CHAPTER 15

Leadership and propaganda in nation building: Evidence from Rwanda under Kagame

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1 INTRODUCTION

Countries that are diverse (whether in terms of ethnicity, language, religion or any other characteristic) and polarised suffer from more conflict, higher corruption, weaker institutions and lower economic growth (Easterly and Levine 1997, Garcia Montalvo and Reynal-Querol 2005, Blattman and Miguel 2010). In light of this, some degree of nation building that aligns preferences and increases trust and cooperation across groups may be important for the *political sustainability* of economic development. In this chapter, we examine what kind of role leadership can play in nation building, especially in countries that are divided and have a history of conflict. In doing so, we cast light not only on the role of structural constraints, but also a leader's ideology and the incentives they face with respect to the shape of nation building – especially using media. In particular, we ask whether a political leader can use propaganda as a tool to help bridge divides in a society and achieve some degree of nation building.

Attempts at nation building by political leaders can come in various forms. As argued by Alesina et al. (2020) and discussed in Chapter 26 of this eBook, the precise shape of nation building, and how aggressively it is pursued, depends fundamentally on the incentives facing the political leadership. For instance, the authors show that democracies are more likely to pursue nation building than stable autocracies, but unstable autocracies may

pursue the most aggressive nation building of all. However, the incentives facing political leaders are important, the ideological convictions of political leadership can also shape the nature of nation building. For instance, do political leaders believe that the core identity of a nation and its peoples is fixed and unchanging over time? Such a view is associated with 'primordialism' and is commonplace among ethno-nationalist political leaders across the globe – from Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan and India's Narendra Modi to Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar and Victor Orban in Hungary. In such instances, nation building is less about compromise and accommodation across different groups. Instead, it is about the imposition of the identitarian beliefs of the politically dominant group (be it ethnic, religious, or otherwise) on others. In this case, nation building is likely to be much more aggressive since it may require forced assimilation and adoption of the cultural and other practices of the ruling group.

However, irrespective of the precise shape of nation building, a crucial tool used by just about all leaders across political institutions is the deployment of propaganda. This propaganda may be delivered to the masses directly through state media, pamphleteering, speeches or mass rallies. But it could also be carried out through private media such as newspapers, books, as well as educational indoctrination. Indeed, this crucial role of propaganda through indoctrination in school is corroborated by the historian Hobsbawm (1992), who argues that over the course of the last two centuries, "states would use the increasingly powerful machinery for communicating with their inhabitants, above all the primary schools, to spread the image and heritage of the 'nation' and to inculcate attachment to it".

In the next section, we discuss the various ways in which propaganda can be deployed to catalyse and cement nation building. In Section 3, we describe a concrete empirical study that was used to study nation building in Rwanda under the autocratic rule of Paul Kagame. Section 4 concludes with a discussion.

2 LEADERSHIP AND PROPAGANDA

A key aspect of nation building is the construction of a national identity. Such nation building projects were adopted in much of Europe in the 19th century. In countries as diverse as Italy, Ireland, France and Germany, political leaders tried to construct a new sense of national identity. As memorably described by Sardinia's Massimo d'Aglezio on the eve of Italian unification, "[w]e have made Italy. Now we need to make Italians." This nation building project often involved not just the adoption of national infrastructure projects and the provision of common curricula in education and the gradual erasure of linguistic diversity, but also the use of propaganda through a variety of means.

We define political propaganda as a form of communication that is used by leaders to persuade their audience to further a particular political agenda – including nation building. Of course, such communication may involve the selective presentation of facts and/or the provision of information in a way that presses the emotional triggers

of the audience and gets them to act differently to how they would have otherwise (see Stanley 2015 for a discussion). This latter role of propaganda was perhaps put forth most sharply by the Minister of Propaganda in the Nazi government, Joseph Goebbels, who argued that "arguments must be crude, clear and forceful and appeal to emotions and instincts, not the intellect. Truth is unimportant and entirely subordinate to tactics and psychology" (Trevor-Roper and Trevor-Roper 1978).

The effectiveness of propaganda in either excluding individuals of certain religious, linguistic and ethnic categories or constructing an inclusive national identity depends on a number of factors.[1] These factors in turn depend on both the demand for information as well as its supply from political leadership. These twin demand-supply dimensions that make for effective propaganda are illustrated nicely in a recent study by Adena et al. (2015). On the supply side, the authors examine pro-government propaganda over radio used (at different times) by both the Weimar leadership and subsequently by the Nazi Party. On the demand side, they examine whether listeners in some regions were more likely to be receptive to anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda – for instance, those who grew up in regions with a history of anti-Semitism. Their results show that pro-government propaganda helped slow the spread of the Nazi Party. Subsequently, when the Nazis acquired political power, their radio propaganda helped consolidate their power with their nationalistic vision that excluded German Jews and worsened anti-Semitism.[2]

Propaganda can also have inadvertent side-effects, as illustrated by DellaVigna et al. (2014) (featured in Chapter 17 of this eBook), who show how Serbian nationalistic propaganda had cross-border effects. In particular, Croats listening to Serbian radio for entertainment purposes were also exposed to Serbian nationalist rhetoric and turned sharply against Serbs as a result.

However, the relative dearth of studies that evaluate whether a country has engaged in inclusive nation building (successful or otherwise) means we have to rely on a handful of studies. This is especially the case when evaluating studies that inform us whether such social engineering can be achieved, in particular in poor countries with a history of inter-ethnic conflict. We describe one such study in the next section, drawing on Blouin and Mukand (2019).

1 Populists as varied as Orban of Hungary, Modi in India and Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom have used propaganda and exclusionary rhetoric to rally popular support behind their policies and vision of the nation. For a recent survey on populism, see Guriev and Pappaiannou (2022).

2 For more on Nazi indoctrination, see Voigtlander and Voth (2015), who argue that Nazi schooling was probably even more important than propaganda over radio or cinema.

3 BRIDGING THE DIVIDE? PROPAGANDA IN KAGAME'S RWANDA

Bridging an ethnic divide would be challenging anywhere. Rwanda, a country that witnessed one of the worst genocides in recorded history, presents a special challenge. In 1994, extremists belonging to the majority Hutu ethnic group massacred up to a million Tutsi, comprising 70% of the total Tutsi population. Compounding the challenge, Rwanda is one of the poorest countries in the world and has never been a liberal democracy.

The autocratic leader of Rwanda is President Paul Kagame, a member of the Tutsi minority. Under his rule, the government has launched an ambitious programme of nation building that aims to bring Hutus and Tutsis together. Has there been real progress in ethnic reconciliation, or has the programme merely been a propaganda ploy to satisfy foreign investors and aid agencies? This question is hard to answer.[3]

Results on the ground are difficult to evaluate because, under President Kagame, Rwanda is an autocracy where the government directly controls the national narrative on reconciliation. Independent investigation of inter-ethnic attitudes is not permitted. Even if it were allowed, local people are often afraid to give honest answers about Hutu–Tutsi relations. The *New York Times* reported recently that "Mr. Kagame has created a nation that is orderly but repressive ... Against this backdrop, it is difficult to gauge sentiment about the effectiveness of reconciliation efforts".

Despite these challenges, in Blouin and Mukand (2019) we investigate the Rwandan government's efforts to reshape ethnic attitudes through propaganda over radio. In Rwanda, much of the populace is illiterate and does not have access to television, so radio is the most important form of mass media and often the only source of information and entertainment. Although Rwanda now has many independent radio stations, the broadcast of news and information is largely confined to Radio Rwanda – the official radio station on which the government controls messaging tightly. The message of national unity comes in a variety of guises, of which two are notable: nation-building rhetoric that frames the presentation of the news, and radio dramas and soap operas that emphasise Hutu–Tutsi reconciliation.

We aimed to compare the ethnic attitudes and behaviour of those who have been exposed to propaganda and news from Radio Rwanda with those who were not. This is not straightforward. To illustrate the challenge, research from the United States tells us that households that decide to tune into Fox News can hold very different beliefs from those that do not. We had to allow for the possibility of a similar situation in Rwanda – households that own radios and listen to Radio Rwanda might already be very different from those who do not.

3 For instance, while trust between Hutus and Tutsis is high, in Blouin and Mukand (2022) we document that in Rwanda and Burundi there remain feelings of victimhood that continue to shape the outcomes of inter-ethnic interactions.

To address this challenge, we used a natural experiment. Rwanda is known colloquially as the 'land of a thousand hills'. Its mountainous topography makes for accidental variation in the coverage of radio broadcasts. Some households that happen to live in villages in clear sight of a radio transmission tower receive clear Radio Rwanda broadcasts. Others, who happen to live out of the line-of-sight of the radio towers, receive poor radio reception and are less likely to have been exposed to government propaganda over the radio.

In general, to receive an audible radio signal a signal strength of about 45 decibel units (dBu) is required. We can therefore compare people who live in villages that receive a signal of this strength with those who do not. Moreover, we can look at other 'false' thresholds to make sure that it is radio, and not some other factor, that is generating any differences in attitudes that we observe. For example, if the 45 dBu signal strength that defines radio reception also marked the largest differences in attitudes, this would strongly indicate that the radio was responsible for shifting attitudes. If, on the other hand, there were multiple radio strength thresholds that generated large differences, or the largest differences came at a very different threshold, then we might be far less convinced that radio propaganda was an important factor in shaping views towards identity.

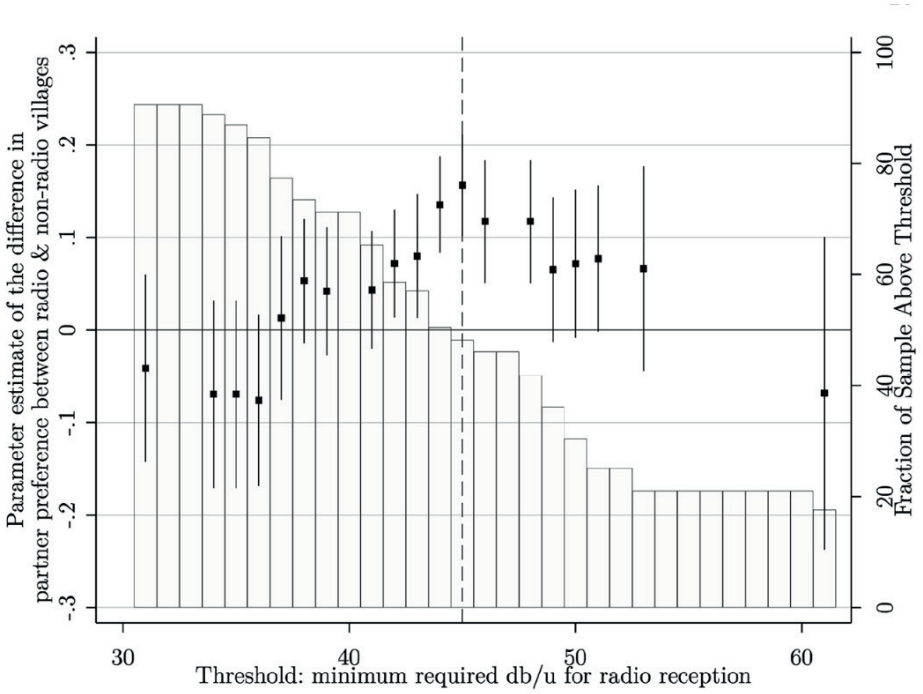
We conducted a series of experiments to compare Hutu–Tutsi attitudes of those exposed to Radio Rwanda broadcasts with others that were not. The results were striking and unexpected. First of all, those exposed to Radio Rwanda broadcasts proved to be much more willing to interact face-to-face with members of the other ethnic group. We asked all participants to identify five other people in attendance that they would like to complete an exercise with. If they completed the exercise productively, they had a chance to earn some additional money. We examined the share of the five people that they identified that were not from their ethnic group.

There were large differences in the inclusion of outgroup members on the lists of those who received the radio propaganda. Furthermore, when we look at all possible radio strength thresholds in the data, the one that generated the largest differences in inter-ethnic partner preferences was the 45 dBu threshold that defines an audible radio signal.

We can see this clearly in Figure 1, which plots the estimated difference in partner preference on the vertical axis, and various dBu thresholds that one can use to define comparison groups on the horizontal axis. The largest difference comes right at the 45 dBu threshold, with weakening effects as we move away from this threshold on either side. This is precisely the relationship that we would expect to see if the radio signal is causing differences in ethnic attitudes. If it was the radio signal that was generating differences, the more incorrectly we define an audible radio signal (by moving away from the 45 dBu threshold), the more we incorrectly categorise people who do receive a signal as not receiving one, and vice versa. At signal thresholds that are completely

uninformative of whether the village receives the propaganda (i.e. far to the left or right on the horizontal axis) we would expect no differences in inter-ethnic attitudes if the radio propaganda is effective. This is precisely what we see.

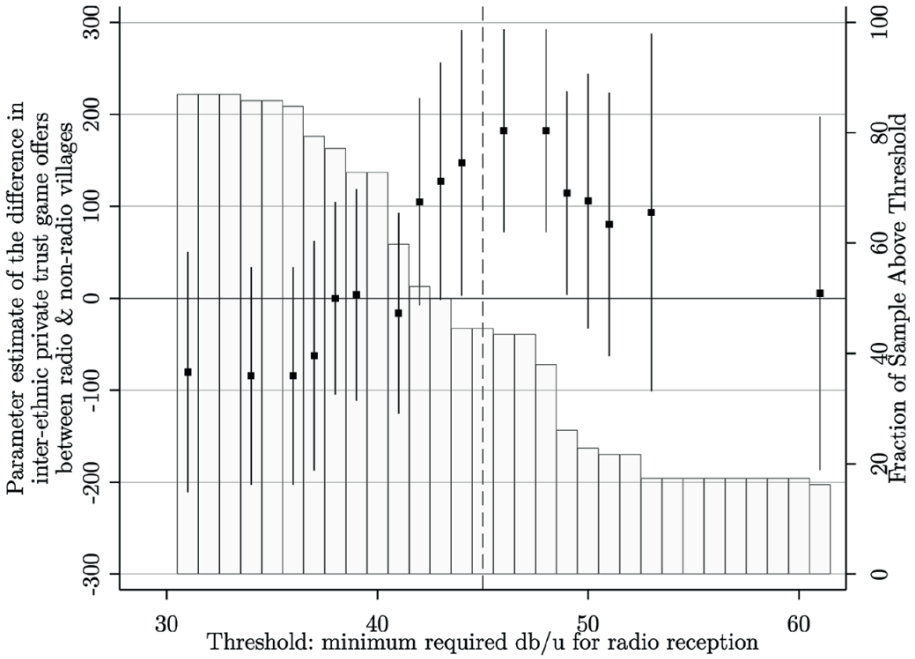
FIGURE 1 PARTNER SELECTION MEASURE AND RADIO RWANDA RECEPTION



Rwandans exposed to propaganda did not only demonstrate increased willingness to partner with those that identified with the other ethnic group. We had respondents play a standard game used in economics to measure trust. The 'trust game' is played with two people: one person is randomly designated as the *sender*, the other as the *receiver*. The sender receives some money at the start of the game (in our case, about $1). They must then decide how much of their endowment they should risk. They are tasked with sharing some portion of their endowment with the receiver. The key is that whatever they share is matched by the research team. The receiver then can return as much or as little of what is shared back to the sender. So, if the sender trusts the receiver to reward them for risking a large share of their endowment, then they should risk everything, as that means more money is matched and everyone has a chance to be better off. If, on the other hand, they fear that the receiver will keep everything that was shared for themselves, then the prudent course of action is to share nothing, ensuring that they leave the game with at least their original endowment.

Just as in the partner preference exercise, when we analysed the offers in the inter-ethnic trust game it immediately became apparent that those exposed to radio propaganda exhibited levels of inter-ethnic trust that were much higher. Indeed, we see differences in inter-ethnic trust that mirror almost precisely the differences that we saw in partner preferences. The differences are the highest at the 45 dBu radio signal threshold, and they drop off consistently as we move away from that threshold (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 PRIVATE, INTER-ETHNIC TRUST GAME OFFER AND RADIO RWANDA RECEPTION

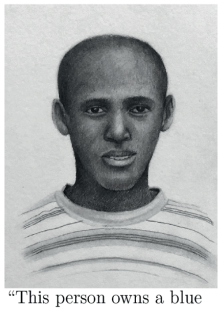


The most remarkable finding was on the salience of ethnic identity. Ethnic salience is not a concept that has been studied extensively by economists, so we adapted a tool from cognitive psychology to try to measure it. We showed each respondent eight different pictures. Some of the pictures were of young male Hutu, some of young male Tutsi. (some examples are in Figure 3). After showing each photo, our research team read a statement about the person in the photo. Each statement was innocuous, and we tried to avoid statements that might be associated with ethnic stereotypes. An example is: "This person likes bananas but dislikes guava".

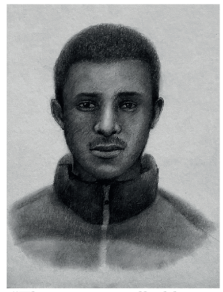
After showing all eight photos and reading aloud the statements, and following a brief break, there was a surprise quiz. All participants made some mistakes in the quiz, but that was expected since they had not dedicated themselves to memorising the associations between the statements and photos. But that was not the point. The point was instead

to see, when they did inevitably make mistakes, whether they systematically confused a Hutu photo for another Hutu, or a Tutsi with another Tutsi. If they did this at far greater regularity than if they were choosing photos at random, we could infer that they were using ethnicity as a cognitive tool to help them categorise the photos. For these people, we can say that ethnicity is salient. If, on the other hand, they mistook a Hutu for another Hutu, or Tutsi with another Tutsi at about the rate we might expect by chance alone, we can infer that for these people, ethnicity is not salient.

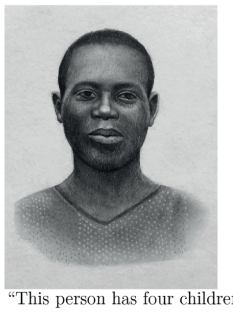
FIGURE 3 EXAMPLE PHOTOS FROM SALIENCE EXERCISE



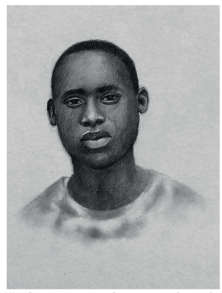
"This person owns a blue bicycle and two red motorbikes"



"This person really likes bananas but dislikes guava"



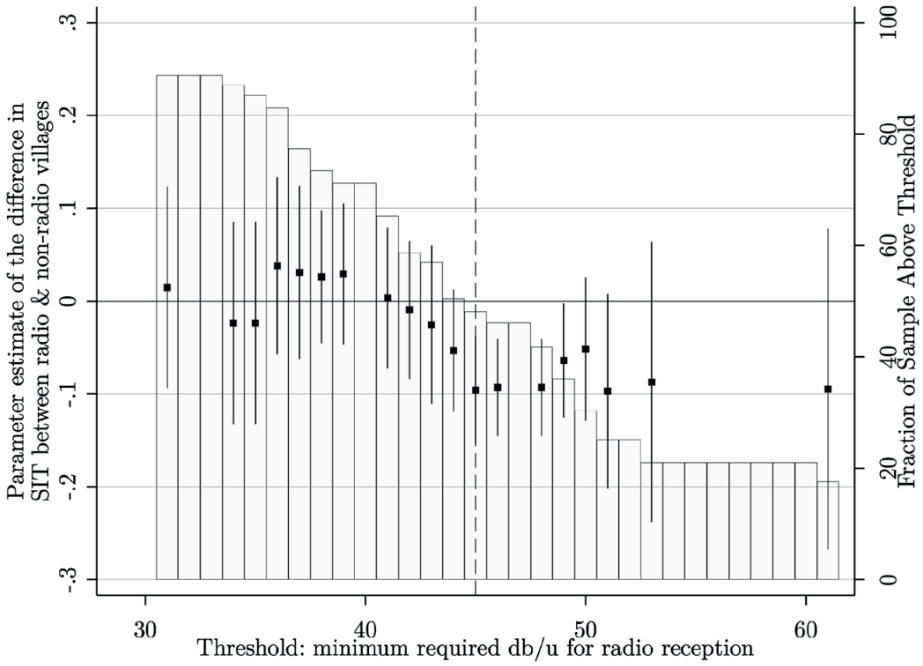
"This person has four children: two boys and two girls"



"This person has two brothers"

Once again, we found that exposure to radio broadcasts made individuals much less likely to categorise others based on their ethnicity. Ethnic salience was much lower among those exposed to radio propaganda than those not exposed – exhibiting again an almost identical pattern to inter-ethnic trust and partner preference (Figure 4). In other words, those individuals for whom ethnicity was cognitively 'erased' were also precisely the ones who were much more trusting and generous towards those of the other ethnicity.

FIGURE 4 SALIENCE OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AND RADIO RWANDA RECEPTION



Taken as a whole, the evidence suggests something very surprising. In one of the poorest countries in the world, and one that recently experienced one of the worst genocides in human history, the government has found a way to bridge the ethnic divide between the Hutus and Tutsis. Moreover, this was done in a relatively short period of time, with just over ten years of radio propaganda.

In sharp contrast to what we have seen elsewhere across the globe, the media in Rwanda has helped reduce ethnic division.

4 DISCUSSION

The above study provides reason for optimism in the case of inclusive nation building. Propaganda can not only be used to divide and exclude groups. Instead, it may also help erase older identities and create a new identity that brings them together. However, there are also grounds for caution. For instance, might the improved inter-ethnic relations in Rwanda be reversed just as easily? Unfortunately, we have no evidence of the extent to which this relatively inclusive nation building is sustainable or not. In part this is because it may well depend on the shifting whims and priorities of President Kagame. The country's own battered history over the past 25 years suggests that the airwaves

have had considerable power in manipulating public opinion for ill (Yanagizawa-Drott 2014) as well as for good – by fomenting inter-ethnic hate before fostering inter-ethnic reconciliation.

Finally, more pessimistically, Rwanda's distinctive political environment makes it difficult to generalise its lessons to other societies. Can liberal democracies use the media to reduce ethnic polarisation in the same way? It is sobering to realise that reducing polarisation and bringing about inclusive nation building through propaganda may be easier in an autocratic country with no real media freedom, such as Rwanda, than in a noisy, competitive democracy where conflicting opinions are seen as normal and are readily voiced.

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