

The Fragility of Ethnic Bloc Voting: Patronage, Populism, Clientelism, and Voter Agency in Mt. Kenya GEMA Region in 2022 Elections

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Abstract

Kenya's August 2022 general election marked an unprecedented political moment, as the sitting President Uhuru Kenyatta campaigned against his own deputy, William Ruto, in favour of a long-time opposition leader, Raila Odinga. Focusing on the Mount Kenya (Mt. Kenya) region, this article examines the fragility of ethnic bloc voting and the role of voter agency in shaping electoral outcomes. Drawing on a qualitative case study of the Gikuyu-Embu-Meru (GEMA) counties, the analysis shows that, despite sustained elite pressure and direct appeals from the sitting President Kenyatta, voters overwhelmingly rejected his preferred successor, Odinga of the *Azimio la Umoja* Coalition Party, and delivered decisive support to Ruto's United Democratic Alliance (UDA), under the *Kenya Kwanza* Coalition. The findings demonstrate that this outcome reflected neither automatic ethnic loyalty nor elite orchestration, but deliberate voter calculations informed by economic grievances, perceptions of elite exclusion, and evaluations of competing political narratives. Ruto's "hustler versus dynasty" populist frame resonated by enabling voters to reinterpret patronage politics and assert autonomy against perceived elite imposition. The article argues that the 2022 Mt. Kenya vote exposes the limits of ethnic headcounts and highlights voters' capacity to defect and strategically realign. While ethnic identity remains politically salient, the case underscores how voter agency can disrupt elite expectations within historically cohesive ethnic blocs.

Keywords

Elections, Ethnic Voting, GEMA, Hustler *versus* Dynasty, Mt. Kenya Region

1. Introduction

On Tuesday, 9 August 2022, Kenyans went to the polls for the seventh time since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in the early 1990s, and for the third consecutive election under the 2010 Constitution. The presidential contest unfolded under highly unusual political circumstances. The Deputy President, William Ruto, sought to succeed his former ally, President Uhuru Kenyatta, on a United Democratic Alliance (UDA) ticket under the *Kenya Kwanza Coalition*, while Kenyatta openly campaigned against him in support of veteran opposition leader Raila Odinga of the *Azimio la Umoja Coalition* Party. Although two other

candidates also contested the presidency¹, the race was widely understood as a two-horse contest shaped by elite rupture, institutional stakes, and voter expectations.

After six days of intense uncertainty and public tension, the Chairman of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), Wafula Chebukati, declared Ruto the winner, having secured 7,176,141 votes against Odinga's 6,942,930. Ruto also met the constitutional threshold by obtaining at least 25 per cent of the vote in 39 counties—well above the minimum requirement of 24 counties—while voter turnout stood at 65.4 per cent, the lowest recorded in the previous two general elections (Cheeseman et al., 2024; IEBC, 2022). These aggregate results, however, masked significant regional variation in voting behaviour, particularly in areas long regarded as bastions of ethnic bloc voting.

The declaration of results was itself contested. Four IEBC commissioners² publicly disowned the announcement, staging a walkout at the national tallying centre at Bomas of Kenya and labelling the process “opaque.” The following day, Odinga rejected the outcome and announced his intention to challenge the results in court, which he later did (Cheeseman et al., 2024; Daily Nation, 2022 August 17). This dispute culminated in a highly charged Supreme Court case, whose judgment on 4 September 2022 upheld Chebukati’s declaration and affirmed Ruto as the duly elected president (Cheeseman et al., 2024; Galava & Kanyinga, 2024; The Star, 2022, September 5).

Beyond the legal drama, the final results revealed a striking electoral pattern: Ruto and the UDA/*Kenya Kwanza* coalition recorded sweeping victories across the Gikuyu-Embu-Meru (GEMA) counties of the Mt. Kenya region. This outcome was politically consequential not simply because of its scale, but because it defied long-standing expectations of ethnic loyalty. Despite sustained elite pressure and explicit appeals from President Kenyatta—widely regarded as the region’s paramount ethnic patron—voters in Mt. Kenya overwhelmingly rejected Odinga, a non-co-ethnic candidate, and instead endorsed Ruto.

This article argues that the Mt. Kenya vote cannot be adequately explained by elite bargaining, ethnic arithmetic, or patronage realignment alone. Rather, it reflects an episode of heightened voter agency, in which citizens actively re-evaluated political loyalties in light of economic grievances, perceptions of elite exclusion, and competing narratives of political legitimacy. Ruto’s successful repudiation of Kenyatta’s earlier succession promise—popularly captured in the slogan *yangu kumi ya William kumi* (“my ten [years], then William’s ten”)—was not merely an elite manoeuvre. It was mediated through a direct appeal to voters via the “hustler versus dynasty” narrative, which resonated with lived socio-economic frustrations and reframed clientelist expectations in populist terms. By demonstrating how Mt. Kenya voters asserted autonomy against presumed ethnic obligation, this article contributes to the growing literature questioning the durability of ethnic bloc voting in Africa (Bratton & Kimenyi, 2008; Ferree et al., 2021; Horowitz, 2022; Kasara, 2013). Empirically, it documents an outlier case of voter defection from an incumbent ethnic patron in a region historically associated with cohesive ethnic voting. Analytically, it advances debates on whether—and under what conditions—voters in ethnically segmented societies can strategically subordinate ethnic identity to performance evaluations and material concerns.

Importantly, this study does not suggest that ethnic politics has ceased to matter in Kenya. Rather, as the analysis shows, the Mt. Kenya outcome stood in contrast to voting patterns in many other regions (Cheeseman et al., 2024; IEBC, 2022), where ethnic alignments remained largely intact. Instead, the 2022 election illustrates that ethnic bloc voting is not fixed, but rather contingent on elite unity, narrative resonance, and voters’ judgment. In

¹ Mr. George Wajackoyah of Roots Party and Mr. David Mwaure of Agano Party.

² IEBC Vice Chairperson Juliana Cherera and Commissioners Justus Nyang’aya, Irene Masit and Francis Wanderi.

foregrounding voter agency, the article challenges deterministic interpretations of ethnic politics and underscores the capacity of Kenyan voters to renegotiate political allegiance when circumstances and narratives align.

2. Methodology

To examine electoral behaviour in the Mt. Kenya region during Kenya's 2022 general election, with particular emphasis on voter agency, that is, how voters interpreted political developments, evaluated competing narratives, and made strategic electoral choices, this study adopts a qualitative case study design (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018). A qualitative approach is exceptionally well-suited to uncovering the meanings voters attach to political events, the interpretive frames through which they assess elite actions, and the conditional nature of ethnic and clientelist loyalties, dynamics that are difficult to capture through aggregate quantitative data alone. The analysis employs process tracing to reconstruct the sequence of political events, elite realignments, and narrative shifts leading to the 2022 electoral outcome in the Mt. Kenya region (George & Bennett, 2005). Rather than treating voting behaviour as a static response to ethnicity or patronage, process tracing allows us to identify critical moments at which voter judgments were recalibrated, including elite ruptures, shifts in economic discourse, and the emergence of populist frames that redefined political choice.

Consistent with best practices in qualitative research, multiple sources were systematically analysed to triangulate interpretations (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). These sources include print and broadcast media reports, campaign speeches and public statements by political elites, electoral data from the IEBC, and secondary scholarly analyses. Particular attention was paid to how political messages were framed and received over time, enabling us to trace how voters in the region came to reinterpret long-standing ethnic and patronage expectations.

Empirically, the process-tracing exercise made it possible to follow the political trajectory from the March 2018 "handshake" between President Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga, through the formation of rival coalitions—*Azimio la Umoja* and *Kenya Kwanza*—to the campaign period and final voting outcomes in August 2022 (Khadiagala, 2021; Omulo, 2023). This temporal sequencing enables linking macro-level developments (such as economic pressures, institutional debates surrounding the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), and coalition reconfigurations) to micro-level voter responses, including shifts in allegiance, rejection of elite endorsements, and resonance with populist narratives.

The case study is geographically bounded to the Gikuyu-Embu-Meru (GEMA)-dominated counties of the Mt. Kenya region, traversing the former Central Kenya Province and some upper parts of the former Eastern Province; and Nakuru and Laikipia in the former Rift Valley Province, historically regarded as a cohesive ethnic voting bloc. However, a brief comparative contextual analysis of voting patterns in other regions is incorporated to underscore the distinctiveness of the Mt. Kenya outcome and to guard against overgeneralization. These contrasts help clarify whether observed patterns reflect broader national trends or context-specific exercises of voter agency. Analytically, the methodology treats ethnic identity, clientelism, and institutional incentives not as deterministic variables but as constraints and resources that voters actively negotiate. The emphasis is therefore on identifying moments where voters deviated from expected ethnic or clientelist scripts, and on explaining how economic grievances, performance evaluations, and populist framing reshaped such electoral choices.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows: the next section introduces the Mt. Kenya (GEMA) region as the study site, situating its historical role in Kenyan electoral politics. This is followed by the theoretical framework, which integrates debates on ethnic voting, clientelism, and populist mobilisation while foregrounding voter agency. The empirical sections then analyse the rejection of President Kenyatta's endorsement, document the erosion of ethnic bloc voting in Mt. Kenya GEMA region, and explain William Ruto's electoral strength through the interaction of populist narratives, structural and institutional factors, and clientelist practices, with brief comparative insights from other regions. The final section reflects on the implications of the Mt Kenya GEMA region case for understanding the evolving salience of ethnic identity in Kenyan electoral politics and identifies avenues for future research.

2.1. The Study Site

The GEMA label- representing around 30 per cent of Kenya's total population (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019) - embraces a group of ethnic sub-groups, namely Gikuyu, Embu, and Meru.³ These groups are domiciled around the Mt. Kenya region, covering Kiambu, Muranga, Kirinyaga, Nyeri, Nyandarua, Meru, Embu, and Tharaka-Nithi counties. There is also a sizeable number of GEMA immigrants, mainly Gikuyu, in Nakuru and Laikipia counties who settled there because of colonial land dispossession at the dawn of the 19th century (Namunyu et al., 2024). The GEMA sub-groups form 20 per cent of 290 constituencies in the country, which accounted for 5.7 million of 22 million registered voters in the August 2022 elections (IEBC, 2022).

The GEMA has dominated Kenyan politics, having produced the first president (Jomo Kenyatta), the third president (Mwai Kibaki), and the fourth president (Uhuru Kenyatta)- all Gikuyus. Since the return of multipartyism, as Horowitz (1985) predicted, the group has tended to vote as a near-united bloc. Apart from 1992 and 2002 (when they had two viable presidential candidates), the group supported Mwai Kibaki under the Democratic Party (DP) and the Party of National Unity (PNU) in 1997 and 2007 respectively, and Uhuru Kenyatta of the Jubilee Coalition and Jubilee Party in 2013 and 2017 respectively. Therefore, following theoretical arguments of ethnic voting (Arriola et al., 2017; Bratton et al., 2011; Hoffman & Long, 2013; Horowitz, 1985; Posner, 2005), to members of this group, voting for one of their own who may end up forming the government implies enjoying benefits of favouritism in access to state jobs and the provision of geographically concentrated public goods and services. Several developments suggested that the GEMA might not vote as a bloc in 2022. First, divisions emerged within the Jubilee Party following a political truce between President Kenyatta and the opposition leader, Raila Odinga. Second, during the run-up to the elections, prominent GEMA politicians could be found in the main opposing political formations, Ruto's *Kenya Kwanza* and Odinga's *Azimio*. Instructively, *Azimio* Council was headed by President Kenyatta, backed by Mt. Kenya tycoons (The East African, 2021, October 3). Finally, Ruto and Odinga picked their running mates - Rigathi Gachagua (The Standard, 2022, May 15) and Martha Karua, respectively- from the populous Gikuyu community.

To understand a potential GEMA split, we need to journey back in time a little. In the 1970s, President Jomo Kenyatta elevated GEMA beyond just a social welfare organisation to become a pre-eminent political organisation in the country (Omolo, 2002). However, Kenyatta's succession politics saw intra-elite division within the group, pitting those supporting Vice-President Daniel Arap Moi against those opposed to him. Eventually, when Moi succeeded Kenyatta in 1978, his primary political survival strategy was to dismantle GEMA (Odhiambo-

³ This list is not exhaustive; other groups often listed include the Mbeere.

Mbai, 2003; Oyugi, 1994). Moi indeed attempted to fracture GEMA's influence in the late 1970s and 1980s – for instance, by purging Gikuyu elites from top government positions and suppressing GEMA institutions (Ahluwalia, 1985, 1997; Bedasso, 2015; Branch & Cheeseman, 2006). This led to a period of political dispersal for the Gikuyu-Embu-Meru alliance. However, Moi's efforts were only partially successful. While he weakened GEMA as a formal bloc during his rule (1978–2002), the underlying ethnic solidarity among those communities persisted.

In 1992, when multiparty politics was restored, the GEMA group was divided between Mwai Kibaki of the Democratic Party (DP) and Kenneth Matiba of the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD)- Asili, and later during Moi's succession in 2002 between Kibaki's National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) and Uhuru Kenyatta of the Kenya African National Union (KANU). Nonetheless, GEMA's political influence resurfaced strongly with Mwai Kibaki's presidency (2003–2013), which reunited the community's vote, and later under Uhuru Kenyatta (a GEMA leader) in 2013 and 2017. As the perceived GEMA kingpin, Uhuru Kenyatta's failure to mentor the GEMA heir implied that, when he exited the scene in 2022 after ten years as president (2013–2022), there was uncertainty about the future coherence and political leanings of GEMA constituents.

3. Theoretical Framework: Ethnicity, Clientelism, and Voter Agency

This article draws on four interrelated conceptual strands: ethnic identity, clientelistic political culture, structural factors, and institutional factors, while explicitly centring voter agency as the mechanism through which these forces are interpreted, negotiated, and sometimes resisted. Ethnic identity politics refers to patterns of political mobilization and voting behaviour aligned with ethnic group identities, in which political appeals and electoral choices are structured primarily around shared ancestry, language, or cultural affiliation (Arriola et al., 2017; Berman, 1998; Bratton et al., 2011; Chandra, 2004; Hoffman & Long, 2013; Horowitz, 1985; Horowitz, 2022; Posner, 2005). In such contexts, voters are expected to support co-ethnic candidates, often as part of a broader ethnic bargaining logic. When this article refers to the fragility of ethnic bloc voting, it denotes a weakening of automatic or taken-for-granted ethnic voting, rather than the disappearance of ethnic identity itself. Importantly, scholarship challenges deterministic readings of ethnic voting by emphasizing that ethnic identities are politically constructed, situational, and strategically activated (Chandra, 2004). This constructivist insight opens an analytical space for voter agency: voters may retain ethnic identity while choosing not to vote ethnically when alternative narratives better align with their material interests, moral evaluations, or political frustrations. Thus, ethnicity is treated here not as a binding directive but as one consideration among several that voters actively weigh.

Clientelistic political culture is defined as a system in which political support is exchanged for personalized material benefits, such as jobs, cash transfers, or development projects (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Kramon, 2017; Stokes, 2005). Kenya's political history has been profoundly shaped by clientelism, often expressed through "Big Man" politics in which powerful patrons—frequently ethnic leaders—dispense resources in return for loyalty (Kramon, 2017). However, treating clientelism solely as elite manipulation underestimates voter agency. Voters are not merely clients; they evaluate, compare, and sometimes reject patronage offers based on past performance, credibility, and perceived fairness, as is commonly the case in Ghana (Lindberg & Morrison, 2008). In this sense, clientelism is better understood as a negotiated relationship rather than a one-way transaction.

Structural factors refer to underlying socio-economic and demographic conditions—such as unemployment, inequality, urbanisation, and education—that shape political preferences and receptiveness to particular narratives (Bratton et al., 2005; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Resnick & Casale, 2011; Opalo, 2022). These conditions do not mechanically determine voting behaviour; instead, they provide the material context within which voters interpret political messages and reassess elite claims. Structural grievances thus amplify voter agency by sharpening evaluative judgments and lowering tolerance for elite imposition.

Institutional factors denote the formal and informal “rules of the game,” including constitutional provisions, electoral rules, and coalition incentives that structure political competition (Hall & Taylor, 1996; North, 1990). Kenya’s requirement that a presidential candidate secure 25 per cent of the vote in at least 24 counties (Constitution of Kenya, 2010, Art. 138(4)) incentivises cross-ethnic coalition building. Nevertheless, institutions do not predetermine outcomes; they shape the strategic environment within which voters and elites interact. Voter agency operates within these constraints, as citizens assess whether institutional bargains serve or undermine their interests.

Broadly, therefore, the article is anchored in two major theoretical traditions: ethnic voting theories and patronage-clientelism theories. Ethnic voting theory posits that ethnicity constitutes a primary cleavage structuring political competition in plural societies (Horowitz, 1985; Posner, 2005). Voting ethnically can be rational if voters expect co-ethnic leaders to channel resources to them (the instrumentalist view) (Chandra, 2004; Horowitz, 1985; Omolo, 2002; Posner, 2005) or if ethnic identity provides psychological attachment and affective loyalty (the primordialist view) (Geertz, 1963; Horowitz, 1985; Omolo, 2002). Kenya’s history of ethnic kingpins and bloc voting aligns with these propositions. However, both perspectives risk underplaying moments when voters override ethnic cues in response to changing political or economic circumstances.

Patronage and clientelism theories similarly emphasise elite strategies for maintaining support through material inducements (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). Yet, the “hustler versus dynasty” narrative introduced a populist reframing that directly appealed to voters’ lived experiences of exclusion and inequality, potentially reconfiguring clientelist expectations along class-inflected lines. Rather than rejecting patronage outright, voters may reinterpret who qualifies as a legitimate patron and what constitutes acceptable exchange.

This article, therefore, treats the 2022 Mt. Kenya vote as a critical case for examining how voter agency mediates ethnicity and clientelism. The central question is not whether ethnicity or patronage disappeared, but whether voters strategically subordinated ethnic loyalty to economic narratives and performance evaluations. By situating voter agency at the centre of these theoretical debates, the study contributes to broader discussions on whether populist mobilisation can disrupt entrenched ethnic political defaults without entirely dismantling the structures that sustain them.

4. The Popular Rejection of Kenyatta’s Plea

Forty-eight hours before the polls, President Kenyatta delivered a final televised address to the Mt. Kenya electorate⁴, recounting the achievements of his ten-year tenure and implicitly urging the region to back his preferred successor, Raila Odinga (Daily Nation, 2022, August 5). Speaking in Gikuyu across vernacular radio and Television stations, Kenyatta stopped short of

⁴ President Kenyatta speaks to the mountain through Inooro TV, Kameme TV, and 9 GEMA Radio Stations, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_D26w-PB48 (accessed 20 August 2022).

overt campaigning. However, he made it clear “where [his] stand is” (Daily Nation, 2022, August 5) – a thinly veiled reminder of his endorsement of Odinga. This unprecedented intervention – the first time a Kenyan president actively campaigned against his own deputy – firmly positioned Kenyatta as Odinga’s patron in Mt. Kenya. Odinga thus entered the race with the public backing of an incumbent president, a factor expected to sway the fiercely loyal GEMA base (Hess & Aidoo, 2024: 382; Cheeseman et al., 2024: 244).

In March 2022, Kenyatta’s Jubilee Party formally joined Odinga’s *Azimio la Umoja* coalition, cementing this alliance (Cheeseman et al., 2024: 244). Yet as events would show, even Kenyatta’s personal plea and alliance-building failed to prevent a popular rebellion in his backyard. Kenyatta’s endorsement of his longtime rival was set in motion by the 9 March 2018 “handshake” – a political truce between Kenyatta and Odinga that ended the post-2017 electoral standoff (Cheeseman et al., 2019: 220; Kanyinga & Odote, 2019: 238). The handshake birthed the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), a proposed constitutional reform package billed as a cure for Kenya’s winner-takes-all politics. In theory, BBI sought to expand the executive and spread power more equitably, ostensibly to address the grievances that fuel ethnic violence (Building Bridges Initiative, 2019; Omulo, 2023; Onguny, 2020). In practice, however, the BBI process deepened rifts within Jubilee. Kenyatta championed the initiative as part of his legacy, but Deputy President Ruto – “excluded” from the handshake deal – condemned BBI as a self-serving project of the “dynasties.” Ruto argued that in a time of economic hardship, pushing constitutional changes was misplaced and elitist. These critiques resonated in Mt. Kenya region, where many saw BBI as a ploy to benefit the political class. Indeed, a leaked letter by Senate Majority Whip Irungu Kang’ata to Kenyatta in early 2021 warned that BBI was overwhelmingly unpopular in the region.⁵ When the courts ultimately struck down BBI as unconstitutional, Ruto’s camp was quick to claim vindication (Lockwood, 2023: 211). The entire episode left Kenyatta politically bruised in his homeland, reinforcing the narrative that he was out of touch with his base’s priorities.

By 2022, the Jubilee Party had splintered into rival factions. On one side, Kenyatta and his allies (branded *Kieleweke*, or “straighten the record”) remained in Jubilee and aligned with Odinga’s *Azimio la Umoja*. Opposing them was the *Tanga Tanga* faction (Gikuyu slang for “wanderers”), composed of Ruto-allied Members of Parliament (MPs) who had not officially decamped from Jubilee and later coalesced into the UDA. As the presumed GEMA kingpin, Kenyatta was expected to deliver his vote-rich region to Odinga (Hess & Aidoo, 2024: 382). However, this assumption ignored the quiet rebellion in the region building since the handshake. Kenyatta’s rapprochement with Odinga had, in fact, provoked an internal rebellion in Mt. Kenya region years before the 2022 vote. By late 2018, a cohort of Mt. Kenya politicians who felt alienated by Kenyatta’s new alliance began holding clandestine strategy meetings to wrestle Mt. Kenya from the domination of one family (Daily Nation, 2022, August 25) – that is, to wrest political control from the Kenyatta family. According to these insiders, Kenyatta was assuming too much and taking the community for granted. Led by figures like Rigathi Gachagua (then a first-term MP of Mathira [Nyeri County]), Ndindi Nyoro of Kiharu (Muranga County), Alice Wahome of Kandara (Muranga County), Kimani Ichung’wa of Gikuyu (Kiambu County), Moses Kuria of Gatundu South (Kiambu County), and Jayne Kihara of Naivasha (Nakuru County), this group resolved to rally behind Ruto as the region’s next patron (Daily Nation, 2022 August 25). By 2021, “defections” from Jubilee were rampant – even prominent Mt. Kenya figures like Governor Anne Waiguru had crossed over to Ruto’s camp – underscoring the President’s waning grip in his backyard (Daily Nation, 2021, October 26). They framed their

⁵ <https://www.kenyans.co.ke/news/60756-leaked-kangata-uhuru-letter-reveals-trouble-bbi-camp>

cause in moral terms of loyalty and honour: the GEMA community, in their view, could not earn the stigma of abandoning an ally who had stood with them. Consequently, they vowed to stand with Ruto come rain or shine, rather than be seen as a community that uses and dumps its friends (Daily Nation, 2022, August 25).

Kenyatta seemed initially dismissive of the brewing rebellion. He doubled down on direct appeals to the voters over the heads of rebellious MPs. During a visit to Nyeri (at an official function in Othaya), Kenyatta implored the crowd not to hold him to his earlier political pact with Ruto, declaring that "I did not promise to throw my people into a ditch" (Daily Nation, 2022, August 8) and warning them against handing the country over to "thieves" – a barely concealed reference to Ruto and his allies. Instead, he insisted, "the game this time is Raila and Martha" (Daily Nation, 2022, August 8). Kenyatta's use of his native language and colloquial expressions was an attempt to project sincerity and connection. Nevertheless, these eleventh-hour pleas did little to shift local perceptions. Many in the region interpreted Kenyatta's scathing attacks on Ruto as ironic and unconvincing, given Ruto had been his closest lieutenant for years. Moreover, Ruto adeptly flipped the script: portraying Kenyatta and Odinga as the privileged and deceitful "dynastic" elite, while he cast himself as the champion of the betrayed and downtrodden (Lockwood, 2023: 210). In effect, what was intended as Kenyatta's passionate pitch for Odinga ended up amplifying Ruto's counter-narrative.

Kenyatta's final campaign push in Mt. Kenya culminated with a flurry of development projects and political gestures in the run-up to the vote (Sunday Nation 2022, July 31). He toured its counties, inaugurating roads, hospitals, and other initiatives, and even convened closed-door forums with local opinion leaders in an attempt to secure last-minute support for Odinga. These moves, however, came across as too little, too late. Decades of patronage politics have shown that such eleventh-hour development largesse rarely overrides entrenched political sentiment (Stokes et al., 2013). Indeed, Ruto's team seized on Kenyatta's activism as evidence that the President was unwilling to relinquish power – accusing him of attempting to extend his rule by proxy through Odinga. On the campaign trail, Ruto repeatedly claimed that "the system" (i.e. the state machinery under Kenyatta) was lined up behind Odinga to perpetuate the Kenyatta-Odinga grip on power. This charge reinforced his populist "hustler vs. dynasty" theme, awakening voters who were already disillusioned by Kenyatta's perceived sense of entitlement (Lockwood, 2023). In contrast, Odinga himself made relatively few visits to Central Kenya (Daily Nation, 2022, July 6), effectively outsourcing the region's campaign to his running mate, Martha Karua. Karua – a veteran Gikuyu politician with reformist credentials – campaigned intensively across the region on Odinga's behalf. Her lone-warrior effort was an explicit acknowledgement by *Azimio* that Odinga faced a trust deficit in Central Kenya and needed a native figurehead to vouch for him. Even Karua's formidable reputation as an incorruptible "Iron Lady" could not overcome the headwinds Odinga faced. The vast majority of GEMA voters ignored the entreaties of their native son (Uhuru) and daughter (Karua) to "return the favour" to Odinga. Even in Gatundu – Kenyatta's own village – nothing had changed in Odinga's favour by election day (The East African, 2022, August 10). In sum, by the close of the campaign, it was evident that Mt. Kenya's political centre of gravity had shifted: Kenyatta's influence had dramatically ebbed, and a popular revolt against his "project" (Odinga) was in full swing.

It is worth noting the paradox in this turn of events. Ruto's emergence as Mt. Kenya's preferred choice in 2022 was historically extraordinary. Ruto is a Kalenjin from the Rift Valley, an ethnic group that was hostile to the Gikuyu during the 2007/2008 post-election violence, yet he secured the backing of a region that had long voted as a bloc for its own. How did this come to be? Part of the answer lies in Ruto's own political journey and outreach. Ruto had been

building bridges to the Mt. Kenya region for over a decade. As early as the mid-2000s, he cultivated allies in Mt. Kenya and positioned himself as a cross-ethnic kingmaker. After the 2005 constitutional referendum – in which Ruto sided with Odinga against Kibaki and emerged as a hero to the “No” camp – Ruto increasingly portrayed himself as a nationalist willing to partner with any community that welcomed him. By 2006, he had successfully rallied a significant faction of the Kalenjin behind him and even earned a ceremonial anointment as a Kalenjin elder (The Standard 2006, June 4), underscoring his rising stature (Lynch, 2014: 96). In subsequent years, Ruto leveraged his alliance with Uhuru Kenyatta (forged in the 2013 Jubilee Coalition) to deepen his networks in Mt. Kenya region. He became a fixture at Mt. Kenya events – harambees (fundraisers), church functions, and local development tours – often contributing generously and endearing himself to grassroots leaders (Daily Nation, 2018, July 22; Sunday Nation 2019, October 6; Opalo, 2022). This long game meant that when the Kenyatta-Odinga pact alienated many in Central, Ruto was well-positioned as the alternative patron. Coupled with a savvy populist message and the organisational vehicle of UDA, Ruto was able to capitalise fully on Kenyatta’s moment of vulnerability.

Also central to the GEMA voters was their interpretation of Kenyatta’s perceived breach of a political promise. In 2013, Kenyatta and Ruto had agreed to a power-sharing deal often summarized by the phrase “*yangu kumi, ya William kumi*”. This gentleman’s agreement implied that after Kenyatta’s two terms, he would back Ruto for the presidency. The handshake with Odinga – and Kenyatta’s subsequent endorsement of Odinga – appeared to GEMA voters as a reneging on this pledge. As scholars have observed (e.g. Lynch, 2014; Mueller, 2014a, 2014b), Kenyan politics is rife with such betrayals; alliances are marriages of convenience and often rest on shaky foundations. Still, the Mt. Kenya voters perceived Kenyatta’s about-face as a personal betrayal of Ruto, and by extension, of their 2013–2017 alliance. Ruto’s opponents tried to counter this narrative by highlighting corruption allegations against him and suggesting Kenyatta owed no debt to a deputy who had “undermined” him (Chome & Willis, 2024). These arguments gained little traction among voters. By 2022, loyalty and betrayal – rather than policy – became the prism through which many GEMA voters viewed their choices. To punish perceived betrayal and reward loyalty, they swung emphatically behind Ruto. In this way, the election in Mt. Kenya became a referendum not just on development or ethnicity, but on Kenyatta’s fidelity to his 2013 pact.

5. Mt. Kenya Anti-Ethnic Voting Behaviour: Evidence of a Revolt

The 2022 election results starkly confirmed Kenyatta’s inability to direct his home region’s vote. Out of the eight core GEMA-dominated counties of Mt. Kenya region, William Ruto won the presidential tally by overwhelming margins. In five of these counties – Kiambu, Murang’a, Nyeri, Kirinyaga, and Tharaka-Nithi – Ruto secured over 80% of the valid votes, and in the other three (Embu, Meru, and Nyandarua) he exceeded 70% (Cheeseman et al., 2024; IEBC, 2022). Even in Nakuru and Laikipia – two ethnically mixed counties with large Gikuyu populations – Ruto won with about 66% and 70% of the vote (Daily Nation, 2022, August 22; IEBC, 2022), respectively, despite the presence of significant non-GEMA voters. In short, the vast majority of GEMA voters rejected Kenyatta’s plea to support Odinga and instead chose Ruto.

Down-ballot results in the Mt. Kenya region further underscore this anti-establishment wave. UDA and its small affiliate parties achieved near-total domination of local contests. UDA candidates won 9 out of 10 governorships in Mt. Kenya’s counties (all except Meru), 9 out of 10 Senate seats, and swept all but a handful of the 58 constituency parliamentary seats in GEMA areas (IEBC, 2022). Even before the conclusion of the presidential petition, the few non-UDA winners quickly gravitated toward Ruto. For example, Meru’s independent governor-elect,

Kawira Mwangaza, joined Ruto's Kenya Kwanza coalition shortly after the election, as did minor-party members of National Assembly who had prevailed against UDA in a few constituencies (Daily Nation 2022, August 21) Mt. Kenya voters updated their calculus of patronage, which saw Ruto as the likely next president, represented a more credible source of future clientelist rewards. In Kenya's neo-patrimonial context, aligning early with the anticipated winner is often a pragmatic choice for communities seeking access to state resources (Posner, 2005).

The former ruling party, Jubilee, by contrast, was decimated. It secured only a scattering of parliamentary seats in the region, often due to incumbents' personal vote caches rather than party popularity. Iconic Jubilee stalwarts and Kenyatta allies – including nearly all *Azimio*-allied incumbents in Central Kenya – were ejected by voters. High-profile figures such as Jeremiah Kioni (Ndaragua MP), Ndiritu Muriithi (Laikipia Governor), Francis Kimemia (Nyandarua Governor), Amos Kimunya (Kipipiri MP), Kanini Kega (Kieni MP) and Ngunjiri Wambugu (MNA, Nyeri Town) all lost to UDA newcomers. Even in Kiambu and Nakuru, where Jubilee had been strong, Kenyatta's close associates like James Nyoro (Kiambu Governor) and Lee Kinyanjui (Nakuru Governor) fell to the UDA wave (IEBC, 2022). In many cases, long-time regional power brokers were unseated by younger or lesser-known opponents running under Ruto's banner – a clear sign that party label and the "hustler" tide mattered more than personal clout. The extent of Jubilee's collapse in its erstwhile stronghold surprised many. What had been the ruling party's machinery in 2017 had, by 2022, been reduced to a shadow of itself in Mt. Kenya.

The manner in which Martha Karua's campaign operated in the region provides further evidence of how thoroughly GEMA voters disregarded Kenyatta's entreaties. Karua threw herself into the task of delivering Central Kenya for Odinga – holding rallies in every county, projecting the message that as a native daughter, she could vouch for "Baba" (Odinga) and protect the region's interests in an Odinga-led government (Citizen TV Kenya, 2022). Yet, the fact that Karua campaigned largely on her own in Mt. Kenya (with Odinga making only sporadic appearances) spoke volumes. It was a tacit admission by the *Azimio* camp that Odinga himself was not welcome or trusted in the Central Kenya (and by extension Mt. Kenya Region), necessitating a Gikuyu surrogate to take charge of the vote hunt there (Citizen TV Kenya, 2022). Initial media optimism that Karua's nomination would galvanise the region proved misplaced. Her solo campaign, despite drawing curious crowds, did not substantially translate into votes to erode Ruto's support. If anything, Karua's efforts highlighted the entrenched scepticism toward Odinga. Many GEMA voters perceived Karua – long respected as an independent-minded reformer – as compromised by her alliance with Odinga and Kenyatta. When the votes were counted, it was evident that Karua's star power had not moved the needle. She and Kenyatta failed to carry even their own polling stations for Odinga (The East African, 2022, August 10; Opalo, 2022), a symbolic embarrassment that underscored the depth of Odinga's rejection in the Mt. Kenya region. In sum, hard voting data and the fate of down-ballot races all confirm that Mt. Kenya overwhelmingly spurned Uhuru Kenyatta's 2022 political project.

Those headwinds against Odinga in Mt. Kenya were fueled by a potent blend of narratives and grievances. Chief among them was Ruto's "Hustler versus Dynasty" populism (Lockwood, 2023; Opalo, 2022). Ruto successfully painted Odinga – and by extension Kenyatta – as part of an entrenched elite that had long neglected ordinary Kenyans. He reminded voters of Kenyatta's privileged pedigree as the son of the country's first president and cast Odinga as another silver-spoon politician from a storied dynasty. In stark contrast, Ruto emphasised his own humble origins as the son of peasants and a self-made businessman. Ruto and his running mate Rigathi Gachagua (a native son of Nyeri) styled themselves as the champions of the

“common person” – or “hustlers” who toil daily for their bread. This class-based narrative resonated well with voters in the region, which, despite being relatively prosperous on average, had seen rising economic discontent in recent years. During Kenyatta’s second term, the Mt. Kenya region’s small traders and farmers were hit by a combination of COVID-19 economic shocks, increased taxation, and perceptions of state capture by a few wealthy families (The Elephant, 2018, July 7; Opalo, 2022). Ruto shrewdly tapped into these frustrations. He promised voters to prioritise “uplifting the hustler” through bottom-up economic policies, while deriding Kenyatta’s administration’s obsession with projects like BBI or infrastructural ventures that did not directly improve livelihoods. Every time Kenyatta campaigned for Odinga by touting his infrastructure legacy, Ruto would counter with tales of market women in Gikomba or boda-boda operators struggling to make ends meet. This narrative convergence of economic justice and anti-elitism helped neutralise the ethnic card in Mt. Kenya. It reframed the 2022 election as not Gikuyu vs. Kalenjin (as might have been expected), but “dynasties vs. hustlers” – a fight for the soul of the nation between oppressive old elites and the industrious underclass. Many GEMA voters came to view voting for Ruto not as a betrayal of their ethnic loyalty, but as a justified revolt against an unresponsive patron. In their eyes, rejecting Kenyatta’s chosen heir was a way to “punish” Uhuru Kenyatta for his perceived betrayal and poor economic performance.

The above concerns were compounded by the issue of state incumbency and propaganda. Kenyatta’s open partisanship – including the involvement of state officials from the region in campaigning for Odinga – actually reinforced Ruto’s narrative. When several sitting Cabinet Secretaries from Mt. Kenya (such as Joe Mucheru [Information Communication and Technology (ICT)], Peter Munya [Agriculture], and James Macharia [Roads and Transport]) openly drummed up support for Odinga, Ruto seized on it as proof that a self-serving “system” was ganging up to thwart the will of the people (Cheeseman et al., 2024). This further energised the voters against anti-establishment sentiment. Ultimately, the popular mood in the Mt. Kenya region had shifted to defiance, and the 2022 election became the vehicle through which Mt. Kenya voters could assert their agency from their erstwhile patron, thereby grabbing UDA’s wheelbarrow symbol with both hands.

6. Beyond GEMA: Comparative Voting Patterns in Other Regions

While the focus is on the GEMA communities of Mt. Kenya, it is important to ask whether the 2022 voting trends were unique to this region or part of a wider national pattern. A brief comparison with other major ethnic blocs in Kenya reveals a mixed picture. In Raila Odinga’s native Luo Nyanza stronghold, ethnic voting remained as robust as ever. Luo voters overwhelmingly supported Odinga in 2022, delivering him on average between 85–95% of the presidential vote in Luo-dominated counties of Siaya, Kisumu, Homabay and Migori – a level of homogeneity consistent with past elections (Cheeseman et al., 2024; Opalo, 2022). In the Kalenjin-majority Rift Valley, the pattern was similarly traditional. Ruto, as the Kalenjin ethnic flagbearer, received upwards of 80% of votes in core Kalenjin counties like Baringo, Elgeyo-Marakwet, Kericho and Nandi, closely mirroring the bloc voting that characterised prior contests (Cheeseman et al., 2024; Opalo, 2022). In Luhya communities of Western Kenya, ethnic solidarity was somewhat split, as the presence of prominent Luhya leaders in both camps divided the vote (Cheeseman et al., 2024; Opalo, 2022). But broadly, most regions outside Mt. Kenya continued to exhibit the familiar logic of ethnic headcounts (Arriola et al., 2017; Bratton et al., 2011; Chandra, 2004; Hoffman & Long, 2013; Horowitz, 1985; Horowitz, 2022; Posner, 2005).

What made Mt. Kenya different in the 2022 elections was the breaking of this norm in the absence of a co-ethnic candidate. Historically, when a Gikuyu or allied GEMA candidate was

on the ballot, the region voted almost monolithically for their “own.” 2022 presented a rare scenario with no viable Gikuyu presidential contender (for the first time since 1992)⁶, placing the community in an unusual position of choosing between “outsiders.” Rather than coalesce around Odinga – whom their kingpin endorsed – the GEMA electorate charted an independent course, embracing Ruto. This contrasts with, say, the Kamba of Eastern Province: in 2022, most Kamba voters followed their ethnic leader, Kalonzo Musyoka, in backing Odinga. Similarly, Kisii voters gravitated significantly (though not entirely) to instructions of their community big-man, Interior Cabinet Secretary Fred Matiang’i, to support Odinga. Mt. Kenya’s electorate, by rejecting its patron’s plea, thus stands out as an outlier case of ethnic de-alignment. Not since 2002 – when many Gikuyu defied President Moi’s plea to support Uhuru Kenyatta – had the region so conspicuously broken ranks with an incumbent authority figure. Unlike in 2002, the 2022 incumbent authority hailed from the region. The implication is that the salience of ethnic cues, at least in this one instance, was superseded by the interpretation of other factors (economic interests, class appeals, and perceptions of performance). However, we must be cautious in generalising. In Kenya’s other regions, the 2022 voting patterns largely reaffirmed that ethnicity remains a powerful mobilizer. The Luo and Kalenjin examples underscore that where a community has a viable presidential contender, ethnic bloc voting persists. Mt. Kenya’s case was distinctive because of the particular confluence of a lame-duck patron, economic disillusionment, and a potent counter-narrative offered by Ruto. It remains to be seen whether this realignment in Mt. Kenya heralds a lasting shift in Kenyan politics.

7. Implications and Conclusion

This article set out to assess whether the 2022 Kenyan general election outcome in the Mt. Kenya region signalled the fragility of ethnic bloc voting. The evidence suggests a more nuanced conclusion. Rather than marking the disappearance of ethnicity, the 2022 election revealed a reconfiguration of how voters relate to ethnic identity, patronage, and elite authority. In the Gikuyu-Embu-Meru (GEMA) counties, voters demonstrated an unprecedented willingness to exercise agency by defying the preferences of their presumed ethnic patron, President Kenyatta. This rejection reflected conscious voter judgment, rooted in economic grievances, dissatisfaction with incumbent performance, and rejection of perceived elite imposition. The Mt. Kenya outcome, therefore, represents a clear departure from the classic ethnic bloc voting model described by Horowitz (1985), in which communities reliably align behind co-ethnic elites as a matter of political routine, popularly referred to as ethnic census. In 2022, ethnicity did not disappear, but it ceased to function as an automatic voting directive. Instead, voters selectively subordinated ethnic loyalty to issue-based and performance-based considerations, particularly those articulated through the “hustler versus dynasty” populist frame. This suggests that under certain conditions, Kenyan voters can recalibrate their political allegiance to prioritise material interests and accountability over ethnic solidarity. At the same time, comparative evidence from other regions cautions against sweeping generalisations. While voters in Mt. Kenya disrupted established ethnic expectations, ethnic bloc voting remained largely intact in other regions. This fragility and continuity of ethnic voting points to a transitional political moment in which ethnic identity remains salient but is increasingly contested by alternative cleavages, including class, performance, and narratives of exclusion.

Crucially, the Mt. Kenya case also underscores the interaction between elite fragmentation and voter agency. The collapse of the Kenyatta-Ruto alliance and the fragmentation of local elite consensus created an opening that voters actively exploited.

⁶ Mr. David Mwaure of Agano Party from the Gikuyu Community did not attract voters.

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Rather than passively following new elite cues, voters interpreted elite conflict through their own lived experiences and grievances. Ruto's success lay not simply in mobilising ethnicity or patronage, but in reframing elite rupture as a moral and economic struggle, thereby inviting voters to reinterpret clientelist expectations and redefine political legitimacy.

The implications are twofold. On one hand, the 2022 election demonstrates that Kenyan politics can, under certain conditions, shift toward more fluid and issue-responsive alignments. Voters demonstrated the capacity to punish incumbents, to override ethnic appeals, and to reward narratives that resonated with their socioeconomic realities. On the other hand, the persistence of ethnic balancing in coalition formation—including ethnically calibrated running mates in both major coalitions—signals that elite reliance on ethnic arithmetic remains deeply entrenched.

Looking ahead, the 2027 election will test whether the Mt. Kenya experience was a context-specific deviation or an early indicator of broader change. Much will depend on whether economic grievances remain salient, whether populist narratives continue to resonate, and whether new or reconfigured ethnic patrons succeed in reasserting control. What is clear, however, is that traditional ethnic voting blocs can no longer be treated as politically inert or indefinitely loyal. The electoral outcome in the Mt. Kenya region provides analytical space to rethink ethnic voting in Kenya, not as given, but as a contextual outcome catalysed by voter agency. It demonstrates that even within traditionally cohesive ethnic groups, voters may have the agency to reconstruct political identity, reconfigure patronage, and realign political allegiance. In doing so, the 2022 election widened civic space, offering the political class an avenue to rethink their strategies, while simultaneously reaffirming voters' non-passive role in Kenya's evolving political landscape.

Acknowledgments

The preliminary draft of this paper was presented at the 3rd Tsinghua Area Studies Forum, Institute for International and Area Studies at Tsinghua University in Beijing, China, on 5th July 2023. I acknowledge the reviewers' comments, which substantially strengthened the article. I also disclose the use of grammar-checking software and OpenAI-based assistance, specifically to support rephrasing and editorial refinement to improve clarity and coherence.

Funding

No funding was received for this work.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares neither competing financial interests nor personal relationships which could influence the production of this work.

Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate

No ethical approval requirement applicable to this study.

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