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Ethnicity, Electoral Politics, and Minority Representation in Post-Communist States

Topic of Research and Countries Visited

My research project examines how ethnic minorities are incorporated into a political system through competitive elections. I approached this question by analyzing three interrelated aspects of ethnic electoral mobilization – legislative representation of ethnic minorities, electoral voting patterns of minority (and majority) groups, and the interrelationship between ethnic diversity and party system fragmentation. I began this project with a comparison of the Russian Federation with its myriad ethnic minorities and Lithuania, which has two dominant minority groups, Russians and Poles. The research I conducted in Kyiv in June 2005 allowed me to add another crucial case to this comparative study, Ukraine, which is distinguished by its large concentration of ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers. With support from IREX, I visited Kyiv and obtained detailed census and election data that will allow me to compare the dynamics of ethnic electoral mobilization and representation in Ukraine with similar processes in Russia and Lithuania.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field

The incorporation of ethnic minorities into emerging democratic polities is one of the most important and perplexing problems facing the world today. The spread of democracy around the world is a primary goal of U.S. foreign policy and the international community. Yet, democratization is regularly undermined or even reversed in the face of deep-seated rivalry between different ethnic groups inhabiting multiethnic states. Since democracy is now being introduced in increasingly unfamiliar or even hostile environments (including ethnically divided societies) it is incumbent upon the academic and policy-making community to thoroughly understand how democracy affects and is affected by ethnic diversity.

Democratic processes are often offered as a means of resolving ethnic conflict. Scholars have recommended different types of constitutional systems such as Arend Lijphart's consociational democracy and various types of electoral systems with an eye to mitigating conflict between rival ethnic groups. This line of research has offered many important insights but also suffers from some significant problems. First, due to the difficulty of collecting data on the ethnic identity of voters and candidates, few scholars have used hard empirical evidence to examine the impact of electoral systems on minority representation. While we have very extensive and reliable datasets on the number of women in parliaments around the world we do not have similar information on the number of ethnic minorities in these same bodies. My research on Russia, Lithuania, and Ukraine will help fill this gap by examining ethnic representation at the level of the individual legislator and studying the electoral behavior of minority ethnic groups using census and electoral data disaggregated to the lowest possible geographic units (raions). Second, scholarship on ethnic electoral politics tends to treat all ethnic groups alike, differentiating them only according to their relative share of the population and geographic concentration. My study will highlight how other factors, particularly relative assimilation into the dominant culture is a primary factor influencing how a minority group is represented in parliament and how its members behave on election day. Finally, this study of post-communist

states will examine a larger set of questions than is typically addressed in the comparative literature on ethnicity and electoral behavior. While the study of American politics has long investigated the role of ethnicity in everything from voter turnout to legislators' behavior in parliament, the study of ethnicity in comparative politics has neglected many of these issues. This comparative study of several very different post-communist states is designed to highlight the wide range of political processes associated with electoral mobilization of minorities.

Approach and Research Methodology

To examine the ways in which ethnicity intersects with democratic elections and representation in emergent post-communist democracies, I systematically analyze electoral results and census data at the raion level in my three cases along with the ethnic background of elected representatives. The principal goal of my fieldwork in Kyiv was to collect the data necessary to conduct these analyses. With the help of a member of the Ukrainian NGO community who served as my research assistant, I personally met with officials at the Ukrainian census bureau and Ukrainian scholars in an attempt to collect data similar to the information I had already obtained for Russia and Lithuania during a research trip the previous year. This search for data was very successful. I obtained data on ethnicity and language use at the level of raions for all of Ukraine, which was precisely the type of data I needed to examine the impact of ethnic diversity on party system fragmentation. I also arranged for a Ukrainian scholar to collect election results at the raion level for elections prior to the most recent parliamentary elections (which had election results at the raion-level posted on the CEC website just prior to my departure for Kyiv).

The final piece of information I sought to collect – the ethnic and/or linguistic background of individual deputies in the legislature – was much more difficult to gather. These data on the ethnicity of individual legislators were included in legislators' biographies published by the national legislatures of Russia and Lithuania, making it relatively easy to examine the conditions under which minority candidates have been elected in these two countries. Unfortunately, ethnic background was not a part of Ukrainian legislators' biographies. In fact, such information seems incredibly difficult to uncover. However, after meeting with several different Ukrainian scholars concerning this matter, I believe I have found several different proxies that can provide information similar to the ethnic background data I have for Russia and Lithuania. I have arranged for a Ukrainian scholar to trace the language use of each individual member of the Ukrainian legislature, the Rada, during floor debates to see whether they used Ukrainian or Russian language. I also have obtained access to a survey of Rada deputies that included a question that indicates whether each legislator preferred to take the survey in Ukrainian or Russian. These data, while not ideal, will serve as a surrogate for self-reported ethnic identity of Rada deputies. Moreover, the data on language use can also be used to examine whether and when deputies adapted their language over time due to political or other pressures to assimilate to the dominant culture.

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

Rather than assume that certain electoral systems (such as proportional representation) are better suited for the representation of ethnic minorities or that ethnic diversity automatically produces party system fragmentation, my project seeks to test these assertions in a variety of different demographic and political contexts. After conducting research on Russia and Lithuania, I found that ethnic minorities can effectively be represented in single-member district elections and, depending on the political and institutional conditions, may benefit more from the geographic representation provided by this type of election than by the party-based PR formula. Moreover, I found that characteristics of ethnic groups themselves, their relative social distance from the majority population in particular, has an important effect on their ability to elect co-ethnic representatives to the national legislature. For example, Ukrainians in Russia are

remarkably successful at gaining seats in the Russian State Duma because, I suspect, they are much more assimilated into Russian society than more geographically concentrated and non-Slavic peoples such as Tatars. Ukrainians are one of the few non-Russian ethnic groups (along with Belorussians and Jews) that won seats in Russian-dominated single-member electoral districts.

The addition of the Ukrainian case adds another layer of analysis. Unlike in Russia, the Russian-Ukrainian cleavage is much more salient in Ukraine for geopolitical and historical regions. Therefore, ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers seem to have a harder time gaining electoral support from ethnic Ukrainians and Ukrainian-speakers than their Ukrainian counterparts in Russia. Systematic analysis of the electoral and census data for both countries will uncover how different these two circumstances are.

Suggestions for Future Research Agenda

Although social science has devoted considerable time and resources to the study of ethnicity and politics, we know surprisingly little about how ethnicity intersects with democratic elections outside the American context. This question is essential if democracy is going to be successfully implanted in regions that have historically been unable to sustain democratic regimes for one reason or another. The first step to greater understanding of how democracy can survive in ethnically divided societies is to gather firsthand and detailed data that provide the opportunity to systematically study how ethnicity affects democratic politics and vice versa. My project studying ethnic voting and representation in several post-communist states is an initial step toward developing a generalizable hypothesis on how minority ethnic groups behave in the electoral arena in different circumstances. The next step would be to extend such detailed case analysis to other countries inside and outside the post-communist region. In particular, countries such as Bulgaria or Romania, which have large and relatively successful ethnic parties, would provide an interesting contrast to the three cases I have examined in this project.

Recommendations for the US Policy Community

My research has implications for the policy community's understanding and approach to democratization in ethnically diverse countries around the world. In particular, it questions the conventional wisdom that proportional representation electoral systems (PR) are preferable to single-member district (SMD) systems for the election of minorities. Moreover, it challenges the assumption that ethnic diversity tends to complicate democratization by increasing the number of viable parties in an emergent party system. In fact, ethnic minorities may act as a force consolidating the party system. Finally, once I examine the mounds of data on Ukraine (along with Russia and Lithuania), my research will make important insights on the relative stability of these crucial states and the incorporation of minorities in the post-communist region.