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# THE INFLUENCE OF VOTER BEHAVIOUR ON POLITICAL LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS IN KENYA

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examined the relationship between voter behaviour and political leadership in Kenya, focusing on how ethnic and issue-based voting patterns influence leadership selection, accountability, and governance quality. Despite repeated electoral reforms, ethnic identity and communal affiliations continue to shape voter decisions, limiting the emergence of merit-based leadership. The study aimed to (i) determine how ethnic-based voting affects leadership effectiveness, (ii) assess how issue-based voting contributes to accountability, and (iii) examine the moderating effect of institutional reforms on these relationships. It targeted 1,327 employees across five key governance institutions IEBC, CRA, KIPPRA, ORPP, and NCIC with a stratified random sample of 308 respondents. Using a quantitative research design, data were collected through structured questionnaires and analyzed using SPSS Version 28 through descriptive and inferential statistics. Guided by Social Identity Theory and Rational Choice Theory, the study found that ethnic identity remains the strongest predictor of voting behaviour, directly influencing leadership legitimacy and equity in governance. However, emerging evidence of issue-based voting among younger, educated voters indicates a gradual shift toward performance-oriented politics. The study concludes that Kenya's democratic growth depends on civic awareness, equitable resource distribution, and institutional reforms. It recommends that electoral agencies intensify civic education, political parties enhance internal democracy, and policymakers strengthen mechanisms promoting inclusivity and issue-based political participation. These efforts can foster credible leadership, reduce ethnic polarization, and enhance national cohesion.*

***Keywords:*** *Accountability, Ethnic Identity, Governance, Institutional Reform, Issue-based Voting, Leadership, National Cohesion, Voter Behaviour*

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## INTRODUCTION

Globally, voter behaviour has undergone a notable transformation, increasingly shaped by identity politics, emotional polarization, and declining trust in institutions. Recent research highlights that political identity now influences citizens' attitudes and decisions far beyond policy preferences (Raile et al., 2024). The 2024 global election cycle, which saw unprecedented shifts in leadership across several continents, demonstrated widespread voter disillusionment, economic anxiety, and the rise of populist movements that capitalized on social divisions and misinformation (Associated Press, 2024). These patterns suggest that modern electorates are becoming more unpredictable, driven by identity alignment rather than ideological or issue-based considerations.

Across Africa, voter behaviour continues to reflect a complex interaction between ethnic affiliations and emerging issue-based politics. Although ethnic loyalties remain significant determinants of electoral outcomes, studies indicate a gradual evolution as younger and urban voters begin to prioritize governance performance and inclusivity (Bekker, 2022; Hanaoka, 2024). Nevertheless, voter apathy, limited political education, and uneven access to civic information continue to constrain democratic participation in many African nations.

In Kenya, electoral processes since 2013 have been characterized by both ethnic-based mobilization and attempts at cross-ethnic coalition building. The European Union Election Observation Mission (2023) noted that digital misinformation and hate speech continue to shape perceptions of political leaders, influencing voter trust and participation. Institutional analyses by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC, 2023) and the Office of the Registrar of Political Parties (ORPP, 2023) reveal that electoral credibility and leadership selection are closely linked to party organization and transparency. Furthermore, reports by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC, 2023) and the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC, 2024) confirm that ethnic patronage and polarization persist in public institutions. Together, these findings show that while Kenya is gradually transitioning toward issue-based voting, ethnic identity remains a dominant factor shaping voter behaviour and political leadership outcomes

### Statement of the Problem

Despite constitutional reforms and repeated electoral cycles since 2013, Kenya's voter behaviour remains strongly shaped by ethnic identity, disinformation-prone online ecosystems, and uneven party institutionalization factors that distort leadership selection and perceived legitimacy. Election observer reports document coordinated inauthentic activity, gendered attacks, and derogatory speech online that influence perceptions of candidates and institutions (EU EOM, 2023; Carter Center, 2024). Administrative reviews reveal persistent operational and transparency challenges that condition participation and outcomes (IEBC, 2023; ORPP, 2023). Concurrently, diversity audits show limited compliance with statutory inclusion thresholds in public service, suggesting that identity-based patronage continues to shadow governance after elections (NCIC, 2023). Emerging scholarship indicates evolving even cross-ethnic coalitions, yet the salience of identity remains high and context dependent (Cheeseman, 2024).

However, a critical gap persists: most Kenyan studies and official reviews describe electoral conduct or post-election administration, but few empirically link types of voter behaviour (e.g., ethnic vs. issue-based voting) to measurable leadership outcomes within core public institutions over the post-2013 period, while accounting for contemporary information disorders. There is limited multi-institution, post-2022 evidence testing how voter behaviour translates into leadership quality, accountability, and inclusion nor how institutional reforms mediate or moderate these effects (KIPPRA, 2024). This study addresses that gap by quantifying the relationship between voter behaviour and political leadership outcomes across key Kenyan institutions.

**Specific Objectives**

- To examine the influence of ethnic-based voter behaviour on the selection and effectiveness of political leadership in Kenya.
- To assess the extent to which issue-based voting contributes to accountability and performance of political leaders in Kenya.
- To determine the moderating effect of institutional frameworks and electoral reforms on the relationship between voter behaviour and political leadership outcomes in Kenya.

**Scope of the Study**

This study focuses on examining the relationship between voter behaviour and political leadership in Kenya, emphasizing the post-2013 electoral period through the 2022 general elections. It specifically investigates how ethnic-based and issue-based voting patterns influence leadership selection, accountability, and governance effectiveness. The research targets five key national institutions central to leadership and governance: the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC), the Commission on Revenue Allocation (CRA), the Office of the Registrar of Political Parties (ORPP), and the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA). Data were collected from their employees

**Limitation of the Study**

The study faced several limitations. First, it relied on self-reported data, which may be affected by personal bias or social desirability tendencies among respondents. Second, the quantitative design limited the exploration of deeper contextual factors that qualitative methods could reveal. Third, the study's focus on selected national institutions may restrict the generalizability of findings to other counties or private-sector entities. Additionally, time constraints and logistical challenges during data collection especially in securing responses from senior officials posed limitations. Despite these constraints, the study maintained methodological rigor through representative sampling and adherence to ethical research standards

**Significance of the Study**

This study provides valuable insights into the dynamics between voter behaviour and political leadership within Kenya's evolving democratic framework. Its findings contribute to academic discourse on governance, electoral behaviour, and institutional accountability in multi-ethnic societies. Policymakers and electoral bodies such as the IEBC, ORPP, and NCIC can use the results to design interventions promoting issue-based politics and inclusive leadership. Moreover, civil society and civic educators may apply the evidence to strengthen voter awareness and participation. The study also offers a foundation for further research examining the long-term effects of voter behaviour on governance quality and national cohesion.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Kenyan voter behaviour continues to be strongly patterned by ethnic identity, shaping who attains and sustains political leadership. Recent work on Kenya's 2022 polls shows that ethnicity remains salient even as urbanization and coalition-building reconfigure alignments; identity cues still structure perceptions of leader competence and legitimacy (Cheeseman, 2024). Administrative audits also reveal uneven ethnic representation in public institutions, suggesting downstream effects of identity-based mobilization on leadership composition and inclusion (NCIC, 2023). Online derogatory speech and coordinated inauthentic activity around the 2022 elections further conditioned voter evaluations of leaders, reinforcing identity narratives over programmatic criteria (EU EOM, 2023).

Evidence on issue-based voting links programmatic appeals to accountability and performance, though their reach is uneven. Comparative research in Africa associates credible policy commitments and reduced clientelism with improved leader responsiveness (Kramon, 2020). Yet Kenya-specific assessments indicate

that information disorders and campaign environments can blunt policy-focused appeals, limiting translation into accountability gains (EU EOM, 2023; IEBC, 2023).

Institutional frameworks and reforms appear to moderate these relationships. The Office of the Registrar of Political Parties underscores the role of party organization, internal democracy, and compliance with law in shaping candidate selection and leadership quality (ORPP, 2023). Post-election evaluations by IEBC highlight procedural strengths and gaps that can either amplify or dampen how voter preferences convert into legitimate leadership outcomes (IEBC, 2023). Policy analysis also documents reform implementation under the 2010 Constitution covering party finance rules, technology, and dispute resolution as levers that can weaken identity capture and strengthen programmatic competition (KIPPRA, 2024; International IDEA, 2024). Together, the literature suggests a dual track: ethnic cues still powerfully influence leadership emergence, while institutional reforms and credible programmatic competition can mitigate these effects and enhance accountability.

**Theoretical Review**

This study is guided by the Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the Rational Choice Theory (RCT), both of which explain voter behaviour and its implications for political leadership in Kenya.

Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner, posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups and seek to enhance their status by favouring in-groups over out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In political contexts, this translates into ethnically aligned voting, where individuals support candidates from their ethnic or regional group to reinforce collective identity and perceived group advantage. Recent studies affirm that ethnic identity remains a central determinant of voter preference in multi-ethnic democracies, influencing leadership legitimacy and representation (Cheeseman, 2024; Horowitz, 2021). In Kenya, SIT explains why voters often prioritize ethnic solidarity over competence, shaping both leadership selection and governance inclusivity (NCIC, 2023).

Rational Choice Theory, on the other hand, conceptualizes voting as a strategic decision where individuals act to maximize expected benefits (Downs, 1957). Voters support candidates or parties perceived to advance their economic or communal welfare. Contemporary African scholarship shows that rational calculations around access to resources, employment, and security underpin much of voting behaviour (Kramon, 2020; Opalo, 2022). In Kenya, RCT elucidates why citizens may rationally choose co-ethnic leaders to secure material advantages through patronage networks, thereby linking electoral behaviour to leadership outcomes and governance performance

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research design to objectively analyze the influence of national integration on political leadership in Kenya. The design facilitated precise measurement and statistical evaluation of relationships among key study variables. The target population comprised 1,327 employees drawn from five key public institutions involved in governance and national integration namely, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), Commission on Revenue Allocation (CRA), Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA), Office of the Registrar of Political Parties (ORPP), and the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC). Using Slovin's formula with a 0.05 margin of error, a sample of 308 respondents was selected through proportionate stratified random sampling to ensure institutional balance and minimize bias.

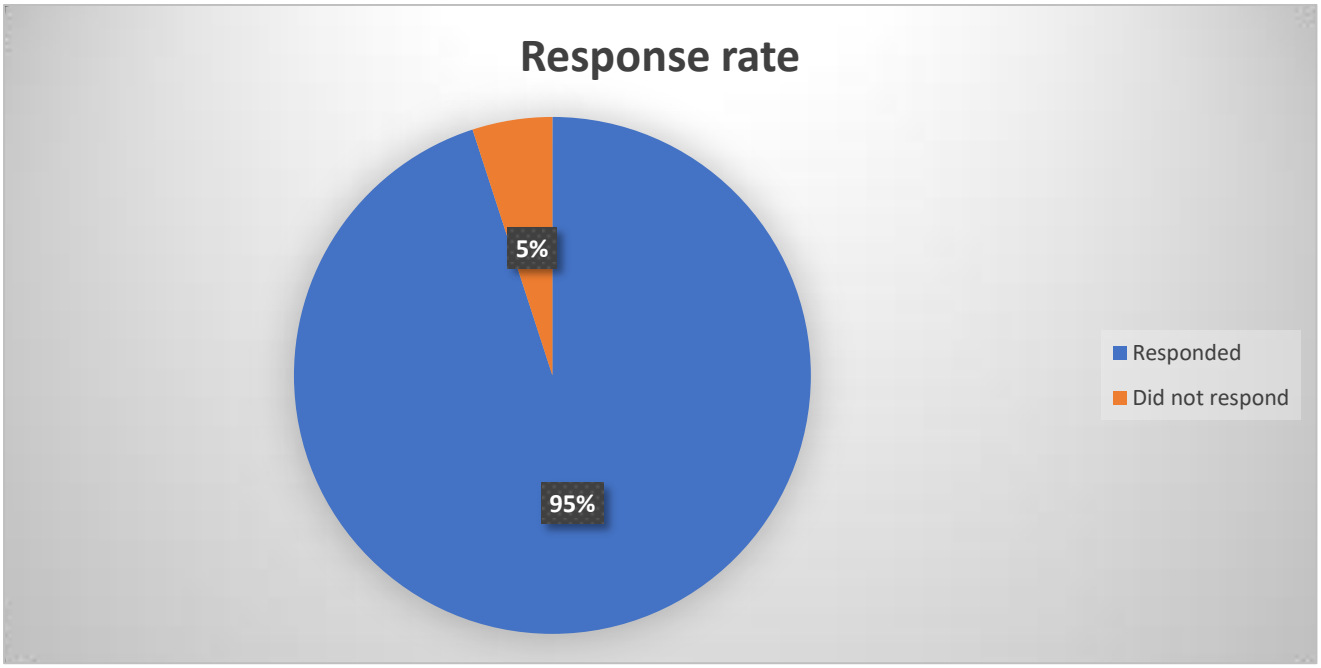
Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire containing 32 items seven demographic and twenty-five analytical measured on a five-point Likert scale. A pilot test with 30 participants was conducted to verify the instrument's clarity and dependability. Expert validation confirmed content accuracy, while factor analysis established construct validity. Reliability testing produced Cronbach's alpha coefficients above 0.70, signifying strong internal consistency. Data collection was conducted both physically and electronically

following ethical clearance and informed consent from participants. The collected data were coded and analyzed using SPSS Version 28, applying descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) and inferential analyses (correlation and regression) to test hypotheses. Ethical considerations were strictly upheld, guaranteeing confidentiality, voluntary participation, and data integrity throughout the research process.

## RESULTS

### Response Rate

Research questionnaires were issued to the sampled respondents randomly selected from a sample population of 308. 270 respondents completed and submitted the questionnaires. This was a response rate of 95%. According to Oso & Onen (2011), a response rate of 70% and above is adequate for statistical analysis and inference. The distribution of the respondents was as shown in Figure 1.




Source; Author, 2025

### Demographic information

The study aimed to determine the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Specifically, it sought to identify their gender, age group, highest level of education attained, ethnic affiliation, and length of political participation.

### Gender

The study sought to determine the gender distribution of respondents in order to understand the representativeness and diversity of the sample. Gender is a key demographic variable that often influences perceptions, political attitudes, and participation in governance processes. Establishing the gender composition of participants was therefore essential in assessing whether views on the politicization of ethnicity and political leadership were equitably drawn from both male and female perspectives. Table 1.1 presents a summary of the findings on respondents' gender distribution.

**Table 1**

***Gender***

| Gender | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | **Frequency** | **Percentages (%)** |
| **Male** | 156 | 57.8 |
| **Female** | 114 | 42.2 |
| **Totals** | **270** | **100** |

The findings in Table 1 indicate that male respondents constituted the majority at 57.8%**,** while female respondents accounted for 42.2% of the total sample of 270 participants. This distribution demonstrates a relatively balanced gender representation, ensuring that both male and female perspectives were adequately captured in the study. The slight dominance of male respondents reflects the gender composition often observed within Kenya's public institutions and political spaces. Nonetheless, the inclusion of a significant proportion of female participants enhances the reliability of the study by providing a more comprehensive understanding of gendered perspectives on the politicization of ethnicity and political leadership in Kenya

**Table 2**

***Age group***

| Age group | | |
|---|---|---|
| Age group | Frequency | Percentages (%) |
| 18–25 | 6 | 2.2 |
| 26–35 | 36 | 13.3 |
| 36–45 | 138 | 51.1 |
| 46–55 | 54 | 20.0 |
| 56 and above | 36 | 13.3 |
| Totals | **270** | **100** |

The results in Table 2 show that the majority of respondents, 51.1%, were aged between 36 and 45 years, followed by 20.0% in the 46–55 years category. Respondents aged 26–35 years and 56 years and above each accounted for 13.3%, while the youngest group, aged 18–25 years, represented only 2.2% of the total sample. This age distribution suggests that most participants were mature adults in their active professional and civic engagement years, making them well-positioned to provide informed perspectives on political leadership and ethnic dynamics. The representation across age groups enhances the validity of the findings by capturing generational variations in political attitudes.

**Table 3**

***Highest level of education***

| Highest level of education attained | | |
|---|---|---|
| Level of education | Frequency | Percentages (%) |
| Primary | 0 | 0.0 |
| Secondary | 0 | 0.0 |
| College | 50 | 18.5 |
| University | 136 | 50.4 |
| Postgraduate | 84 | 31.1 |
| Totals | 270 | 100 |

The results in Table 3 revealed that a majority of respondents, 50.4%, had attained a university degree, followed by 31.1% who possessed postgraduate qualifications, and 18.5% who held college-level diplomas.

None of the respondents reported having only primary or secondary education. This indicates that the study population was highly educated, reflecting the professional nature of the sampled institutions and respondents. The high academic attainment among participants suggests that the data collected is grounded in informed opinions and critical understanding of governance, ethnicity, and leadership issues in Kenya. Such an educated sample enhances the credibility and analytical depth of the study's findings.

**Table 4**

***Length of political participation***

*Length of political participation*

| Political participation | Frequency | Percentages (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Never voted | 18 | 6.7 |
| Voted once | 36 | 13.3 |
| Voted in multiple elections | 180 | 66.7 |
| Actively involved in political activities | 36 | 13.3 |
| Totals | 270 | 100 |

The findings in Table 4 reveal that the majority of respondents, 66.7%, had voted in multiple elections, indicating a high level of political awareness and sustained engagement in Kenya's democratic processes. A further 13.3% reported being actively involved in political activities, such as campaigning or civic mobilization, while an equal proportion had voted only once. Notably, 6.7% of respondents indicated that they had never voted, suggesting a small segment of political disengagement. In addition, the results demonstrate that most participants possessed substantial experience with Kenya's electoral and political systems, making them well-positioned to provide informed insights into how politicization of ethnicity influences leadership, governance, and citizens' participation in democratic decision-making.

**Voter Behaviour on Political Leadership**

To adequately measure the Voter Behaviour on Political Leadership, the variable was broken down into four sub constructs. The respondents were thus asked to rate the latter on the Likert scale SA-strongly Agree, A-Agree, N-Not sure, Disagree, and SD-Strongly Disagree with the results being as in table 5

**Table 5**

***Voter Behaviour on Political Leadership***

| | **SA** | | **A** | | **N** | | **DA** | | **SDA** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Statement** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** |
| Ethnic identity strongly influences how citizens vote during national elections in Kenya. | 57 | 51.4 | 48 | 43.2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 5.4 |
| Voters in Kenya tend to support candidates who belong to their ethnic community rather than those with strong leadership qualities. | 54 | 51.4 | 39 | 37.1 | 3 | 2.9 | 9 | 8.6 | 0 | 0 |
| Voter behavior in Kenya is largely shaped by perceived access to state resources through co-ethnic leaders. | 36 | 31.6 | 54 | 47.4 | 6 | 5.3 | 9 | 7.9 | 9 | 7.9 |
| Issue-based voting (for example policy or performance) is replacing ethnic-based voting in Kenya. | 12 | 10.5 | 42 | 36.8 | 15 | 13.2 | 45 | 39.5 | 0 | 0 |

The findings presented in Table 5 provide compelling empirical evidence on the enduring influence of voter behavior on political leadership in Kenya. The results reveal that ethnic identity continues to serve as the most dominant determinant of electoral choices, reflecting the persistence of identity-based politics despite constitutional reforms and civic education efforts aimed at fostering inclusivity. A combined 94.6% of respondents (51.4% strongly agree and 43.2% agree) affirmed that ethnic identity strongly influences how citizens vote during national elections. This overwhelming consensus highlights how deeply embedded ethnic loyalty remains in Kenya's political culture. Similar observations have been made by Horowitz (2021) and Cheeseman and Lynch (2018), who argue that ethnicity serves both as a psychological anchor and a strategic heuristic in electoral decision-making, particularly in multi-ethnic societies such as Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda.

The second statement further reinforces this trend, with 88.5% of respondents (51.4% strongly agree and 37.1% agree) asserting that voters tend to support candidates from their ethnic communities rather than those with strong leadership qualities. This finding reveals that ethnic solidarity often supersedes considerations of competence, ideology, or performance, underscoring the rational logic underpinning identity-based voting. According to Oloo (2022) and Chandra (2021), such behavior can be interpreted through Rational Choice Theory, which posits that voters act strategically to maximize perceived benefits. In contexts like Kenya where access to state resources is often mediated by ethnicity voting for a co-ethnic leader is seen as an investment in communal welfare and political security. This aligns with Bleck and van de Walle (2019), who note that in clientelist political systems, ethnic voting becomes a rational adaptation to the scarcity and inequality of public goods.

Equally significant is the finding that 79% of respondents (31.6% strongly agree and 47.4% agree) believe that voter behavior in Kenya is shaped by expectations of material rewards and preferential access to state resources through co-ethnic leaders. This underscores the Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) perspective by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), which explains how access to critical resources determines power and influence within political systems. In the Kenyan context, leaders use public resources jobs, contracts, and development projects as instruments of loyalty and control, reinforcing ethnic patronage networks. Empirical studies by Opalo (2021) and Shilaho (2023) confirm that resource allocation at both national and county levels often follows ethnic lines, with dominant groups capturing a disproportionate share of state benefits. Such patterns perpetuate inequality, entrench clientelism, and diminish the prospects of meritocratic leadership.

However, the final statement "issue-based voting is replacing ethnic-based voting" revealed a transitional but incomplete shift toward policy-oriented politics. Only 47.3% of respondents agreed, while 39.5% disagreed and 13.2% remained neutral, indicating that Kenya is in the early stages of moving from ethnic to issue-based voting. This nuanced finding suggests that while civic awareness, education, and urbanization are slowly changing voter priorities, ethnic loyalty remains resilient. Kramon (2020) and Resnick (2021) have documented similar transitions in African democracies, noting that younger, urban, and more educated populations are increasingly evaluating leaders based on performance indicators such as service delivery, economic management, and anti-corruption record. Nonetheless, as Nyabola (2018) observes, digital misinformation and ethnic mobilization during elections often undermine these progressive shifts by reintroducing identity narratives into public discourse.

Collectively, these results affirm that Kenya's voter behavior continues to be profoundly shaped by ethnic affiliation and perceptions of resource access, which in turn influence leadership selection and governance priorities. While emerging patterns of issue-based voting represent an encouraging trend, their impact remains localized, particularly in urban constituencies with higher civic literacy. The findings resonate with the theoretical underpinnings of Rational Choice Theory and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) illustrating that Kenyan voters make decisions that are simultaneously strategic (resource-driven) and identity-affirming (ethnically rooted).

In addition, the evidence highlights that the politicization of ethnicity remains central to Kenya's electoral behavior, perpetuating leadership choices that prioritize communal advantage over national interest. However, the growing presence of informed, issue-oriented voters suggests that Kenya's democracy is evolving, albeit gradually, toward a more performance-based political culture. Sustained civic education, transparent governance, and equitable resource distribution are therefore essential for deepening this transition and redefining the incentives that shape voter behavior and political leadership in Kenya's democratic evolution

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that voter behaviour in Kenya continues to be predominantly influenced by ethnic identity, resource expectations, and communal affiliations, all of which significantly affect the quality and inclusivity of political leadership. Although efforts toward civic education and institutional reform have increased, ethnic-based voting remains the most defining feature of electoral choices. The persistence of such identity-driven politics perpetuates patronage networks, undermines accountability, and limits the emergence of merit-based leadership. However, the findings also reveal a gradual but encouraging transition toward issue-based voting, especially among younger, urban, and more educated populations. This shift suggests that Kenya's democratic landscape is slowly evolving toward performance-oriented and policy-driven political competition. Institutional reforms, transparency in governance, and equitable resource distribution remain central to sustaining this transformation. Ultimately, strengthening democratic institutions, promoting civic literacy, and ensuring fair access to public resources are vital to diminishing ethnic polarization and enhancing political leadership effectiveness in Kenya. The study underscores that the evolution of voter behaviour will continue to shape the future of governance and leadership legitimacy in the country

Based on the study findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, electoral institutions such as the IEBC, ORPP, and NCIC should intensify civic education to promote issue-based voting and discourage ethnic mobilization. Voter awareness programs must emphasize the long-term benefits of electing leaders based on integrity, competence, and policy vision rather than ethnic affiliation. Second, political parties should strengthen internal democracy and transparency in candidate nomination processes to reduce perceptions of bias and exclusion. Third, policy interventions should target equitable resource distribution and balanced representation in public service to reduce the perceived link between ethnicity and access to power. Fourth, the media and civil society must promote fact-based political discourse and counter misinformation that fuels ethnic polarization. Finally, future research should integrate both quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture the evolving nature of voter attitudes and their implications for governance. Collectively, these measures can foster inclusive politics, strengthen institutional accountability, and enhance leadership effectiveness, contributing to a more cohesive and democratic Kenya

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