



Who controls the wealth? Electoral system design and ethnic war in resource-rich countries



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ABSTRACT

Both natural resource wealth and electoral system design are frequently investigated factors in the civil wars literature. So far, however, there is no well-known study which explicitly considers the interaction effect between these two factors on the risk of violent ethnic conflict. We argue that resource-rich countries with a proportional electoral system for the legislature are less prone to ethnic civil war than resource-rich countries with a majoritarian or mixed electoral system, as proportional electoral systems tend to increase the effective number of parliamentary parties and thus the number of groups who can share state control over resource wealth. We find empirical support for this argument using binary time-series-cross-section analysis covering 83 to 140 countries between 1984 and 2007.

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1. Introduction

Given that both natural resource wealth and electoral system design are frequently investigated factors in the civil wars literature (see e.g. Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Fjelde, 2009; Horowitz, 2002; Reilly, 2001), it is surprising that there is no well-known study which explicitly considers the interaction effect between these two factors on the risk of violent ethnic conflict. We seek to fill this gap in the academic debate by highlighting the impact of electoral systems for the legislature on the risk of ethnic civil war in resource-rich countries. Since proportional electoral systems tend to increase the effective number of parliamentary parties and thus the number of groups who can share state control over resource wealth, we expect resource-rich countries with a proportional electoral system to

experience lower risks of ethnic war than resource-rich countries with a majoritarian or mixed electoral system.

In the following sections, we will, first, review arguments on the relevance of electoral system design in ethnically diverse societies more generally, before then outlining possible causal connections between electoral system design and the prospects of ethnopolitical (in)stability specifically in resource-rich countries. In the empirical part of our analysis, we will test the interaction effects between different types of electoral system for the legislature and different forms of natural resource wealth on the risk of ethnic civil war using binary time-series-cross-section analysis. The results from this analysis provide strong empirical support for our hypothesis that resource-rich countries with a proportional electoral system for the legislature are less prone to ethnic civil war than resource-rich countries with a majoritarian or mixed electoral system.¹

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It is thereby important to note that we kept our arguments in this paper intentionally simple, as this analysis should be seen as a first, exploratory step into research on the interaction effects between electoral system design and natural resource wealth on the risk of large-scale ethnic violence. We thus purposely operationalise electoral systems purely on the basis of the electoral formula used to translate votes into seats (not taking into account further electoral system features such as district magnitude, thresholds or seat reservations) and do not seek to explain why different types of natural resource wealth might have different effects on the risk of ethnic civil war. Instead, we invite future research to build on the findings from this analysis by investigating the aforementioned ‘finer’ aspects of electoral system design and natural resource wealth in more detail.

2. Electoral systems and the risk of ethnic violence

Ethnic civil wars are civil wars in which ‘the goals of at least one conflict party are defined in (exclusively) ethnic terms, and ... the primary fault line of confrontation is one of ethnic distinctions.’ (Wolff, 2007: 2)² Given their potential to create vast social, political and economic damage (see e.g. Addison and Murshed, 2003; Lake and Rothchild, 1998; Wolff, 2007), it remains a key task for scholars and policy-makers alike to understand why ethnic civil wars may occur and how they can be managed.

For the purpose of this paper – and in line with our choice of data by the Political Instability Task Force (PITF) for our dependent variable (see Section 4 of this paper) –, we concentrate on episodes of ethnic civil war in which the government appears as one of the conflicting parties, and use the term ‘ethnic’ as catch-all phrase for a variety of national, ethnic, religious, or other communal characteristics. Since we are interested in the effects of electoral system design (i.e. specifically: the electoral formula used to translate votes into seats) in resource-rich countries, our analysis belongs to the institutionalist tradition of inquiry, which focuses on the relationships between political institutions and ethnopolitical (in)stability (Varshney, 2002). Within this tradition of inquiry, the design of electoral systems for the legislature is frequently referred to as key institutional choice in ethnically diverse societies (see e.g. Horowitz, 2002; Lijphart, 2004; Reilly, 2001), as the electoral rules by which votes are translated into seats are a basic yet crucial indicator for the representativeness of any political system (cf. Shugart and Carey, 1992; Norris, 1997).

Following Norris (1997) and Reilly (2002), there are two key debates about the effects of different types of electoral system design: whether majoritarian electoral systems are superior to proportional ones (Norris, 1997), and whether list proportional representation (PR) or preferential electoral systems such as alternative vote (AV) and single transferable vote (STV) are more suitable for ethnically diverse societies (Reilly, 2002). Majoritarian electoral

systems can be defined as systems that require the winning candidate to obtain either a plurality or majority of the vote, while proportional systems allocate seats in proportion to a party’s (or candidates’) share of the vote (Golder, 2005).

For the purpose of this paper, we do not classify preferential electoral systems into a separate category (see also Section 4), since relatively few countries employed a preferential electoral system for the legislature during the time period considered in our empirical analysis. Instead, we include AV systems into our majoritarian electoral system category and STV systems into our proportional one, as AV is clearly majoritarian, because it ‘systematically discriminates against those at the bottom of the poll in order to promote effective government for the winner’ (Norris, 1997: 302), while STV follows the inclusionary logic of a proportional electoral system (Mitchell, 2008). For these reasons, we focus here on the academic debate on majoritarian versus proportional electoral systems (Norris, 1997), rather than list proportional representation versus preferential electoral systems (Reilly, 2002).

Discussions regarding the choice between majoritarian and proportional electoral systems typically focus on the former’s emphasis on government effectiveness and accountability, and the latter’s aim to give political voice to a diversity of social groups and to promote greater fairness for minority parties (Norris, 1997). Majoritarian electoral systems are based on winner-takes-all principles whereby the candidate – or, in majoritarian electoral systems using multi-member districts such as the limited vote, the candidates – supported by a plurality or majority of the vote are elected, while all other voters remain unrepresented (cf. Golder, 2005; Lijphart, 1999). In legislative elections, this tends to lead to an exaggeration of parliamentary seats for the party that gains a nationwide plurality or majority of votes, with the aim to produce a decisive parliamentary majority which, under parliamentary forms of government, facilitates the establishment of a strong (i.e. single-party) government (ibid.; Norris, 1997, 2002). Put differently, majoritarian electoral systems for the legislature (and especially plurality systems) tend to create a manufactured majority for the party in first place ‘by translating a relatively small lead in votes into a larger lead of seats in parliament’ (Norris, 1997: 304) which makes it less likely that coalition governments need to be formed (ibid.). In this manner, majoritarian electoral systems for the legislature are said to enhance both government effectiveness and vertical accountability in parliamentary forms of government, since – as long as they maintain their own backbenchers’ support – single-party executives arguably will find it easier to implement their manifesto promises than coalition executives (Norris, 2004), while conversely voters will have less difficulties ‘to assign blame or praise for the government’s performance and to reward or punish parties accordingly’ (ibid.: 70).

On the other hand, however, the reliance of majoritarian electoral systems for the legislature on winner-takes-all principles implies that the trade-offs for achieving decisive majorities, government effectiveness and accountability are significant, especially in ethnically diverse societies. Since only those candidates are elected to parliament who win a

² Ethnic distinctions, in turn, can be defined as distinctions of enduring collective identities that are ‘based on common descent, shared experiences, and cultural traits’ (Gurr, 2000: 4).

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