

WHY ETHNIC POLITICS AND “PORK” TEND TO GO TOGETHER*

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ABSTRACT

Coalitions aimed at the capture of political “pork” have a strong incentive to limit their size in order not to dilute each winner’s share of the spoils. This means that a criterion is needed to distinguish losers from winners so they can be excluded from entry into the winners’ coalition. In mass politics, the ascriptive mark of ethnicity serves this purpose much better than marks or criteria that can be chosen by anyone who wants access to the pork, such as party affiliation or ideological beliefs. If pork is dispensed on the basis of a criterion that can be chosen or readily altered, then the winning coalition will rapidly expand. Thus, *the politics of pork favors coalitions based on features not easily chosen or changed by individuals, among which ascriptive criteria such as ethnicity are leading candidates*. The paper develops this simple idea, showing how it may help explain why political coalitions in some many countries are based on ethnicity, and what explains variation in the political salience of ethnicity across countries and over time.

1 Introduction

Why are political coalitions in so many countries based on ethnicity, and what explains variation in the political salience of ethnicity across countries and over time? Broadly speaking, the social science literature gives two sorts of answers to these and related questions about the sources of ethnic politics. Primordialist views hold that ethnic bonds are particularly strong, enduring, and pervasive due to (reputed) facts about human nature – we are “hard wired” in such a way that ethnic ties have powerful emotional resonance, much more so than do ties of class, party ideology, or universal religions, for instance.¹ In their stronger forms, such arguments have difficulty with the fact that the political salience of ethnicity varies across countries and locales, and over time within countries. For example, ethnically based political coalitions are more common in relatively poor, former colonies than in rich countries, and mark urban politics in many U.S. cities but not political coalitions at the U.S. national level. Likewise, we observe temporal variation in the power of practically all ethnic identities to motivate collective political action. While alleged facts about human nature might explain a general disposition to ethnic coalitions in a weak sense, they can’t by themselves explain any sort of variation in the political salience of ethnicity, which is probably the most interesting aspect.

Also problematic for primordialist arguments are the many examples showing how people may redefine or choose different formulations of ethnicity for instrumental purposes.² Many “primordial” ethnic or racial categories, such as “Yoruba” in Nigeria and “white” in the U.S., were in fact constructed relatively recently, in response to new political or economic circumstances. Seeking to account for such evidence, instrumentalist arguments tend to view ethnic groups as political coalitions formed to extract material benefits from others or to defend possessions. In one of the most influential statements of this view in political science, Robert Bates (1983, 152) argued that rather than being primordially-given, premodern survivals, “ethnic groups represent, in essence, coalitions which have been formed as part of rational efforts to secure benefits created by the forces of modernization – benefits which are desired but scarce.”

This approach can make better sense of the observed lability of ethnic categories and coalitions, and of the numerous cases in the former British and French colonies where new, more encompassing ethnic identities formed in the colonial period (e.g., Yoruba in Nigeria, Kikuyus and Luhya in Kenya, etc.).³ But there remains the question of why *ethnically* based political coalitions rather than something else, such as class, religion, gender, occupation, party platform, or single-issue interest groups. If people choose political coalitions with an

¹See Shils (1957), Geertz (1973), Horowitz (1985), Connor (1994), Smith (1986).

²See Young (1976), and Vail (1991), for instance.

³Similar processes occurred earlier for “the French,” “the Germans,” etc.

eye to material or other instrumental purposes, then why should it so often be that ethnically defined coalitions are efficient means to these ends?⁴ On this question a primordialist argument might be thought to have some merit. Perhaps something about human nature disposes us to define political coalitions in terms in (presumed) descent groups, even if the exact form these definitions take is a matter of choice and social construction.

Bates (1983) in fact posed two instrumentalist answers to the question of why ethnic as opposed to other sorts of political coalitions. First, he noted that many goods of modernity – for example, schools, water and electrical networks, agricultural extension programs, and other infrastructural investments – have a strong spatial aspect. They have to be located somewhere, and they benefit the people who live where they are located. Thus it can make sense for people living near each other to lobby together for such political and economic goods, and it so happens that ethnic categories frequently denote people who are territorially concentrated, whether in the countryside or in city neighborhoods.

By itself this isn't a very good explanation, however, since it is not clear why an ethnic definition of group membership would be the optimal way to delimit a territorially based coalition in any given case. If coalition formation is a means to obtain spatially distributed goods, then why should ethnic as opposed to other, possibly arbitrary criteria so often be the one that demarcates geographic coalitions?⁵ Further, there are many cases of ethnic groups who live intermingled in an administrative unit, but who do not lobby together for commonly desired public goods. Indeed, many if not most of Bates' own examples seem to be of ethnic groups competing for resources within the same administrative unit.

Bates' second argument seems more compelling, though it runs some risk of shading into primordialism. He maintains that because ethnic groups are often marked by common language and common culture, political entrepreneurs' costs for putting together ethnic political coalitions may be lower than for assembling other sorts of coalitions. Presumably, the idea is that to put together a political coalition one needs to coordinate the actions and attitudes of many people, and this is most easily done among those who communicate easily with each other. In addition, as Fearon and Laitin (1996) argue, greater levels of interaction and information may increase trust among coethnics, which in turn would facilitate coalition building along ethnic lines. If, however, the argument is that the cost of forming ethnic coalitions is low due to preexisting (or "ancient") affective ties, then this argument overlaps considerably with more primordialist approaches.

While I think there is something to both of Bates' arguments, in this note I propose a

⁴More on the meaning of "ethnically based" below.

⁵As Bates notes, the colonizers often conceived of and drew colonial boundaries along what they took to be ethnic lines of demarcation. In this case, it is easier to see why ethnic political coalitions would be encouraged. On a similar dynamic in the Soviet Union, see Suny (1993) and Slezkine (1994).

different instrumentalist answer to the questions of why political coalitions are often based on ethnicity rather than on other principles, and under what conditions we should expect to observe ethnic politics.

The main idea is simple. For coalitions formed to capture political “pork,” there is a strong incentive to limit the size of the winning coalition in order not to dilute each winner’s share of the spoils. This means that some criterion is needed to distinguish losers from winners so they can be excluded from entry into the winners’ coalition. And for this purpose, the ascriptive mark of ethnicity fits the bill much better than do marks or criteria that can be *chosen* by anyone who wants access to the pork. If pork is dispensed on the basis of a criterion that can be chosen, like party affiliation, then the winning coalition will rapidly expand. Thus, *the politics of pork favors coalitions based on features not easily chosen or changed by individuals*. An individual’s ethnic affiliation is just such a feature, since one is coded as belonging to this or that ethnic group on the basis of how one’s parents were coded. And while there can be marginal cases and some room for reformulation by individuals, most often one cannot easily manipulate how one’s parents were coded. Similarly, common markers of ethnicity – physical appearance, speech and other manners – can be difficult or impossible for an individual to misrepresent.

One attractive feature of this argument, in contrast to Bates’, is that it explains the formation of ethnic coalitions in terms of properties that are constitutive of our concept of ethnicity rather than merely contingent. Living in a geographically concentrated area is neither necessary nor sufficient for us to call a group “ethnic.” Nor do we require that an individual share the typical language or customs and culture of an ethnic group for us to say that he or she is a member. If I learn fluent Armenian and present myself in all respects according to Armenian customs and manners, no one would say that I had become “ethnically Armenian.”⁶ Rather, we decide an individual’s ethnicity by asking about his or her parent’s ethnicity. If both were coded as A’s, then their children are A’s. In the case of ethnically mixed marriages, we use arbitrary social conventions or allow the individual some choice.

Regarding Bates’ argument that the costs of forming ethnic coalitions is relatively low due to common language and culture, there are many cases of groups who share a common language and much common culture but who regard themselves as ethnically distinct (e.g., Serbs and Croats, Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants, Hutus and Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi). Also, it is interesting to note that there are a number of cases of successful ethnic political entrepreneurs who communicated rather badly in the language they championed on behalf of their ethnic group.⁷ Common culture, language, and region are contingent properties of ethnic groups, whereas descent rules for deciding membership are constitutive

⁶At most, I would be Armenian with an asterix.

⁷Mohammed Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, is one example ...

of our concept of ethnicity.⁸ The mechanism proposed here regarding the politics of pork shows how this constitutive feature may favor a certain sort of coalition politics – a politics of exclusion.

The note has three sections. In the first, I develop the argument sketched above in greater detail, distinguishing between three sorts of political goods and arguing that each favors a particular strategy of coalition formation. When developed, my argument is not that ethnic coalitions and politics are favored *only* in competitions for political pork. They can also arise on the basis of polarized preferences over public policy issues, where individual preferences are highly correlated with ethnic identities.

In the second section, I pose a simple game model of political identity formation. The model brings into sharper focus the problem of coordination involved in constructing coalitions and political identities. The model also formalizes the argument that for political goods with the properties of “pork,” coalitions based on ascriptive rather than achievement or self-selection are favored. The third section discusses some stylized facts that the core insight of the paper might help explain.

2 Coalition strategies and political goods

2.1 Three types of political goods

Many, though far from all, political goods have the essential characteristics of what is colloquially called “pork”: The good is highly divisible, one person’s consumption reduces the amount available for others, and almost everyone prefers having more rather than less. Examples include access to government employment, government funds of all sorts, government contracts, military basing and funding decisions, and special tax or tariff favors.⁹

Pork goods may be contrasted with what might called “policy” or “issue space” goods, such as abortion policy, policies regulating the use of the environment, policy on national health insurance, or a linear tax rate, for example. The difference between pork and policy goods is not divisibility. Note that even for abortion there is a whole gradated range of possible policies extending from “abortion on demand” to “no abortion under any circumstances whatsoever,” with subtle variations distinguishing many of the policies in between. Rather, policy goods differ from pork on the structure of individual preferences for the good. With a pork good, one can always take two randomly selected individuals and make them better off

⁸For more on meaning of “ethnic group,” see Fearon and Laitin (1997).

⁹Even if one personally has no use for a city job, having the power to dispose of city jobs is still a pork good in this sense.

at the expense of everyone else, because everyone prefers more of the good to less. With a policy good, by contrast, this is not always possible. For instance, there is no way to choose a policy on abortion that will make both an extreme pro-lifer and an extreme pro-choicer better off at the expense of everyone else. In general, for policy goods, making one person better off implies making *particular* other people worse off – people who are distinguished by having certain sorts of preferences over the issue. With pork goods, everyone essentially wants the same things, and it is just a question of who will get how much.

For the purpose of analyzing strategies of coalition, it is useful to distinguish between *two types of policy goods*. These differ according to the structure of individual preferences over the policy space in question. Preferences over a policy good may be relatively *polarized* or relatively *unimodal*. Consider a policy good such as the choice of the state or official language in a country whose population speaks more than one first language. Often, virtually all whose first language is A would prefer that A be official, while virtually all whose first language is B would prefer B. If there is no large majority whose *first* preference is for both languages to be official (or some other compromise), then this is a case of a policy good with polarized preferences.¹⁰ Questions of official or state religion, symbols like flags or the question of whether the state presents itself to the world as (say) “the state of the Estonian nation” versus “the state of Estonia and all its peoples,” are sometimes also associated with polarized preferences.

By contrast, in the case of policy spaces characterized by unimodal preferences, individuals’ most favored policies are distributed more evenly across a range of alternatives, with the mode being in favor of a centrist policy. It often happens that on a particular issue, it is sensible to speak of “extremists” on the left and right, and a majority of moderates who favor various shadings of more centrist policies. The distinction between polarized and unimodal preferences is illustrated by Figures 1a and 1b. The distinction is a matter of degree, although if a society is divided between two groups whose members’ have common ideal points and whose utility declines as policies move closer to the other group’s ideal point, then this is clearly a case of polarized social preferences.

Probably the most important examples of unimodal preferences concern the politics of public finance in industrial states that raise revenue chiefly via the individual income tax.¹¹ Almost everyone would ideally prefer more rather than less public goods – more pension benefits, more health care where this is publicly provided, more public infrastructural investment, more security from defense spending, etc. But these public goods cost money

¹⁰Note that I am referring to preferences over language use alone. If we bring in other dimensions, such as expectations about civil strife due to making one language official, then this will induce more “moderates” on language policy. See below.

¹¹In 1988, 81% of U.S. government revenue derived from taxes on individuals (income tax, social security payroll tax, and estate taxes) (Stiglitz 1988, 188).

and people can differ over their desired levels of provision when the tax cost is taken into account.

For example, if we assume that (1) individuals value both after-tax income and public goods, (2) public goods are financed by a linear or a progressive tax, and (3) the distribution of income is unimodal, then preferences over levels of provision will often be unimodal along the classic left-right dimension that has marked the politics of the welfare state since the initiation of income taxes in the early part of this century. To see this, consider a society of n individuals who have preferences represented by a utility function $u(c_i, g)$ where c_i (for “consumption”) is individual i ’s after-tax income and g is per capita public spending. Assume that $u(c_i, g)$ increases at a decreasing rate in both arguments, and that $c_i = (1-t)y_i$, where t is a (linear) tax rate and y_i is individual i ’s pre-tax income. Finally, let total income be $\sum y_i = Y$ and average income $\bar{y} = Y/n$, so that public goods spending per capita is $g = t\bar{y}$.

An individual’s effective “budget constraint” is then $c_i = (1 - g/\bar{y})y_i$, or $c_i + \frac{y_i}{\bar{y}}g = y_i$. We can use this budget constraint to analyze how the demand for public goods varies with an individual’s pretax income. There are two effects. First, pretax income y_i determines the amount of consumption the individual has to forego in order to get a given increase in public goods – y_i/\bar{y} is “tax price” of public goods relative to consumption. Thus there is a substitution effect, since *for richer people the tax price of public goods is higher*. In intuitive terms, while everyone gets the same benefit from a marginal increase in the amount of a (pure) public good, the tax cost for this increase is greater for the rich, since the total tax an individual pays increases with income.¹² Second, there is an offsetting income effect – greater pretax income relaxes the individual’s budget constraint, so that the relatively rich may be able to “afford” higher taxes and greater public spending despite the greater relative cost.

Whenever the substitution effect is greater than the income effect, the result will be the classic case of left-right preferences over taxes and public goods – the rich will want relatively lower taxes and less government spending, the poor will want relatively higher taxes and more government spending. Austin (1995) and others show that the substitution effect will tend to dominate the income effect to the extent that consumption and public goods are substitutes rather than complements, which seems plausible in the main since greater income allows the purchase of private security guards, private education, private health care, and so on. When this is the case, a unimodal distribution of individual pretax income will imply a roughly unimodal distribution of preferences over levels of public goods, with poorer people preferring more and richer people less.

¹²Note that this is true even with a flat (i.e., linear) tax rate. With progressive taxation, the tax cost per unit of public good is of course even greater for the relatively rich.

The distinctions between these three types of goods are not always very sharp, and specific goods or issues can have more than one aspect. For example, decisions about the location of military bases have a significant “pork” element, but in so far as different bases would affect the public good of national security differently, or would cost very different amounts for all taxpayers, then there may be a policy dimension here as well. The distinctions are probably most tenable when we consider specific issues in relative isolation from other issues – for example, how will *this* public money be distributed among a large set of potential claimants?, or what state language policy will apply to all citizens?, etc. In other words, the distinction is sharpest when a political situation can be reasonably, if not thoroughly, described as follows: Either (1) there is some amount of “stuff” to be divided up among a set of potential claimants, all of whom want it (this is a pork good), or (2) there are a range of feasible public policies on an issue and the structure of preferences over them is essentially one-dimensional, in the classic Downsian sense (this is a policy good).

2.2 Strategies of political coalition

In this section I make the general and somewhat loose claim that strategies for building a successful political coalition will vary with the type of political good at issue. By “political coalition” I mean a set of people who coordinate their actions – or have their actions coordinated by elites – toward the achievement of some political end. By a “strategy of political coalition” I mean a plan answering the questions of who and how many should be included. I will consider, in turn, policy goods with unimodal preferences, policy goods with polarized preferences, and pork goods. The arguments will chiefly assume a democratic setting in which elections choose leaders and thus electoral (voting) coalitions are relevant. I think the same arguments may apply in any political system where the number of supporters for a policy increases its odds of implementation.

Policy goods with unimodal preferences. Certainly in electoral settings, such goods or issues favor a centrist politics in which coalition builders compete for the allegiance of the median voter (Downs 1957). Such coalition strategies give rise to what might be called a *politics of inclusion or moderation*.¹³ In general, there will be an incentive to court the middle. Little more can be said about likely composition of political coalitions here without information about the electoral or party systems. (For example, single member districts with plurality rule will favor two parties, at least at the district level (Cox 1997).)

Policy goods with polarized preferences. Consider, as an illustration, a situation where 70% of the society would ideally prefer policy A, 30% prefer policy B, and each person’s

¹³It can be the case, however, that in trying to appeal to the center coalition builders will seek to distance themselves from those with relatively extreme preferences on the issue space in question, thus producing a politics of excluding extremists.

value for compromise policies between A and B decline as the policy shifts toward her less favored policy. This situation closely resembles the classic bargaining problem, in which two people have diametrically opposed preferences over the division of some good (Nash 1950; Schelling 1960). It differs in that there are not just two people here, but many, who are divided “naturally” into two sets on the basis of their preferences. This is in sharp contrast to the case of unimodal preferences, where the structure of preferences does not by itself suggest any particular basis for group divisions.

In an electoral setting, the people who favor policy B would seem to be out of luck, since there is a solid majority for policy A. Those who prefer policy B have basically two alternatives for trying to move the chosen policy towards their preferred outcome. First, they might threaten the majority with various costs if some more equitable compromise is not reached. Using international relations terminology, this is a strategy of coercive bargaining. Second, they might try to convert members of the majority or otherwise convince them to switch their most preferred policy to B. Thus, policy goods with polarized preferences will tend to favor a *politics of coercive bargaining or conversion*. The politics surrounding abortion in the U.S. provide both examples of both tactics, such as the bombing of clinics and the distribution of bloody photographs. Likewise, autonomy and independence movements frequently involve the coercive bargaining tactic of imposing costs on a majority that is more less unified in a preference against granting autonomy.¹⁴

Pork goods. Consider a number of people, $n > 2$, who have one unit of “pork” they can divide up and distribute among themselves (it could be one thousand or one million dollars, for instance). Suppose that if any subset of at least $(n + 1)/2$ people can agree on a division, it will be implemented.

This is a canonical representation of the problem of distributive politics, and it is well-known that there are strong incentives here to form a *minimum winning coalition* of exactly $(n + 1)/2$ people. Any larger coalition would lower the share that each member of the winning coalition receives, so there would be an incentive for self-interested players to pare down the coalition to the minimum size needed for success (whether this is a majority or not).¹⁵ Obviously, without introducing more context and detail to break the symmetry of the description, nothing can be said about *which* people would be most likely to find themselves in the winning coalition. We can only say that whatever specific coalition forms, there will be an incentive to make it minimum winning.

¹⁴Sometimes a third strategy may be feasible – get other issues onto the political agenda that will divide the majority and create the possibility of a log-roll coalition based on a trade of support on one side of the new issue for tactical support for policy B. See Riker (1982), Weingast (1998), Weingast, Bailey and Goldstein (1997).

¹⁵See Riker (1962), whose model was slightly different. The version I give here is typically referred to as “the divide-the-dollar problem.”

Thus, pork goods favor a *politics of exclusion*. The nature of the good and preferences over the good provide an incentive to draw lines to exclude a set of “losers” from getting any pork. This is quite different from the preceding two cases. With pork, group divisions arise as an *endogenous* consequence of rational strategies pursued by individuals with common preferences or desires. By contrast, in the polarized preference case, group divisions are a consequence of exogenous differences in underlying preferences, and in the unimodal case those on the extremes have an incentive to include rather than exclude.

2.3 Two bases for ethnic coalitions and ethnic politics

The preceding analysis suggests a distinction between two bases for ethnic political coalitions and ethnic political conflict. First, political coalitions may form along the lines of ethnicity when preferences over public policies are shared within groups but are polarized across groups. For example, if different groups in a country subscribe to different religions or speak different first languages, then preferences may polarize along ethnic lines over all manner of public policies concerning religion and language use. Should there be a mosque or a Hindu temple at Ayodhar? Should Sinhalese be the official language of Sri Lanka? And so on. This is not to say that the politicization of ethnicity will be automatic when underlying preferences are structured in such a fashion. Politics will still help determine which conflicting preferences get politicized, if any. But when they are, ethnic coalitions are based on the common preferences of coethnics over particular policy dimensions.¹⁶

Second, political coalitions may form along the lines of ethnicity when ethnicity is for some reason a convenient line for dividing winners from losers in a struggle over the control of political pork. In this case, an ethnic coalition is not based on any important differences between individuals. Everyone wants the same thing, it is just a matter of who gets it and ethnically based coalitions may be useful for this end. We now consider why this might be the case.¹⁷

¹⁶Typically, preferences polarize on such an issue not solely because of the material implications of policies on language or religion, but rather because the question of language or religion raises the question of the relative status of the groups in the state.

¹⁷[Suppose individuals in a country have preferences over a large number of issue dimensions. In general there will be no Condorcet winner, and any point in the space can be defeated in a majority contest by some other issue position, just as in the divide-the-dollar problem. Is this structurally close enough to the divide the dollar problem that we can say that the analysis for “pork” applies here as well?]

3 A game of political identities

An individual may respond to appeals by politicians to act (vote, demonstrate, show favoritism, etc.) as a worker, a Liberal, a Scot, a mother, a Protestant, or any social category that the person happens to belong to. Some categories seem to have no political appeal. In the U.S. no one seeks to mobilize the blue-eyed, for instance. Others structure the political cleavages of a country for a long time – witness Republican vs. Democratic partisanship in the United States. Even if a great deal of political science can be done taking the set of such political identities as given, it is still interesting to ask where they come from and why political identity X rather than Y. Perhaps little can be said at a general level.¹⁸ The best answers may just be historical accounts of how political identities developed and changed in particular cases. Granting this – indeed, the argument given below actually provides a theoretical warrant for this position – I develop here an abstract model that casts political identity formation as a species of coordination problem.¹⁹

3.1 The model

Imagine a country whose voting population plays the following **political identity game**:

1. Everyone simultaneously chooses to vote for a social category, that is, a label that describes some or all members of the society. For now, take the set of social categories to be all labels currently in use in everyday interactions. Individuals can “vote” for any label they want to, so they are choosing from a very big set, ranging from, for example, “used car salesmen” to “human beings.” We might imagine that each social category has its political exponent or entrepreneur campaigning for it – e.g., Vote for the Blue Eyes Party!
2. Count the ballots to determine which social category received the most votes. This category is the winner. (If there is a tie, choose the winner at random from the top vote-getters.)
3. Distribute the benefits, say \$10 million, equally among *all members of the social category that won*. Thus, if you are a member of the winning category, you get a share of the benefits whether you voted for it or not.

¹⁸Lipset and Rokkan (1967) is probably the most famous effort.

¹⁹Laitin (1998) has pioneered thinking about political identity in terms of social coordination, though as usual there is some precedent in Schelling (1960, 92), in the observation that social roles may represent coordination equilibria of a sort. See also Kuran (1998).

This game attempts to capture in a schematic fashion three aspects of political competition in the context of modern states. First, control of government implies the control of spoils that virtually everyone values. Second, larger coalitions (in the democratic context, electoral blocks) have a greater chance of winning control of the government. And third, winning coalitions must be so large, and the technology of distributing spoils is so constituted, that coalitions must be defined by social categories rather than as lists of individual names. On this last point, note that in a legislature ad hoc coalitions of particular members may form, but in an election no politician can campaign on a platform of “more pork for John A, Susan B, Gordon T, ... etc.” up to many thousands of names.

Faced with the choice of what social category to vote for or mobilize on behalf of, what should one do? First off, note that voting for a category that you are not a member of is a weakly dominated strategy. There is no situation in which this makes you better off and some situations in which this makes you worse off than if you voted for a category you belong to. Suppose, then, that everyone votes for a category to which he or she belongs.

It is immediately clear that voters face an enormous coordination problem, roughly akin to Schelling’s famous “where to meet in New York City” problem, or Keynes’ “beauty contest” example where newspaper readers won a prize if they picked the young woman’s picture picked as “most beautiful” by the largest number of other readers.²⁰ In the political identity game, the voter wants to coordinate with other voters who all belong to some common category, and they want their group to be larger than the number voting for any other category. But what category to choose when there are so many to choose from? One is guessing about what others will guess, knowing that they are making the same sort of guess as well. As Schelling argued for the New York City example, in such coordination problems rational players will look for contextual features that have some cultural or otherwise commonly understood salience, which he called focal points. For example, playing the political identity game with all other United States citizens I would think that “professor” or “blue-eyed people” would be poor choices – not very salient – while “Republican” or “Democrat” probably much better.

The political identity game differs from Schelling’s and Keynes’ examples in that it is not a matter of pure coordination. Rather, players may have conflicting preferences over which social category wins. But before exploring how the more conflictual aspect of the problem works, I note several straightforward implications of the coordination aspect.

First, it is likely that there will be multiple equilibria (this is easily shown, below). When pork is at issue, there may be many hypothetically possible bases for political coalitions

²⁰Schelling’s example: “You are to meet somebody in New York City. You have not been instructed where to meet; you have no prior understanding with the person on where to meet; and you cannot communicate with each other. You are simply told that you will have to guess where to meet and that he is being told the same thing and that you will just have to try to make your guesses coincide” (Schelling 1960, 56).

and identities.

Second, despite multiple equilibria, once some pattern of coordination is established within a society, it may be very difficult to refocus expectations on some other pattern, precisely because no one has an incentive to deviate unilaterally from the coordination equilibrium. Over time, if a population comes to mobilize and vote as (say) Luos, Kikuyus, Luhyas, Kalenjin, and so on, this will become “naturalized” at least in the sense of being overwhelmingly and correctly expected as the basis for political coalitions.

Third, what determines the pattern of coordination in the first place may be idiosyncratic factors particular to the time, place and interplay of political strategies. So understanding how a pattern of political coalitions and identities came about may often be a matter of historical narrative rather than the finding of general factors.²¹ Indeed, there will never very really be a “first place,” since there are always prior cultural beliefs and experience that suggest salient categories for coordination.

Returning to the analysis, how best to coordinate? In order to maximize one’s share of the spoils, one would ideally like to be a member of the category that wins the vote but has as few members as possible, since the spoils will be distributed equally to *all* members of the winning category. Let’s say that category A “beats” category B if it has a larger number of members and would give all of these members a higher payoff than they would get if the spoils were shared among the members of category B. Category A is “unbeatable” if there is no other category that can beat it. Finally, we should distinguish between *universalist* and *exclusivist* categories. The former is a category that any person is or can choose to be a member of, like Democrats or human beings. The latter is a category that, by the rules of membership it presumes, is not open to some sorts of people.²²

Clearly, *any universalist category can be defeated by any exclusivist category that has at least half of the voting population as members*. And an exclusivist category can be defeated by another exclusivist category that is smaller but still covers a majority of the population.²³ Thus, to the extent that the voters grasp the logic of the problem, in making their choices they will be looking for a salient exclusivist category that they belong to and that comprises as bare a majority as possible.²⁴

²¹Cf. Laitin (1998), Przeworski and Sprague (1986), Kalyvas (1996), Chhibber (1999).

²²For many categories one may become a member by paying some cost. This variant is discussed below.

²³With the size of the pie normalized to be 1, the payoff for a universalist category is $1/n$, while an exclusivist category with $m < n$ members gets $1/m$ for each member. Since $1/m > 1/n$, the exclusivist category is sure to win provided it has a majority of the votes ($m > (n + 1)/2$).

²⁴This is not exactly right, since to win one needs only a plurality, not a strict majority. This would be relevant if one expected others to coordinate on many small categories – e.g., tribes in Tanzania. Even so, over time there should be incentives for the coalescing of groups and categories.

For instance, if political pork in the city of Chicago is handed out on the basis of being a Democrat, then the Democratic coalition would rapidly expand, and an incentive obtains for a more exclusivist coalition that would give a greater share of the pork to its members. Ethnicity, and indeed any other ascriptive affiliation that is costly or impossible for an individual to change, fits the bill nicely. This is the basis for arguing that there is an elective affinity between the politics of pork and ethnically based political coalitions.²⁵

It is possible for there to be a unique social category that is “unbeatable” in the sense defined above. It would be the smallest exclusivist category whose members form a majority of the population. Perhaps there would be some tendency for this category (if it is unique) to emerge as the winner in repeated play of the political identity game. But nonetheless, if the number of social categories is large, the game will almost certainly have multiple Nash equilibria, and those who would benefit under the unbeatable category may face considerable difficulties in moving towards an equilibrium where this is the winner.

To see that there will typically be multiple Nash equilibria, note that *any* category can emerge as the winner in a Nash equilibrium provided that (a) all members of the category vote for it in the equilibrium; (b) each of the nonmembers votes for a category that receives at least two fewer votes than the winning category. The second condition implies that no one nonmember can change his vote and make some other category win (or tie for winning).

In principle, then, the category “political science professors” could win the election in the United States, given a dramatic failure to coordinate by the rest of the population. One would certainly think that if the game were repeated, political entrepreneurs would campaign to “Beat the political science professors by voting for Californians!” (for example). The problem, however, is that more than one such entrepreneur would ask for votes, again raising the problem of coordination. We could have a situation like that in Kenya in the last elections, where Luos and Kikuyus failed to coordinate in an effort to unseat the Kalenjin president.

3.2 Concatenations

Let L_i be the set of social categories (“labels”) of which person i is a member, with typical element l . Let L be the set of all social categories present in the society ($L = \bigcup_i L_i$). Above, I

²⁵What about male vs. female political coalitions? This division is salient, to put it mildly, exclusive (up to very costly sex change operations), and many people know that the sex ratio is close to 50-50 but tilted in favor of women. Indeed, when I have asked undergraduates to play the political identity game, many write down their gender. Perhaps some scholars of gender relations would argue that pork is in fact monopolized by a male political coalition more-or-less everywhere. Alternatively, I would argue that political coalitions that systematically divide families will never be favored in a competition for pork, since households involve some institutionalized sharing and joint disposition of income.

proposed defining L as the set of social categories currently referred to everyday interactions. But this is not satisfactory, since this does not allow for any invention or innovation in the politicization of social categories. In particular, if “Kikuyu” and “Luo” are social categories in Kenya, why can’t a political entrepreneur propose a coalition/category “Kikuyu-Luo”? We have seen in the informal analysis above that the political identity game contains strong incentives for coalition formation, so why not allow this? Why not define a new set of labels as the set of combinations of the “original” or “primary” labels. For example, if $l, l' \in L$, let $l + l'$ be a *concatenation* of l and l' . We can easily go to concatenations of three labels or more as well.

But allowing for invented coalitions or categories creates a problem. The label “James D. Fearon” applies to me. So why not a concatenation like “James D. Fearon + Joe R. + Anita C. +”? If we allow for any concatenation, then we are in a world where mass coalitions of particular, named individuals are possible. I can imagine a coalition of Luos and Kikuyus, but I can’t imagine a politician assembling a coalition of individuals not selected according to any social category guidelines – the costs of formation and of distributing benefits would be too high. What’s missing, then, is that concatenation raises the costs of forming, advertising, and distributing benefits to the members of the coalition. A simple way to represent this inefficiency would be to suppose that the benefits available for distribution to a winning coalition are reduced depending on the number of primary categories that comprise it.

3.3 Costs for changing identities

In the discussion to this point, I have assumed that there are two types of social categories: Categories that anyone can become (or already is) a member of, and categories that certain people can never become members of. For example, anyone can be a member of the categories Christian, Buddhist, or “believer in life after death” simply by adopting certain beliefs and declaring that it is so. Membership in many political parties is similarly open. By contrast, if membership in a particular ethnic group is defined by descent rules, then it may be impossible for me to become a member, except by misrepresentation.

Though analytically useful, this contrast is too stark. In general, the costs of becoming a member of a social category vary according to both the nature of the category and the particular individual in question. It would be less costly for me to become a member of the Sierra Club than to become a trial lawyer. And the costs for adopting or acquiring identities may involve not just time, money, and effort, but also more “psychic” costs. Even if the N.R.A. were handing out substantial material benefits, I would find it very difficult to become a member. As we currently use the term, “identity” often refers to a social category in which members take a particular pride (Fearon 1997). The pride one takes in membership

in a particular identity may raise the costs of re-identifying and mobilizing politically as a member of some other category.

What would happen in the political identity game if individuals could become members of any category for a cost $c > 0$? Normalize the size of the “pie” to be 1 and suppose that there are m members in the winning category. Thus, prior to any assimilation, the payoff to being a member of the winning category is $1/m$. If the cost of switching is less than this, then the size of the winning identity will expand up to the point where the benefits of membership equal the costs of switching, thus a coalition of size $m' > m$ where $c = 1/m'$.

In the politics of pork, then, the benefits for assimilation will be higher the smaller the size of the winning category.²⁶ To maintain a relatively small winning political identity, higher costs for entry will be necessary. Once again, we find that ethnic and other ascriptive categories where membership depends on how one’s parents were coded will be favored.

4 Empirical Implications

The political identity game and the preceding analysis have at least four significant empirical implications.

1. Contrary to what a strict primordialist account would predict, *changing state boundaries can produce changes in political identity*. If a country becomes more “homogenous” either due to decolonization or a secession, then competition for state pork implies that incentives increase for new exclusivist identities that will divide the formerly homogenous group.

To see how this prediction follows from the model, suppose that at one point in time, exclusivist identity A forms a winning coalition, and that the excluded minority consists mainly of people who identify as B’s and live in one region of the state. Suppose the B’s successfully secede. Then in both A-land and B-land what were formerly exclusivist identities are now nearly universalist identities. As such, in a competition for state pork they become beatable by exclusivist identities that were subcategories of A-ness and B-ness.

Alternatively, suppose that small groups A, B, C, D, and so on, interact locally and dyadically at first, but then are lumped together into a larger political unit with the arrival of colonizers. If there is a competition for pork at this higher level, then the logic of the political identity game implies that there are now incentives for amalgamation and the construction

²⁶Other factors, however, push in the opposite direction. If incentives to assimilate depend on the frequency of individual interactions with members of an out-group, then smaller groups will face more assimilation pressure in a large society (Fearon and Laitin 1996, 726).

of higher-level ascriptive identities.

Empirical examples of this prediction abound in the literature on ethnic politics. Indeed, the observation that new political boundaries stimulate the formation of new ethnic groups is one of the central stylized facts in this literature.²⁷ Prior to the drawing of colonial boundaries and the creation of pork related to export agriculture in capitols such as Lagos and Nairobi, “groups” like the Yoruba and the Kikuyu had little if any sense of Yorubanness or Kikuyuness. Instead, the relevant political identities were at a lower level, whether based on clan, locale, or ancestral city. When all these smaller groups were brought into competition for schools and other benefits associated with colonial modernization, they faced strong incentives for the construction of more encompassing political identities, as in the political identity game above. Further, since the colonial state’s outputs were primarily pork goods, the model above would predict that exclusivist coalitions would tend to result, which is what happened for the most part.

Decolonization provides another set of examples. In the colonial period state pork was entirely controlled and mostly consumed by the colonial administrations staffed by Europeans. Decolonization movements saw the successful mobilization of “Africans” (“Kenyans,” “Nigerians,” etc.) against Europeans as the relevant political categories. Many analysts at the time thought these political identities were quite “real” and likely to endure. But the exit of the Europeans (B’s, in the stylized example above) led to strong pressures for more minimal exclusivist coalitions among the Africans.

Decolonization is not the only class of examples of the reconstruction of ethnic identities following the exit of a group. Horowitz relates the case of Madras state in India, the reorganization of which in 1953 led to the separation of Tamil Nadu from Andhra Pradesh. In Madras state, “with large Tamil and Telugu populations, cleavages within the Telugu group were not very important. As soon as a separate Telugu-speaking state was carved out of Madras, however, Telugu subgroups – caste, regional, and religious – quickly formed the bases of political action” (Horowitz 1985, 66).

2. If we can order governments or political systems by the amount of political pork

²⁷See, for examples, Horowitz (1985, 66), Bates (1983), and Vail (1991). Bates (1983) saw that the dynamics of minimum winning coalitions have this implication, although, as argued above, I do not think he explained why the coalitions that form would tend to be ethnic (i.e., ascriptive) as opposed to something else. Horowitz (1985) offered an explanation based on “social judgement theory” holding that what one sees as different depends on the range of contrasts available. While this argument may help explain how workers in Nairobi from Nakuru and Muranga would come to see themselves as having more in common as Kikuyus than with their coworker from Nyanza (Luoland), it does not help explain how rural Africans who rarely encountered people outside their own tribe could be mobilized on a tribal (rather than clan or local) basis. That is, new identities have often developed very quickly following administrative boundary changes, whereas social interaction patterns change much more slowly.

they make available, then *we would predict ethnic political coalitions to be more common in governments where pork is more prevalent and accessible to politicians.*

I next present five stylized facts or pieces of conventional wisdom from several areas of political science that seem consistent with this prediction. I do not know how well any of these empirical generalizations would hold up under closer scrutiny.

- a. Because of fewer checks based in institutions and civil society, control of a government in the “third world” is more attractive relative to being out of power than in the richer, more democratic advanced industrial states.²⁸ Control of government itself is, of course, a pork good, perhaps the biggest of all. And politics organized by ethnic coalitions are more common in the third world (Horowitz 1985).

This association is not meant as proof of the prediction that pork goods favor ethnic political coalitions, since there are many other factors not considered here and it could also be that ethnic coalitions cause both nondemocracy and poor economic performance. I am merely pointing out a bivariate association consistent with the theoretical argument. This caveat should be recalled in each case below.

- b. These same institutional and civil society-based checks imply that issue-based goods are more typical of political competition than pork goods in advanced industrial states. In the former colonies, controlling and distributing pork goods seems to be a relatively more significant part of a politician’s job description than in the western democracies, where influencing the choice of policies from an issue dimension seems relatively more important.²⁹ Chhibber (1999, 8-9) summarizes this bit of conventional wisdom as follows:

In rentier states, such as Algeria [and others, like India, where the state takes the leading role in economic development policies], the state is the owner of and distributor of most resources to society. Access to state office in the rentier state then provides an opportunity to politicians to distribute and accumulate state revenue. In other countries, such as the United States, politicians have not been able to avail themselves of such opportunities, since the rise of what Coleman (1996) calls the “fiscal state” placed some policies in the hands of the civil service and limited the influence of politicians to appropriate and distribute resources.

Once again, this association goes in the direction predicted by the argument that pork goods favor ethnically based coalitions.

²⁸See, for one example of this claim, Przeworski and Limongi (1997, 166).

²⁹For a nice example, see Tambiah (1986, xx) who notes an act of the Sri Lankan parliament guaranteeing each member the control of 1000 civil service positions!

- c. In the U.S., ethnically based political coalitions have been much more typical in city politics than at the national level, and city politics is typically more concerned with pork goods like civil service positions and city contracts than issue-space goods like tax rates and regulatory policies.
- d. Consistent with (b) above, conventional wisdom about the Progressive Era in the U.S. traces the (relative) decline of Tammany Hall-style politics, which turned on ethnic coalitions, to the efforts of reformers to subject pork allocation to more bureaucratic and meritocratic standards (Skowronek 1982).
- e. For the 81 countries in the Minorities At Risk data set (Gurr 1993) for which I have data, the effective number of ethnic groups in a country is positively correlated share of government spending in GDP.³⁰ The correlation is positive but not significant once we control for (log of) GDP per capita in 1960. This is what we would predict if government share of the economy is a rough measure of pork available, although we should note again the caveat above: it may also be true that once a country has ethnically based political coalitions, pressures for government spending increase.

3. We should be able to find *cases where the possibility of assimilation of an excluded category into a winning coalition led to a redefinition or new formulation of the winning identity.*

Horowitz (1985, 43) notes that

In seventeenth century North America, the English were originally called “Christians,” while the African slaves were described as “heathens.” The initial differentiation relied heavily on religion. After about 1680, however, a new dichotomy of “whites” and “blacks” supplanted the former Christian and heathen categories, *for some slaves had become Christians*. If reliance had continued to be placed mainly on religion, baptism could have been employed to escape from bondage. ... To the extent that Christianity was a voluntary affiliation, the special place of color in American ethnic relations seems to have originated in the special desire of the slaveholders for a permanently servile group.³¹

A final, striking example of this prediction concerns the politics of Native American mobilization in the U.S. [which at the moment I have only by hearsay – do not quote me

³⁰Using Shvetsova’s data on effective number of ethnic groups and the Penn World Tables for the government spending data.

³¹Emphasis added. Horowitz uses this example for a different purpose, to help show that no one indicator of ethnicity uniquely defines ethnicity.

on this]. In a case study of the XXX in upstate New York by Cynthia Irving, movement organizers defined membership very broadly during the initial mobilization to gain legal recognition as a tribe entitled to certain rights. That is, the descent criterion was treated very openly – anyone who asserted that he or she had a distant ancestor who was a member of the tribe might be counted as a member. *After* legal recognition was granted and the prospect of casino revenues came into view, the organizers began to make the membership rule more strict, again on the basis of number of close ancestors, precisely so that control of casino revenues could be limited to a smaller group.

4. In accounts of the politicization of ethnicity, *we should find competition over pork goods playing an especially prominent role in the sequence of events that led to ethnically based politically coalitions.*

Political competition over government allocation of civil service and university positions is mentioned prominently in accounts of the politicization of ethnicity around the time of independence in Rwanda, Burundi, and Sri Lanka.³² I suspect these examples are not idiosyncratic, though this is obviously very conjectural.

5 Conclusion

The standard argument for why ethnic political coalitions and democracy do not go well together is based on the observation that ethnic identity is difficult for an individual to change, precisely because it is ascriptive. The argument goes like this: Stable democracy requires that individuals expect that even if they are on the losing side today, they will be a member of winning electoral coalition at some time in the future.³³ But if individuals expect that electoral coalitions will be ethnically based and impervious to change or reconstitution, then there is no possibility for an ethnic minority to defeat an ethnic majority in the future (unless a much higher birth rate will make it a majority). There is no possibility of persuading the winners to change their ethnicity, and perhaps little possibility that one's children can join the winning coalition either. Thus, incentives are high to opt out of electoral politics altogether, either by trying to grab control of the state or to secede by force. Numerous examples may be adduced, mainly cases of democratic breakdown in the years following independence in Africa and Asia.

Oddly, efforts to explain why we observe ethnically based political coalitions *in the first place* have never focused on the strategic incentives that follow from the “stickiness” of

³²See, respectively, Prunier (1995), Lemarchand (1993), and Tambiah (1986).

³³This is the logic behind the old idea that cross-cutting cleavages are good for democracy, and also behind the more recent formulations of Przeworski (1991).

ethnic identities. The main point of this note is very simple. When pork goods are at issue, there are strong incentives to form a coalition that can effectively exclude losers, and this requires that losers can be distinguished from winners. Any basis for a coalition that allows individuals easily to cross lines will be selected against in competitions for political pork.

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