Does your leader's ethnicity matter? New study links ethnic favoritism in Africa to citizen winners and losers

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An African child whose country is ruled by a leader from their ethnic group has a significantly improved chance of surviving childhood and getting a good education, a new study has found.

Leaders of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa consistently favor those from their own ethnic background when it comes to allotting funds and other resources to education and health benefits. They build new schools and hospitals, hire more teachers and doctors, expand immunization programmes and raise the number of skilled birth attendants.

This counters conventional wisdom, which assumes that leaders will channel resources to the "swing voters" – people who are not their co-ethnics but who are open to more quid pro quo appeals.

In a study (‘Ethnic Favoritism, Education, and Health in Sub-Saharan Africa') reported in the *American Political Science Review*, published by Cambridge University Press, researchers Raphaël Franck and Ilia Rainer studied the ethnicity of the leaders of 18 African countries over 50 years.

They then compared this with gains in education and the trend of the infant mortality rate among the ethnic groups the leaders had come from.

They found that the leaders had, on average across the 18 countries, increased the primary school attendance, completion and literacy of their ethnic groups by about 2% and reduced their infant mortality by about 0.4%. Franck and Rainer say their findings back up arguments that link Africa's poor economic performance to ethnic favoritism.

Franck comments: "Our analysis of individual African countries confirms the importance of the leader's ethnicity. Although the effects of ethnic favoritism vary from country to country, we found that in most countries in our sample it had a strong impact on education, infant mortality, or both. Demonstrating the importance of ethnic favoritism in Africa in this way bolsters ethnicity-based explanations of the continent's underdevelopment."

Franck and Rainer illustrate their findings with a case study from Congo-Brazzaville. In this West African state, leaders from the two dominant ethnic groups, the Kongo and the Mbochi, have consistently favored their own groups when in power.

Following independence, Kongo leaders ruled Congo-Brazzaville from 1960 to 1968, presiding over a period when Kongo citizens made advances in education which outstripped their Mbochi neighbors. Once Mbochi leaders achieved power from 1968 to 1992, the Mbochi soon closed this gap, eventually achieving higher rates of primary school completion that the Kongo.

The researchers found that ethnic favoritism was equally present in democracies and autocracies. They also suspect that further research will show that elites within ethnic groups benefit even more than ordinary people when a leader from that group is in power and that ethnic favoritism may be especially prevalent in African countries whose leaders have access to large fiscal resources to spend.

Franck and Rainer also claim that the costs of African ethnic diversity may be even higher than suggested by their research so far. Rainer says: "The education and health benefits that ethnic groups receive from their leaders take time to appear - they don't make a difference overnight. Until we have better data on things like changes in the income of different groups, how long their children stay in school and how many healthy children they have, we may be underestimating the amount of ethnic favoritism in Africa and it may be an even more pervasive and intractable problem than has yet been revealed."

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