



Democracy with group identity

Arye L. Hillman^{a,b}, Kfir Metsuyanım^c, Niklas Potrafke^{d,e,*}

^a Department of Economics, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan 529002 Israel

^b CESifo, Munich, Germany

^c Government of Israel, Jerusalem, Israel

^d LMU Munich, 80539 Munich, Germany

^e Ifo Institute, Poschingerstr. 5, 81679 Munich, Germany



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 October 2014

Received in revised form 31 March 2015

Accepted 2 April 2015

Available online 9 April 2015

JEL classification:

D03

D72

D74

H77

Keywords:

Voting turnout

Voter decisiveness

Expressive voting

Instrumental voting

Local government

Arab Spring

ABSTRACT

Group-based identity undermines democracy by impeding democratic change of government. A substantial literature has therefore studied how to make democracy consistent with group identity. We contribute to this literature by introducing the role of group decisiveness into voting incentives and mobilization of voters. In the elections that we study, for the same populations, accounting for income and other influences, group identity increased voter turnout on average by some 8 percentage points in local elections and decreased voter turnout by some 20 percentage points in national elections. We empirically investigate the effect of group identity on voter turnout and also evaluate whether group identity resulted in budgetary imbalance or replacement of local government because of dysfunctionality. Our contribution is to show how democracy can persist with group identity, although democracy in such instances differs from usual political competition.

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1. Introduction

Whether identity is individualistic or group-based (see Inglehart, 2000) affects the feasibility of democracy. Individualistic voters decide through emotion (Westen, 2008) or reevaluation of candidates and policies (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2013) whether to retain or change their political preferences, so allowing democratic change of government to take place through the outcome of political competition (Ursprung, 1991). Group-based identity is, on the other hand, usually inconsistent with political competition and democracy (see for example Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972; Hillman, 2007). For there is no point to contesting elections when voting according to group identity results in repetition over time of the same electoral outcome. Or there is no point in being a 'loyal opposition' that awaits a turn in government when, because of group voting, such a turn will never come. With group identity impeding change of government through electoral competition, there has often been autocracy rather than democracy and change of government has been by non-democratic means.

* Corresponding author at: Ifo Institute, Poschingerstr. 5, 81679 Munich, Germany. Tel.: +49 89 9224 1319; fax: +49 89 907795 1319.
E-mail address: POTRAFKE@ifo.de (N. Potrafke).

There have been proposals for how transition from autocracy to democracy might be implemented when identity is group-based. A suggestion has been to ensure political inclusion of groups through proportional representation (see for example [Lijphart, 1977, 2004](#)). Another suggestion (for example, [Horowitz, 1985](#)) has been to design political institutions so that candidates and parties can appeal to a broad base of voters encompassing different groups. [Reilly \(2001\)](#) observed that proportional representation encourages candidates to appeal to group identity whereas preferential voting allows voters with group identity to give their first preference to the candidate of their group and then to proceed to vote for candidates of other groups. [Birnie \(2007\)](#) proposed that democracy could be implemented by including leaders of different groups in government.¹

Notwithstanding the various suggestions, democracy with group-based identity has often been elusive. A wide range of studies has found that democracy has in particular been absent from Muslim-majority societies ([Lipset, 1994](#); [Midlarsky, 1998](#); [Barro, 1999](#); [Fish, 2002](#); [Karatomyky, 2002](#); [Borooah and Paldam, 2007](#); [Rowley and Smith, 2009](#); [Facchini, 2010](#); [Potrafke, 2012, 2013](#)). Also, the ‘Arab Spring’, which had been predicted to introduce persisting democracy into Muslim-majority countries, ended with a general return to autocratic government.²

Sustained democracy with Muslim-majority populations is however found in local-government jurisdictions in the state of Israel. Voter turnout in these jurisdictions is ostensibly the highest in the world in democratic elections with voluntary voting, approaching in some cases 100%.³ The high voter turnout includes men and women.⁴ Voter turnout has been high in Muslim Arab communities and also in the Druze and Christian populations. The latter three groups have together constituted some 20 percent of the population of the state of Israel (the time of elections that we shall study, in 2008, the Muslim population constituted 16.6% of the total population and the Druze and Christian populations both 1.3%).⁵ Although minorities in the total population (the majority population is Jewish), the Muslims, Druze, and Christian populations are often majorities in their local-government jurisdictions.⁶

Identity in the three minority groups tends to be group-based. The source of group identity can be religion. Religiously mixed jurisdictions are however uncommon (although we shall presently describe for illustrative purposes a mixed jurisdiction). Most commonly, the source of group identity is the extended family or clan. [Ben Bassat and Dahan \(2012\)](#) matched family names of voters to family names of candidates using data from elections in 2003 to show that voting in local elections was based on extended-family identity (which they describe using the Arabic term ‘hamula’).⁷

The Jewish population does not tend to live in a structure of extended families and does not have the opportunity to vote for a member of an extended family as a candidate for political office (or to vote for a candidate who extended families have agreed to support). We attribute individualistic identity to Jewish voters and draw on our own empirical results from elections in 2007/8/9 and the prior research of [Ben Bassat and Dahan \(2012\)](#) on elections in Israel in 2003 as background for studying voter behavior with group and individualistic identity.⁸

Section 2 considers voting incentives distinguishing between expressive and instrumental motives for voting ([Fiorina, 1976](#); [Hillman, 2010](#)). Instrumental voting requires a prospect of material gain through decisiveness. Individual voters are usually not decisive but groups can be decisive. We consider incentives for inclusiveness in government when voters have group identity. Group decisiveness requires mobilizing voters and overcoming the free-rider problem of group voter turnout.

In Section 3 we describe the institutional background to voting in Israel, which is the source of our data. We also present a case of group inclusiveness in government and describe consequences when the prior sharing agreement is disrupted.

Section 4 reports empirical results on the relation between group identity and voter turnout in local-government and national elections (our results are consistent with the results of [Ben Bassat and Dahan, 2012](#) for the previous elections).

In Section 5 we investigate empirically whether group identity is associated with local-government budgetary imbalance. Group identity has been proposed to be linked to cultural obligation of officials in government to cater to requests for privileged benefits from members of their own group ([Lipset and Lenz, 2000](#)). The sought privileged benefits include ‘rent seeking from state coffers’ ([Park et al., 2005](#)) and can result in budgetary imbalance. Local governments in Israel with budgetary imbalance are subject to regulation through financial rehabilitation budgets of the Ministry of the Interior of the central government. A local government with budgetary imbalance that does not, in a majority vote, agree to implement a financial rehabilitation program effectively disbands itself, with local-government elections then not taking place until conditions consistent with fiscal viability are judged by the Ministry of the Interior to have been restored. A procedure is thus in place for addressing the moral hazard problem of fiscal federalism that local governments may overspend in anticipation of ‘soft budgets’ from higher levels of government ([Hillman, 2009, chapter 9](#)).

¹ Coexistence of democracy with group identity is of course not an issue if cultural assimilation makes differences in identity transitory ([Young, 1976](#)). In high-income democracies, group identity can make secession an issue (as in Québec, Scotland, Britany, and Catalonia). High incomes do not prevent identity-based conflict (see [Abadie and Gardeazabal, 2003](#) on the Basque country and [Dubois, 2013](#) on Corsica). Rather than minorities, ethnically-based political parties can represent majority groups (see [Higashijima and Nakai, 2011](#) on the Baltic countries). On democracy and group identity in low-income societies, see [Chandra \(2004\)](#) on India, [Posner \(2005\)](#) on Africa, and [Kimenyi \(2013\)](#) on Kenya.

² On expectations regarding the Arab Spring, see [Weddady and Ahmari \(2012\)](#), [Amin et al. \(2012\)](#), [Crystal \(2012\)](#), and [Inbar \(2013\)](#). On the brief period of democracy in Egypt, see [Elsayyad and Hanafy \(2014\)](#) on parliamentary elections and [Al-Ississ and Atallah \(2015\)](#) on the presidential election. Democratic elections took place in 2014 in Tunisia, where the Arab Spring began. On a political economic model of the Arab Spring see [Hodler \(2012\)](#).

³ High “voter turnout” also occurs in single-candidate autocracies. In such cases, voting is not an act of choosing from among alternatives. See [Yeret \(1995\)](#).

⁴ Arab society has been traditionally patriarchal (see [Joseph, 1994, 1996](#)). On gender aspects of Arab society, see also [Donno and Russett \(2004\)](#), [Cooray and Potrafke \(2011\)](#), [Rahman \(2012\)](#), [Potrafke and Ursprung \(2012\)](#), and [Gutmann and Voigt \(2015\)](#).

⁵ Central Bureau of Statistics State of Israel (2009).

⁶ Christians in Israel include those of European (or Russian) origin living in Jewish-majority localities and also those whose ancestors lived in the region before the Arab invasion in the 7th century. The latter Christians are mostly associated with eastern churches. When we refer to ‘Christians’, the intention is eastern Christians and not European (or Russian-origin) Christians who live in Jewish majority areas. On the different Christian denominations and groups in Israel, see [Hänzel \(2010\)](#).

⁷ The research was facilitated by the extended family tending to live together in the same neighborhood and to vote at the same polling station.

⁸ The data for our study and also [Ben Bassat and Dahan \(2012\)](#) were for citizens of the state of Israel. The population under the auspices of the government of the Palestinian Authority was not part of our study.

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