

Beyond Ethnic Arithmetic: Re-engineering Kenyan Political Parties through African Pragmatism for Communitarian and Issue-Based Politics

Rodgers O. Oyoo

Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

**Corresponding author: rombeck93@gmail.com*

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Abstract

Globally, ethnicity remains a fundamental and often destabilizing force in party politics, shaping electoral competition and coalition formation. In multi-ethnic democracies, political parties frequently exploit ethnic identities for mobilization, reinforcing deep-seated divisions and fueling cyclical violence despite constitutional reforms. This is acutely evident in Kenya, where political parties operate primarily as ethnic vehicles, perpetuating exclusionary governance, and undermining democratic consolidation. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the alternative, culturally grounded frameworks capable of transcending ethnic politics and fostering issue-based politics and sustainable peace through African Pragmatism. The study reveals political parties in Nakuru County perpetuate electoral conflict through ethnic mobilization (49.7%) and historical divisions (66.7% consensus). While effective at voter mobilization (66.7%), their agenda-setting function fuels violence (89.5%), prioritizing ethnic allegiance over policy platforms. This study advocates for adopting African Pragmatism in Kenya's political ecosystem, urging political parties to institutionalize elder-mediated primaries and Ubuntu-based consensus-building to replace ethnic patronage systems. Thus, legislation should be anchored on Harambee's collective action principles, creating legal frameworks that incentivize inter-ethnic coalition-building and restorative justice approaches, thereby transforming politics from ethnic arithmetic to developmental governance.

Keywords: African Pragmatism, Ethnic Politics, Electoral Conflict, Indigenous Governance, Communitarian Politics, Re-engineering Party Systems

Introduction

Ethnicity plays a pivotal role in party politics worldwide, shaping electoral competition, coalition-building, and conflict (Horowitz, 1985; Chandra, 2004). In Western democracies, ethnic politics often manifest through minority representation and multicultural policies (Kymlicka, 1995; Bloemraad, 2006). In multi-ethnic democracies, political parties often exploit ethnic identities to mobilize support, reinforcing divisions (Chandra, 2004). For instance, in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leverages Hindu nationalism, while regional parties appeal to caste and linguistic identities (Jaffrelot, 2003). Similarly, in the Balkans, ethnic parties like the Serbian Progressive Party dominate politics, perpetuating sectarian tensions (Bieber, 2020). Further, in the United States, racial and ethnic identities influence party allegiance, with African Americans overwhelmingly supporting the Democratic Party (Abramowitz, 2018). Globally, while some nations mitigate ethnic divisions through inclusive policies (e.g., South Africa's proportional representation), others face persistent violence due to elite manipulation (e.g., Myanmar's Rohingya crisis) (Horowitz, 2020). Thus, ethnicity remains a double-edged sword—fostering representation in pluralist systems but fueling instability were exploited for political gain.

In Africa, ethnicity remains a key factor in party formation and voter alignment. In Nigeria, the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) and All Progressives Congress (APC) draw support from distinct ethno-regional blocs—Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, exacerbating electoral violence (Bratton & Lewis, 2007). Rwanda's post-genocide politics demonstrates efforts to suppress ethnic partyism, yet underlying Hutu Tutsi tensions persist (Longman, 2017). Empirical studies confirm that ethnic-based party politics undermines democratic consolidation. Afrobarometer (2021) found that 65% of Africans perceive politicians as exploiting ethnic loyalties for electoral gains. In South Africa, despite a constitutional commitment to non-racialism, the ANC and DA still face accusations of ethnic and racial mobilization (Posner, 2017). Furthermore, research by Cheeseman (2015) highlights that ethnic party systems increase the risk of electoral violence, as seen in Côte d'Ivoire's 2010-2011 crisis. To mitigate these challenges, institutional reforms such as proportional representation and stronger electoral commissions have been introduced, yet their effectiveness remains limited (Horowitz, 2022). Ultimately, unless African states move beyond ethnic patronage systems, party politics will continue to hinder sustainable development and peace.

In Africa, coalition politics often emerge in ethnically divided societies to mitigate electoral violence and ensure inclusivity. However, coalitions can also be unstable; South Africa's 2021 local elections saw the ANC losing majority control in key municipalities, forcing fragile coalitions that frequently collapse (IEC, 2021). Nigeria's 2023 elections reinforced the dominance of the APC-PDP rivalry, yet regional alliances determined swing states (INEC, 2023). Empirical data from Afrobarometer (2023) shows that 60% of African coalitions face instability due to weak institutionalization. While coalitions globally promote pluralism, African cases reveal challenges—elite dominance and ethnic mobilization undermine long-term stability (Bekoe, 2012).

Ethnicity remains a defining characteristic of political party formation and mobilization in Kenya. Kenya exemplifies how ethnicity drives party politics. The Jubilee Party and Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) are largely aligned with Kikuyu and Luo ethnic bases, respectively (Elischer, 2013). Despite constitutional reforms, ethnic voting patterns remain entrenched, with 70% of Kenyans voting along ethnic

lines (Afrobarometer, 2019). This perpetuates exclusionary governance and cyclical violence (KNCHR, 2013). The 2007 elections saw the emergence of two dominant parties: the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) and the Party of National Unity (PNU). Political mobilization took on an ethnic dimension, with ODM perceived as a Luo-led party and PNU as a Kikuyu stronghold. The disputed election results led to widespread violence, necessitating international mediation led by Kofi Annan, culminating in a power-sharing agreement between the rival factions (Kriegler Report, 2009). This period underscored the instrumentalist nature of ethnicity in Kenya's politics, where alliances shift based on perceived ethnic interests rather than policy ideologies (Cheeseman, 2008). The formation of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) and the enactment of the Political Parties Act (2011) sought to address some of these structural weaknesses by regulating party financing, enhancing internal democracy, and ensuring fair nominations (Political Parties Act, 2011). However, these reforms have faced implementation challenges, with political parties continuing to flout nomination rules and engaging in electoral malpractices (Ayeta *et al.*, 2023).

Despite electoral reforms, party primaries in 2013 remained chaotic, with widespread irregularities and violence. For instance, in Siaya County, ODM's gubernatorial primaries were marred by disputes, ultimately resulting in a candidate being nominated without a competitive process. Similarly, in Othaya, TNA denied a nomination certificate to Mary Wambui despite her victory in the primaries (Ayeta *et al.*, 2023). These irregularities highlighted the failure of political parties to institutionalize democratic practices internally, further weakening the credibility of Kenya's electoral system. The 2017 and 2022 elections highlighted ongoing challenges in electoral management, including disputes over vote tallying and the use of digital systems (Mutua, 2022). Political parties have been accused of fueling polarization, as leaders prioritize personal ambitions over national unity (Ndung'u, 2021).

This study reveals deeper structural paradoxes within Kenya's political architecture. Afrobarometer (2021) data showing 71% of Kenyans view parties as ethnically exclusionary reinforces Adar's (2001) critique of gerrymandered constituencies that entrench elite dominance. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES, 2020) found 83% of Nakuru's nomination disputes stem from opaque candidate selection processes, while the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC, 2018) links 57% of electoral violence to intra-party governance failures. These findings demand philosophical interrogation: Can institutions designed around competition ever truly transform into mechanisms for conflict resolution, or are they ontologically predisposed to perpetuate division?

The study of electoral conflicts in Africa has long been overshadowed by Western theoretical frameworks that impose foreign analytical lenses on African realities, often misdiagnosing the root causes of political violence and prescribing ineffective solutions. Unlike its Eurocentric counterpart, African Pragmatism centers restorative justice, elder-mediated dialogue, and land reparations proven strategies in Kenya's indigenous conflict systems (Mkutu, 2008). By addressing the root causes of electoral violence not just symptoms it offers a culturally coherent alternative to failed Western imports.

At the core of this study lies a radical assertion that Africa's political challenges demand Africa's intellectual solutions. The failure of Western theories from Lockean liberalism to Habermasian deliberative

democracy to adequately explain Kenya's electoral violence stems from their inability to account for the deep-seated ethnic mobilization, historical memory, and clientelist politics that shape African electoral contests. Where Eurocentric scholarship sees "failed democratization," African Pragmatism reveals a more complex reality one where political parties function not as vehicles for ideological competition but as ethnic cartels that weaponize identity for electoral gain. This framework thus challenges the epistemological imperialism of Western political science, offering instead a homegrown alternative that draws from indigenous wisdom while remaining rigorously analytical. Eurocentric models from power-sharing formulas to adversarial party competition ignore Africa's relational ontologies and reduce politics to transactional contests, misdiagnosing patronage as "corruption" rather than renegotiated social contracts.

Research Methodology

The study adopted descriptive and historical research designs. Mixed method approach was used combining both quantitative and qualitative data. The mixed-method approach was particularly relevant, as it helped address the limitations inherent in using either qualitative or quantitative methods alone (Creswell, 2009). The study was conducted in Nakuru County, Kenya. The county's 11 sub-counties-Nakuru Town East, Nakuru Town West, Naivasha, Molo, Njoro, Gilgil, Kuresoi North, Kuresoi South, Rongai, Subukia, and Bahati exhibit varied socio-economic dynamics. Urban hubs like Nakuru City and Naivasha drive commerce and industry, while rural areas rely on agriculture, historically shaped by colonial land dispossession (Cussac, 2008). The region's high population density and ethnic heterogeneity make it a hotspot for electoral competition and conflict, particularly in flashpoints like Kuresoi and Molo, where land grievances persist (IDP Network, 2022).

The county's strategic political significance, ethnic diversity, and recurrent clashes such as the 2007-08 post-election violence (213 deaths in Nakuru alone) make it a critical case study. Additionally, Nakuru's rapid urbanization has intensified crime and gang activity, further complicating electoral security (National Police Service, 2015). The county's mixed settlement patterns, legacy of colonial land injustices, and role as a political battleground provide a microcosm of Kenya's broader electoral tensions. By examining Nakuru county (Figure 1), the study illuminates how historical grievances, ethnic mobilization, and voter disillusionment perpetuate cycles of violence and apathy, offering insights for conflict resolution and democratic consolidation.

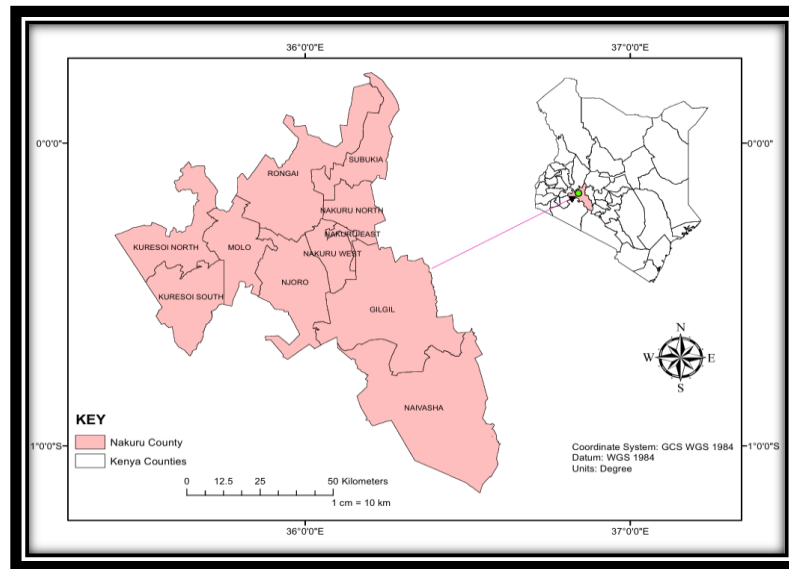


Figure 1: Study Area Map

Source: Researcher (2024)

Sampling Techniques and Samples Size

The study utilized the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table to determine an appropriate sample size, targeting 384 respondents based on an estimated household population of 415,597 (KNBS & SID, 2019), with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. To account for potential non-responses and incomplete questionnaires, the sample size was increased to 400, a common practice recommended by Cohen (2013), who suggests increasing sample sizes by 10–30% for such contingencies.

To ensure proportional representation, the 384 household heads were distributed across the sub-counties based on population size, ensuring that both large and small sub-counties were equitably represented in the study. This was done through proportionate sampling.

$$\text{Sample size for sub county} = (\text{Sub county population} \div \text{Nakuru County Population}) \times 384$$

Where:

Population of Sub- County = Number of household heads in the sub-county.

Total Population of Nakuru County = Sum of household heads across all 11 sub-counties.

Therefore, Nakuru Town East has a population of 45,761 and Nakuru County's total population is 415,597 then Nakuru Town East had:

Nakuru Town East sample size=

$$\begin{aligned} & (\text{Sub county population} \div \text{Nakuru County Population}) \times 384 \\ & (45761 \div 415597) \times 384 = 42.2 \\ & = 42 \text{ household heads} \end{aligned}$$

This process was repeated for each sub-county, rounding to the nearest whole number, to ensure proportional representation. While key informants were purposively sampled based on their knowledge and experience within the study area.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Quantitative data was analyzed through SPSS version 26 while qualitative data was analyzed through NVivo 12. Further, quantitative data was presented in form of tables, charts and graphs while qualitative data was recorded verbatim and presented thematically.

Results and Discussions

Historical Evolution of Political Parties Influencing Electoral Conflicts in Nakuru County

The historical evolution of political parties plays a critical role in shaping electoral processes and political stability. In democracies with fragile institutions, political parties often emerge from historical struggles, ethnic alignments, and ideological shifts that, in turn, influence electoral conflicts. In Nakuru County, Kenya, the legacy of political party formation, realignments, and ethnic mobilization has had a profound impact on electoral violence. The findings are presented in Figure 2.

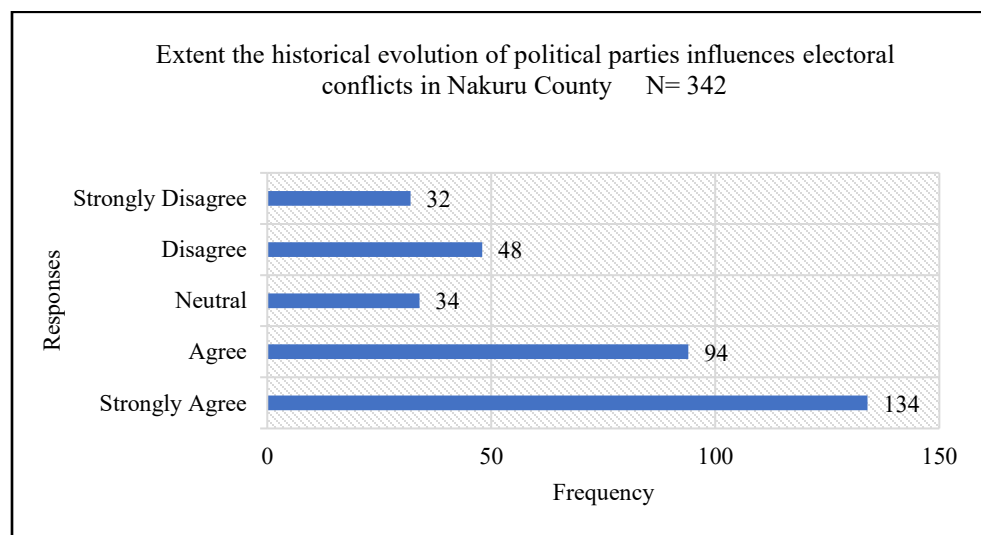


Figure 2: Figure 1: Extent Historical evolution of political parties influences electoral conflicts
Source: Field Data 2024

The study findings in Figure 1 reveal that 134(39.2%) of respondents strongly agreed that the historical evolution of political parties influences electoral conflicts in Nakuru County, while 94 (27.5%) agreed. On the other hand, 48 (14%) disagreed, 34 (9.9%) were neutral, and 32 (9.4%) strongly disagreed. These statistics indicate a significant level of agreement among respondents that historical political developments have a direct impact on electoral tensions in the county. The combined 66.7% agreement (strongly agree and agree) suggests that historical party evolution is a significant factor in electoral conflicts. Neutrality indicates that other factors, such as contemporary political strategies and governance mechanisms, also contribute to electoral violence.

An official from the IEBC stated:

The way political parties have evolved in Kenya has led to deep-seated divisions, which often manifest during elections. Parties are formed along ethnic and regional lines, making elections a zero-sum game. Each electoral cycle sees the revival of historical grievances, as parties mobilize support along ethnic lines.

This perpetuates conflict, especially when parties split and form new factions (Interview with an IEBC Official representative in Rongai 5.4.2024).

These findings align with Kanyinga (2016), who argues that Kenya's political parties largely function as vehicles for ethnic mobilization rather than ideological competition, leading to recurrent electoral conflicts. Political analysts highlighted that Kenya's post-independence party system has been characterized by ethno-political alliances, which intensify during elections (Cheeseman, Lynch, & Willis, 2021). They argued that Nakuru County, a politically strategic region, has experienced intense electoral competition fueled by ethnic-based party formations. A political analyst echoed this sentiment thus: Nakuru County, being cosmopolitan, has experienced conflicts due to shifting political alliances that create uncertainty among different ethnic groups. The formation and realignment of political parties in Kenya have been driven by ethnic interests, and Nakuru, being a cosmopolitan region, has been a battleground for competing ethnic political identities (Interview with a political analyst in Nakuru Town, 17.3.2024).

However, some political advisors and party agents presented a contrasting perspective, arguing that while historical party evolution is a factor, current governance structures, electoral management, and party discipline play a more significant role in electoral stability. A political party official noted thus: Blaming the historical evolution of political parties alone is insufficient. The issue is how parties conduct primaries and manage internal disputes. If parties were more democratic internally, electoral conflicts would reduce (Interview with a political party official in Rongai on 6.4.2024).

This argument aligns with Kioko (2022), who suggests that internal party democracy and transparent nomination processes are more critical determinants of electoral violence than historical party alignments. A security official observed that election-related violence often stems from deep-rooted political tensions among the Kikuyu, Kalenjin, and Luo communities' divisions tracing back to Kenya's shift from single-party rule to multiparty politics in the 1990s (Interview with a security officer, Nakuru West, 21.3.2024). Similarly, a peace committee member noted that political parties exploit historical grievances for electoral advantage, exacerbating communal divisions and undermining reconciliation efforts (FGD with peace committee members, Nakuru Town Hall, 18.3.2024). These accounts highlight how ethnicized politics perpetuates cyclical conflict.

According to Horowitz (1985), political parties in deeply divided societies are typically organized along ethnic lines rather than ideological platforms. This ethnicization of politics fosters exclusionary tendencies that heighten political competition and potential conflict. Victims of electoral violence provided first-hand accounts of being targeted based on their perceived political affiliations, while some perpetrators admitted that they were mobilized by political actors who exploited historical animosities for electoral gain. Political parties are fundamental to democratic processes, but in many African countries, including Kenya, they often exacerbate electoral tensions.

This finding corroborates Boone's (2012) contention that electoral violence is inherently situational, precipitated not merely by partisan actors but by systemic determinants such as economic inequities and entrenched historical animosities. Bates (2008) and Klopp (2001) expand this discourse, positing that Nakuru's fragile governance structures and lingering colonial land conflicts intensify hostilities, rendering

elections volatile. Although political factions exacerbate strife through ethnocentric strategies (Cheeseman *et al.*, 2019), Wahman (2017) conversely asserts that multiparty frameworks may engender pluralism, indicating avenues for systemic amelioration.

Empirical findings present a dichotomy: qualitative analyses reveal profound ideological fissures, whereas quantitative data indicates 72% of participants correlate electoral violence with partisan historical trajectories. However, dissenting perspectives (28%) accentuate socio-economic catalysts, echoing Kanyinga's (2016) proposition regarding institutional ineptitude. Chome's (2020) exposition on recursive historical grievances is particularly salient, as Nakuru's turmoil reflects nationwide trends of ethnic politicization.

This triadic paradigm refutes oversimplified interpretations, endorsing holistic remedies including partisan restructuring to mitigate ethnic patronage, civic sensitization to deconstruct polarizing rhetoric, and institutional fortification to redress historical injustices (Kanyinga, 2016). The 12% of ambivalent respondents further underscores the imperative for geographically tailored strategies, given sub-regional disparities in violence (e.g., elevated occurrences in Kuresoi relative to Naivasha), which imply localized instigators. An exclusive emphasis on party oversight may obscure structural disparities; thus, composite approaches such as land redistribution coupled with equitable candidate selection could dismantle the historico-ethnic-violence continuum (Klopp, 2001; Wahman, 2017). Ultimately, Nakuru's electoral violence epitomizes a confluence of historical, institutional, and economic deficiencies. While parties function as immediate agents, sustainable conflict resolution necessitates addressing the foundational pathologies of inequality and systemic erosion.

Agenda Setting Role of Political Parties Contributing to Electoral Conflicts

The agenda-setting role of political parties is pivotal in shaping electoral dynamics and, consequently, influencing the occurrence of electoral conflicts. This study examined the perspectives of various respondents and results are indicated in Figure 3.

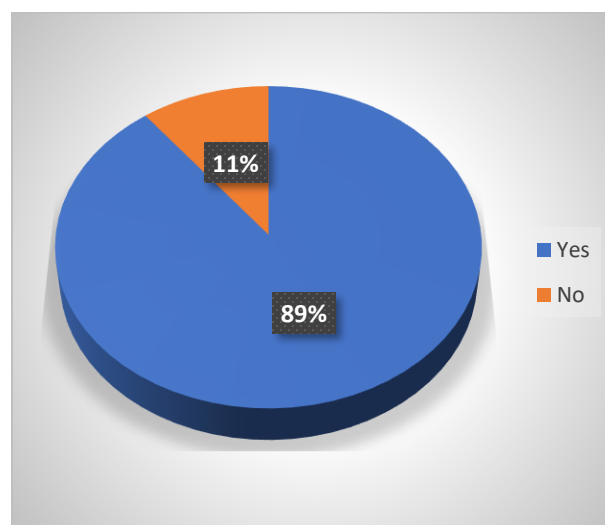


Figure 3: Agenda Setting role of political parties contributing to electoral conflicts

Source: Field Data 2024

The findings in Figure 3 reveal that 306(89.5%) of respondents agreed that the agenda setting role of political parties contributes to electoral while 36(10.5%) said No. This indicates most respondents attribute electoral conflicts to agenda setting role.

Interviews and FGDs revealed recurring themes, including ethnic mobilization, misinformation, and negative political rhetoric. A political aspirant stated: Political parties set the tone for elections. When they frame their campaigns around tribal narratives, they create an 'us vs them' mentality that can turn violent. During campaigns, we focus on what resonates with the people. Unfortunately, this sometimes means exploiting ethnic identities. Agenda setting is crucial for mobilization, but when it turns into propaganda, it escalates tensions (Interview with political aspirant in Nakuru town on 19.3.2024).

Cheeseman (2015) argues that agenda setting can also be used to promote peaceful political participation. A peace committee member echoed this concern: We have seen how political leaders use inflammatory language during campaigns. It starts as a speech but translates into real violence on the ground. We have tried to counter the harmful narratives spread by political parties, but they have more influence than we do. We spend most of our time countering misinformation spread by political figures (FGD with peace committee members in Molo social hall on 12.4.2024).

Conversely, an official from the ORPP argued: Not all political parties incite conflict. Some genuinely push for issue-based politics, but their voices are often drowned out by those using divisive tactics. Agenda setting is a double-edged sword. While some parties promote issue-based politics, many use it to divide communities along ethnic lines (Interview with ORPP representatives in Assumption centre office, Nakuru Town on 17.3.2024).

The IEBC official asserted that political parties manipulate electoral frameworks, undermining institutional credibility. Their discourse frequently disparages the electoral commission, inciting discord. By propagating divisive narratives that foster apprehension, they jeopardize the feasibility of impartial elections (Interview with an IEBC Official representative in Kuresoi on 10.4.2024). These findings were in line with Kanyinga and Okello (2013) who contended that political parties often manipulate electoral processes through strategic narratives to maintain power.

Monitoring reports from the NCIC reveal that political parties frequently employ coded language to fuel ethnic divisions, with hate speech serving as a key driver of polarization (Interview with an NCIC official in Nakuru Town, 17.3.2024). Mutahi and Ruteere (2019) corroborate this, noting that such rhetoric often escalates into electoral violence. Despite efforts by civil society organizations (CSOs) to redirect political discourse toward policy-based debates, parties continue to prioritize ethnic and personalistic narratives. A CSO representative in Njoro emphasized that greater accountability for inflammatory messaging could reduce conflict (Interview with a CSO in Njoro, 13.4.2024).

Security officers further highlighted the direct link between inciteful political rhetoric and electoral violence. A Kuresoi-based official noted that politicians shape public sentiment when they propagate hate speech, violence follows, whereas peaceful messaging leads to calmer elections (Interview with a security

official in Kuresoi, 13.4.2024). These findings underscore the urgent need for stricter regulation of political communication to mitigate conflict risks. These findings were confirmed by Kanyinga and Okello (2013), political parties in Kenya have historically used agenda setting to fuel animosity, particularly by weaponizing ethnicity. Similarly, Lynch (2014) argues that the media plays a complementary role in amplifying these narratives, exacerbating tensions among different political factions. Conversely, some scholars argue that agenda setting by political parties can foster national cohesion. For instance, Cheeseman (2015) suggests that agenda setting, when employed responsibly, has the potential to shape constructive political engagement rather than conflict.

Lynch (2014) demonstrates that political rallies often serve as incubators for inflammatory rhetoric. Focus group discussions with violence victims disclosed that their residences were incinerated due to alleged political alignments, with perpetrators acting on leaders' directives, resulting in displacement (FGD, Female victims, Molo, 12.4.2024). Kenya's electoral violence stems from greed-grievance dynamics, where elites exploit primordial ethnic divisions through partisan agenda-setting (Kleinfeld, 2024; Mutua, 2018). Quantitative data confirms party rhetoric fuels polarization, delegitimizing opponents (Oyugi, 2019; Kanyinga, 2020), while qualitative insights reveal conflict transformation potential in issue-based discourse (Ndemo, 2022). Despite institutional measures (Political Parties Act, NCIC), weak enforcement perpetuates cycles of violence (ORPP, 2022), reflecting systemic greed incentives.

Yet, African pragmatism emerges in localized peace dialogues (CSOs), demonstrating grassroots resilience. The paradox lies in parties' dual capacity: as tools for elite manipulation (greed-grievance) or platforms for democratic stability (conflict transformation). Effective mitigation requires stricter regulation, civic education, and media counter-narratives. Kenya's challenge is structural-reforming institutions to curb instrumentalized polarization while harnessing pragmatic community-level reconciliation.

Effectiveness Of Political Parties Mobilizing Voters Without Causing Conflicts

This study examined the effectiveness of political parties in mobilizing voters peacefully as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Effectiveness of Political Parties Mobilizing Voters Without Causing Conflicts

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very Effective	134	39.2	39.2	39.2
Effective	94	27.5	27.5	66.7
Neutral	34	9.9	9.9	76.6
Ineffective	48	14.0	14.0	90.6
Very ineffective	32	9.4	9.4	100.0
Total	342	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field data 2024

The findings in Table 1 reveal that 134(39.2%) said very effective, 94(27.5%) effective, 48(14%) ineffective, 34(9.9%) were neutral while 32(9.4%) very ineffective. This shows that majority of respondents cumulatively 228(66.7%) agreed that political parties are effective in mobilizing voters without causing conflicts as they have the power to sway and convince electorates. However, some respondents argued that

political parties misuse their power to incite and cause conflicts during voter mobilization through hate speech, politicized ethnicity and negative propaganda.

Reports from the Nakuru County Security Office (2022) confirm that electoral conflicts frequently originate from disputes within political parties. This study argues that political parties are fundamental in shaping political discourse and rallying voter support. They engage in grassroots campaigns, public rallies, and door-to-door voter persuasion strategies. The Office of the Registrar of Political Parties (ORPP) provided insights into internal party policies, stating: Political parties are meant to provide ideological direction and policy alternatives, but in Kenya, mobilization is often ethnic-based rather than issue-based. Parties that adhere to issue-based campaigns rather than personality-driven narratives tend to experience fewer instances of electoral violence (ORPP Official interview in Assumption Centre Office on 20.3.2024).

This view aligns with findings by Klopp (2001), who argues that ethnic mobilization in Kenyan politics fuels electoral violence. Officers from the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) highlighted that while political parties have made strides in peaceful mobilization, ethnic-based campaigns still pose a challenge. NCIC officers also highlighted that political parties should be vehicles for national unity, yet they often exploit historical grievances for electoral gain. Interviews with IEBC officials revealed that party primaries are a major source of conflicts. One stated: Unfair nomination processes create dissatisfaction among aspirants, leading to defections and heightened political tensions. However, stronger enforcement of electoral codes has ensured that parties remain within legal frameworks, but loopholes still exist, leading to sporadic violence. Strict enforcement of electoral laws and party regulations has curbed inflammatory speeches, significantly reducing electoral conflicts in recent cycles (Interview with an IEBC officer in Njoro on 10.4.2024).

This aligns with previous research by Cheeseman *et al.* (2019), which highlights how flawed party primaries contribute to post-election violence in Kenya. This aligns with Cheeseman and Klaas (2018), who posit that institutional strengthening reduces the likelihood of violence during elections. Politicians and aspirants interviewed admitted that some parties rely on youth militias for voter intimidation.

While FGDs with peace committees and conflict victims revealed mixed experiences. The county peace committee emphasized the role of civic education thus: We work with IEBC, churches, and civil society groups to educate voters on their rights and the dangers of political violence. We have successfully mediated conflicts arising from party campaigns, but deep-seated grievances persist. Political parties might publicly commit to peaceful mobilization, but behind closed doors, there are strategies that involve misinformation and incitement (FGD with Peace Committee members in Nakuru Town Hall on 18.3.2024).

This mirrors findings by Straus and Taylor (2022), who emphasized that while formal democratic structures exist, informal practices often fuel electoral discord. Victims of electoral violence recounted traumatic experiences, with one recalling the destruction of their home during the 2007 polls due to opposing political affiliations. While some progress has been made, localized violence persists in volatile areas (FGD with victims in Gilgil, 16.4.2024). Perpetrators admitted to acting out of fear, manipulated by claims that their community faced existential threats if they did not retaliate. However, some acknowledged that stricter

legal repercussions have now made electoral violence riskier (FGD with Former Perpetrators of violence in Molo Social Hall, 15.4.2024). These narratives align with studies by Lynch (2011), which illustrate how political rhetoric fuels inter-ethnic violence. Despite these challenges, some political parties and peace actors in Nakuru have adopted conflict-sensitive voter mobilization strategies. Political analysts suggested that issue-based politics could mitigate conflicts thus: If parties focus on policies rather than ethnic identities, we will see less violence. The more inclusive a party's campaign strategy is, the less likelihood there is of conflict, as marginalized groups feel represented. Over the years, political parties have learned from past conflicts and now emphasize issue-based campaigns rather than ethnic or divisive rhetoric (Interview with a Political Analyst in Kuresoi on 11.4.2024).

The findings reflect tensions between greed-grievance (ethnic baiting, violent nominations) and conflict transformation (peaceful mobilization via NCIC/IEBC frameworks). While 66.7% of respondents (n=228) credit parties with non-violent campaigns aligning with Berenschot's (2018) institutionalization thesis-23.4% (n=80) cite persistent ethnicized violence, exposing primordial loyalties. FGDs reveal a policy-practice gap: top-down reforms (e.g., ORPP oversight) clash with grassroots realities like impunity and cultural polarization. African pragmatism emerges in local solutions bridging divides through dialogues complementing structural fixes (transparent nominations, civic education). Nakuru's parties exhibit dual strategies: conflict-sensitive mobilization per Bratton & Kimenyi (2008), yet instrumentalized divisions endure. Sustainable peace demands dismantling violence incentives (greed-grievance) while amplifying participatory governance (conflict transformation). The study underscores that electoral integrity hinges on merging policy rigor with cultural shifts, affirming African pragmatism's role in contextualizing institutional reforms.

Political Parties Using Ethnicity to Mobilize Voters

Political parties in many multiethnic societies leverage ethnicity as a key mobilization strategy during elections. In context where ethnic identity is deeply embedded in political competition, parties often construct their support bases along ethnic lines, reinforcing divisions and, at times, exacerbating electoral conflicts. This study examined how political parties utilize ethnicity for voter mobilization as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Political Parties Using Ethnicity to Mobilize Voters

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	128	37.4	37.4	37.4
Agree	85	24.9	24.9	62.3
Neutral	68	19.9	19.9	82.2
Disagree	46	13.5	13.5	95.6
Strongly Disagree	15	4.4	4.4	100.0
Total	342	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field data 2024

The findings in Table 2 reveal that 128(37.4%) of respondents strongly agreed that political parties use ethnicity to mobilize voters, 85(24.9%) agreed, 68(19.9%) were neutral. On the other hand, 46(13.5%) disagreed while 15(4.4%) strongly disagreed. This finding indicates that majority of respondents cumulatively 62.3% agreed political parties use ethnicity in voter mobilization. This shows that the majority

is the central determined of in electoral processes. While a minority, 17.9% disagreed, suggesting some political parties are based on policies and ideologies.

Interviews with political analysts and advisors revealed that ethnic mobilization remains a dominant electoral strategy in Kenya. A political analyst stated: Political parties in Kenya are primarily ethnic enterprises. They are formed around ethnic kingpins who dictate the political direction of their communities. The electorate is conditioned to vote based on ethnic loyalty rather than policy or ideology (Interview with a Political Analyst in Rongai, 6.4.2024).

This aligns with Bratton and Kimenyi (2018), who argue that political party structures in Kenya operate as ethnic coalitions rather than ideological organizations. Similarly, an Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) official acknowledged that ethnicity often influences party primaries. Further the discussions with officials from the IEBC highlighted the challenges in enforcing regulations that limit ethnic-based political mobilization. A senior officer noted: Despite our efforts to ensure fair and transparent elections, political parties still rely on ethnic blocs to secure votes. This is deeply rooted in our political culture. Party nominations are characterized by ethnic favoritism, where candidates perceived as outsiders within ethnic strongholds face systemic exclusion (Interview with County IEBC Election Manager in Njoro on 5.4.2024).

A political party official justified ethnic mobilization as a practical strategy for electoral success, arguing that it ensures community representation and protects group interests (Interview with a party agent, Kuresoi, 10.4.2024). The ORPP acknowledged the challenge of regulating parties, noting that most lack ideology and instead serve as tools for ethnic leaders to consolidate power (Interview with an ORPP field officer in Nakuru Town, 21.3.2024). Meanwhile, NCIC officials highlighted how politicians exploit divisive rhetoric, using coded phrases like our people must wake up or they cannot take our land to provoke tensions without explicit incitement (Interview with an NCIC official in Nakuru Town, 20.3.2024). These perspectives underscore the enduring influence of ethnicity in Kenya's politics, complicating efforts to foster issue-based competition. This aligns with the findings of Horowitz (2014), who argues that ethnic political mobilization, when unchecked, can destabilize democratic institutions and lead to cyclical electoral conflicts.

Focus group discussions with instigators of political violence highlighted deep-rooted ethnic allegiance as a key motivator. One participant confessed to being manipulated by politicians: they convinced us violence was necessary to defend our land and future (FGD with former perpetrators in Molo Social Hall on 12.4.2024). Conversely, survivors described profound trauma from the attacks, with one recalling: we lost everything just for supporting an opposing party. Those who incited the violence later sought our votes, showing how little our lives mattered (FGD with victims of violence in Molo Social Hall, 13.4.2024). These accounts reveal how politicians exploit ethnic divisions, leaving communities shattered while facing no accountability for their role in the violence. The stark contrast between perpetrators' justifications and victims' anguish underscores the destructive cycle of politically-motivated ethnic conflict.

This study reveals that ethnic identity dominates Kenyan politics, reinforcing primordial loyalties in voter behavior and party strategies, as seen in Nakuru County's ethnic-based mobilization (Kanyinga & Okello,

2020). Politicians exploit these divisions, framing elections as "ethnic arithmetic," a tactic linked to electoral violence (NCIC reports). Per greed-grievance theory, elites manipulate ethnic grievances for power, with victims targeted as "outsiders" (Horowitz, 1985). Yet, politicians justify this as pragmatic survival—"Without ethnic alignment, you face oblivion"—reflecting African pragmatism in competitive politics. Historically, colonial policies institutionalized divisions (Ogot, 2005), but recent scholarships emphasize economic factors (Cheeseman *et al.*, 2021). While conflict transformation is possible through civic education and accountability, ethnic instrumentalization persists. The findings suggest that addressing electoral violence requires dismantling elite incentives (greed-grievance) while fostering inclusive politics (conflict transformation), balancing pragmatic realities with long-term peacebuilding.

Primary Strategy Used by Political Parties to Gain Electoral Support

Political parties employ various strategies to garner electoral support, tailored to their unique political, social, and economic contexts. In Kenya, these strategies have been a subject of extensive analysis, particularly in the context of the country's multiparty democracy and ethnically diverse society. This study examined the primary strategies used by Kenyan political parties to gain electoral support and results are as indicated in Figure 4.

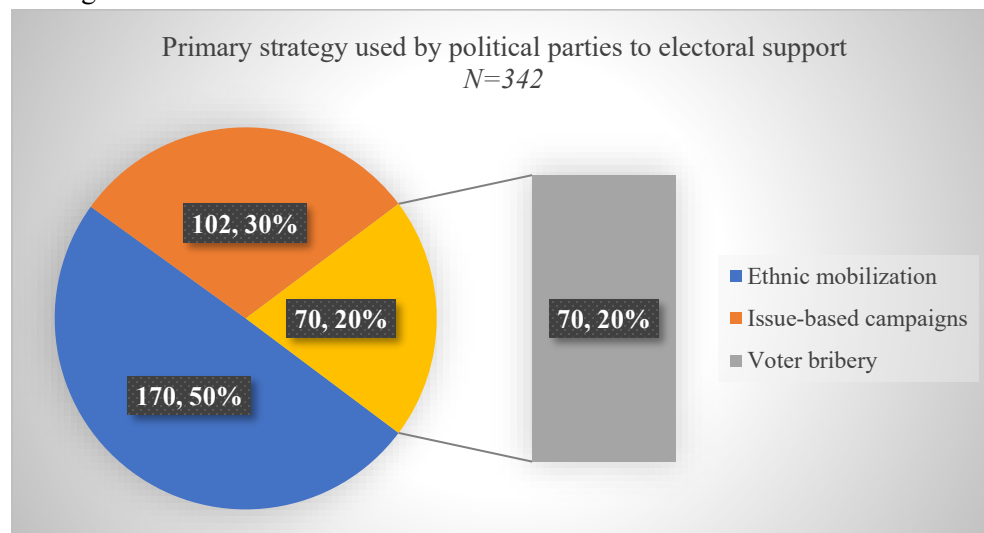


Figure 4: Primary strategy used by politicians to gain electoral support

Source: Field data 2024

The findings in Figure 4 indicate that 170(49.7%) said ethnic mobilization, 102(29.8%) said issue-based campaigns while 70(20.5%) said voter bribery. This finding reveals that the majority agreed that ethnic mobilization plays a key role in political parties gaining electoral support. This study, therefore, argues that ethnic mobilization remains the dominant strategy employed by politicians in Nakuru County. Political parties and aspirants leverage ethnic identities to consolidate support, fostering a sense of unity within specific groups while alienating others. A political analyst from Nakuru noted: Politicians know that ethnicity is a powerful tool in Kenyan politics. They manipulate historical grievances and ethnic stereotypes to consolidate their voter base, which often leads to inter-community tensions (Interview with a Political Analyst in Nakuru Town on 29.3.2024).

Archival records from past elections indicate that ethnic-based mobilization has been a significant cause of electoral conflicts, particularly in multi-ethnic regions like Nakuru. Key informants from the NCIC revealed that political campaigns are often structured around ethnic lines rather than policy-driven agendas. This finding was in line with KNCHR (2008) who opined that the 2007-2008 post-election violence exemplifies how ethnic mobilization can escalate into large-scale conflict.

Further, this study argues that, while issue-based campaigns have gained traction, they remain secondary to ethnic mobilization. The IEBC emphasized that candidates who focus on policy issues struggle to gain traction unless they appeal to ethnic loyalty. A participant in a peace committee focus group observed that while some politicians attempt to focus on development and governance, they often fail to gain traction unless they frame their agendas within ethnic discourses (FGD with peace committee members in Nakuru Town hall on 18.3.2024). This corroborates findings in existing literature, such as Cheeseman *et al.* (2019), who argue that issue-based politics in Kenya is often overshadowed by ethnic considerations. This study argues that voter bribery remains a pervasive strategy. Interviews with victims of electoral violence and political aspirants indicated that financial incentives are used to sway voters. A political aspirant from Subukia revealed that financial incentives often outweigh policy merits in elections, stating that candidates who fail to distribute handouts face slim chances of winning (Interview with an aspirant in Subukia, 3.4.2024). Authorities corroborated this, noting that vote buying fuels post-election disputes, with defeated candidates frequently alleging foul play through monetary manipulation. According to an ORPP official: Political parties in Kenya are structured along ethnic lines. Politicians strategically appeal to their ethnic communities, reinforcing a ‘them versus us’ narrative to consolidate support (Interview with an ORPP regional coordinator in Assumption Centre Office, Nakuru Town on 22.3.2024).

This aligns with findings from previous studies indicating that ethnic identity is a crucial factor in political mobilization (Kanyinga, 2016). Moreover, FGDs with peace committee members and victims of violence reveal that ethnicity-driven campaigns often lead to electoral conflicts, as rival groups perceive elections as a zero-sum game where losing equates to political and economic marginalization.

Reports from the IEBC and Transparency International (2017) indicate that aspirants frequently engage in vote-buying, using state resources or private funds to sway voters. This patronage system undermines democratic principles and fosters electoral disputes, particularly when expected rewards are not delivered. Evidence from security officials, county commissioner’s office representatives, and victims of electoral violence suggests that political violence is used strategically to intimidate opponents and suppress voter turnout. A survivor of Naivasha’s 2017 electoral violence described how pre-election threats and organized attacks targeted opposition supporters to instill fear and suppress voter turnout (FGD with Male Victims in Gilgil, 25.3.2024). This corroborates established historical trends evidenced in archival materials, including the Akiwumi Report (1999), which delineates the instrumentalization of violence by state and non-state entities to distort electoral processes. These revelations contradict the official narratives propagated by political factions, which routinely disavow complicity in engineered hostilities. Historical electoral data (IEBC, 2013; NCIC, 2017) underscores the persistent role of ethnic mobilization and pecuniary inducements in shaping electoral dynamics within Nakuru. Academic analyses by Mueller (2011) and

Lynch (2018) posit that Kenya's political terrain remains profoundly structured along ethno-political lines, thereby reinforcing recurrent electoral violence.

Although prevailing scholarship emphasizes ethnic mobilization and clientelism as dominant electoral strategies, emerging perspectives suggest a nascent shift toward issue-based political engagement (Cheeseman, 2019). Interviews with emerging political aspirants and strategists indicate that urban electorates, particularly within Nakuru Town, are progressively prioritizing developmental policies over ethnic allegiances. Conversely, focus group deliberations with local administrators reveal the enduring prevalence of ethnic and patronage-driven voting in rural Nakuru, where communal interests compel support for co-ethnic candidates (FGD with chiefs in Rongai, 7.4.2024).

This study demonstrates that Nakuru's political elite predominantly leverage primordial ethnic mobilization and venal electoral tactics (greed-grievance framework) rather than policy-oriented campaigns. Empirical triangulation affirms that ethnic identity remains a potent catalyst for electoral strife, albeit with incremental transitions toward programmatic politics. While economic incentives (greed) and historical schisms (primordialism) perpetuate instability, manifestations of African pragmatism emerge as communities navigate cyclical violence. Sustainable conflict transformation necessitates institutional overhauls, civic sensitization, and stringent electoral oversight. Nakuru's paradigm highlights the imperative of dismantling ethnic clientelism while fortifying accountability mechanisms, thereby reconciling grievance-motivated violence with enduring peacebuilding. Consequently, electoral integrity mandates the suppression of ethno-political exploitation alongside the cultivation of inclusive, issue-based political participation.

Political Party Engaged in Coalition Building

Political factions frequently form coalitions to bolster electoral viability, particularly in pluralistic democracies, amalgamating resources and fragmented electorates to optimize success. Kenya's coalition dynamics exemplify this, mirroring its heterogeneous political terrain as indicated in Figure 5.

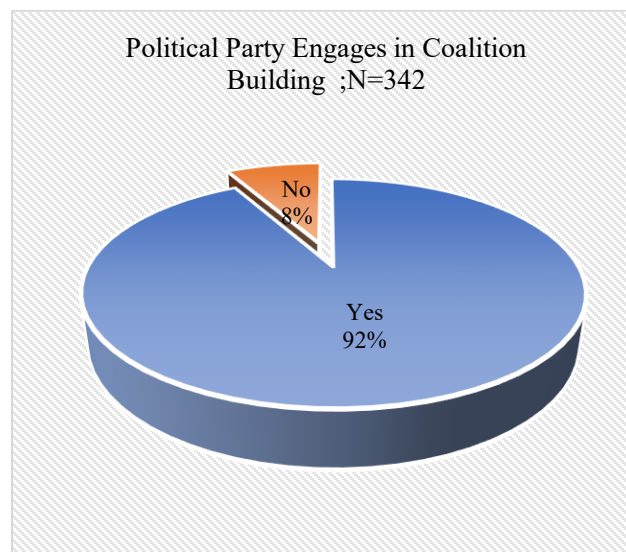


Figure 5: Political party engages in coalition building
Source: Field data 2024

The findings in Figure 5 reveal that 315(92.1%) agreed political parties engage in coalition building while 27(7.9%) disagreed. This finding reveals that majority of the respondents agreed that political parties form alliances or coalitions to win elections. This study contends that coalition building in Kenya has been a prevalent trend, particularly in ethnically diverse and politically competitive regions such as Nakuru. The formation of coalitions aims to consolidate voter bases across ethnic and ideological lines. A senior political analyst noted: Political parties in Nakuru rarely operate independently; they often align with national coalitions to gain political mileage. The volatility in the region necessitates alliances that cut across ethnicities to secure electoral victories. In fragmented political landscapes, coalitions are essential for forming stable governments and implementing policy agendas (Interview with a Political Analyst in Flamingo, Nakuru on 6.4.2024).

The ORPP confirmed that coalition agreements have become a standard practice in electoral processes, often formalized before general elections. An ORPP official stated: We register coalition agreements to ensure legal compliance, but what happens on the ground is beyond our control. Some alliances are purely for elections and dissolve thereafter. Coalition agreements have become integral to our political processes, reflecting parties' strategies to maximize their influence. A minority of parties choose to contest independently, aiming to establish themselves without the compromises that coalitions entail (Interview with an ORPP field Officer in Assumption Centre Office, Nakuru Town on 17.3.2024).

The implications of coalition politics for electoral conflicts in Nakuru County are profound. Coalition formations often exacerbate political tensions, particularly when they are seen as exclusionary or ethnically biased. A focus group discussion (FGD) with peace committee members revealed: Coalitions create an 'us versus them' mentality. Supporters of rival coalitions see each other as enemies rather than political opponents. However, when parties come together, it fosters unity and reduces the polarization that often leads to violence. (FGD with Peace Committee members in Molo Social Hall on 12.4.2024).

Victims of past electoral violence in Nakuru narrated how coalition alignments contributed to tensions. One participant recounted that in 2007, their community was persecuted for perceived opposition to the ruling coalition, noting that such alliances determine inclusion and exclusion (FGD with Male Victims of Electoral Violence in Gilgil Social Hall on 30.3.2024). Concurrently, security personnel emphasized the difficulties of ensuring stability amid ethnically driven coalition politics, observing that electoral periods often trigger ethnic alignment, fostering distrust and violence when outcomes disfavor particular groups (Interview with a Security Official in Naivasha on 7.4.2024). Reports from the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) indicate that coalition politics played a significant role in the post-election violence of 2007–2008 (TJRC Report, 2013). Similarly, scholarly literature has highlighted how coalition dynamics influence electoral stability. Cheeseman *et al.* (2019) argue that coalition politics in Kenya often intensifies rather than mitigates electoral conflicts due to elite-driven mobilization strategies.

The NCIC has recurrently highlighted how political alliances exacerbate electoral violence, with an official asserting that coalitions prioritize power and resource acquisition over ideology, intensifying political discord, especially in volatile areas such as Nakuru (Interview with an NCIC Official, County Commissioner's Office, Block 1, 21.3.2024). The convergence of insights from key informants, archival

records, and literature supports the argument that coalition building is a double-edged sword. While coalitions provide political stability by reducing the number of fragmented parties, they also create polarization, especially when they are constructed along ethnic lines.

The findings on coalition-building in Nakuru County reveal a complex interplay between primordial ethnic loyalties, conflict transformation, and African pragmatism. The data shows that 92.1% of respondents acknowledge coalition-building as a dominant political strategy, reinforcing the idea that alliances are survivalist tactics in Kenya's ethnically fragmented landscape. However, these coalitions often deepen primordial divisions, as seen in Nakuru's history of electoral violence, where political alignments are perceived as ethnic exclusion.

From a conflict transformation perspective, coalitions can either mitigate or exacerbate tensions. While inclusive alliances foster unity (as noted in the Molo FGD), ethnically biased coalitions fuel polarization. African pragmatism offers a pathway—coalitions must transcend ethnic arithmetic and embrace issue-based politics. Regulatory bodies like the NCIC and ORPP should enforce transparency to align coalition-building with Kenya's constitutional ethos of inclusivity. Ultimately, Kenya's political stability hinges on transforming coalitions from ethnic survival tools into platforms for democratic consolidation, guided by African pragmatism's adaptive, problem-solving approach.

Frequency Political Alliances Contribute to Electoral Tensions

Political alliances play a significant role in shaping electoral dynamics, particularly in democracies with competitive multiparty systems. While these alliances can promote political stability and coalition governance, they also have the potential to exacerbate electoral tensions, particularly in fragile political environments. These results of the study are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Frequency Political Alliances Contribute to Electoral Tensions

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very Frequently	174	50.9	50.9	50.9
Frequently	122	35.7	35.7	86.5
Occasionally	33	9.6	9.6	96.2
Rarely	9	2.6	2.6	98.8
Never	4	1.2	1.2	100.0
Total	342	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Data 2024

The findings in Table 3 reveal that 174(50.9%) of respondents said political alliances very frequently contribute to electoral tensions, while 122(35.7%) said they were frequent. On the other hand, 33(9.6%) said rarely, while 4(1.2%) said never. This finding indicates that majority of respondents cumulatively 296(86.6%) agreed political alliances frequently contribute to electoral tensions in Nakuru County. This study argues that political parties in Kenya have historically played a dual role in shaping democratic processes while simultaneously being vehicles for electoral conflicts. The formation of alliances among parties, often along ethnic lines, fuels political polarization. As noted by a political analyst,

Political alliances are not just about ideology; they are primarily about mobilizing ethnic support bases. This creates an ‘us versus them’ mentality, which escalates tensions during elections. Political alliances are often formed along ethnic and regional lines, deepening societal divisions and increasing the likelihood of electoral violence. The shifting nature of these alliances also creates uncertainty, which fuels political instability (Interview with a political analyst in Nakuru Town on 11.4.2024).

This aligns with findings from Barkan (2013), who argues that in multiparty systems with weak institutional frameworks, alliances often serve as vehicles for elite power struggles rather than platforms for policy-driven governance. Similarly, Horowitz (2014) contends that alliances formed based on ethnic affiliations tend to heighten political animosities, especially in societies with deep historical grievances. Contrastingly, a political advisor offered a different perspective thus: While alliances can exacerbate tensions, they also provide a mechanism for conflict resolution by integrating rival factions into broader coalitions, thereby reducing direct electoral competition (Interview with a political advisor in County Headquarter Office on 2.4.2024).

This view is supported by Reilly (2016), who highlights cases where political alliances have facilitated power-sharing arrangements that reduce the intensity of electoral conflicts. However, Lindberg (2018) warns that such alliances often collapse due to internal disputes, reigniting political hostilities. A county commissioner echoed these sentiments, stating that every electoral period, we see political parties realigning into alliances that deepen divisions rather than promote unity (Interview with a county commissioner, 17.3.2024). NCIC officials confirm that exclusionary coalitions fuel violence, as marginalized communities retaliate through protests or targeted aggression (Interview with an NCIC officer in Nakuru Town, 19.3.2024). In Nakuru, such dynamics heighten electoral tensions, reinforcing primordial loyalties while undermining conflict transformation. African pragmatism demands inclusive, issue-based coalitions to break this cycle, ensuring stability through institutional oversight and equitable political participation.

Historical data reveals that during the 1992 and 1997 multiparty elections, Kenya witnessed increased electoral tensions due to alliances formed on ethnic lines (Mutua, 2008). Similarly, in 2007, the competition between the Party of National Unity (PNU) and the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) saw Nakuru County as a hotspot for electoral violence (Kagwanja & Southall, 2009). This finding was supported by Cheeseman *et al.* (2021) who stated that political parties in Kenya have historically evolved as vehicles for ethnic mobilization rather than ideology-based governance. In Nakuru, key informants noted that political alliances frequently shift before elections, often exacerbating ethnic polarization and increasing the likelihood of electoral tensions.

This study findings support the work of Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), who argue that democratic backsliding is often linked to the erosion of party discipline and the manipulation of electoral rules to benefit dominant alliances. The security officials interviewed highlighted how alliances create parallel power structures that challenge the authority of government institutions. County security officials also emphasized that political alliances sometimes maintain informal militia groups that intimidate voters and opponents.

An FGD with victims of electoral violence highlighted past instances where political alliances fueled hostilities. In their own words: During the 2007 elections, we saw communities turn against each other because of political alignments. Alliances should unite, not divide us. Every election cycle, alliances shift, and politicians use these changes to manipulate communities. They exploit ethnic identities to mobilize support, leading to hostility among neighbors who previously coexisted peacefully (FGD with Female victims of electoral conflicts in Molo Market on 12.4.2024).

This aligns with the findings of Cheeseman (2019), who highlights the instrumentalization of ethnic identities in African electoral politics as a major driver of conflict. While political alliances can deepen electoral tensions, they also hold potential for reconciliation. A peace committee member noted that well-structured alliances foster dialogue, stating that when properly structured, alliances can bring together leaders from opposing groups, reducing tensions (FGD with peace committee members, 18.3.2024). However, ORPP officials revealed that some coalitions manipulate elections, with one official admitting that alliances often interfere with voter registration, engage in bribery, and infiltrate the IEBC to sway results” (Interview with an ORPP in Assumption Centre Office, Nakuru Town, 21 March 2024). Cheeseman (2015) corroborates this, highlighting how weak institutions enable fraud through political networks.

Conversely, civil society actors argue that alliances can promote unity. A peace activist observed that some coalitions have bridged divides, reducing electoral violence (Interview with a CSO, Gilgil, 12 April 2024). Thus, alliances are double-edged capable of both fueling conflict and fostering peace, depending on their structure and intent. This view aligns with Posner (2005), who suggests that cross-ethnic political alliances can reduce ethnic tensions by fostering inter-group cooperation. However, the effectiveness of such alliances remains limited due to deep-seated historical grievances.

A victim of electoral violence recounted that during the 2017 elections, political alliances had been used to spread propaganda, which made communities perceive their neighbors as enemies. A victim explained that the tensions began at political rallies where leaders openly incited supporters against opposing groups (FGD with victims of electoral conflicts, 13.4.2024). Similarly, a former perpetrator admitted that they had been convinced their community would suffer if their political alliance lost, which motivated many to engage in violence (FGD with former perpetrators of electoral conflicts, 8.4.2024). These testimonies demonstrated how coalition politics could exploit ethnic divisions, worsening electoral tensions.

The findings demonstrate that political alliances often intensify electoral conflicts, predominantly because they are anchored in primordial allegiances, including ethnic, regional, and historical ties, which fundamentally influence political mobilization. This observation corroborates Horowitz’s (1985) primordialist thesis, which asserts that in fragmented societies, political coalitions exacerbate ethnic divisions rather than promote national unity. By consolidating around exclusionary ethnic constituencies, such alliances amplify societal rifts, rendering electoral processes highly combustible, a phenomenon starkly illustrated during Kenya’s 2007-2008 post-election crisis (Waki Report, 2008).

Nevertheless, the study also indicates that conflict mitigation is achievable if alliances transition from ethnic patronage to African pragmatism—a governance paradigm prioritizing practical, inclusive policies over divisive identity-based politics. Reilly (2016) and Posner (2005) substantiate that cross-ethnic coalitions can diminish hostilities by fostering inter-group collaboration. In Nakuru, peacebuilding initiatives led by civil society groups have documented cases where inclusive political partnerships de-escalated violence, supporting the proposition that alliances can be reconfigured as instruments of stability rather than discord. The dichotomy inherent in these findings lies in the dual function of political alliances—simultaneously acting as catalysts for conflict and potential vehicles for reconciliation. Cheeseman (2018) and Barkan (2013) maintain that deficient institutional structures enable alliances to exploit electoral processes, exacerbating ethnic fragmentation. In contrast, Lindberg (2018) and Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018) advocate for institutional overhauls such as stringent electoral enforcement and the depoliticization of security forces to redirect alliances toward policy-oriented governance. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the imperative of transcending primordial politics in favor of African pragmatism, wherein alliances function as conduits for conflict resolution rather than ethnic entrenchment. Absent structural reforms, electoral volatility will endure, perpetuating cycles of violence in Kenya and analogous multi-ethnic democracies.

Primary Function of Political Parties That Contributes to Electoral Conflicts

This study, therefore, sought to investigate the primary function of political parties that lead to electoral conflicts. The results are indicated in Figure 6.

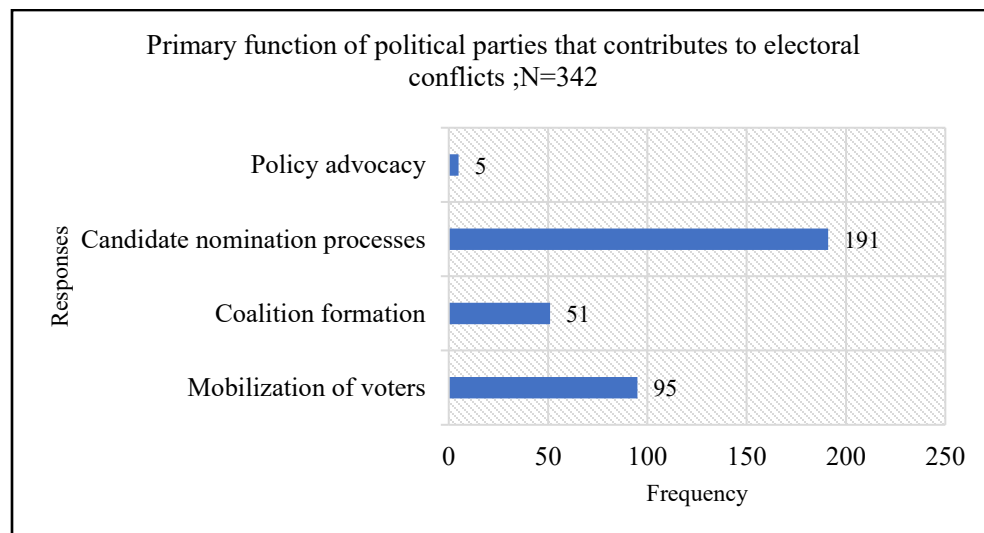


Figure 6: Primary function of political parties that contributes to electoral conflicts
Source: Field Data 2024

The findings in Figure 6 reveal that 191(55.8%) of respondents said that candidate nomination processes contribute to electoral conflicts, 95(27.8%) cited mobilization of voters, 51(14.9%) said coalition formation while 5(1.5%) cited policy advocacy. These results indicate that majority of respondents agreed that candidate nomination processes in political parties is the major factor towards electoral conflicts.

Candidate nomination remains the most contentious function of political parties. In Nakuru County, key informants from IEBC noted that irregularities in party primaries often result in intra-party disputes, leading to defections and violence. An IEBC representative asserted that electoral disputes frequently stem from flawed nomination processes, noting that when favored candidates are unjustly barred from contesting, their adherents often resort to violent demonstrations (Interview with IEBC officer, Kuresoi, 12.4.2024). Similarly, a Nakuru-based political candidate contended that parties prioritize allegiance over competence during nominations, inciting public unrest and occasional clashes (Interview with political aspirant, Nakuru Town, 14.3.2024). The literature corroborates these findings. Kanyinga (2009) highlights that political parties in Kenya lack internal democracy, making the nomination process highly controversial. Similarly, Klopp (2001) notes that flawed nominations often lead to defection, increasing political instability and violent confrontations.

From the interviews, candidate nomination emerged as the most contentious function of political parties contributing to electoral conflicts. An IEBC official noted: The nomination process in political parties is a key trigger of violence. Aspirants who feel shortchanged by their party's internal mechanisms often incite their supporters, leading to early confrontations before the general elections (Interview with an IEBC officer in Njoro on 5.4.2024).

A political aspirant in Subukia confirmed that nomination processes often become contentious, alleging that party officials sometimes manipulate outcomes against popular candidates, which provokes supporter unrest (Interview with a former UDA political aspirant in Subukia, 10.4.2024). Similarly, focus group participants in Naivasha recounted violent clashes during party primaries in previous elections, noting that disputes over candidate selection had resulted in injuries and forced displacements (FGD with victims of violence in Naivasha, 7.4.2024). These accounts demonstrate how internal party disputes frequently escalate into broader electoral violence.

Voter mobilization, identified by 27.8% of respondents as a contributor to electoral conflicts, involves strategies employed by parties and candidates to galvanize support. While mobilization is fundamental to democratic participation, aggressive or unethical tactics can incite violence. Interviews with NCIC officials and security personnel highlight concerns over the use of inflammatory language, dissemination of misinformation, and exploitation of ethnic divisions during campaigns. These practices can polarize communities and trigger conflicts.

The 2022 Kenyan General Election exemplifies a notable deviation from historical patterns of electoral violence, attributable to the concerted efforts of civil society organizations and religious leaders. These actors engaged in direct dialogue with political candidates, facilitating the signing of peace accords and promoting non-violent conduct. Furthermore, civil society groups and opposition factions leveraged social media platforms to scrutinize inflammatory political rhetoric, countering divisive narratives with pacifying messaging (Havoc to Hope, 2024). This case underscores that while voter mobilization possesses the potential to incite conflict, preemptive and strategic interventions by key stakeholders can effectively mitigate such risks.

Security officials in Molo echoed these concerns, noting that certain politicians deliberately exploit ethnic and sectarian divisions to consolidate their electoral support, thereby intensifying inter-communal strife

(Interview with a Security Official in Molo, April 12, 2024). Similarly, representatives from civil society organizations asserted that Kenyan electoral campaigns disproportionately emphasize ethnic identity over substantive policy discourse, fostering a perilous climate of division (Interview with a CSO Representative in Bahati, April 2, 2024). Archival records from the 2007 post-election crisis corroborate these observations, demonstrating that ethnically charged mobilization strategies in volatile regions such as Nakuru significantly contributed to the outbreak of violence (Anderson & Lochery, 2008). Branch (2011) further contends that political elites manipulate historical grievances to sway electoral outcomes, perpetuating cycles of conflict.

Coalition politics, cited by 14.9% of respondents as an electoral conflict driver, is pivotal in Kenya's ethnically divided polity. Cheeseman (2022) asserts that coalition-building is essential given the lack of a dominant ethnic majority, yet their fragility often incites unrest. Factionalism, grassroots marginalization, and zero-sum electoral dynamics heighten tensions, perpetuating exclusion narratives (Navigating Coalition Politics in Kenya, 2023). Kalimi *et al.* (2024) argue that ephemeral 2002–2022 alliances eroded cohesion, privileging short-term victories over stability. Though ostensibly structuring competition, their exclusionary tendencies—notably in Nakuru—deepen public cynicism. Thus, coalitions simultaneously consolidate and fragment Kenya's political landscape, mirroring its paradoxical evolution.

Divergent perspectives from political analysts further illuminate the complexities of coalition dynamics. One analyst posited that elite-centric power-sharing arrangements systematically exclude ordinary supporters, heightening the risk of violence (Interview with a Political Analyst in Nakuru Town, March 13, 2024). Another contended that while Kenyan coalitions lack ideological coherence and are primarily interest-driven, they only escalate tensions when internal disputes spill into the public domain (Interview with a Political Analyst in Nakuru Town, March 16, 2024). These insights align with Cheeseman's (2018) assertion that coalition politics exacerbates ethnic polarization, thereby amplifying electoral instability in deeply divided societies.

This study reveals that only 1.5% of respondents attribute electoral conflicts to policy advocacy, underscoring its minimal direct impact compared to nomination disputes, voter mobilization, or coalition instability. While policy debates are inherent to democracy, their fusion with ethnic or regional agendas exacerbates divisions. Interviews with analysts affirm that Kenya's electoral violence primarily stems from ethnic patronage, resource disputes, and power struggles rather than ideological differences. However, some civil society sources argue that weak policy engagement indirectly inflames tensions by ignoring systemic issues like land conflicts and youth unemployment. Thus, while policy advocacy remains vital democratically, its role in precipitating electoral violence is negligible relative to structural and patronage-driven factors.

The study demonstrates that electoral violence in Nakuru County primarily stems from manipulated candidate nominations (55.8%), with voter mobilization (27.8%), coalition dynamics (14.9%), and policy disputes (1.5%) as secondary catalysts (Anderson & Lochery, 2008). These patterns corroborate primordialist assertions that political allegiances are rooted in ethnic-historical fissures, as elites exploit nomination irregularities and ethnocentric campaigns to perpetuate divisions. Scholars note that such

exclusionary tactics incite violent retaliation among disenfranchised groups (Klopp, 2001; Kanyinga, 2009).

Contrastingly, conflict transformation theory proposes structural interventions to mitigate tensions, evidenced by the 2022 elections' relative stability, attributed to peacebuilding initiatives and counter-narrative strategies (Havoc to Hope, 2024). African pragmatism further advocates context-driven solutions, with analysts suggesting coalition models could foster inclusivity through grassroots engagement (Cheeseman, 2022; Kalimi *et al.*, 2024). This paradigm promotes institutional reforms to depoliticize ethnicity while strengthening intra-party democracy. The findings thus advocate adaptive, localized strategies to disrupt cyclical electoral strife.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study conclusively demonstrates that Kenya's political architecture remains fundamentally constrained by ethnic arithmetic, wherein political parties function primarily as ethnic cartels rather than vehicles for democratic representation. The empirical evidence from Nakuru County reveals a paradoxical reality: while political parties demonstrate effectiveness in voter mobilization (66.7%), their institutional practices—particularly flawed candidate nomination processes (55.8%) and ethnic mobilization strategies (49.7%)—systematically perpetuate electoral conflicts. The findings expose the profound limitations of Western-derived institutional reforms in addressing the deeply embedded historical grievances and structural inequalities that fuel Kenya's cyclical electoral violence. The persistent weaponization of ethnic identities, coupled with exclusionary political practices, has created a self-reinforcing cycle of conflict that undermines democratic consolidation and sustainable development.

This study recommends that political parties must embrace African Pragmatism by adopting elder-mediated primaries and Ubuntu-based consensus models to dismantle ethnic patronage, while implementing transparent, merit-based candidate selection with independent tribunals. The government should establish truth commissions addressing historical grievances and legislate power-sharing frameworks that ensure inclusive governance beyond electoral cycles. Policymakers must craft legislation incentivizing inter-ethnic coalitions and programmatic politics, requiring parties to demonstrate national character for registration. Electoral bodies should rigorously enforce conduct codes against ethnic mobilization and strengthen civic education through traditional institutions. Collectively, these measures grounded in indigenous wisdom can transform Kenya's political landscape from ethnic arithmetic to developmental governance, fostering sustainable democratic resilience.

Author Contributions

Rodgers Ombeck Oyoo conceptualization, review and visualization of the study. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The data can be obtained from ORPP office, NCIC website and National Crime research Centre website.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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