort to emphasize a unified Hindu identity intentionally overlooks the marginalization of lower caste voters since advocating for their interests may alienate elite upper caste Hindus. Although the BJP has had more success with lower caste voters in recent years, the salience of caste identity in India has not declined. As Huber and Suryanarayan (2016) argued, "elites cannot turn the salience of particular group identities on and off like water from the tap".

A history of ethnic violence, discrimination, resource inequalities along ethnic lines or denied symbolic expression can all make ethnic identities highly salient for some groups and create powerful demands for material or symbolic remedies (Cederman, Wimmer, & Min, 2010; Gadjanova, 2013; Van Cott, 2007). Zambia's Barotse Lozi have long demanded the restoration of the 1964 Barotseland Agreement granting them regional autonomy (Noyoo, 2016). Despite admonitions by President Sata that "people in the Western province cannot eat the Barotseland Agreement" and calls for them to "embrace development," demands for regional autonomy have not subsided.

The presence of such entrenched ethno-political interests and identities could also explain why some attempts to build alliances based on highlighting broader identities have had limited success: in Kenya, the so-called "old," ethnic, identities have frequently "triumphed" in elections over relatively newer ones, such as gender, youth and religion (Oloo, 2010). In India, the Akali Dal, a Sikh political party in the state of Punjab, has attempted to appeal to a pan-ethnic cultural Punjabi identity encompassing both Sikhs and Hindus with limited success.

Our larger point is that in ethnically diverse polities, ethnic group preferences exist alongside a plethora of nonethnic interests and identities, and in many cases, the salience of ethnic issues cannot be easily dismissed. Ethnic communities often demand recognition, representation, or resource redistribution in return for their votes and are reluctant to accept broader, nontargeted material or symbolic rewards as a substitute, as has been the case with Zambia's Barotse Lozi (Gadjanova, 2017a; Noyoo, 2016) and Uganda's Bakhonzo who demanded kingdom status ("obusinga") and only supported parties willing to oblige (Doornbos, 2017). This creates incentives for politicians seeking votes to appeal across ethnic lines by promising to safeguard, protect and recognize other communities' existing *ethnic* interests and identities.

We term such promises “cross-ethnic appeals” and define them as *parties' attempts to reach across ethnic lines by offering targeted material benefits, political representation, or symbolic recognition to noncore voters*. Targeted transfers can take the form of patronage or local club goods such as roads, schools, hospitals, electricity or various other “electoral goodies” (Carrier & Kochore, 2014; Green, 2011). Offers of representation include cabinet appointments, quotas or reserved seats in government institutions, inclusion in party lists, the granting of regional autonomy, and devolution. The recognition of languages, traditions, symbols, historical figures, cultures or the restoration of past status often seeks to meet longstanding ethnic group demands. Cross-ethnic appeals thus differ from the various other ways to build broader electoral coalitions noted in the existing literature in that they concern *ethnic* issues and group interests and do not attempt to place the speaker in a common broader identity category with the communities whose support is being courted.

Why do we need to recognize the existence of cross-ethnic appeals in plural societies? First, in contrast to other ways to reach out to different communities, cross-ethnic appeals evoke *current* ethnic categories and therefore paradoxically reaffirm, rather than transcend, existing ethnic boundaries. This matters for the structure of political cleavages in plural societies and for the role parties play in either transforming or maintaining this structure. Second, while all attempts at voter persuasion face potential difficulties, the type of outreach we describe here is particularly challenging because it addresses communities' ethnic interests and can inflame current divisions or backfire by turning existing supporters away. Nonethnic messages or valence appeals do not carry the same risks for states' social cohesion or for parties' existing support bases. Third, cross-ethnic appeals offer much desired material or symbolic goods to noncore groups. This raises important questions about the sources and determinants of substantive representation in plural societies, which current research does not anticipate and is unable to address.

We tend to assume that representation is most effectively achieved by coethnics, i.e., that descriptive representation has the best chance of translating into substantive gains in plural democracies down the line. Yet that may not necessarily be the case, as we show through the India and Kenya case studies below. Thus, one implication of recognizing and studying cross-ethnic appeals is a better understanding of the nature and sources of substantive representation in plural democracies.

## 4 | DEVELOPING A TYPOLOGY OF CROSS-ETHNIC APPEALS

The presence of electoral incentives notwithstanding making cross-ethnic appeals involves a delicate balancing act: parties need to simultaneously demonstrate credibility when addressing noncoethnics and avoid alienating too many of their core supporters or other potentially pivotal voters. How politicians reconcile these two contradictory pressures determines what forms cross-ethnic appeals take and whether they could succeed in garnering votes and achieving substantive representation for the communities being courted.

### 4.1 | Making credible cross-ethnic appeals

The credibility of cross-ethnic appeals depends on the level of commitment a party or politician can demonstrate to addressing noncore voters' highly salient ethno-political issues or demands. One way to signal commitment is to provide resources, representation or recognition *immediately*. Thus, paving a road or building a school as part of campaign outreach is credible because it is immediate and verifiable (Green, 2011). They can also signal commitment to future rewards (Kramon, 2016). Likewise, immediate moves to appoint group members to government positions or include them in party lists, institute language or cultural rights, put in place affirmative action policies, recognize traditions or historical figures and so forth are credible signals to noncore voters, particularly if these address longstanding group demands.

On the other hand, *promises* of material and symbolic rewards or of future favourable policies are generally less credible because they are less easily verifiable. However, parties can signal commitment by formalizing such pledges: for example, by including them in party manifestos or with their implementation outsourced to an independent institution or agency (Magaloni, 2008). Thus, in an effort to reach out to the relatively small Ga-Dangbe community in Ghana in 2008, the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) promised in their national election manifesto to revise Accra's land laws, which the Ga had long insisted were discriminatory and encroached on their ancestral lands (Paller, 2019, pp. 158–161).

Occasional symbolic gestures politicians make when addressing noncore voters such as speaking a local language, donning traditional attire, attending commemorative events or receiving endorsements from cultural figures are unlikely to be viewed as credible commitments to safeguarding noncore communities' ethno-political interests. Although these gestures can show respect and goodwill, they need to be accompanied by one of the additional commitment signals described above in order to be considered credible.

It is important to stress that in conditions of political competition, credibility is always *relative*: i.e., a candidate or party is credible to the extent that other parties or candidates are less so. Thus, apart from the ability to provide immediate benefits or formalize commitments in some way, credibility is a function of past performance. Candidates can also improve the credibility of their own cross-ethnic offers by undermining the credibility of competitors, for example, by holding the latter accountable for broken promises or past (in)action. Thus, competition for noncore voters can increase accountability and pave the way for improved representation by maintaining the focus on a highly salient ethno-political issue for the community being courted.

## 4.2 | Allaying the risks of cross-ethnic appeals

Offering resources, representation and recognition to noncore voters is risky if these offers are seen as zero-sum or perceived as giving away too much by parties' core supporters or by a third group whose support is also actively being sought. Promising some part of a limited resource such as development funds or valuable party or government positions is more likely to be seen as zero-sum, although there often is some leeway. For example, Scheduled Caste voters in Uttar Pradesh have been willing to accept their ethnic party, the BSP, diverting some patronage benefits to noncore voters as long as policies still addressed their needs (Guha, 2007). In general, parties with a strong record and a solid grip of their core ethnic voters would feel more secure in reaching out to noncore communities. Thus, paradoxically, having a strongly consolidated ethnic base can help with allaying the risks of cross-ethnic outreach.

Granting symbolic recognition to noncore voters can also be risky if a high degree of historical animosity between communities leads such recognition to be perceived as a betrayal of coethnics. Scholars of politics in plural societies often distinguish between "major" and "minor" cleavage lines within a diverse polity, implying that it is much easier to successfully appeal to voters across minor cleavages than across major identity fault lines (D. L. Horowitz, 1985; Scarritt & Mozaffar, 1999). Major cleavages are harder to bridge precisely because this carries significant risks of losing core voter support or being outbid by an in-group competitor.

Offering resources, representation and recognition would be less risky if candidates can draw on unlimited resources or when symbolic gestures to other communities are not perceived as threatening by parties' own core voters. Positions in public institutions need not be limited in number, as demonstrated by the exploding size of cabinets in Sub-Saharan Africa (Arriola, 2009). Strategically placed club or public goods that benefit both core and noncore voters such as roads in Ghana (Ichino & Nathan, 2013) or law and order in India (Devasher, 2014) can be successful strategies for acquiring cross-ethnic support.

In sum, the *riskiness* of a cross-ethnic appeal is influenced by how confident a politician feels in her own ethnic base and how likely it is that the appeal will be interpreted as zero-sum by her core voters or other communities whose support is also valued. Note that overconfidence can lead to misjudging the true risks associated with cross-ethnic outreach, a notion we return to below. Cross-ethnic appeals' *relative credibility* is influenced by the extent to

which a party or candidate is able to offer immediate rewards or signal commitment by formalizing a promise of future benefits. Having control over resources or state institutions helps, but so does highlighting one's own favourable past record compared with those of competitors. The types of cross-ethnic appeals made will thus depend on where appeals fall on the credibility/riskiness matrix defining the cells of Table 1.

The classic ethnic politics literature often assumes that cross-ethnic outreach is both highly risky and futile, i.e., that it falls in the bottom right cell. We term such appeals *reckless postures*. Given that they risk core voters support and are not credible, should we expect to see such appeals at all? If candidates had perfect information, certainly not. However, given the uncertainty of election campaigns, there is much room for misjudging the preferences of different communities, the strength of one's own core support and the strategies of opponents.

Conversely, cross-ethnic appeals most likely to succeed in garnering support while carrying little risk of backfiring are offers of immediate resources and political representation that do not draw on a finite resource or the symbolic recognition of groups without a history of animosity towards a party's core support base. We term such offers *safe bets* to denote their high credibility and low risk.

If, however, candidates are unable to provide immediate benefits or tangible rewards (due to lack of resources or control of state institutions, for example) and are unwilling to risk their core supporters or other valuable voters, they can still make symbolic overtures or promise future benefits in a way that fails to signal serious commitment. Such outreach efforts we view as *token gestures*. They may not help much in the short run but can improve a party or candidate's reputation among noncore groups and pave the way for future gains in support.

Finally, politicians may be in a position to make a credible offer of resources, representation or recognition to another ethnic group because they have identified a highly salient ethno-political issue that has remained unaddressed, but this offer may be seen as zero-sum and risk the support of the candidate's core voters or a third group. We term such outreach efforts *risky gambles* to denote their potential for success and danger of backfiring. The extent to which such gambles will be attempted depends on candidates' tolerance to risk: parties lagging behind in the electoral race may be willing to risk more.

Why is classifying cross-ethnic appeals along the dimensions of risk and credibility important? Politicians making credible commitments to voters is a key prerequisite for substantive representation in democracies. Two types of cross-ethnic appeals are credible within our typology: safe bets and risky gambles. Thus, if we are concerned with the prospects for substantive representation in plural societies beyond what coethnics have to offer, we should strive to identify the conditions most likely to give rise to either safe bets or risky gambles to noncore voters. Within our framework, building up a favourable performance record, formalizing cross-ethnic commitments or drawing attention to the failures of opponents can shore up a party's credibility among noncore voters and transform a token gesture into a safe bet or a reckless posture into a potentially lucrative gamble.

Conversely, while safe bets are more likely when ethnic competition is not considered zero-sum, we recognize that such conditions may be unlikely in countries with long-standing and deep-seated ethnic divisions. Still, parties will not abandon efforts to seek cross-ethnic support when they learn ways to reduce its risks: i.e., by successfully framing offers to noncoethnics as not threatening to their core supporters and by effectively parrying political opponents' outbidding efforts.

Therefore, our typology is useful for two main reasons: first, in distinguishing between those cross-ethnic appeals likely to result in substantive cross-ethnic representation in plural societies and those that will not, and second, in providing a set of strategies parties can pursue to reduce the risk of core voter defection when reaching out beyond the ethnic base.

**TABLE 1** A typology of cross-ethnic appeals in plural societies

	Not risky	Risky
Credible	<i>Safe bets</i>	<i>Risky gambles</i>
Not credible	<i>Token gestures</i>	<i>Reckless postures</i>

## 5 | CROSS-ETHNIC APPEALS IN INDIA AND KENYA

India and Kenya are often given as paradigmatic examples of the centrality of ethnicity to electoral politics (Ajulu, 2002; Brass, 2005; Chandra, 2007; Jaffrelot, 2003; Kanyinga, 2009; Kothari & Manor, 2010; Lynch, 2011). Caste and religious identity have long been considered crucial to vote choice in India, while in Kenya, political competition has frequently revolved along “tribal” and regional lines.

Politicians also face strong incentives to appeal across ethnic lines in both cases. In Kenya, where capturing the presidency is seen as the ultimate political prize, presidential candidates have to assemble cross-ethnic coalitions to win because coethnic voters are numerically insufficient for victory. Within India’s federal parliamentary system, electoral districts are heterogeneous and can rarely be won with a single group. Further, regional and ethnic parties have proliferated over the past three decades, and voters do not consistently support coethnic parties, making elections unpredictable. Thus, many parties pursue seek broad voter bases in order to counter these trends and maximize their power.

In both countries, ethno-political issues and identities are highly salient for voters, which has undermined efforts to redefine or transcend ethnic identities in the past. While there is an extensive anthropological literature describing how Kenyan citizens have gradually become or passed as members of different ethnic groups (Kipkorir & Welbourn, 2008; Lynch, 2006; Parsons, 2011; Schlee, 1989), many have drawn attention to the hardening and impermeability of ethnic identities at election times and the tendency towards ethnic block voting (Burbidge, 2014; Kanyinga, 2009; Oloo, 2010; Oucho, 2002).

The two need not be seen as irreconcilable: the political logic of electoral appeals drives an effort towards defining distinct electoral blocks and a tendency towards “grouping” during campaigns, which may not hold in other spheres of social life or outside election times. Thus, in interviews, politicians campaigning for office in Kenya invariably evoked “tribes” (“the Kikuyus,” “the Luos,” “the Kipsigis,” etc.) when describing their electoral strategies *as if* these communities were empirical facts rather than constructed, malleable identities, thus actively reproducing ethnic differences (wa Gĩthinji, 2015). Conversely, voters readily acknowledged that their own tribal affiliations had an outsize importance at elections times: “You wouldn’t know that I’m a Luhya until election year, and then I’m *really* Luhya.”<sup>4</sup>

In India, castes are nested within linguistic, religious and other institutionally privileged groupings. However, politicians have limited ability to successfully highlight new cross-cutting identities, even in the face of competitive pressures. Embedded party elites are difficult to displace, which prevents a party from drastically reinventing itself, and party brands and reputations are sticky.

In sum, parties in both India and Kenya face incentives to make cross-ethnic appeals in election campaigns. In line with our typology, we discuss examples of safe bets, risky gambles, reckless postures and token gestures for the votes of communities beyond parties’ established ethnic bases (Table 2). We draw on

**TABLE 2** Safe bets, risky gambles, reckless postures and token gestures in India and Kenya

	Not risky	Risky
Credible	<i>Safe bets</i>	<i>Risky gambles</i>
	Returning land to the Taitas in Kenya	“Majimbo” and evicting settlers from the Mau forests in Kenya
	Providing security to Muslims in India	Offering cross-ethnic representation on candidate lists in India
Not credible	<i>Token gestures</i>	<i>Reckless postures</i>
	Reversing the ban on “mnazi” wine and Miraa politics in Kenya	Raila Odinga warning the Masai not to “sell land to foreigners” in Kenya
	Affirmative action (reservations) promises to Muslims and poor upper castes; religious endorsements in India	BJP nominating Muslim candidates in West Bengal



interviews with politicians, party strategists and analysts carried out during several rounds of fieldwork in each country, original survey data, official party communications, newspaper sources of campaign rhetoric and other research.

The Bahujan Samaj Party's (BSP) provision of security to Muslims in India and a Kikuyu President promising to return the land to the Taita ethnic group in Kenya are examples of *safe bets* in seeking cross-ethnic support. While law and order may at first glance appear to be a valence issue, in India, security is a far greater concern for vulnerable ethnic groups and Muslims in particular who are disproportionately the victims of Hindu-Muslim riots (Wilkinson, 2006).<sup>5</sup> In recent years, the BSP has attempted to draw away Muslim voters from the SP by pointing to their own track record of successfully preventing riots and maintaining law and order. The frequent transfer of power between the SP and BSP has allowed both to stress their record on the issue. However, the SP's record in preventing riots has gotten weaker over time, creating a situation in which the BSP hopes to outbid the SP, emphasizing their own successes and the SP's failures (Vij, 2017). Muslim support for the BSP has grown significantly over time, from 3% to 6.5% of Muslims supporting the BSP in 1996 to 20% in 2012 (Economic and Political Weekly, 2012; Kumar, 1999).

Promising law and order does not endanger the BSP's core voter support either. Law and order are by nature not a finite resource and are unlikely to be perceived in zero-sum terms. Similarly, providing social services can also be a safe way to reach out across ethnic lines because of its low-cost, low-risk nature: Thachil (2014) argued that social service provision allows the BJP to gain Adivasi votes without sacrificing valuable leadership positions in the party and risking their core upper caste support.

While in the case of security for Muslims in India, the credibility of the appeal stems from parties' favourable past records, the case of returning land to the Taitas in Kenya demonstrates that cross-ethnic outreach can be "safe" even in the absence of a favourable past record when politicians offer tangible material resources they have control over and can thus readily expend. In the 2013 presidential election campaign, Uhuru Kenyatta—an ethnic Kikuyu heading the "Jubilee" alliance between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin ethnic groups—promised to give back 30,000 acres of his family land to the Taitas—a small community in Kenya's Coast region, which had so far aligned with the opposition.

Kenyatta's promise to return land his family owns in the Taita-Taveta district was credible because it was immediate (title deeds were signed during the campaign) and addressed the highly salient issue of landlessness and squatter problems in the district. Because the land belonged to his family, Kenyatta did not risk alienating any other of Kenya's ethnic communities by offering to give it away. Moreover, as the opposition had repeatedly brought up the Kenyatta family's land possessions as a way to portray the President as antireform and rally coastal votes against his Jubilee party, agreeing to return the lands was the safest way for Kenyatta to counter the accusations and signal his openness to land reform.<sup>6</sup> Opposition politicians from the Coast defecting to the Jubilee Alliance in 2017 cited Uhuru's changed stance on the county's land problem as a reason for switching parties (Star Kenya, 2017). Voting results show Kenyatta's Jubilee Alliance made significant inroads in Taita-Taveta between 2013 and 2017.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike *safe bets*, *risky gambles* are strategies that offer desired benefits in credible ways to noncore voters but can backfire among candidates' ethnic bases or other potential supporters. In India, allocating limited seats on parties' tickets to candidates from noncore groups often falls within this category. The BSP, which promotes Scheduled Caste interests, has courted both Brahmins and Muslims by highlighting their representation in the party's ranks and on candidate lists. In 2017, the BSP nominated 100 Muslims for the Uttar Pradesh (UP) state legislature elections, nearly 25% of their candidate list. Party officials do this precisely because they believe that cross-ethnic representation can increase votes from noncore groups.<sup>8</sup> Representation is a credible signal because the distribution of positions on a party list happens *before* an election, so a commitment is demonstrably made. Muslims are more likely to support the BSP when it nominates Muslim candidates (Devasher, 2019; Heath, Verniers, & Kumar, 2015). Thus, candidate nominations can be a rewarding strategy that increases substantive representation, as evidenced by rising Muslim support for the BSP.

However, since the strategy ousts elites from some groups, it risks a dissatisfied politician joining another party and diverting votes. Swami Prasad Maurya, an OBC leader, was a member of the BSP until 2016, when he moved to the BJP. Maurya had continuously won state legislative office since 1996 and was touted as the “non-Yadav OBC face” of the BSP—a key element to lend credibility to the BSP’s appeals to these voters. In 2016, the BSP increased Muslim and Brahmin nominations at the expense of non-Yadav OBCs, denying a ticket to Maurya’s children as well. While Maurya and BSP leader Mayawati flung accusations at each other about selling candidate slots and fostering dynastic politics, respectively, the shrinking space on the party’s list allotted to non-OBC Yadavs also seems to have contributed to his departure (Singh, 2016; Tiwari, 2016). Maurya’s example demonstrates the transience of cross-ethnic support and the costs of reaching out to different ethnic groups through a zero-sum resource like candidate nominations.

In Kenya, the issue of land redistribution is highly contentious and often interpreted in zero-sum terms by the country’s ethnic communities (Boone, 2011; Klaus, 2020). The Luo and Kikuyu ethnic groups favoured a unitary state after decolonization, while a number of other ethnic groups—the Kalenjin, Masai, Turkana, Samburu (together known as KAMATUSA) and some Coastal communities—preferred federalism and land issues being devolved to the regions (Anderson, 2005; Ogot & Ochieng, 1995). Because of this history of groups positioning themselves along the land issue, offering land restitution to KAMATUSA would be particularly risky for a Luo or Kikuyu politician. What’s more, making such an offer would also risk alienating the Luhya and the Kisii—two of the country’s other sizeable communities, who have traditionally preferred land control vested in a centralized state. Nevertheless, it is exactly what Raila Odinga—an ethnic Luo and the leader of the main opposition Orange Democratic Movement party—did in 2007.

In an effort to reach out to the Kalenjin, Masai and Coastal voters who were seen as the main “swing” communities in 2007 (Gadjanova, 2017b; J. Horowitz, 2016; Oloo, 2010), Odinga made “majimbo” (Swahili for federalism) central to his 2007 election campaign. The Kalenjin and Maasai, considered to be the “original” or “indigenous” settlers of the country’s Rift Valley, have rallied behind politicians who have promised to reinstate indigenous land rights and to evict the Kikuyu and other “settler” groups from the Rift (Boone, 2011; Gadjanova, 2017b; Lynch, 2011). Odinga’s promise for land redistribution as part of a broader framework of a devolved government was highly credible to the Kalenjin, Masai and Coastal voters in 2007 because he had led a successful constitution referendum on the issue in 2005. By contrast, the incumbent President Mwai Kibaki was from the Kikuyu ethnic group, perceived as benefiting from the land status quo, and had strongly opposed federalism and redistribution.

Lynch cited numerous examples from interviews with voters across the Rift Valley suggesting that the majimbo issue resonated among the Kalenjin and Masai and led them to favour Odinga (Lynch, 2011). As a result, he won cross-ethnic support and united the Masai, Kalenjin and Coastal voters. Outside of the Rift Valley, the framing of majimbo as a matter of an equitable distribution of resources was intended to allay fears of a zero-sum competition over land among communities who had opposed federalism in the past, such as the Kisii and Luhya (Gadjanova, 2017b). The strength of “Odingaism”—the veneration of Raila and his family among the Luo (Oloo, 2002)—gave Odinga additional leeway in making risky gambles for cross-ethnic support while maintaining the Luo vote.

The “majimbo” issue underscores two broad lessons about the politics of risky gambles in plural societies: first, candidates can mitigate perceptions of the zero-sum nature of redistributive promises by portraying them in valence terms, and second, politicians enjoying a solid hold of their core voters are more likely to take chances in reaching out to noncore voters. If the gamble succeeds in winning support, there can be substantive gains for noncore groups: Kenya adopted a devolved constitution in 2010, which had long been favoured by the Kalenjin, Masai and Coastal communities.

Another contentious land issue in Kenya—that of evicting settlers from the Mau forests—can also be seen as Raila Odinga making a risky gamble for cross-ethnic support. After decolonization, authority to administer the Mau forest complex was vested in the hands of the Kenyan president, giving the office holder the power to excise forest land and alter boundaries with little to no oversight. This turned forest land into a precious patronage resource: studies estimate that 20,000 hectares of the forest’s total 46,000 have been destroyed by illegal settlements

(Klopp & Sang, 2011). The main beneficiaries of land excision and allotment in the Mau forests since decolonization were the Kalenjin (particularly those from the majority Kipsigi clan) and the Kikuyu.

The growth of settlements and illegal logging in the Mau forest have exacerbated drought and caused water contamination downstream in the Southern Rift Valley, home to the Masai. This has contributed to a sense of victimization among the Masai in the South Rift (Hughes, 2005) and prompted calls for the “punishment” of Kalenjin “culprits.” Popular narratives among the Masai in Narok accuse the Kalenjin of “stealing” their forest and water (Morgan, 2009).

Politicizing the issue of illegal settlements in the Mau forests presented an opportunity for Odinga to appeal to the Masai and divide the South Rift Valley vote. In its 2013 manifesto, his ODM party pledged to “reclaim, improve, conserve, and protect Kenya’s water towers” from encroachment.<sup>9</sup> Thus, like majimbo had been a wedge issue dividing the Kikuyu and Kalenjin in 2007, the Mau forest was a wedge issue dividing the Masai and the Kalenjin in the South Rift in 2013.<sup>10</sup> Odinga’s team had calculated that, in 2013, the ODM would lose Kalenjin support because their coethnic—William Ruto—was given the vice presidential spot on Uhuru Kenyatta’s ticket, so appealing to the Masai vote in the Rift Valley was seen as a way to compensate for the expected drop in Kalenjin votes.<sup>11</sup>

The Mau forest issue does not concern Odinga’s core voters (the Luo), but its potential riskiness lay elsewhere—in further pushing the Kalenjin away and in alienating “swing” communities (such as the Kisii) whose votes were also pivotal in 2013.<sup>12</sup> And while the majimbo gamble paid off for Odinga in 2007, the Mau forest one did not in 2013. Ruto and Kenyatta’s Jubilee Alliance used the issue to unite and mobilize the Kalenjin vote against Odinga. They portrayed Odinga as a direct threat to the Kalenjin community, alleged he had engineered widespread Mau evictions as Prime Minister, and blamed him for the lack of progress on resettling evictees. The ODM campaign had hoped to retain some Kalenjin support given its strong performance in the Rift Valley in the past, but the party lost the Kalenjin vote by a large margin in 2013 in part because Odinga was blamed for engineering the Mau forest evictions.<sup>13</sup> Further, Odinga’s stance on the Mau forests in 2013 and again in 2017 alienated the Kisii and Luhya who oppose land redistribution in general. The case illustrates the potential for risky cross-ethnic outreach to backfire when exploited by a political opponent and shows that the riskiness of a cross-ethnic appeal can lie not only in alienating one’s own core voters but also in pushing other pivotal voters away.

*Reckless postures* are strategic blunders emanating from the uncertainty inherent in campaigns. In Kenya, in 2017, when Odinga urged the Masai not to sell their land to “outsiders,” the move was condemned as a reckless posture both because it risked alienating supporters from other communities and urban voters by inflaming land grievances and because of its relatively limited resonance among the Masai themselves at the time (Maina, 2017). Such strategic blunders are unlikely to lead to substantive gains for the communities being courted because of their limited resonance and therefore inability to generate political momentum for change. Yet, they are common and underscore the uncertainty of election campaigns and the potential for misjudging how various messages will be received.

In India, during the 2018 village-level elections in West Bengal, the Hindu right-leaning BJP nominated more than 800 Muslim candidates out a total list of 29,292, doubling their proportion of Muslim candidates from the party’s list in 2013 (Chowdhury, 2018). West Bengal’s 30% Muslim population justifies nominating Muslims and many of these candidates won. However, the BJP faces credibility challenges among Muslims because of its history and reputation, particularly in a state like West Bengal where the BJP has used religious polarization to increase its popularity in the state (Daniyal, 2019). Although the BJP tends to nominate Muslim candidates in Muslim-concentrated areas (Das Gupta, 2019) where it is less likely to win, candidate lists are finite resources, so alienating core communities by passing them over is risky. While the Bahujan Samaj Party’s nomination of Muslim candidates in Uttar Pradesh discussed earlier could be seen as risky but credible, in this instance, the Bharatiya Janata Party’s nomination of Muslims lacks credibility as well. In the face of the BJP’s reliance on Hindu nationalist rhetoric, its nomination of Muslims will not enhance the substantive representation of their interests.

Finally, politicians can make a range of *token gestures* to endear themselves to noncore voters. These include showing deference to symbols or traditions or seeking the endorsements of prominent figures of symbolic standing.

Prior to elections in India, many parties seek the endorsements of well-known religious leaders. The Shahi Imam of Delhi's prominent Jama Masjid is often courted by parties hoping to win Muslim votes in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. In Punjab, to win Dalit votes, parties have sought the endorsement of Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, a controversial figure convicted of murder and rape who leads a religious organization, the Dera Sacha Sauda. However, these endorsements are not usually very effective in delivering votes. A survey of Muslim voters in Uttar Pradesh in 2012 shows that less than half of respondents had even heard of the Shahi Imam's endorsement, and 74% of these respondents said it influenced their vote only a little or not at all.<sup>14</sup> Others have shown that Rahim Singh's support rarely resulted in a victory (Brar, 2017).

There are many similar examples from Kenyan election campaigns: candidates frequently stage highly choreographed endorsements by local notables during rallies, wear local attire in public appearances and carry local symbols of leadership and authority, participate in rituals, attend weddings and funerals and consume traditional foods and beverages. In the 2002 election campaign, presidential candidate Simeon Nyachae—an ethnic Kisii—called for the lifting of the ban on “mnazi” (palm) wine, a traditional brew of symbolic and ritual value to ethnic communities in Kenya's Coast (Nyassy, 2002). When campaigning in Meru in 2013 and 2017, Raila Odinga would often chew miraa—a local crop popular among the Meru ethnic group (Kulundu, 2016).

Like in India, the credibility of such symbolic gestures in Kenya is diminished by the fact that local notables frequently switch support and that virtually every candidate can find willing endorsers. Their futility is widely recognized, but candidates fear that communities may be offended if symbolic deference was not shown during campaign visits. So common are such public displays of token cross-ethnic recognition that failing to take part in these rituals would be seen as a sign of extreme disrespect and hurt the candidate among the community and even outside.

Given their symbolic nature, the gestures are often not seen as threatening by candidates' core supporters or third communities. In Africa, in particular, symbolic gestures to non-coethnics may even be reputation enhancing at home because they signal the candidate's national political standing and viability (Scarritt, 2006). However, for substantive representation to improve, such token gestures need to be accompanied by credible commitments to addressing communities' salient ethno-political concerns.

In sum, cross-ethnic appeals have important implications for minorities' substantive representation in plural societies in ways existing research does not anticipate. In India, the BSP's desire for non-coethnic votes has resulted both in the increased representation of Muslims and other groups in the state legislature as well as some advocacy for their policy interests (Devasher, 2019; Guha, 2013). In Kenya, ethnic groups other than those of the main presidential contenders and their running mates have seen substantive gains in both material resources and substantive representation as a result of direct cross-ethnic outreach. Even risky gambles, which in hindsight end up proving unsuccessful (like the Mau forests issue), have elevated marginalized communities' concerns to the national political arena in ways disproportionate to group size alone.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

It is clear that many contemporary ethnic parties pursue a range of strategies to win elections beyond a singular commitment to their core ethnic groups. In this article, we elaborate on one such strategy, which has so far remained unexplored: candidates' promises of resources, representation and recognition to communities beyond their core ethnic bases. We argue that such cross-ethnic appeals are important to distinguish because they matter for the quality of interest representation and the structure of ethnic cleavages in plural democracies.

However, unlike multiethnic and nonethnic parties, ethnic parties face additional challenges of establishing credibility among noncore voters. This makes the types of outreach ethnic parties engage in highly transactional and the coalitions formed by such outreach inherently unstable. Rather than resulting in long-term partisan realignments, cross-ethnic outreach often aims at short-term vote gains.

Nevertheless, the type of interest representation ethnic parties offer to noncore voters is not always purely token: as the examples of minority inclusion on party lists and security provision to Muslims in India, and “majimbo” and land restitution to the Taitas in Kenya show, ethnic parties can provide substantive issue representation to noncore groups, sometimes even going beyond what coethnics have been able to achieve. The pressure to overcome deep-seated credibility disadvantages when reaching out incentivizes ethnic parties to uncover salient issues and demonstrate commitment to delivering on promises in ways that coethnics often do not have to face. Thus, paradoxically, cross-ethnic outreach can sometimes result in more substantive representation than purely coethnic outreach. Even if unsuccessful, cross-ethnic outreach can up the ante for group votes, thus forcing communities' own parties to provide more benefits and resources. One long-term implication of this process is that plural societies, in which parties make cross-ethnic appeals, are likely to have more equitable resource allocation across ethnic groups.

Finally, it is worth briefly elaborating on the effects of cross-ethnic appeals on ethnic boundaries in plural societies. Constructivist approaches to ethnic politics draw attention to the potential of politicians' appeals to reconfigure and transcend ethnic boundaries when rhetoric emphasizes an overarching identity dimension or seeks to make existing categories less politically salient. Unlike such nonethnic or pan-ethnic appeals, however, cross-ethnic outreach maintains ethnic boundaries and identities because it employs existing labels and categories. Thus, we do not expect ethnic boundaries to gradually fade as a result of the types of outreach we describe in this article. But we do expect a reduction of the “security dilemma” among ethnic groups—or the perception that one group's win is necessarily another group's loss.

Here, we aim to make a conceptual and theoretical contribution to the study of politics in plural societies. A rigorous test of which strategies politicians pursue is beyond the scope of this article, although we have indicated what factors might influence strategic decisions. Parties that control resources and institutions (often the incumbents) are more likely to favour immediate material offers as these would be highly credible and low risk, while challengers would likely face a choice between making risky gambles or token gestures. Nevertheless, challengers can effectively demonstrate credibility by emphasizing their own past records or attacking incumbents' past failures to keep promises. Risks may be worth taking when elections are closely fought or in a more ethnically heterogeneous and fractionalized electoral arena where no group is large enough to propel a party to victory. Risk-taking will also depend on the ambitions of individual party leaders.

Further research can develop models of the types of cross-ethnic outreach parties are more likely to engage in given their relative strengths vis-à-vis competitors and the competitiveness of the race and test these models empirically in a range of settings. This research agenda promises to broaden our understanding of ethno-political competition and its effects in plural societies.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The research data supporting this publication are provided within the paper.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rabushka, Alvin, Shepsle and Kenneth (1972, p. 20) wrote, “the hallmark of the plural society, and the feature that distinguishes it from its pluralistic counterpart, is the practice of politics almost exclusively along ethnic lines.”

<sup>2</sup> We use the terms “coethnics” and “core voters” interchangeably throughout the article, although we readily recognize this may not always be the case. Ethnic identities are defined as “a subjectively-experienced sense of commonality based on a belief in common ancestry and shared culture” (Wimmer, 2008). Ethnicity can thus encompass a variety of attributes such as language, tribe, clan, race and religion.

- <sup>3</sup> A campaign strategist for Kenya's ruling party stated in an interview, "We relied on [clan leaders] to increase our vote in North Eastern, but since [the opposition] started talking to them too, we knew that could not work anymore [...] so we pushed the leadership to go in person and campaign." Author interview, Nairobi, June 12, 2017.
- <sup>4</sup> Authors' interview with Nairobi professional, June 15, 2017.
- <sup>5</sup> Interviews with BSP campaign official, Saharanpur City, December 9, 2011; Congress Member of Legislative Assembly, Lucknow, Feb 24, 2012; and Rajya Sabha member, New Delhi, April 18, 2012.
- <sup>6</sup> Interview with Jubilee campaign official, Nairobi, June 15, 2017.
- <sup>7</sup> Support for the Jubilee presidential ticket in Taita-Taveta doubled from 13% in 2013 to 28% in 2017.
- <sup>8</sup> Interviews with BSP campaign official, Saharanpur City, December 9, 2011; Congress Member of Legislative Assembly, Lucknow, February 24, 2012; BSP politician, Lucknow, March 29, 2012; and Rajya Sabha member, New Delhi, April 18, 2012.
- <sup>9</sup> ODM 2013 national manifesto, p. 64
- <sup>10</sup> Authors' interview with senior ODM campaign strategist, June 15, 2015, Nairobi; Authors' interview with senior academic, Nairobi, June 14, 2015.
- <sup>11</sup> Authors' interview with senior ODM campaign strategist, June 15, 2015, Nairobi; Authors' interview with senior academic, Nairobi, June 14, 2015.
- <sup>12</sup> Odinga himself admitted to these risks as early as 2009. See "Raila's Gamble: Saving the Mau Forests," Daily Nation, July 28, 2009.
- <sup>13</sup> Authors' Interview with ODM campaign strategist, June 23, 2017.
- <sup>14</sup> Author survey of Muslim voters in Uttar Pradesh in 2012.

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