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## The organizational ecology of ethnic cleavages: The nonlinear effects of ethnic diversity on party system fragmentation



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### ABSTRACT

The conventional wisdom regarding party system fragmentation assumes that the effects of electoral systems and social cleavages are linear. However, recent work applying organizational ecology theories to the study of party systems has challenged the degree to which electoral system effects are linear. This paper applies such concepts to the study of social cleavages. Drawing from theories of organizational ecology and the experience of many ethnically diverse African party systems, I argue that the effects of ethnic diversity are nonlinear, with party system fragmentation increasing until reaching moderate levels of diversity before declining as diversity reaches extreme values. Examining this argument cross-nationally, the results show that accounting for nonlinearity in ethnic diversity effects significantly improves model fit.

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### 1. Introduction

The conventional wisdom regarding party systems maintains that the number of parties is determined by the interaction of electoral systems and social cleavages (Duverger, 1954; Ordeshook and Shvetsova, 1994; Amorim Neto and Cox, 1997; Clark and Golder, 2006; Singer and Stephenson, 2009). According to this literature, more proportional electoral systems produce greater party system fragmentation when cleavage diversity increases. Implied, though rarely stated so explicitly, is the notion that increases in party system fragmentation resulting from increased cleavage diversity are relatively linear.

Recent work has questioned the degree to which this interaction effect is linear. Noting that most work has employed the logged functional form of district magnitude—which implies a nonlinear relationship to party system fragmentation—instead of the linear functional form, Lowery et al. (2010) argue that the relationship between electoral system proportionality and party system

fragmentation is nonlinear. Drawing from organizational ecology theories, they maintain that at higher levels of proportionality, competition for voters becomes too intense and the availability of resources too scarce to support additional political parties; thus, increases in party system fragmentation level off at the highest levels of electoral system proportionality.

This paper builds on these criticisms of the linear assumptions made by previous research, though focusing specifically on the effect of ethnic diversity. I examine ethnicity in large part because ethnic diversity has been the cleavage measure of choice in most studies examining the interaction of electoral systems and social cleavages. Drawing from organizational ecology theories, I argue that the effect of ethnic cleavages is nonlinear. While increases in ethnic diversity will produce increases in party system fragmentation at moderate levels of ethnic diversity, extreme ethnic diversity will be associated with lower levels of party system fragmentation than a linear relationship would imply. This is because extreme ethnic diversity leaves few ethnic groups with bases of support sizable enough to sustain parties with enough votes to

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compete for control of the government and/or to influence policy favorable to their ethnic groups. Instead, parties in contexts of extreme ethnic diversity have to (and often do) build broad multiethnic coalitions if they want to compete for control of the government and/or increase their chances of influencing policy.

In this paper, I examine the linearity of the relationship between ethnic diversity and party system fragmentation. Specifically, I examine whether this organizational ecology argument helps to explain the patterns of party system fragmentation cross-nationally. Applied to a data set that includes elections from countries around the world, this argument helps to explain the nonlinear relationship between ethnic diversity and party system fragmentation.

## 2. Ethnic diversity and party system fragmentation

As noted above, most previous research regarding the relationship between ethnic diversity and party system fragmentation—which focuses primarily on party systems in Western democracies—maintains that the effects of ethnic diversity on party system fragmentation are roughly linear (e.g. Ordeshook and Shvetsova, 1994; Amorim Neto and Cox, 1997; Clark and Golder, 2006). However, if one is to explain the relationship between ethnicity and party systems cross-nationally, one must understand the effects of ethnicity within the context of Sub-Saharan African elections and how the relationship between ethnic diversity and party system fragmentation seen in African polities fits with the patterns seen elsewhere. Much of the research on African party systems has focused on the degree to which the patterns of party system fragmentation in Africa are different—that is, the degree to which the effects of institutions and social cleavages on African party systems match the findings of previous research. For instance, some work (Mozaffar et al., 2003; though see also Brambor et al., 2007a) has argued that institutions, ethnic cleavages, and the interaction between the two types of variables do not have the same effects on party system fragmentation as those seen in previous research focusing on non-African party systems.

The notion that African party systems are distinct is seen particularly clearly with regard to the low levels of party system fragmentation and high frequency of one-party dominance (Bogaards, 2004). Contrary to the fears of those like Horowitz (1985), the adoption of PR in some African countries has not resulted in highly fragmented party systems, as low party system fragmentation pervades the continent, occurring under PR just as it does under majoritarian electoral systems (Erdmann and Basedau, 2008). Some claim that low party system fragmentation in African countries occurs in a context of high electoral volatility, with one dominant party and several inconsequential opposition parties that enter and exit the party system from one election to the next (Mozaffar and Scarritt, 2005; though see also Bogaards, 2008), while others claim that most African party systems are either becoming more institutionalized or have been highly institutionalized from the outset of democratic elections (Kuenzi and Lambright, 2001; Lindberg, 2007). Regardless one's interpretation of the effect and importance of electoral volatility, the

consensus remains that many African party systems are characterized by low party system fragmentation, despite high levels of ethnic diversity in several of those countries.

Unlike the conventional wisdom, which has assumed that greater ethnic diversity produces greater party system fragmentation, some literature focusing on African party systems argues that extremely high levels of ethnic diversity actually serve to limit party system fragmentation. As part of the “Big Man” style of politics, African politicians try to build the largest possible coalitions of supporters as a means of demonstrating their power and prestige, as well as to maintain electoral stability and security (Hyden, 2006: 103–104). Given the high degree of ethnic diversity in many African polities, many African politicians often call for national unity in ways that appeal to multiple ethnic groups through what are termed ethnic congress parties instead of appealing to voters along specific ethnic-group lines as ethnic-based parties do.<sup>1</sup> As a result, party system fragmentation is low in countries with extremely high levels of ethnic diversity (Erdmann and Basedau, 2008).

A good example of how low levels of party system fragmentation can occur despite high levels of ethnic fragmentation is the case of South Africa. Defined in ethnic terms, South Africa's population is quite diverse: in addition to whites (who can be divided further into Dutch Afrikaners and English) and Indians (those whose ancestry traces back to the Indian subcontinent), South Africa's black population is divided into several ethnic groups, including (to name a few) the Zulu, Xhosa, Pedi, Tswana, Sotho, Tsonga, Swazi, Venda, and Ndebele. This fragmentation makes South Africa one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world: using data from Fearon (2003), the effective number of ethnic groups in South Africa (i.e. calculating ethnic fragmentation in the same way as party system fragmentation using the effective number of parties: see Laakso and Taagepera, 1979) is 8.3. With such considerable ethnic diversity, and basing expectations regarding party system fragmentation in South Africa on the conventional wisdom, one would expect that South Africa's party system would be highly fragmented as well. Despite considerable ethnic diversity and using a highly proportional electoral system, party system fragmentation in South Africa is actually quite low: the effective number of electoral parties in 1994 and 1999 was 2.24 and 2.16, respectively.

While several prominent opposition parties exist, South Africa's party system revolves predominantly around the African National Congress (ANC), which has won no less than 60 percent of the vote since it was first allowed to contest elections in 1994. Instead of party leaders mobilizing voters along *ethnic* lines, the ANC has chosen to mobilize support along *racial* lines from voters belonging to most of the black African ethnic groups. This has rendered each South African election into a “racial census,” with

<sup>1</sup> Because of the difficulty in defining the concept of ethnic parties (see Chandra, 2011), I use the term “ethnic-based party” to refer to a party that appeals to (and wins support from) one ethnic group exclusively (or nearly so) and the term “ethnic congress party” to refer to parties that mobilize voters and win support from multiple ethnic groups.

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