

# The Political Implications of Cross-Ethnic Marriage in Africa

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## **Abstract**

In democratic Africa, where ethnicity is a key driver of vote choice, politicians must attract voters across ethnic lines. This paper explores one way politicians can do this: by appealing to a coethnic bond through their spouse. We offer a systematic investigation into the effect of cross-ethnic marriages on politicians' ability to garner support across the ethnic aisle. We combine new data on leader-spouse ethnicity with Afrobarometer survey data to show that cross ethnic marriages occur frequently among African executives and that spouses come from large groups with low baseline levels of support. Thus, spousal coethnics represent a potential key resource in elections. We explore this possibility with a survey experiment in Benin, where President Yayi has married across ethnic lines. Our results confirm that priming the first lady's ethnicity increases support amongst her coethnics, suggesting that cross-ethnic marriages are one tool leaders can use to create cross-ethnic coalitions.

In the recently democratized states of Africa, where ethnicity is a key driver of vote choice and where most countries lack a majority ethnic group, politicians must reach across ethnic lines to build a winning electoral coalition in order to secure office. To do so, politicians must convince non-coethnic voters that they will represent them while in power. How do they do this?

There are a number of ways politicians can credibly signal their commitment to non-coethnics. One method is to create political alliances with ethnic others. In Kenya's 2013 presidential election, front-runner Uhuru Kenyatta won by appealing to his ethnic group's (Kikuyu) historically political rivals in offering the vice presidency to William Ruto, a Kalenjin. In Nigeria, multiethnic tickets are expected to comprise Northerners and Southerners as well as Muslims and Christians, and the media has criticized the All Progressive Congress (APC)'s deviation from this norm in announcing that they will run a Muslim-Muslim ticket in 2015 (Nnanna 2014).

Presidential candidates can further signal their dedication to inclusive politics by promising to create multiethnic cabinets. In an attempt to secure cooperation in Sierra Leone, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah reportedly included in his cabinet a representative from every district within the country (Collier 2014). In Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi headed a four party multiethnic coalition for over two decades (Davison 2012).

Alternatively politicians can rely on their own individual characteristics to signal a commitment to ethnic others. Politicians who know multiple local languages signal a familiarity with other groups. In Sierra Leone, Siaka Stevens spoke both Mende and Temne fluently and Ahmad Tejan Kabbah spoke five of the local languages (Kandeh 2003). In Benin, President Yayi leverages his membership in more than one ethnic group to garner support across ethnic lines (Adida 2014).

In this paper, we explore one way in which candidates can play the ethnic card to appeal to non-coethnics: via their spouse. We investigate the prevalence of cross-ethnic marriages by African leaders, and whether a non-coethnic spouse can be leveraged to build a multiethnic coalition. We argue that non-coethnic spouses are useful to candidates who wish to signal support for ethnic groups other than their own, and thus offer one way in which African leaders can build multiethnic coalitions.

Elite marriages have played a dramatic role in politics historically, where elites used marriages explicitly to build political alliances (Dixon 1985). Today, even in the context of modern democratic politics, elite marriages can still hold implications for coalition-building in democratic African countries. In Benin, where North, Southeast and Southwest jockey for political power, every president since the country's transition to democracy has had personal ethnic ties to the North as well as ethnic ties, via marriage, to the South. After the 2006 firing of Vice President Chilumpha in Malawi, President Mutharika faced tremendous pressure not to appoint another Southerner. Yet, journalists and politicians alike believed that Joyce Banda was a real contender, in spite of being a Southerner, because she was married to a Northerner (The Chronicle 2006). But the anecdotal evidence does not always point to cross-ethnic marriages as an obvious asset to leaders: Zambia's President Sata accused his predecessor, Rupiah Banda – a Southerner who had married a Northerner from the Bemba tribe – of being a tribalist and working behind the scenes to keep Bembas out of political power (BBC Monitoring Africa 2012).

This article systematically explores the extent and the potential effects of cross-ethnic marriage among leaders in sub-Saharan Africa, where ethnicity is a key determinant of voting behavior (Bates 1983; Ferree 2006; Posner 2005) and of public goods distribution (e.g., Franck and Rainer 2012). In doing so, we join recent scholarship that explores more nuanced ways in which ethnicity intervenes in African politics. Ichino and Nathan (2013), for example, show that in rural Ghana, local ethnic demography and the non-excludable nature of local public goods can lead voters to vote for a non-coethnic. Our focus on cross-ethnic marriages similarly helps us understand how leaders and candidates build broad coalitions in countries where ethnicity and ethnic divisions are politically salient (Posner 2004).

In order to systematically explore the nature and effects of cross ethnic marriages in Africa we first combine new data on the ethnic identity of leaders' spouses in democratic countries with Afrobarometer survey data<sup>1</sup> to explore the prevalence of cross-ethnic marriage and to capture the

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<sup>1</sup>The Afrobarometer is a non-partisan research project that regularly collects survey data on social, political, and economic variables in Africa. See <http://afrobarometer.org>.

baseline attitudes associated with spousal coethnics relative to respondents who share an ethnicity with neither the leader nor the leader's spouse. We find that cross-ethnic marriages at the leadership level are prevalent, occurring in half of Afrobarometer cases for Rounds 3 and 4. We also find that, relative to respondents who share an ethnicity with neither their leader nor their leader's spouse (hereafter non-coethnics), survey respondents who do not share an ethnicity with their leader but do share an ethnicity with their leader's spouse (hereafter spouse coethnics) express less support for their leader but are more likely to view their ethnic group as politically powerful. This low baseline of expressed support indicates that spousal coethnics represent a large source of potential voters to attract in an election period.

We test this conjecture with a randomized survey experiment conducted in Cotonou, Benin – where President Yayi, a Yoruba<sup>2</sup>, is married to Chantal Yayi, a Fon. Our experiment confirms the Afrobarometer finding that spouse coethnics hold low baseline levels of support for their leader relative to non-coethnics; more interestingly, our results demonstrate that spouse coethnics respond positively to coethnic priming via Chantal's Fon identity. Based on these results, we suggest that cross-ethnic marriages have the potential to rally support beyond the leader's ethnic base, and thus offer one political tool for coalition building in African democracies.

## **The many faces of ethnic politics in Africa**

That ethnicity matters in African politics is a claim neither new nor controversial. Though some have attributed this to expressive, psychological motivations (Horowitz 1985), a more widely accepted explanation is an instrumental one: voters rely on ethnicity as a cue for candidates or parties most likely to deliver goods their way (Bates 1983; Ferree 2006). And, apparently, they are right to do so (e.g., Franck and Rainer 2012).

Yet, as Ichino and Nathan (2013) point out, the correlation between ethnicity and vote choice,

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<sup>2</sup>More precisely, President Yayi is a Nago, a sub-group of the Yoruba.

while strong, is imperfect (Ichino and Nathan 2013: 344). Two factors might explain this. First, as many Africa scholars have shown, ethnicity is not the sole determinant of vote choice in Africa. In Ghana, for example, Lindberg and Morrison (2008) suggest that candidate performance and policy platforms matter more to Ghanaian voters than do ethnic ties. In Kenya in 2007, Bratton and Kimenyi (2008) identify two types of voters: *ethnics* prioritize ethnic ties while *non-ethnics* focus instead on policy issues such as corruption and socio-economic wellbeing. Across sixteen Afrobarometer countries, Bratton and co-authors find that ethnicity *and* economic concerns matter to the African voter (Bratton et al. 2011). In Zambia, Posner and Simon (2002) show that economic factors play an independent role in the reelection of an incumbent. And in an experiment embedded in an exit poll of Kenyan voters, Gibson and Long (2012) propose that Kenyans care more about performance than coethnicity.

A second explanation, while not mutually exclusive with the first, focuses instead on more nuanced ways in which ethnicity determines vote choice. Ichino and Nathan (2013), for example, take into account the local ethnic demography a rural voter faces when making her voting decision. They argue that members of local ethnic minorities face a rational basis for voting for a non-coethnic, in this case a member of the majority ethnic group that surrounds them, in order to enjoy the non-excludable local public goods that such a leader would deliver to his coethnic constituencies. They show that this is indeed the case in the 2008 Ghanaian elections. Another approach has been to recognize the sometimes ambiguous nature of leaders' ethnic identity, and the political implications of such ambiguity (Adida (2014)). Leaders benefit from ethnic favoritism in ways more complex than it appears. We further investigate this complexity by looking at cross-ethnic marriages.

## **Cross-ethnic marriages: an empirical introduction**

In order to better understand the potential for leaders to recruit spouse coethnics through the use of indirect ethnic appeals, we begin by examining cross-ethnic marriages among democratic African

presidents, their prevalence and the attitudes of voters who are coethnics of the leader's spouse. More specifically, we compare the political attitudes of individuals who share an ethnicity with the leader's spouse but not with the leader (*spouse coethnics*) against those who share an ethnicity with neither leader nor spouse (*non-coethnics*).<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 illustrates the comparison under discussion in this analysis.

We begin this analysis with an identification of the prevalence of cross-ethnic marriages, and the broad patterns with which they are associated. We note that the observational data we analyze in this section do not allow us to test any causal relationships; rather, we exploit it to introduce a number of empirical regularities about the prevalence of and patterns associated with cross-ethnic marriages in contemporary democratic Africa, and to demonstrate that a cross-ethnic marriage is an important phenomenon that merits greater scrutiny. To do so, we collected original data on the ethnic identity of leaders' spouses for the eighteen African countries covered by the Afrobarometer project Rounds 3 and 4. We offer only a snapshot of this phenomenon for a subset of African countries – primarily democracies – and during one period of time (2005-2009).

We find cases of leader cross-ethnic marriage in sixteen out of twenty-six country-rounds, or in twelve out of eighteen distinct countries (see Table SI-1 in the appendix).<sup>4</sup> In Table 1, we compare the set of cases where leaders marry a coethnic to the set of cases where leaders marry a non-coethnic. Unsurprisingly, the cross-ethnic marriage rate in the population – calculated using the Demographic Health Survey for each country – is higher for countries where leaders marry across ethnic lines (22.5%) than for those where they do not (11%). Furthermore, countries with leader cross-ethnic marriage seem to be less populous and slightly more democratic. But both sets of

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<sup>3</sup>Note that, given this paper's focus on the resources leaders can use to build multiethnic coalitions, we focus exclusively on individuals who are not coethnic with the leader.

<sup>4</sup>We note that in three cases, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Malawi, the cross-ethnic marriage is actually a case of a leader marrying a non-national. In robustness checks, we confirm that our results hold when excluding these cases.

countries have similar levels of ethnic diversity (measured either as ELF or PREG<sup>5</sup>). In terms of ethnic characteristics, leaders who out-marry are not observably different from those who do not: they belong to ethnic groups of roughly similar sizes (approximately 33-34%); and they tend to marry into groups that are, on average, only slightly larger (by 5.5 percentage-points). In addition, according to the classification offered by the Ethnic Power Relations dataset (Wimmer et al. 2009), leaders who out-marry are not necessarily less powerful than leaders who do not (not shown here).<sup>6</sup>

The incidence of leader cross-ethnic marriage is high. As Table 1 points out, 12 out of 18 Afrobarometer countries have experienced at least one cross-ethnic marriage case, and 11 out of 23 leadership tenures are cases of cross-ethnic marriage. As a result, the proportion of respondents who are not coethnic with the president but are coethnic with the leader's spouse in the Afrobarometer dataset is not trivial. An Afrobarometer respondent's coethnicity with the leader's spouse occurs about 18% of the time, a similar rate as that of coethnicity with the leader (see Table SI-3 in the Appendix).

With these data on the ethnicities of leaders and their spouses we are able to compare the political attitudes of respondents who are not coethnic with the spouse to those of respondents who are, in countries where leaders have married an ethnic-other. We investigate these patterns for four political outcomes of interest: whether the respondent would vote for the incumbent's party if the election were held tomorrow (*Vote*), whether the respondent approves of the leader's job performance (*Job performance*), whether the respondent believes her ethnic group has influence in politics relative to other ethnic groups (*Ethnic political power*), and the extent to which the

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<sup>5</sup>ELF is the ethno-linguistic fractionalization index developed by Atlas Narodov Mira, indicating the probability that two individuals chosen at random will belong to different ethnic groups. PREG is the index of politically-relevant ethnic groups developed by Posner (2004), indicating the probability that two individuals chosen at random will belong to different politically-relevant groups.

<sup>6</sup>None of the differences-in-means presented here reach conventional levels of statistical significance. This is unsurprising, given our low number of cases.



respondent believes his ethnic group is treated unfairly by the government (*Ethnic unfair*). These four measures most directly capture political support for the leader as well as political attitudes about access to power.

Comparing average support and political attitudes between respondents who are not coethnic with the spouse and respondents who are, we uncover the following results. Respondents who share an ethnicity with the leader's spouse are less likely to support the leader but more likely to see their ethnic group as politically powerful than are respondents who do not share an ethnicity with the leader's spouse. Furthermore, these differences are substantively large. For example, looking at raw tabulations, approximately 64% of respondents who do not share an ethnicity with the spouse or with the leader express an intent to vote for the leader; this drops to 42% for those who share an ethnicity with the leader's spouse. The difference is statistically significant beyond the 99% confidence level.<sup>7</sup> Spouse coethnics are also less approving of the leader's job performance. However, they are significantly more likely to believe that their ethnic group has access to political power over other ethnic groups, and no more likely to believe that their ethnic group has been treated unfairly by the government in power.

We estimate Equation (1) via multivariate regression analysis to measure these relationships more precisely and account for the fact that we are pooling data from a set of diverse countries and time periods:

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbf{Y} = & a + b_1.(SpouseCoethnic) \\ & + \mathbf{b}'_2(\mathbf{X}) + \mathbf{b}'_3(\mathbf{Country}) + b_4.(Round) + e \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where  $\mathbf{Y}$  is one of the four variables – *Vote*, *Job performance*, *Ethnic political power*, *Ethnic unfair* – described above. *Spouse Coethnic* is a binary variable capturing whether the respondent shares an ethnicity with the leader's spouse.  $\mathbf{X}$  is a vector of socio-demographic controls.<sup>8</sup> **Coun-**

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<sup>7</sup>Results available upon request.

<sup>8</sup>These include: respondent age, sex, race, education level, head of household status, perception of country's economic wellbeing, perception of the country's future economic wellbeing, percep-

*try* is a vector of country fixed effects; and *Round* is a binary variable for the Afrobarometer round. We estimate Equation (1) above on the sub-sample of respondents who are not coethnic with their leader and of cases where leader and spouse are not coethnics. In Table 2, we presents results from a bare-bones specification with no controls (Models 1, 4, 7, 10), a fixed-effects specification with country and round fixed effects (Models 2, 5, 8, 11), and a kitchen-sink specification with all controls and all fixed effects (Models 3, 6, 9, 12).

The results in Table 2 effectively compare, in cases of cross-ethnic marriage, the political support and attitudes of respondents who are coethnic with the leader's spouse to the political support and attitudes of respondents who are coethnics with neither leader nor spouse. We find that among respondents who are not coethnic with the leader, and in cases of cross-ethnic marriage only, those who share an ethnicity with the leader's spouse are less supportive of the leader but more likely to acknowledge that their ethnic group is politically powerful. These effects are statistically significant at least at the 99% confidence level and hold whether or not we control for country fixed effects, round fixed effects, and a plethora of socio-economic variables.<sup>9</sup>

An important set of empirical patterns arises from this observational analysis: in cases where leaders marry an ethnic-other, spouse coethnics tend to claim less political support for the leader but greater access to political power than do non-coethnics. Furthermore, looking at our spouse tion of his/her own future economic wellbeing, and level of interest in public affairs; whether the household is in an urban or rural area; whether the respondent believes leaders should favor their own group, owns a radio, owns a TV, owns a vehicle, and voted in the last presidential elections; how often the respondent household has gone without food, without water; and interviewer age, education level, and sex.

<sup>9</sup>We also run the following robustness checks: (1) we run maximum likelihood rather than linear specifications; (2) we exclude cases where the leader had more than one wife (Kenya and Malawi); (3) we exclude countries with negative polity scores, i.e. the less democratic countries in our sample (South Africa, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Tanzania and Burkina Faso); (4) we exclude cases where the cross-ethnic marriage is a marriage to a foreign national. All our results hold.

ethnicity data in combination with the AB survey data, we note that leaders who marry across ethnic lines tend to marry into the largest eligible group. The AB analysis thus suggests that spouse coethnics are a large potential resource that leaders could mobilize in an election. The rest of the paper tests this possibility.

## The ethnic politics of cross-ethnic marriages

We propose that cross-ethnic marriages can rally support among spouse coethnics (SC in Figure 1). Leaders build coalitions in a number of ways, from the choice of a running mate to the composition of a cabinet (e.g., Arriola 2012). Spouses, we contend, may play a unique role in helping candidates send *credible signals* of coalition-building before the election. Indeed, unlike the ad hoc nature of political coalitions, marriages often happen long before candidates enter a political race or campaigns heat up; they represent a much more personal investment in an individual, and by extension, in that individual's identity. Because they are present from the beginning, cross-ethnic spouses can send the *pre-election signal* that the candidate will build cross-ethnic coalitions after the election. Because marriages are long-term commitments, candidate spouses can also improve the *credibility* of the signal sent by candidates. We thus join MacManus and Quecan (2008) in focusing on spouses as “high profile surrogates” on the campaign trail (MacManus and Quecan 2008: 337).<sup>10</sup>

Drawing on the ethnic politics literature, we propose three reasons why a cross-ethnic marriage might boost support from spouse coethnics. First, scholars have argued that there are psychic benefits to seeing one's coethnic in power; powerful coethnics can improve a voter's self-esteem

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<sup>10</sup>In the American 2004 presidential race, the Kerry-Edwards campaign strategically placed the candidates' wives on the campaign trail. Elizabeth Edwards, from North Carolina, visited the more conservative states; Teresa Heinz Kerry, who is not American-born and whose style and wealth quickly turned into a liability, limited her appearances largely to Blue states (MacManus and Quecan 2008).

as well as her sense of belonging (Horowitz 1985). Seeing a coethnic in the presidential palace could engender this type of effect. In other words, voters may receive an expressive benefit by supporting their coethnic as first spouse, and voting for that leader may serve as an affirmation of the voter's ethnic identity.

Second, according to theories of instrumental voting, voters prefer to elect leaders who are more likely to direct the provision of development goods and services their way (Ichino and Nathan 2013); and they tend to rely on ethnicity as a credible signal for the post-election fulfillment of pre-election promises (Chandra 2004; Posner 2005). Hence, for spouse coethnics, a cross-ethnic marriage may act as a credible signal that the leader will favor their ethnic group in the same way, or close to the same way, he will favor his own; or, at the very least, a cross-ethnic marriage might counter the impression or delegitimize the claim by rivals that the leader is ethnically exclusive.<sup>11</sup>

Third, cross-ethnic marriages may increase support from spouse coethnics not at all because of ethnic favoritism but rather because cross-ethnic marriages signal a certain degree of cosmopolitanism and national orientation. Via marriage, a leader might signal that s/he is above ethnic rivalries, reinforce the notion of a unified nation, and potentially bolster support among voters across ethnic lines.<sup>12</sup>

All three of these mechanisms support the same hypothesis: cross-ethnic marriages can be used to increase support from spouse coethnics. In the following section, we test this hypothesis using a survey experiment from Benin.

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<sup>11</sup>Ferree (2011) shows in South Africa that the African National Congress party keeps African voters from supporting rival parties by labeling those parties as exclusively white.

<sup>12</sup>Note that, if this last mechanism is at play, then the boost in support from a cross-ethnic marriage should apply across all ethnic groups, and should not be specific to spouse coethnics.

## Identifying the causal effect of priming coethnicity with the leader's spouse

In this section, we aim to identify the extent to which cross-ethnic marriages can be used to sway political support; to do so, we turn to a survey experiment implemented in Cotonou, Benin in August 2012, where President Yayi, a member of the Yoruba ethnic group, is married to Chantal Yayi, a member of the Fon ethnic group. We rely on a cueing experiment to approximate what politicians tend to do in campaigns, something we cannot do with the Afrobarometer data. We randomize respondents' exposure to cues about President Yayi's wife and her ethnic identity, and thus gauge the effectiveness of such strategies for building ethnic coalitions.

Benin is a small West African country of approximately 10 million people that transitioned to democracy in 1989-1991, acting as a first-mover and model during the wave of democratization that characterized sub-Saharan Africa that same decade (Banegas 2003; Bierschenk 2009; Lynch and Crawford 2011). On April 6, 2006, the Beninois elected Thomas Boni Yayi; they re-elected him in March 2011 for a second and final term. In both elections, Yayi enjoyed high levels of support, winning the 2006 election with approximately 75% of the vote in the run-off, and the 2011 election with a majority vote in the first-round.

Since its independence, the main cleavage in Benin politics has been a regional one, with Southeast, South-Central and North jockeying for political power.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, during the first twelve years of independence, leaders hailing from each of these regions struggled for power in coups and counter-coups, until Kérékou established a military regime in 1972 that lasted until 1990. But the regional cleavage persists in Benin politics to this day (Bigou 2011; Degboé 1995; Wantchekon 2003).<sup>14</sup> The most populous ethnic groups in each of these three regions are the Bariba (North),

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<sup>13</sup>The Southeast represents the ancient kingdom of Porto-Novo; the South-Central represents the ancient kingdom of Danhomé; and the North represents the ancient kingdom of Bariba.

<sup>14</sup>Note, however, that a fourth region has become increasingly politically salient over the years: the Southwest, where the Adja dominate.

the Yoruba (Southeast) and the Fon (Southwest).

In that light, President Yayi seems to have covered all his ethnic bases: he is a Yoruba from his paternal line, a Bariba from his maternal line, and he has married a Fon wife. Additionally, President Yayi is an independent, meaning that voters cannot rely on partisan cues the way they might with a candidate associated with a political party; they must, instead, revert to other cues such as personal – namely ethnic – identity. President Yayi is thus a particularly useful case for our study of the political implications of a cross-ethnic marriage. Indeed, previous work suggests that President Yayi benefits from his mixed ethnic heritage (Adida 2014). Does he also benefit from his cross-ethnic marriage?

Chantal Yayi was a relative political unknown when her husband ran for President of Benin in 2006; she has since gained political gravitas by maintaining a delicate balancing act of maneuvering mostly behind the scenes so as not to upset social norms, which look down on the political involvement of a first lady. She often appeared with her husband when he first campaigned for the 2006 presidency, and worked on mobilizing key political figures in her hometown of Ouidah, a Fon stronghold. She subsequently ran in the 2011 legislative elections to become a representative of Ouidah. She won the election, and ceded the position to her brother-in-law. Over the past eight years, she has maintained an important political role in Ouidah, canvassing for political hopefuls and mobilizing party activists. To wit, even in the face of a Fon opponent, candidate Yayi carried Ouidah in 2006 and in 2011.

As a mixed Bariba-Yoruba, President Yayi embodies two of the salient regional cleavages in the country; with his marriage to a Fon wife, it seems that he captures all three. To test whether this is actually the case, we fielded a survey experiment in Cotonou, Benin in August 2012.<sup>15</sup> Cotonou is the economic capital and the largest city in Benin. It provides a particularly useful opportunity to test the questions we introduce in this paper for two reasons. First, as the economic capital, it draws migrants from all parts of the country and thus offers an ethnically diverse landscape from

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<sup>15</sup>See Appendix SI-6 for our sampling protocol.

which to recruit respondents from various key ethnic groups. Second, as a southern city located in Fon-land, Cotonou is majority Fon and thus offers a unique opportunity to examine how the Fon – Chantal’s coethnics – respond to Yayi’s cross-ethnic marriage. Alternatively, we could have recruited respondents from Ouidah, Chantal’s hometown; in doing so, however, we would have faced greater difficulty recruiting members of other ethnic groups. Cotonou thus offers the optimal combination of ethnic diversity and Fon concentration to field a survey meant to compare how Fon and non-Fon respond to Yayi’s marriage to a Fon wife.

After collecting a set of pretreatment variables on the respondent’s sex, age, ethnic identity, religion and religiosity, place of birth, number of years in Cotonou, education level, occupation, and socio-economic wellbeing, enumerators read to the respondent a short biographical paragraph about President Yayi. This section appeared in three versions. The control made no reference to President Yayi’s wife. The second mentioned his wife; and the third mentioned his Fon wife, thus stressing her ethnic identity. Although we are primarily interested in identifying the effect of the Fon wife cue relative to the control condition, we include a *Wife* treatment to control for the fact that our *Fon Wife* treatment includes both a reference to Yayi’s wife and to the fact that she is Fon. The prompt is reproduced below:

{ $\emptyset$ ; Along with his wife, Chantal; Along with his Fon wife, Chantal}, Yayi Boni became President of Benin on April 6, 2006 and was just re-elected for a second term. He has led a presidential campaign based on economic growth and suppressing corruption. However, some critics claim that the country’s economic growth has been disappointing, and that Boni’s administration is, itself, corrupt.

Immediately following the reading of the prompt, respondents were asked the following: “If there were no term limits and the election were held today, would you vote for Yayi Boni for

President?”<sup>16</sup> This question emulates the Afrobarometer question on vote choice.<sup>17</sup> At the end of the survey, respondents were then asked – as a manipulation check – to identify the ethnic membership of President Yayi’s wife.

We first note in Figure 2 that the patterns we found in the Afrobarometer data are reproduced in our Benin survey: respondents who share an ethnicity with Chantal hold significantly lower baseline levels of support than do respondents who share an ethnicity with neither Chantal nor Yayi. Indeed, in the control condition (where no cueing occurred), 77% of non-coethnics would vote for Yayi compared to merely 21% of Chantal coethnics. This more-than fifty percentage-point difference is statistically significant beyond the 99% confidence level, and consistent with our Afrobarometer results. It is also easily explained by the fact that the Fon have rarely had a coethnic president in spite of being the country’s plurality group, and are coethnics with Yayi’s main political opponent in both presidential elections (2006 and 2011).

Can Yayi use his cross-ethnic marriage to his advantage? To answer that, we analyze our experimental results.<sup>18</sup> In Table 3, we compare support for President Yayi in the control condition, for respondents exposed to the wife cue, and for respondents exposed to the Fon wife cue. We compare these effects for Chantal coethnics (the Fon) and for noncoethnics (those who share an ethnicity with neither Yayi nor Chantal). Table 3 shows that Chantal’s coethnics, the Fon, react positively to cues about Yayi’s Fon wife. Indeed, though a mere 21% of Fon support Yayi in the control condition, this proportion increases to more than 37% in the *Fon Wife* condition. This

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<sup>16</sup>In 2012-2013, controversy emerged over President Yayi’s intention to reform the Constitution to, possibly, extend his term. This controversy gained traction in the media after our survey was completed in September 2012, and thus would not have contaminated this question.

<sup>17</sup>The only exception is that the Afrobarometer question asks about voting for a party, while this question asks about voting for a candidate.

<sup>18</sup>Table SI-4 in the Appendix summarizes balance tests between the three survey conditions and indicates that balance was achieved over a large set of pretreatment covariates.



effect is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, and is not driven by the fact that the treatment also cued Yayi’s wife.<sup>19</sup>

In Table 4, we estimate the effect of cueing Yayi’s Fon wife more precisely on sub-samples of Chantal coethnics and non-coethnics. Specifically, we estimate the following equation:

$$\text{Support} = a + b_1.(WifeCue) + b_2.(FonWifeCue) + \mathbf{b}_3'(\mathbf{Enumerator}) + e \quad (2)$$

where *Support* captures whether or not the respondent would vote for Yayi, *Wife Cue* captures whether the respondent received the wife prompt, *Fon Wife Cue* captures whether the respondent received the Fon wife prompt, and the omitted category is the control condition where the respondent received neither prompt about Yayi’s wife or her ethnicity. *Enumerator* is a vector of enumerator fixed effects. Standard errors are robust.<sup>20</sup>

The results in Table 4 echo the difference-in-means analysis. Chantal’s coethnics, the Fon, express greater support for Yayi when they receive the *Fon Wife* cue. Additionally, we run an alternative specification, which pools all respondents except for Yayi’s coethnics and estimates the effect of an interaction term between being a Fon respondent and receiving the treatment. We run two tests: one that considers only the control condition and the *Fon Wife* cue; and one that considers only the *Wife* cue and the *Fon Wife* cue. In both cases, the interaction effect is positive and statistically significant at least at the 95% confidence level, indicating that the Fon respond positively to the *Fon wife* cue and that this effect is statistically significantly different from how non-coethnics respond.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Indeed, Table 3 indicates that the *Wife* effect is actually negative: in line with Benin social norms, mentioning the leader’s wife has a negative effect on support for Yayi across the board.

<sup>20</sup>For ease of interpretation, we present results from a linear regression specification; but in robustness checks, we estimate a logit model and the results do not change.

<sup>21</sup>In a final robustness check, we estimate bootstrapped estimates for the treatment effect on Fon respondents. Indeed, we may worry that our standard errors are incorrect when our sample

The discrepancy between the *Wife* effect, which decreases support and the *Fon Wife* effect, which increases support, raises the question: do respondents not know that Chantal Yayi is Fon? In Table SI-5 in the appendix, we present results from a manipulation check where all respondents were asked, in an open-ended question post-treatment, what Chantal’s ethnic identity is. If respondents do not know that she is Fon, then the *Fon Wife* treatment should provide new information and we should see this effect in the manipulation check. The results in Table SI-5, however, indicate that all respondents know that Chantal Yayi is Fon: in the control condition, 100% of Chantal’s coethnics and close to 98% of non-coethnics are able to identify her ethnicity. The *Fon Wife* cue has no statistically significant effect on respondents’ ability to identify Chantal’s ethnic identity. These results indicate that the *Fon Wife* treatment effect is not an information effect, but rather a priming effect (e.g., Lenz 2009). This is rather unsurprising, given that Chantal’s Fon identity is common knowledge, at least in the South (where we fielded this survey experiment).

In a cueing exercise where we randomly introduce references to President Yayi’s wife, and to his *Fon* wife, we find out that the Fon – who hold the lowest baseline levels of support for President Yayi – increase their support by approximately fifteen percentage points when they are cued to the fact that President Yayi has a Fon wife. We attribute this effect to priming rather than learning: priming Yayi’s Fon wife appears to be a winning strategy for the president. It boosts support from the group with the lowest baseline, and it does not significantly alter support for Yayi among non-coethnics.<sup>22</sup>

These results complement the Afrobarometer analysis. In both the observational and experimental studies, we find that spouse coethnics tend to be least supportive of the leader. But our size for sub-group analysis dips below 200, which is the case in some of our tests. We follow the standard bootstrapping approach, which has been shown to perform well with small samples, and is nonparametric in nature (see Efron 1979). Our results hold and are available upon request.

<sup>22</sup>It also has no robustly significant effect on Yayi coethnics, though when the effect is significant, it is positive. Results are available upon request.

cueing experiment reveals a powerful boost in support among Chantal's coethnics, and only among them, *when they are primed to think about her ethnic identity*. In sum, priming spouse coethnics to their shared ethnicity with the first lady improves support for the leader. Used in this way, a cross-ethnic marriage may offer one tool for building cross-ethnic political coalitions.<sup>23</sup>

## Discussion

In the previous section we identified that spousal coethnics, when primed to think about their shared ethnicity with the president's wife, express greater support for their president. This suggests that spousal ethnicity is one potential strategy leaders might use to build support across ethnic divisions. Yet this result relies on a survey experiment, which does not capture the behavior of Beninois voters in real elections. In this section, we examine the electoral patterns of Benin's 2006 run-off election, which pitted Boni Yayi against Adrien Houngbédji, a Fon.

Benin's run-off presidential election in 2006 offers a simple way to observe correlations be-

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<sup>23</sup>Although outside the scope of this paper, we can say a few words about the likely mechanisms underlying this boost in support. Our evidence is inconsistent with the claim that Yayi's cross-ethnic marriage helps him by conveying an image of cosmopolitanism. If this were true, the *Fon wife* prime would boost support across all Yayi non-coethnics. Yet, we find that the *Fon wife* prime boosts support among the Fon only. Furthermore, we can test for the instrumentalist hypothesis in a couple ways. First, we test our treatment effects on a second question we posed after gauging support for Yayi: "Do you believe that President Yayi favors people from the North or people from the South?" If the instrumentalist mechanism is at work, we expect to see Fon respondents exposed to the *Fon wife* cue more likely to answer "South" to this question. Yet we uncover no treatment effect on this question. Although we are unable to find experimental evidence in support of the instrumentalist mechanism, we do note that, compared to his two predecessors, President Yayi doled out a greater proportion of cabinet positions to the Fon. Therefore, our evidence so far casts doubt on the cosmopolitanism mechanism and provides inconclusive evidence for the instrumentalist mechanism.

tween ethnic loyalties and electoral outcomes because it pitted two candidates with different ethnic backgrounds against one another. Recall that Boni Yayi is a Bariba from his mother's side and a Yoruba from his father's side. The Bariba are largely located in northeastern Benin, while the Yoruba are prevalent in the central and southeastern parts of the country. Adrien Houngbédji, on the other hand, is a Fon. He hails from Porto-Novo (Southeast) on his father's side and from Abomey (Southwest) on his mother's side, both Fon strongholds.<sup>24</sup> Pure ethnic voting based solely on Yayi's paternal and maternal ethnic heritage would yield the electoral support map illustrated in Figure 3a, which represents 41% of registered voters in 2006 (27% for the North<sup>25</sup>, 14% for the Center/Southeast). This leaves open close to 60% of registered voters, located in the South and where the Fon predominate.

Houngbédji's great hope – in his third race for president of Benin at the time – was that he could unify and rally the South in his support (Soudan 2010). He was, after all, a Fon; and the Fon constitute Benin's majority ethnic group in the South. Yet the electoral results in the second-round of Benin's 2006 presidential election revealed Houngbédji's inability to garner support beyond Ouémé department in the Southeast, his ethnic stronghold from his paternal line. Figure 3b reveals that candidate Yayi, with no personal links to the Fon – except via his spouse – was able to capture, on top of the Northern and Central blocs already guaranteed to him by his Bariba/Yoruba membership, most of the Fon South.

Of course it may very well be that non-ethnic voting explains these results; the purpose of this observational analysis is to show that the electoral results from Benin's 2006 presidential run-off are consistent with a story of ethnic voting, where candidate Houngbédji successfully rallied only his coethnics from his paternal line while candidate Yayi successfully rallied his coethnics from both paternal and maternal lines, as well as via his wife's Fon identity.<sup>26</sup> These patterns in and

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<sup>24</sup>More specifically, Porto-Novo is the home of the Goun, a sub-group of the Fon.

<sup>25</sup>Northerners in Benin have historically voted as one bloc.

<sup>26</sup>This raises a question, which remains outside the scope of this paper: why was Yayi more

of themselves provide no smoking gun in favor of this interpretation. But, in combination with the experimental results showing that Yayi can benefit from priming Beninois to his wife's Fon identity, these patterns suggest that the spouse-as-surrogate argument likely applies in an African democracy as well.

The core finding of this paper, that politicians are able to use their spouse in campaigns in order to rally supporters across ethnic lines, raises an interesting set of questions. Are aspiring politicians who have married across ethnic lines more likely to advance to high political office because of the valuable resource that their spouse may prove to be? If so, are aspiring politicians more likely to choose to marry into strategically important ethnic groups in order to improve their political prospects?

Political marriages have been an important element in elite strategies of conquest and rule dating back at least to the Roman Empire. Scholars have described these marriages in explicitly strategic terms, highlighting deliberate attempts by monarchs and rulers to pacify subjects and consolidate power (e.g., Potter 1934). There is evidence of similar political marriages in precolonial Africa as well (Bay 1998). One possible interpretation of the Afrobarometer results presented above, showing that spousal coethnics are less supportive on baseline than other non-coethnics of the president, is that leaders who out-marry are likely to marry into antagonistic groups. Another possibility, one which assumes much less foresight on the part of aspiring politicians, is that politicians who happen into such marriages for reasons exogenous to politics are simply more likely to attain high office. This may explain the surprisingly high prevalence of cross-ethnic marriages among African leaders.

While these questions are certainly worth exploring, to do them justice would require much more analysis in the form of in-depth biographies of political aspirants as well as the leaders themselves. Therefore, we take these questions to be outside the scope of the current study, which

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successful at playing the ethnic card than was Houngbédji? Note that Houngbédji's wife was also a Fon from Ouidah. Yet she was never politically involved, and hardly known to the Benin public.

puts forth as its core result that cross-ethnic spouses are one possible resource that a leader may use in order to increase support among non-coethnic voters.

## Conclusion

This paper is the first to provide a systematic investigation into the political implications of cross-ethnic marriages in contemporary Africa. At a cross-national level, it relies on the Afrobarometer surveys and original data on the ethnic identity of leaders' spouses to unveil differing patterns of support between spouse coethnics and non-coethnics in cases of a cross-ethnic marriage. This analysis indicates that, relative to non-coethnics, spouse coethnics have lower political support for the leader but higher evaluations of their own ethnic group's access to political power. At a sub-national level, we rely on a survey experiment to identify the effect of priming the leader's cross-ethnic marriage to his various constituents. Our results indicate that spouse coethnics – whose baseline levels of support for their President are significantly lower than that of non-coethnics – respond positively to coethnic cues via the leader's wife. Cross-ethnic marriages thus offer one potential tool for rallying cross-ethnic support.

Our experimental approach complements the Afrobarometer analysis by offering a priming experiment, which – we contend – mimics the kinds of messages voters receive during campaigns. Indeed, while the Afrobarometer allows us to explore the prevalence of cross-ethnic marriages across a wide set of countries, it does not allow us to test whether such marriages can be used as a political resource for leaders. Instead, we use a survey experiment allowing us to replicate the short-term priming effects of political campaigns. Our results reveal that the strategy is a beneficial one for Yayi. In other words, Chantal acts as a successful “surrogate” on the campaign trail.

Our results also raise new questions about the strategies and implications of cross-ethnic marriages in contemporary African democracies and beyond. If a cross-ethnic marriage can be used as a tool to rally support from non-coethnics, do political systems favor politicians with marriages to strategically-important ethnic groups? Our Afrobarometer results indicate that the groups into

which leaders marry tend to have lower baseline levels of support; might there be a strategic element to spousal choice in cases of cross-ethnic marriages? Identifying this selection effect would require a broader investigation into the political processes that may interact with politicians' marriages; looking into the ethnic identities of candidates and their spouses, as well as the strategies that candidates pursue on the campaign trail, is a promising avenue for future research.

Additionally, if a non-coethnic spouse is used to send credible signals about post-electoral outcomes, do leaders make good on the signals they send during the campaign? Future work should investigate whether leaders reward spouse coethnics during their tenure, relying, for example on the detection of patterns of public goods provision for the spouse's ethnic base. Such an analysis would enable us to test the instrumental voting mechanism that might underlie the spouse coethnic effects we have identified. Finally, we have no reason to believe that spouse coethnic effects prevail in Africa only. In fact, our study is inspired in part by the prevalence of political marriages in Europe at least since the Roman Empire. In an effort to better understand the myriad ways in which political actors build broad coalitions in diverse societies, future work should investigate this phenomenon beyond Africa, namely in democracies where social divisions such as ethnicity, race or caste are politically salient.

Meanwhile, our results bring texture to the literature on ethnic voting in Africa, which tends to remain silent about the ethnic motivations of voters who have no coethnic options.<sup>27</sup> We focus precisely on those non-coethnic voters, and consider ways in which ethnicity could still shape their political choices. We draw inspiration from the marriage politics that have characterized European monarchical and African precolonial history, and investigate the phenomenon in contemporary Africa. Doing so helps us confirm that the cross-ethnic marriages we have identified have important political implications, and that even voters who share no ethnic identity with their leader may be driven by ethnic motivations.

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<sup>27</sup>Ichino and Nathan (2013) are a notable exception.

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## Tables and Figures

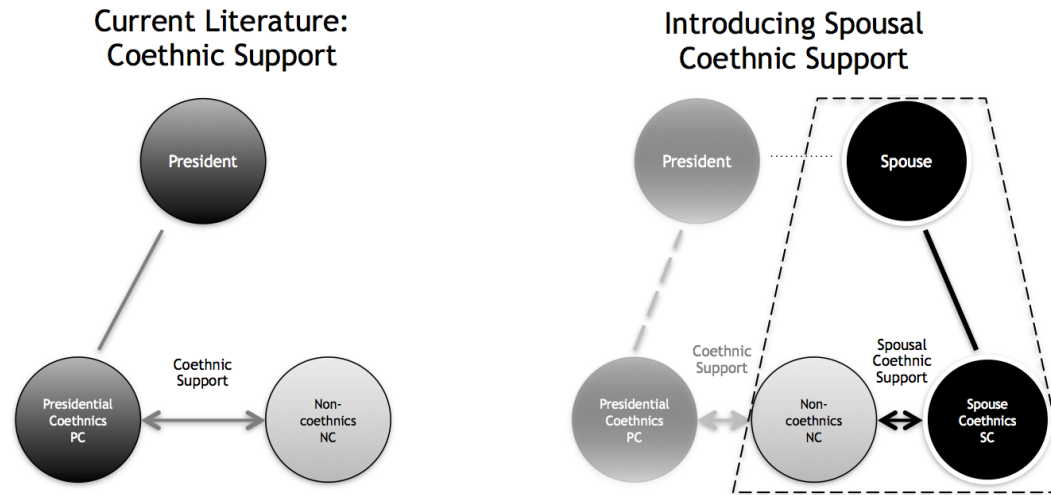


Figure 1: Introducing Spouse Coethnics

Table 1: Comparing cross-ethnic and coethnic marriage cases

Unit of observation: country		
Variable	Coethnic marriage	Cross-ethnic marriage
Population cross-ethnic marriage rate	0.110	0.225
ELF	0.704	0.731
PREG	0.378	0.355
Population (in thousands)	38,000	19,000
Polity	3.2	4.4
Number of cases	6	12
Unit of observation: leadership tenure		
Variable	Coethnic marriage	Cross-ethnic marriage
Leader group size	0.334	0.346
Spouse group size	0.334	0.404
Number of cases	12	11

*Notes:* For the country unit of observation, we compare countries that have experienced only coethnic marriages to countries that have experienced at least one cross-ethnic marriage. For the leadership tenure unit of observation, we compare leadership tenures where the leader is married to a coethnic with leadership tenures where the leader is married to a non-coethnic (excluding marriages to foreign-nationals).

Table 2: Determinants of Support for Leader in AB Survey

	Leader non-coethnics only; Cross-ethnic marriage cases only											
	Vote			Job performance			Ethnic political power			Ethnic unfair		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Spouse coethnic	-0.22*	-0.07*	-0.04*	-0.36*	-0.24*	-0.16*	0.17*	0.23*	0.21*	-0.02	0.01	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)
Country FE	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Round FE	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
SES controls	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
R-squared	0.026	0.008	0.070	0.019	0.024	0.119	0.004	0.010	0.029	0.000	0.001	0.057
Observations	12,487	12,487	9,181	15,206	15,206	11,108	15,030	15,030	11,032	14,729	14,729	10,782

*Notes:* The unit of observation is the Afrobarometer survey respondent. The sample is limited to cases of cross-ethnic marriage and respondents who are not coethnic with their leader. Models (1), (4), (7) and (10) are bare-bones models, with no controls. Models (2), (5), (8) and (11) are fixed effects models, with country and round fixed effects. Models (3), (6), (9) and (12) are kitchen-sink models, with all fixed effects and socio-economic and demographic controls described in Table SI-3. \* indicates 1% significance level.

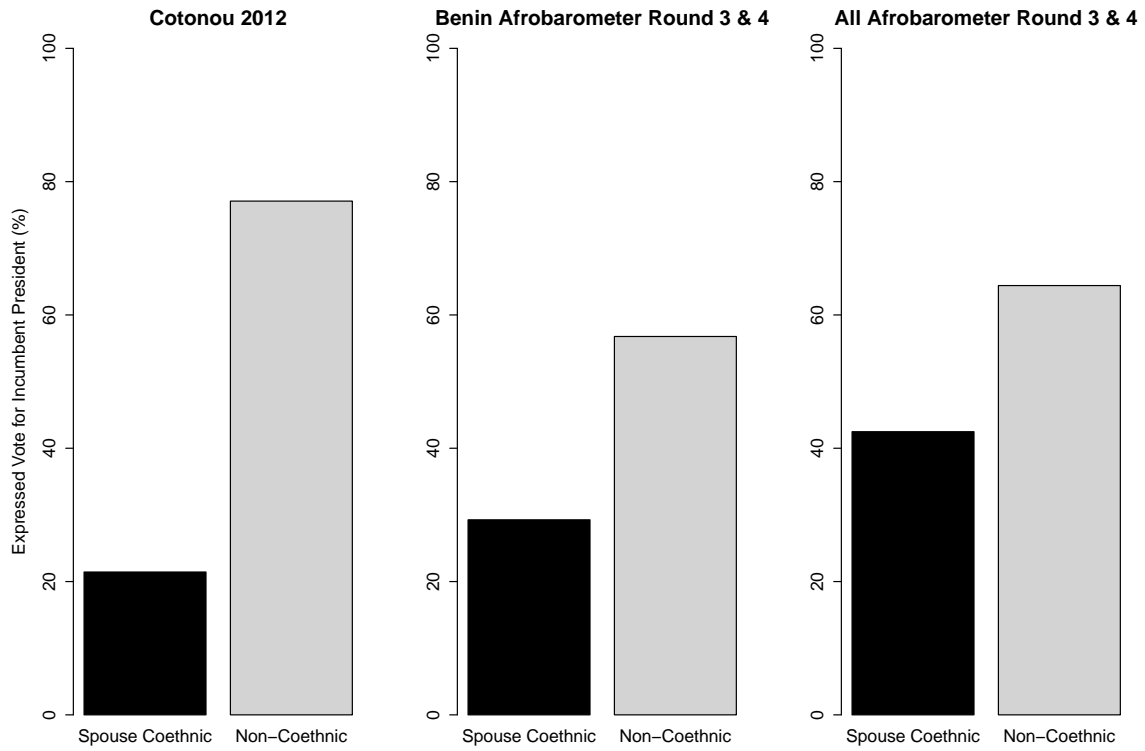


Figure 2: Presidential support by spouse coethnicity across surveys

Table 3: Vote Choice Difference-in-means in Benin Survey Experiment

DV: Vote for Yayi	Control	Wife	Fon	Wife – Control	Fon – Control	Fon – Wife
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(b-a)	(c-a)	(c-b)
Chantal coethnics	21.43 (N=70)	13.79 (N=58)	37.31 (N=67)	-7.64 ( $p = 0.27$ )	15.88* ( $p = 0.04$ )	23.52* ( $p = 0.00$ )
Non-coethnics	77.08 (N=48)	67.92 (N=53)	64.71 (N=51)	-9.16 ( $p = 0.31$ )	-12.38 ( $p = 0.18$ )	-3.22 ( $p = 0.73$ )

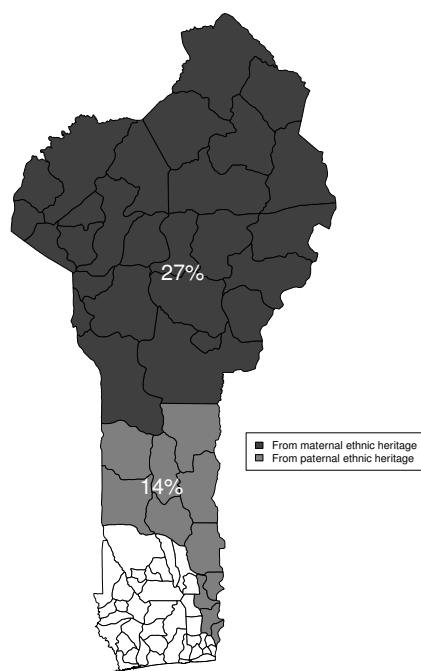
*Notes:* The unit of observation is the respondent. The *Control* condition makes no reference to President Yayi's wife or to ethnicity. The *Wife* condition makes a reference to President Yayi's wife. The *Fon* condition makes a reference to President Yayi's Fon wife. *Chantal coethnics* is a sub-sample of Fon respondents (the president's wife's ethnic group). *Non-coethnics* is a sub-sample of respondents who do not share an ethnicity with Yayi or his wife. \* indicates 5% significance level.



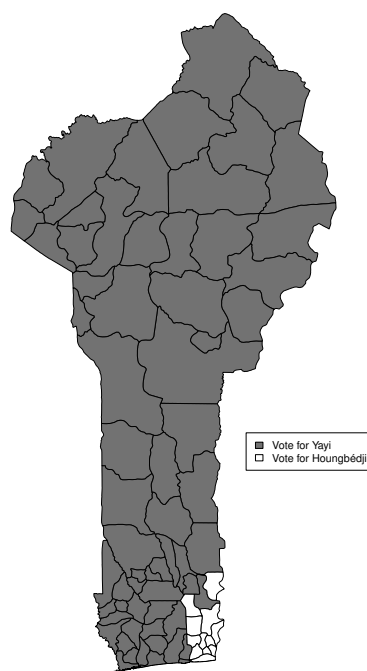
Table 4: Determinants of Yayi Vote Choice on Chantal co-ethnics and non-coethnics in Benin Survey Experiment

	Chantal Coethnics		Non-coethnics	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Fon Wife	0.16* (0.08)	0.14* (0.07)	-0.12 (0.09)	-0.14 (0.09)
Control for <i>Wife</i> cue	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Enumerator FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
R-square	0.05	0.12	0.01	0.06
Observations	195	195	152	152

*Notes:* The unit of observation is the respondent. OLS estimates. \* indicates 10% significance level.



(a) Yayi's ethnic strongholds



(b) Electoral results (2006 run-off)

Figure 3: (a) Yayi's ethnic strongholds with percentage of registered voters in 2006; (b) Benin's presidential run-off electoral results in 2006