1

Introduction

Institutions and Ethnic Politics

Nearly all multi-ethnic political systems contain more than one dimension of ethnic cleavage. Israel is divided by religion, but its citizens are also divided by their places of origin and their degrees of secularism. South Africa is divided by race, but also by language differences and by tribe.[1] India is divided by language (which serves as the basis for its federalism), but also by religion and caste. Switzerland is divided by religion and by language. Nigeria is divided by religion, region, and tribe. Even sub-national units are frequently ethnically multi-dimensional: cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Miami all contain prominent racial cleavages, but also cleavages based on their residents' countries of origin, languages of communication, and lengths of residence in the United States.

Given these multiple bases of ethnic division, when does politics revolve around one of them rather than another? Journalists and scholars who write about the politics of ethnically divided societies tend to take the axis of ethnic cleavage that serves as the basis for political competition and conflict as a given. They write eloquently about hostilities between Hindus and Muslims in India but never pause to ask why that country's conflict takes place along religious lines rather than among Hindi-speakers, Bengali-speakers, and Marathi-speakers. They discuss the competition among Hausas, Yorubas, and Igbos in Nigeria but never stop to question why the political rivalries in that nation rage among these broad ethno-regional communities rather than between Christians and Muslims.

[1] "Tribe" is a loaded word. Here, and throughout the book, I use the term to refer to an ethnic community that is (or was historically) organized under the authority of a traditional chief. Membership in a tribe is determined by the answer to the question: are you (or were your parents) subjects of Chief X? For an extended discussion of how "tribes" were created during the colonial era, and why "tribe" and "language" cannot be used interchangeably, see Chapters 2 and 3.

They probe the conflict between blacks and Latinos in Miami but never think to inquire why the city's tensions revolve around racial differences rather than divisions among Haitians, Cubans, Dominicans, and other Caribbean immigrants, or between immigrants and non-immigrants. In country after country and city after city, they provide detailed accounts of how and why politicians "play the ethnic card." Yet they almost never bother to ask why politicians play the particular ethnic card that they do.

Why, given multiple potentially mobilizable bases of ethnic division, does political competition and conflict come to be organized along the lines of one ethnic cleavage rather than another? Why do politicians emphasize (and why do people respond positively to appeals couched in terms of) race rather than language, religion rather than tribe, caste rather than state? Under what conditions does the dimension of ethnic cleavage that is salient change? When does politics shift from being about religious differences to being about language differences, from being about country of origin to being about race? These are the questions that this book seeks to answer. It seeks to account for *when* and *why*, given multiple axes of ethnic division in a society, one cleavage becomes the basis of political competition and conflict rather than another. It builds its explanation by distinguishing between two distinct, but often conflated, processes: identity construction (the process through which the repertoire of political identities in society that might be mobilized is constructed) and identity choice (the process through which political actors decide to emphasize one identity from this set of potentially mobilizable social categories rather than another). I argue that the cleavage that emerges as salient is the aggregation of all actors' individual decisions about the identity that will serve them best, and that these decisions are constrained, first, by the option set from which the actors are choosing, and, second, by the formal institutional rules that govern political competition, which make some identities more advantageous than others.

THE ARGUMENT

Political institutions are the formal rules, regulations, and policies that structure social and political interactions.[2] This book shows how they

[2] This definition is significantly narrower than, for example, North (1990: 3), who defines institutions as "the rules of the game in a society, or, more formally . . . the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction." North's definition, like that of others (e.g., Bates 1988; World Bank 2002), would include such social

help to determine which ethnic cleavage becomes politically salient in two stages, and via two distinct causal mechanisms. First, they shape the repertoires of potentially mobilizable ethnic identities that individuals possess. That is, they determine why some of the myriad objectively identifiable bases of cultural difference in society come to be viewed as at least potentially politically salient, and why others do not. Second, they shape peoples' incentives for selecting one of these potentially salient ethnic identities rather than another, and then coordinate these choices across individuals so as to produce a society-level outcome. To borrow the metaphor of a card game, political institutions explain, first, why players' hands contain the cards they do and, then, why the players play one of these cards rather than another. They also explain why one player or set of players ultimately wins the game.

The part of the argument about how political institutions shape individuals' identity choices – about why players play the cards that they do – is built from three simple, well-established propositions: people want resources from the state. They believe that having someone from their ethnic group in a position of political power will facilitate their access to those resources. And they understand that the best way to get someone from their ethnic group into a position of political power is to build or join a political coalition with fellow group members. Taken together, these propositions suggest that ethnic politics can be viewed in terms of the politics of coalition-building and that ethnic identity choice can be seen in terms of the quest to gain membership in the coalition that will be most politically and economically useful. The idea that ethnic politics can be interpreted as a kind of coalition-building was first articulated by Robert Bates, who described ethnic groups as "coalitions which have been formed as a part of rational efforts to secure benefits created by the forces of modernization" (1983: 152). This book builds on Bates's insight by extending this argument beyond the question of why ethnicity is politically useful and applying it to the question of why individuals choose to emphasize the particular ethnic identities they do.

phenomena as markets, traditional lineage structures, and even norms of behavior. In the more restricted definition used here, institutions are the formal, codified rules, regulations, or policies to which the existence of these structures, and norms might be traced, not the structures and norms themselves. Markets, lineage structures, and behavioral norms are (or may be) *products* of institutions, but, by the definition employed here, they are not institutions themselves. How the formal rules gave rise to these social phenomena is left as something to be explained rather than simply assumed.

Ethnic coalition-building is straightforward in a world where individuals have only a single ethnic identity. In such a context, political actors turn to ethnicity because of the mobilizational advantages it brings (Bates 1983; Hardin 1995; Hechter 2001; Chandra 2004) or because of the ability it affords them to limit access to the spoils that successful mobilization provides (Fearon 1999; Caselli and Coleman 2001). However, matters become more complicated when we recognize that individuals possess multiple ethnic identities, each of which might serve as a basis for coalition formation. Given multiple ethnic group memberships, the question is: which coalition should a political actor interested in gaining access to state resources seek to mobilize or join? The one with their fellow tribe members? The one with their fellow language-speakers? The one with their co-religionists? Which will be the most advantageous identity to select?

To the extent that access to resources is determined through a process of electoral competition, the most useful identity to mobilize will be, as Riker (1962) showed, the one that puts the person in a winning coalition (or, if more than one coalition is winning, then the one that is *minimum* winning – the one that contains the fewest members with whom the spoils of power will have to be shared). Individuals will consider each of the identity groups in which they can claim membership (and which others will recognize as meaningful) and embrace the one that defines the most usefully sized group. They will consider each of the principles of group division that divide the political community (religion, language, race, clan, etc.), compare the size of their own group with that of the other groups that each of these cleavages defines, and then select the identity that puts them in a minimum winning coalition. Thus, a Sinhalese Christian from Sri Lanka would begin by comparing the size of her religious group (Christians) with the sizes of the other religious groups in the country (Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus) and the size of her language group (Sinhalese) with the sizes of the other language groups (Tamil and English). Then, she would select the ethnic affiliation that puts her in the most advantageous group and attempt to build or join a coalition with fellow members of that group. In this particular case, she would choose her language group, since Sinhalese-speakers are a majority vis-à-vis other language groups in Sri Lanka, whereas Christians are a minority vis-à-vis other religions. Her identity choice – that is, her choice about which identity to use to identify herself politically – is constrained by the options in her repertoire (her Christian religion; her Sinhalese language group membership), both of which are commonsensically part of who she

understands herself to be due to history, government policy, and childhood socialization. But she is free to choose between these two identity options to select the one that will be most advantageous given the situation in which she finds herself.

Why, then, do political institutions matter? First, they matter because the usefulness of any coalition will depend on the boundaries of the arena in which political competition is taking place, and these boundaries are products of institutional rules.[3] As the formal rules governing political competition change, the boundaries of the political arena will often expand or contract, and this will cause memberships in ethnic groups of different sizes to become more or less useful as bases for political coalition-building. For example, our Sinhalese Christian found it advantageous to emphasize her language group identity because she was engaged in a competition for political power at the national level and, at that level, being Sinhalese was more useful than being Christian. If she had been competing for a share of power in her town (say, in the context of a mayoral race) or in her region (say, in the context of an election to a provincial council), her choice might have been quite different. The particular ethnic coalition in which it will make sense for her to seek membership, and thus the particular identity she will invoke to try to do so, will depend on the boundaries of the arena in which she is competing. To the extent that these boundaries are defined by institutional rules – in this example, rules devolving power to municipalities or sub-national units – those rules will be central to our explanation of her identity choices.

The second reason institutions matter is because, in addition to shaping the strategic choices that individuals make, they also coordinate these choices. People's decisions about which identity will serve them best are influenced by a great many contextual factors, including who their interacting partners are, the events or issues of the moment, and the physical location in which they find themselves at the time they are making their choice. What makes the choice-shaping effects of political institutions different from these more fleeting and individualized sorts of contexts is that

[3] Institutions may also affect ethnic identity choices more directly by providing for the preferential treatment of members of certain groups (Weiner and Katzenstein 1981; Horowitz 1985), prohibiting appeals made in terms of certain kinds of identities (Brass 1991), or facilitating political representation by small groups and thereby creating incentives for mobilization along such lines, as, for example, in proportional representation (PR) electoral systems (Reilly and Reynolds 1997). The emphasis here on how political institutions affect identity choices by defining the arena of political competition is a somewhat different argument from these more familiar ones.

political institutions affect everyone in society that is subject to them. They define a uniform context in which coalition-building calculations are made. Moreover, everyone knows that this is the case, so individuals are able to choose the strategies that are best for them in light of what they can infer about the best strategies for others. Institutions provide common knowledge (Chwe 2001) about the incentives faced by everyone in society. This gives them the power not just to shape how individuals identify themselves but also to coordinate these identity choices so as to affect which ethnic cleavage becomes politically salient in society more generally.

But before political actors even face the choice about which ethnic identity to mobilize, political institutions will have already affected their decisions in another, less proximate, way by shaping the universe of possible ethnic identities from which they are choosing. To suggest that individuals can choose their ethnic affiliations strategically is not to suggest that the range of options from which they are choosing is infinite. The identities they seize upon must be ones that both they and other members of society view as commonsensical units of social division and political self-identification. While appeals to race or language might resonate in most societies, appeals to "hazel-eyed people" or "left-handed people" will be unlikely to lead to energetic political mobilization, since neither eye color nor left-handedness is understood as a meaningful principle of groupness – at least not in any society of which I am aware. Ethnic mobilization requires coordination, and this requires that the identity around which the mobilization is to take place be understood by would-be mobilizers as at least potentially politically salient.

The kinds of identities that are understood to be potentially politically salient will vary from society to society. For example, the distinction between religious and non-religious people might resonate in Holland (where it has served as a basis for the Dutch party system) but not in Iran or Afghanistan, since nobody in these countries sees themselves, or others, in terms of these categories. Only those identities that are part of society members' shared understandings of how the social landscape of the polity might conceivably be divided up can serve as viable bases for political coalition-building. Thus, before we inquire into why political actors embrace or seek to mobilize the ethnic identities they do, we must first account for why some identities are understood to be meaningful candidates for mobilization and others are not. We need to explain why, when people think about politics and reflect on who they are, they conjure up the range of identities they do.

This is where the second part of the argument about the role of political institutions comes in. In addition to shaping players' choices about which cards to play, political institutions also help to determine the cards that they hold in their hands. They affect the process of subconscious socialization and conscious investment that determines the contents of individuals' identity choice sets. Most instrumentalist accounts of ethnic identity choice simply take people's identity repertoires as given and begin their analysis by stipulating that the individuals in question have the particular identities that they do. In contrast, I seek to account for these identity repertoires. I do this by showing that the ethnic identities that people use to define who they are can often be traced to specific state policies, regulations, and administrative structures: that is, to institutions. Further, I demonstrate that the numbers, sizes, and distributions of the groups that these identities define can also be shown to be products of administrative structures and policies. As we shall see, the relative sizes and physical locations of groups are important, since these factors determine whether or not they will serve as useful bases of self-identification and political mobilization.

This book thus treats the question of why political conflict in a given community comes to revolve around the particular dimension of ethnic division that it does as the outcome of two separate but equally important processes: the process by which the menu of people's identity options is generated and the process by which the choices from this menu are made. It separates the process of *identity construction* from the process of *identity choice*. The former operates over the long term and, as I shall show, involves a mix of subconscious social learning and conscious investments by individuals in particular group memberships. The latter is a short-term process that is immediately sensitive to alterations in the rules of the political game and is viewed here as an outcome of strategic choice. The process of identity construction operates in keeping with the "sociological institutionalist" tradition; the process of identity choice operates in keeping with a "rational choice institutionalist" perspective (Hall and Taylor 1996). Although the two are different, both mechanisms are products of the formal institutional environment in which political and social life is carried out. The complementary roles that each of these processes play in shaping ethnic cleavage outcomes are depicted in Figure 1.1.

To demonstrate how political institutions shape ethnic cleavage outcomes in both of these ways, this book draws on empirical materials from Zambia. In Zambia, political actors identify themselves as members

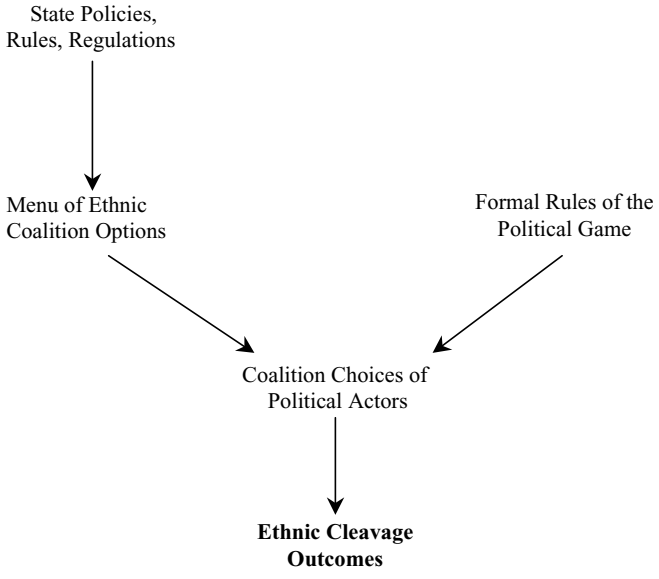

Figure 1.1. The Institutional Origins of Ethnic Cleavage Outcomes

of (and can build political coalitions around) ethnic groups defined either in terms of tribal affiliation or language group membership. The tribal cleavage divides the country into roughly seventy small groups, whereas the linguistic cleavage partitions it into four broad regional coalitions. To explain Zambians' ethnic identity choices, the first task, accomplished in Part I of the book, is to account for why tribe and language, but not other bases of social identity, have come to serve as the key components of Zambians' identity repertoires and thus as the central bases of potential ethnic political cleavage in the country. The second task, accomplished in Parts II and III, is to account for why one of these axes of ethnic division emerges as the basis for political competition and conflict rather than the other. As it turns out, the salient cleavage in Zambia changes over time. The specific question that I address is therefore: when (and why) does political competition in Zambia revolve around tribal divisions and when (and why) does it revolve around language group distinctions? My answer is that the relative political salience of the linguistic and tribal cleavages depends on the nature of the country's formal political institutions – in particular, on whether the country is operating under a multi-party or one-party political system. I show that, during periods of multi-party rule, language group cleavages serve as the central axis of coalition-building

and political conflict in Zambia, whereas, during periods of one-party rule, tribal cleavages play this role.

The analysis I present is not meant to provide an all-encompassing theory of how institutions shape ethnic cleavages. The particular institutional rules that I emphasize (party system type) are only one of a larger set of formal institutional arrangements that might affect people's ethnic identity choices. Moreover, even if we restrict our focus to the specific rules that I treat here – that is, even if we try to generalize about the effects of shifting from a one-party to a multi-party political system in a context of single-member plurality electoral rules – the specific tribal and linguistic cleavage outcomes that I show this change to generate in Zambia are not generalizable in themselves. The kinds of ethnic cleavages that will become salient in one-party and multi-party elections in other countries and political arenas will depend on the contents of the identity option set from which political actors in those places are choosing. This will become clear in Chapter 9, where I apply the model to other African cases. In Zambia, it just happens that, for reasons I will explain at length, language and tribal identities are the only two options in the option set.

My purpose, instead, is to develop and apply a simple, general model that illustrates the power of formal institutional rules to determine the kinds of identities that individuals will embrace and, through these identity choices, the social cleavages that will emerge as politically salient. The "discovery" – and, over the last forty years, gradual acceptance – that ethnic identities are situational and strategic constitutes probably the most important general insight that has yet been made in the study of ethnicity and ethnic politics. From the standpoint of heightening awareness of the complexity of ethnic identifications, this insight has been extraordinarily useful. Descriptive inferences about the nature of ethnic identities are made much more carefully today than in the past. Research techniques designed to measure ethnic loyalties and their political and social consequences are becoming increasingly nuanced and sophisticated (Banton and Mansur 1992; Laitin 1986, 1998; Wilkinson 1999). But from the standpoint of theory building, the discovery that ethnic identities are fluid and situation bound has been paralyzing. The recognition that ethnic identities may shift from situation to situation has made students of ethnicity hesitant to propose general hypotheses about people's identity choices that apply to more than a unique context or a single individual. As a consequence, the literature on ethnic politics is almost entirely devoid of generalizations about the conditions under which one ethnic identity or cleavage will be likely to emerge as politically salient rather than

another. The principal purpose of this book is to develop and document the empirical basis for an argument that can begin to fill this gap.

ETHNICITY AND ETHNIC CLEAVAGES

To even pose the question that this study seeks to answer, let alone answer it in the way that I propose, is to embrace a conceptualization of ethnicity and ethnic cleavages that differs in important ways from how these subjects have traditionally been treated in the literature. Before proceeding with the discussion in the chapters that follow, it will be useful first to explain and justify in greater detail the perspective that this book adopts.

Ethnicity

As I have noted, a first way in which the treatment of ethnicity in this book differs from that in most studies is in the outcome it seeks to explain. Whereas most studies of ethnic conflict seek to explain when and where conflict occurs, this study seeks to explain why it is carried out in the name of one set of identities rather than another. A second way in which this book differs from many studies of ethnic conflict is that it focuses its attention not just on ethnic violence but also on the logic and dynamics of ethnic political competition more generally. Headline-grabbing events in Rwanda, Bosnia, Nigeria, and India notwithstanding, communal riots, civil war, and other forms of violent ethnic conflict are the exception rather than the rule in multi-ethnic societies. Even in stereotypically violent places like Africa, ethnic divisions only rarely generate inter-group violence: Fearon and Laitin (1996) estimate that there has only been one instance of ethnic violence in Africa for every two thousand cases that would have been predicted on the basis of ethnic differences alone. Thus, whereas trying to understand the roots of communal violence may be a worthy goal, limiting our theory-building efforts to accounting for ethnic bloodshed risks leaving us without the appropriate tools for understanding ethnicity's contribution to voting patterns, policy choices, government formation, and other important yet non-violent political outcomes. A goal of this book is to introduce a way of thinking about ethnic politics that provides new leverage on issues of these sorts. Of course, an implication of such an approach is that, to the extent that the dynamics of ethnic violence are different from the dynamics of non-violent ethnic politics, the account presented here may be applicable only to explaining the latter.