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Eric Wesselkamper '00
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Electoral System Design and Ethnic Separatism

A Rationalist Approach to Ethnic Politics in Eastern Europe

Eric Wesselkamper
Spring 2000

The resurgence of nationalism taking place throughout Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union raises important questions with respect to ethnic political mobilization, particularly with respect to the potential for ethnic separatism. Moreover, the region provides scholars an excellent setting in which to study the political effects of constitutional choices. This article, utilizing a rationalist approach which emphasizes the cost-benefit calculus of ethnic groups, seeks to analyze the impact of one such constitutional choice, the electoral system. The competing theories regarding the determinants of ethnic separatism are also examined. We find that the most important factor in explaining ethnic separatism is the basic geo-political arrangement of the group, as measured through spatial distribution.

Within the setting of the far-reaching ethnic resurgence witnessed throughout post-communist Eastern Europe, several competing explanatory frameworks have been put forth to explain the phenomenon of ethnic separatism. Building on what March and Olson (1988) refer to as the "new institutionalism," numerous studies have sought to empirically demonstrate the link between *institutions* and the political behavior of ethnic groups (Ishiyama, 1998; Pejovich, 1993; Horowitz, 1985; Lijphart, 1992; 1986; 1974; 1977). This article, operating on the basis of a rationalist approach, tests the effect of one such institution--the electoral system. To what extent does the design of a country's electoral system impact the political and behavioral calculus of an ethnic group with respect to separatism? To what extent is separatism determined by the other calculations about the costs, benefits, and feasibility of autonomy?

Theoretical Analysis of Separatism

Separatism (or secession) is a subcategory of nationalism that refers to an organized attempt to establish a separate sovereign state. Premdas argues that the determinants of ethnic separatism can be divided into two broad categories: primordial

and secondary. Primordial factors include race, religion, values or culture, and territory or homeland. Secondary factors serve as the "triggering mechanism of collective consciousness" and include neglect, exploitation, domination and internal colonialism, repression and discrimination, and forced annexation. Economic, political, and cultural conditions can provide the objective basis in which these often subjective variables are rooted:

Group demands are predicated on the *empirically demonstrable* existence of commonalities in individual life experience. In the case of minority groups this is determined by the constraints society imposes upon individual members. . . . These structural pre-conditions generate . . . demands (Murray, 1983).

Thus the social, economic, and political setting within which national groups operate is expected to have a determining impact on the development of separatist orientations.

Several theoretical frameworks have been put forth to predict which of these societal conditions is more or less conducive to ethnic separatism. One such approach, the "revised modernization" thesis, argues that separatist movements may in fact be a product of the modernization process (Gould, 1966). According to this approach, with urbanization and increased education, previously disparate groups are brought into contact and competition with one another, creating a situational dynamic that fosters ethnic tension. Moreover, modernization (and the process of industrialization in particular) creates the conditions which facilitate nationalist resurgence by introducing new infrastructure, transforming the political system, and changing the existing distribution of resources. The importance of resource distribution is particularly salient in the post-communist context, as the consolidation of the "dual transition" to democracy and market capitalism is itself a competition for political and economic resources.

An alternative framework discusses the concept of "relative deprivation" as the primary motivating factor behind ethnic political mobilization (Davies, 1962; Gurr, 1968). Rooted in a psychological perspective, the relative deprivation theory maintains that ethnic mobilization is a product of feelings of frustration, aggression, and alienation. These feelings, at the most basic level, are a function of a differential distribution of resources which leads to a sharp disparity between "value expectations" (in terms of life quality) and "value capabilities" (Gurr 1970).

Several other theories also emphasize the importance of these sorts of perceptions in explaining separatism. The "internal colonial" school, for example, focuses on ethnic claims of oppression and exploitation, which depend more on subjective perceptions of relative deprivation than on empirically demonstrable conditions (Hechter, 1975, 1978). It is important to note that in both the relative deprivation and internal colonial approaches, inequality of economic standing and political power can only lead to separatist sentiment under certain conditions of collective consciousness--that is to say, conditions of *conscious* frustration.

Some groups are more likely than others to develop and mobilize this consciousness. Important characteristics include the relative size of the group versus the size of the dominant cultural pool, the existence of an intellectual and political personnel base, the geopolitical arrangement with respect to the group's proximity to kin-states, and the relative compactness and concentration of the group within a given territory (Gellner, 1983; Dutter, 1990).

Empirical and Normative Considerations of Proportional Arrangements

Aside from these determinants of ethnic political mobilization, another set of key variables to consider is the institutional structure of the political system. As Mainwaring notes, political institutions do indeed matter. Among other things, they "shape actors' identities" and "create incentives and disincentives for political actors" (Mainwaring, 1993). Indeed the ability of political institutions to structure incentives is central to our argument regarding the relationship between electoral system design and ethnic separatism. Ultimately this issue of incentive rests on the most basic theoretical debate regarding electoral systems: proportional versus majoritarian system design.

The empirical effects of electoral laws have been clearly demonstrated. Duverger proffers a fundamental "law" (Duverger, 1963) which is here presented in a slightly modified form as a group of two "tendency laws" (Sartori 1994):

Tendency Law 1: Plurality formulae facilitate a two-party format and, conversely, obstruct multipartyism.

Tendency Law 2: PR formulae facilitate multipartyism and are, conversely, hardly conducive to two partyism.

Essentially, majoritarian systems make it difficult for smaller ethnic parties to gain representation because, barring a geographic concentration of support, they need to win pluralities of the vote in electoral districts (Lijphart, 1994). Such parties are therefore more able to gain representation in PR systems which do not require first-past-the-post showings, but instead allocate seats on a proportional basis.

This extremely basic empirical showing has engendered an enormous amount of literature on the normative merits of electoral system design with respect to ethnic politics. While there are "neither widely accepted conclusions nor much conclusive

evidence on institutional remedies for ethnic conflict," (Cohen, 1997) several important propositions exist within the literature. One such tenet suggests that proportional representation and the promotion of "group rights" are effective mechanisms for ameliorating ethnic conflict in developing countries (see Osaghae, 1996), particularly those countries in the post-communist world (Ishiyama, 1996). The "consociational" school contends that representing groups proportionally fosters the integration of as many subcultures as possible into the political process (Lijphart, 1974; 1977; Nordlinger, 1972; McRae, 1974; Daalder, 1974; Lorwin, 1971). This integration affords the channeling of ethnic grievances through democratic institutions and processes, thereby providing the group a vested interest in the system. This vested interest in turn leads the group to moderate their demands, mitigating against the more extreme separatist variant of ethnic political mobilization. Cohen (1997) states the issue succinctly, noting that

Under proportional arrangements, conflict is likely to take more frequent but less intense forms due to the institutional means available and accessible to dissatisfied minorities . . . They will use moderate means of resistance to effect change in the status quo.

Majoritarian models, by contrast, do not afford and incentivize the institutionalization of ethnic grievances. They are therefore inappropriate in ethnically divided societies because they "systematically exclude blocs," which is "likely to result in violence and democratic collapse" (Lijphart, 1985; Duchacek, 1977).

Electoral System Design and Ethnic Separatism: A Rationalist Approach

Another important resource-based approach to ethnic separatism is the resource mobilization concept. This notion asserts that nationalism is basically a form of political

power struggle over scarce resources. In this sense, ethnic mobilization is a political resource and is therefore "rational" in terms of the cost-benefit ratio it entails.

Building on this theoretical tool, this article suggests that many of the determinants of ethnic separatism can be integrated into one explanatory approach: the rationalist model (see Becker, 1976 for example). Scholars have praised PR as an effective structural mechanism in the management of ethnic conflict. However, there have been few systematic efforts to specify the *linkage* between institutional structure on one hand and political behavior on the other. It is here that Mainwaring's argument regarding the ability of institutions to structure incentives becomes clear, for it directly relates to a critical aspect of the separatism equation: the *cost-benefit calculus* of an ethnic group as determined by a given institutional setting.

This rationalist approach rests on several assumptions. First we assume that an ethnic group can best be described as a collectivity of rational, self-interested actors, seeking to maximize their preferences. Second, we assume that the preference to be maximized in this case is *political power*, a concept which entails control over the resources of the state, including the civil service. And finally we assume that in the process of determining *how* to maximize that preference through the structural constraints and incentives afforded by the institutional setting, ethnic groups act on accurate information.

With these considerations in mind, ethnic separatism, like nationalism itself, becomes the product not of an emotional outburst but of a rational cost-benefit calculus. This calculus is in turn structured by institutions such as a country's electoral system. The logic behind this approach to political mobilization is relatively straightforward.

Greater proportionality literally lowers the cost of winning a legislative seat. Small ethnic parties, with the broader representation and expanded access provided by PR designs, have a much greater chance of pressing their claims within the system. Therefore the benefits of this vested interest in the political system outweigh the potential costs of separatism, an always uncertain proposition. By contrast, in majoritarian systems it literally costs more to win a legislative seat. Such systems, moreover, do not facilitate broad representation and expanded political voice of minority groups. These systems therefore incentivize separatism, as the benefits to ethnic groups would outweigh the costs of the political limitations currently imposed by the structure of the system. This sort of cost-benefit calculus applies to political, economic, and structural factors as well. Political and economic marginalization of an ethnic minority obviously entails certain costs. The costs associated with these conditions may be weighed against the *potential* benefits, in terms of improving resource distribution (both political and economic), that would be generated by secession. This calculus, furthermore, is predicated on a component essential to any cost-benefit analysis--feasibility. Ultimately, it is the basic structural arrangement of the ethnic group, in terms of such factors as concentration and proximity to kin-states or regions, which is crucial in determining such feasibility and therefore crucial in shaping the cost-benefit calculus of an ethnic minority contemplating separatism.

Design and Methodology

As indicated above, this paper is interested in the relationship between institutional mechanisms and ethnic separatism. Thus the focus here is not on all ethnic groups but only those groups which are likely to be of a separatist orientation. This

typology would include all groups that "define themselves using ethnic criteria (who) make claims on behalf of their collective interests against the state, or against other political actors" (Gurr, 1994). Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, the cases examined are what the literature terms *minorities at risk*. Gurr defines a minority at risk as a group that "collectively suffers or benefits, from systematic discriminatory treatment" and therefore is the "focus of political mobilization and action in defense or promotion of the group's self-defined interests" (Gurr, 1994).

The primary unit of analysis for this study is the "group-year," or the separatist tendency of a given ethnic group in a particular year. Following Ishiyama's treatment of ethnic conflict management, we have excluded from the sample the Russian Federation and all states that were either decidedly not democratic, engaged in a protracted civil war, or had no minority at risk population to speak of. This left a total sample of 21 identifiable minorities at risk and 52 group-years (See Table 1).

Table 1: Countries, Ethnic Groups, and Group-Years

Country	Ethnic Group	Group-Years
Albania	Greeks	1992, 1993, 1995, 1998
Bulgaria	Turks	1991, 1992, 1995, 1998
	Roma	1991, 1992, 1995, 1998
Croatia	Serbs	1993, 1996
	Roma	1993, 1996
Czech Republic	Roma	1991, 1993, 1997
	Slovaks	1991, 1993, 1997
Estonia	Russians	1993, 1996
Hungary	Roma	1991, 1995
Latvia	Russians	1994, 1996

Lithuania	Poles	1993, 1997
	Russians	1993, 1997
Macedonia	Albanians	1991, 1995
	Serbs	1991, 1995
	Roma	1991, 1995
Moldova	Gagauz	1995
	Slavs	1995
Romania	Hungarians	1991, 1993, 1997
	Roma	1991, 1993, 1997
Slovakia	Hungarians	1991, 1993, 1995
	Roma	1991, 1993, 1995

Operationalization of the Dependent Variable: Separatism

The dependent variable, separatism, is measured using the separatism index derived from the Minorities at Risk (MAR) Dataset Phase III. The index scores a group's political orientation from least to most separatist based on the following coding scheme (Table 2):

Table 2: Measuring Separatism

Score	Description
1	"Latent" Separatism, meeting one or both of the following conditions - Ethnic group was historically autonomous, or - Ethnic group was transferred from another state, either physically or in terms of jurisdictional modification
2	Historical Separatism: The group gave rise to a separatist or autonomy movement that persisted as an active political force for five or more years in their region of origin (between 1940 and 1980).
3	Active Separatism: The group has an active separatist or autonomy movement in the 1980s or 1990s.

Independent Variables

This model weighs the relative importance of electoral design in explaining ethnic separatism. An underlying theme of the literature reviewed above is that differences in the distribution of society's resources, both political and economic, constitute a necessary precondition for ethnic separatism (Emizet and Hesli, 1995). To test the effect of political and economic discrimination stressed by the relative deprivation and internal colonial theories, this study utilizes two index variables from the MAR dataset phase III. Both the political and economic variables address the interactive effect between the prevailing social practice and government policy (See Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3: Political Discrimination

0	No Discrimination
1	Historical Neglect/Remedial Policies --Substantial under-representation in political office and/or participation due to historical neglect or restrictions. Explicit public policies are designed to protect or improve the group's political status.
2	Historical Neglect/No Remedial Policies -- Substantial under-representation due to historical neglect or restrictions. No social practice of deliberate exclusion. No formal exclusion. No evidence of protective or remedial public policies.
3	Social Exclusion/Neutral Policy --Substantial under-representation due to prevailing social practice by dominant groups. Formal public policies toward the group are neutral or, if positive, inadequate to offset discriminatory policies.
4	Exclusion/Repressive Policy --Public policies substantially restrict the group's political participation by comparison with other groups.

Table 4: Economic Discrimination

0	No Discrimination
1	Historical Neglect/Remedial Policies --Significant poverty and under-representation in desirable occupations due to historical marginality, neglect, or restrictions. Public policies are designed to improve the group's material well-being.
2	Historical Neglect/No Remedial Policies -- Significant poverty and under-representation in desirable occupations due to historical marginality, neglect, or restrictions. No social practice of deliberate exclusion. Few or no public policies aim at improving the group's material well-being.
3	Social Exclusion/Neutral Policies --Significant poverty and under-representation due to prevailing social practice by dominant groups. Formal public policies toward the group are neutral or, if positive, inadequate to offset active and widespread discrimination.
4	Restrictive Policies --Public policies (formal exclusion and/or recurring repression) substantially restrict the group's economic opportunities by contrast with other groups.

Aside from assessing the impact of these political and economic determinants of ethnic separatism, this study also examines the role of basic structural factors. Perhaps the most basic consideration in this respect is the physical, geopolitical arrangement of the group. The obvious reason for this is that collective action of any type requires that there be an underlying "collective." A widely scattered ethnic group has neither the incentive nor the practical ability to press for territorial reorganization. Thus the extent to which an ethnic group engages in separatist activity is largely determined by the logistical consideration of group concentration. This variable is measured using a spatial distribution index, once again derived from the MAR Dataset Phase III.

Table 5: Spatial Distribution

Score	Description
0	Widely dispersed
1	Primarily urban or minority in one region
2	Majority in one region, others dispersed
3	Concentrated in one region

Effect of Electoral System Design

For the purposes of measuring the impact of electoral system design on ethnic separatism, this study only examines the lower houses of the selected countries. Not only are the emerging political systems of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union varied in terms of cameral structure (some are unicameral, as is the case in Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the Baltics), but in all of the bicameral systems, the lower house is unquestionably the more powerful. Therefore, for the sake of theoretical significance and comparability, this article only examines those electoral designs which govern the composition of the respective lower houses.

Rather than employ the measure traditionally used to determine proportionality--average district magnitude (ADM)--this model utilizes Gallagher's Least Squares measure of disproportionality (LSq) (Gallagher, 1991). Recall that the primary interest of this study is how the *effects* of electoral system design impact the behavioral calculus of ethnic groups, specifically with respect to desires for separatism. Therefore this indicator proves to be the most comprehensive as it measures the degree of proportionality produced by a given electoral system *on the whole*. By measuring the total effect of system design all of the relevant structural features are taken into account (such as seat allocation formula, electoral thresholds, assembly size, etc.). The LSq measure is calculated based on the following formula:

$$LSq = \sqrt{1/2 \sum (v_i - s_i)^2}$$

Where v_i = the popular vote share of party I

s_i = the seat share of party I in the lower house

These four factors—political discrimination, economic discrimination, spatial distribution, and electoral system disproportionality—suggest the following hypotheses with respect to ethnic separatism:

Hypothesis 1: The greater the degree of political discrimination, the greater the degree of ethnic separatism.

Hypothesis 2: The greater the degree of economic discrimination, the greater the degree of ethnic separatism.

Hypothesis 3: The more concentrated the ethnic group (in terms of its spatial distribution) the greater the degree of ethnic separatism.

Hypothesis 4 The less disproportional the electoral system (that is, more proportional), the lesser the degree of ethnic separatism.

Results and Conclusions

Table six reports the results of regressing the dependent variable separatism against the four independent variables in the model specified above.

Table 6: Model of Ethnic Separatism

Variable	Beta	T	Sig.
LSq	.084	.683	.498
Economic Discrimination	-.127	-.944	.350
Political Discrimination	-.142	-1.118	.270
Spatial Distribution	.490	3.679	.001

N=52

F=6.820

Sig.=.000

Adjusted R²=.327

The results prove to be rather striking. According to our model, spatial distribution of the ethnic group, the only variable to achieve statistical significance, is by far the strongest factor determining ethnic separatism. Not only are the other variables relatively weak, but both the political and economic discrimination variables are in the direction opposite that predicted. This study therefore indicates that the greater the level of political and economic discrimination, the *less* the degree of ethnic separatism. Disproportionality of the electoral system, while in the predicted direction, is by far the weakest of the independent variables and fails to achieve statistical significance.

The findings of this study therefore suggest several interesting conclusions. First, it is apparent that fundamental structural factors play a huge role in determining separatist activity. This makes intuitive sense. A widely dispersed group, such as the Hungarian Roma (or Roma in general given that they exist in diaspora worldwide), will have greater

practical difficulty in organizing and staging collective action of any sort. A more heavily concentrated group, such as the Hungarians living in Slovakia or the Albanian Greeks, will be more able to mobilize politically, and they may also have added help from co-nationals just across the border. A wide scattering of people does not lend itself easily to territorial reorganization, the very definition of separatism.

A second important point these findings reveal is that one must differentiate the conditions associated with the *emergence of nationalist demands* from the conditions which affect the *ability of a given minority to mobilize* around those demands. Both the relative deprivation and internal colonial theories suggest that heightened political and economic discrimination should yield ethnic separatism. The findings with respect to both the political and economic discrimination variables could therefore potentially suggest a curvilinear relationship. There may exist an "optimum" point of political and economic discrimination conducive to ethnic separatism, beyond which a group becomes so marginalized as to not even have the ability or resources to engage in separatist activity. This interpretation ultimately affirms the resource mobilization theory of ethnic separatism, emphasizing the nature of separatist activity as a political resource which requires organizational skills, personnel, infrastructure, and other resources to manage effectively. Political and economic discrimination may determine conditions of nationalist mobilization, but they clearly do not determine ability to mobilize.

In a similar fashion, the surprising findings regarding the design of a country's electoral system may likewise entail a curvilinear relationship with ethnic separatism. Recall that proportionality, through its ability to facilitate broader representation of ethnic groups, provides incentives to participate within the existing system of institutions.

However, there might exist the potential for too much of a good thing. An extremely permissive system of proportional representation could allow for a fragmentation of the party system which would result in cabinet instability and deadlock, conditions conducive to political mobilization of all sorts--including ethnic separatism. Furthermore, greater proportionality allows for entrance of extremist right wing parties, some of which have ultra-nationalist and xenophobic orientations. This political dynamic might also tend to encourage ethnic separatism if ethnic minorities felt marginalized by the political forces on the right. The complicated nature of these relationships and theoretical linkages clearly requires further research.

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