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Introduction: Elections in Divided Societies

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Divided societies around the world require specific institutional arrangements, including electoral rules, to accommodate diversity of interest in ways that can deal with social divisions in a non-violent manner. What might sound like a truism is still frequently challenged in discussions on institutional design for divided societies. While scepticism in academia and among policy makers often focuses on whether democracy is at all possible in divided societies, a large number of countries have been forced to meet this particular challenge in recent decades. In some cases, such as Belgium, long-established democracies have experienced increasing division along linguistic (or ethnic) lines. In others, such as Macedonia, the transition to democracy has occurred under conditions of deep ethnic division and a long-standing antagonism between different communities with very distinct visions of the future of the state in which they live. A third category of cases is constituted by countries in which hegemonic parties in the past have dominated and at times constrained democratic competition, such as in Singapore or in Rwanda, but have subsequently moved towards more competitive elections. The marked divisions along ethnic, religious or racial lines not only inform today's voters' choices at the ballot box but they also frequently precede the specific electoral rule and political system in place today.

The conceptual discussions and case studies that follow this introduction focus on the evolution of electoral systems in seven countries around the world, from Belgium to Trinidad and Tobago. In some cases, such as Rwanda, experiments with multiparty elections in the post-genocide context of the country are recent, whereas in other cases, such as Guyana, elections discussed here date back several decades. The cases demonstrate that the ethnopolitical dynamics of elections are best understood in the context of the *evolution* of electoral systems, and not just by a snapshot analysis of their technical design. Understandably, much discussion on electoral systems in recent years has focused on the institutional design component: academic and policy-oriented research has made significant contributions to devising new electoral systems to 'manage' democracy and diversity in post-conflict divided societies, ranging from

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South Africa to Bosnia and Iraq. Whereas the choice of the electoral system is obviously crucial in setting the framework for the emergence of a stable democratic process and its ability to manage existing divisions peacefully within such societies, only the passing of time can provide more insight into the effectiveness of electoral rules and the evolving relationship between democracy and identity. In fact, the 'design' of electoral systems, like that of other institutions, is driven not only be intention but often also by accident or evolution and the consequences of social and political change (Goodin, 1998, pp. 24–30).

The way in which group interests are represented in any political system is also the result of a number of other factors often not related to ethnicity. Adjustments to the electoral system frequently have a profound relevance for minorities, although these changes are made on the basis of other considerations. In the case of Singapore the expansion of Group Representation Constituencies in the 1990s, as Eugene Tan details, appears at first sight to be a measure directed at enhancing the representation of smaller communities, in particular Malays. In fact, these constituencies primarily served to consolidate the political control by the dominant People's Action Party. Similarly in Macedonia, the majoritarian electoral system in use until 2002 was primarily motivated by the incumbents' desire to secure political dominance.

The two predominant schools in conflict resolution today—integrative and consociational power sharing—take very distinct views on which electoral systems stand the best chance of contributing to the successful management of conflict in deeply divided societies. As the debates on institutional and electoral system design are interlocked, there often appears to be a choice only between a proportional system, advocated by Arend Lijphart and other proponents of consociational systems, and 'integrative' electoral systems, such as alternative votes, suggested by Donald Horowitz and others (Sisk, 1996, pp. 27–45). As the following contributions demonstrate, this line of debate remains important, but constitutes at best only the starting point for a number of other key issues involved in addressing ethnic diversity in electoral systems.[1] In his contribution on Slovakia and Macedonia, Eben Friedman argues that the choice of proportional representation in majoritarian electoral systems for divided societies is not a foregone conclusion. While more effective in securing the representation of larger groups, such as Magyars in Slovakia or Albanians in Macedonia, proportional representation might disadvantage communities which are either small or which lack the necessary degree of political mobilization, such as the Roma in these two countries and elsewhere in Central and Southeastern Europe. Small minorities often find it extremely difficult to achieve representation in parliament through standard electoral rules. If the goal is indeed to assure the representation of members of smaller groups in parliament, this might require special minority-friendly rules, such as reserved seats or separate electoral rolls.

A related key challenge in electoral systems which seek to ensure the representation of groups and minorities is the nature according to which ethnicity, race or religion is represented. In the case of Belgium, as Jean-Benoit Pilet emphasizes, the determination of votes along linguistic lines is unacceptable, as this is viewed to foster a potentially divisive 'linguistic nationality'. In Singapore, on the other end of the spectrum, citizens are assigned their racial identity at birth. Predetermining the relations between individuals and their ethnic, racial and national identities naturally constrains the range of electoral systems available for representing groups. Even more so, such policies also limit the degree of subjective choice any given electoral system might offer. As the Bosnian

Constitutional Court pointed out in a landmark ruling in 2000 in regard to the predetermination of ethnicity, "the Belgian system does not exclude per se the right to stand as a candidate *solely* on the ground of language. Every citizen can stand as a candidate, but has—upon his election—to decide whether he will take the oath in French or in Flemish. It is therefore the subjective choice of the individual candidate whether to take the oath in French or in Flemish and thereby to 'represent' a specific language group" (Constitutional Court, 2000, para. 120, original emphasis). The dilemma between allowing candidates and voters to determine their ethnic, racial or religious identity on the basis of subjective criteria or defining a more rigid and possible even quasi 'objective' system for determining affiliation to a particular group is a reccurring problem in electoral systems which give representation to particular identities. The fundamentally subjective nature of such identities suggests that any predetermined identification without the consent of the individual, be it a candidate or a voter, is inappropriate in a liberal democracy. At the same time, a system allowing full, unchecked subjective choice might be equally problematic. Consider, for example, the well documented case of Hungary's local minority councils. All citizens have been able to vote for these minority councils during municipal elections, resulting in a large number of impostors reaping the benefit of being elected to represent a minority they clearly have no link to. Furthermore, voting across the community divide does not always help moderation, as the case of Brussels illustrates. In the only region of Belgium which allows voting across linguistic lines, the extremist Vlaams Blok has been more successful in wooing Francophone voters on its anti-immigrant platform than more moderate parties.

The nature of representation of ethnic and other indentities also informs the larger function of electoral systems or rules which address diversity. Matthijs Bogaards has distinguished between electoral systems which block ethnicity, those which aggregate and those which translate ethnicity (2004, pp. 250–256). Translating ethnicity is clearly linked to proportional representation, whereas aggregation transforms ethnic identity through electoral rules such as the alternative vote. Blockage finally suppresses the expression of ethnicity in the electoral system. One-party systems, such as in Rwanda and Singapore, in particular fall into this category. Interesting, however, is the divergence between the two. As David Emmanuel Kiwuwa demonstrates, Rwanda qualifies as a classical electoral system aimed at blocking ethnic representation with the goal of downplaying the division between Hutus and Tutsis as a factor in the country's post-genocide politics and possibly disguising the ethnic bias of the governing party. In Singapore, on the other hand, Eugene Tan argues that ethnic polarization has been blocked or at least heavily discouraged, but this dominant one-party system has also sought to institute a system of translating the diversity in the population at large into representation in parliament. In fact, these two divergent strategies can be found widely in many countries in Africa and Asia. The suppression of ethnicity as a politically relevant cleavage bears a number of obvious problems, as detailed by Kiwuwa for the case of Rwanda. First, it easily allows a hegemonic party to stave off competition by accusing it (rightly or wrongly) of being organized along ethnic lines. This danger particularly poses itself in majority–minority situations were majority ethnopolitical parties are accepted as regular political parties, whereas similar parties among minorities are defined as a potential threat and a target for banning. Second, such a ban is unlikely to render ethnicity irrelevant. In fact, such measures frequently accentuate the importance of ethnicity outside official politics, especially when ethnic cleavages had been previously instrumentalized.

As a result, ethnicity might matter, even if officially discouraged, and challenge the legitimacy of such policies and the regimes who propose them. The approach in Singapore, on the other hand, reflects the equally common policy not to ban ethnic representation as such, but to encourage cross-ethnic coalitions in a restrictive framework. As in the case of Rwanda, this approach has been closely associated with one hegemonic political party. The predominant Group Representation Constituencies require multiracial candidate lists, which discourage mono-racial parties. Similarly, presidential elections in Nigeria and Kenya require candidates to gather a minimum number of votes (and/or signatures for registration) from different regions to ensure the geographic (read ethnic) representativeness of the candidate. The case of Lebanon, which also has multi-member multi-religious electoral units, suggests that such systems do not *per se* benefit cross-ethnic parties or coalitions because of tokenism and temporary cross-community alliances. An alternative approach in the case of dominant parties are consociational features *within* the dominant party, as in the case of Singapore, but arguably also to be found in the ANC in South Africa (Bogaards, 2005, pp. 164–183).

In addition to the function of the electoral rules, the factor time is crucial in disentangling electoral rules and electoral systems. As Taagepera has argued, electoral systems are only the process of long-term evolution and 'appropriation' of a set of electoral rules into the political system (2002, pp. 248–264). As such, the electoral rules might acquire different meanings over time with the development of the electoral system. In Belgium the electoral rules changed much later than the system itself. As a result, the same electoral rules governed two different political systems: one in which only a few seats were won by separate linguistic parties and most electoral contestation took place between the 'spiritual families'; and, later, a system where no party cut across the linguistic boundary and the division of the country shifted from one based on ideology and religion to one based on language. The cases of Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago illustrate the same type of development, if only in the reverse direction. Here, as Sara Abraham demonstrates, multiracial parties and coalitions won in both countries in a setting where otherwise mono-racial parties had prevailed (before and after). Unlike in the case of Belgium, where the transformation towards a more ethnicized party system has been lasting, the switch to multiracial parties has been temporary. As Abrahams shows, this *temporary* reorientation of the electorate has been closely linked with larger economic transformations and major crises in the political systems (decolonization/decline of dominant party) which called for a broader coalition. The trajectory of the electoral systems in the countries under discussion here thus suggests that emergence of a system focused on ethnic lines can be the result of a gradual transformation, while the reduced rule of ethnicity is either of a temporary nature (Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana) or the result of explicit blockage (Rwanda).

A key lesson from these cases of elections in diverse societies is related to the development of electoral systems. Whether in established democracies like Belgium or in more recent democracies such as Macedonia or in countries like Rwanda which are just beginning to see multiparty elections (albeit severely constrained), electoral systems have been in flux and adjusted to the demands and needs of the societies' mobilized ethnopolitical groups. The changing nature of electoral systems in diverse societies suggest that there is neither one clear approach for all divided societies, nor is there one set of electoral rules which will not require adjustment over time to reflect the changing relationship between identity, society and democracy.

Note

1. For a more detailed analysis of these two interlocked debates on institutional and electoral system design, see Wolff (2005).

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