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978-0-521-89141-7 - Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Patronage and Ethnic Head Counts in India  
Kanchan Chandra

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# 1

## *Introduction*

Why do ethnic parties succeed in obtaining the support of members of their target ethnic group(s)? Ethnic political parties now flourish across the democratic world. Canada, Spain, India, the United Kingdom, Israel, Sri Lanka, Macedonia, South Africa, and Russia are only a few examples of the established or emerging democracies in which they have taken root. For social scientists interested in explaining important political phenomena, the question is worth asking for its own sake. At the same time, the answer has broader implications for those with a stake in the survival of democratic regimes. Ethnic parties, and the politicization of ethnic differences more generally, are presumed to constitute a major threat to democratic stability.<sup>1</sup> An exploration of the processes by which such parties succeed or fail, then, illuminates also the processes that undermine or preserve democracy.

Drawing on a study of variation in the performance of ethnic parties in India, this book proposes a theory of ethnic party performance in one distinct family of democracies, identified here as “patronage-democracies.” Voters in patronage-democracies, I argue, choose between parties by conducting ethnic head counts rather than by comparing policy platforms or ideological positions. They formulate preferences across parties by counting the heads of co-ethnics across party personnel, preferring that party that provides greatest representation to their co-ethnics. They formulate

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971); Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977); Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth Shepsle, *Politics in Plural Societies* (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill, 1972).

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expectations about the likely electoral outcome by counting the heads of co-ethnics across the electorate. And they vote for their preferred party only when their co-ethnics are sufficiently numerous to take it to a winning or influential position.

This process of ethnic head counting is the foundation for the central argument advanced in this book: An ethnic party is likely to succeed in a patronage-democracy *when it has competitive rules for intraparty advancement and when the size of the ethnic group(s) it seeks to mobilize exceeds the threshold of winning or leverage imposed by the electoral system.* Competitive rules for intraparty advancement, other things equal, give a party a comparative advantage in the representation of elites from its target ethnic category. And a positive difference between the size of its target ethnic category and the threshold of winning or leverage indicates that the party has a viable shot at victory or influence.

The implications of this argument for the survival of democracy are paradoxical. At first glance, a politics of ethnic head counting appears to subvert democratic competition by producing predetermined results based on ethnic demography.<sup>2</sup> But a closer look yields a more optimistic prognosis. Ethnic head counts need not produce predetermined results, for the reason that the categories that voters employ in their counts are not predetermined. As constructivist approaches to ethnic identity have shown us, these categories are open to manipulation. And in an environment in which the choice of one category for counting over another means the difference between victory and defeat, we should expect competing political entrepreneurs to engage in such manipulation to the greatest extent possible. The determining role played by ethnic head counts in patronage-democracies, then, may well prevent the *predetermination* of election results.

### I. Definitions

#### *Ethnic Group and Ethnic Category*

I take the term “ethnic group” to refer to the nominal members of an ascriptive category such as race, language, caste, tribe, or religion. As used here, the term “ethnic group” does not imply active participation in a common

<sup>2</sup> For an argument in this vein, see Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 84.

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group identity. Wherever possible, I use the term ethnic “category” rather than “group” to emphasize this point.

Nominal membership in such ascriptive categories is inherited: I might, for instance, be born as a Sikh from the Mazhabi caste in Punjab, a Yoruba Christian from western Nigeria, or an African American Muslim from Chicago. As these examples illustrate, however, we are usually born as members of several categories, with a choice about which one we consider to be especially salient.

### *Ethnic Party*

An *ethnic party* is a party that overtly represents itself as a champion of the cause of one particular ethnic category or set of categories to the exclusion of others, and that makes such a representation central to its strategy of mobilizing voters. The key distinguishing principles of this definition are those of *ascriptive*, *exclusion*, and *centrality*: The categories that such a party mobilizes are defined according to ascriptive characteristics; the mobilization of the “insider” ethnic categories is always accompanied by the exclusion of ethnic “outsiders”; and, while the party may also highlight other issues, the championing of the cause of an ethnic category or categories is central to its mobilizing efforts. A *multiethnic* party is defined here as a party that also makes an appeal related to ethnicity central to its mobilizing strategy but that assumes a position of neutrality or equidistance toward all relevant categories on the salient dimension(s) of ethnicity. A party that does not include and exclude categories mainly on the basis of ethnic identity, or that addresses ethnic demands but does not make such demands central to its political platform, is *nonethnic* by this definition.

In order to categorize a party as “ethnic,” “nonethnic,” or “multiethnic” according to this definition, it is necessary to examine the message that it sends to the electorate (what issues it highlights in its election campaigns and rallies, what policies it proposes or implements, how it promises to distribute resources).<sup>3</sup> Note that the message that a party sends to the

<sup>3</sup> The emphasis on a party’s *message* distinguishes this definition from Donald Horowitz’s in *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 291–3. For Horowitz, “the test of an ethnic party is simply the distribution of support” (291–2). What the party says and does, according to him, follows directly from its support base: “In practice, a party will serve the interests of the group comprising its overwhelming support or quickly forfeit that support” (291). This definition is not useful for the question driving this study. Incorporating the nature of a party’s support base in the definition itself obscures the question of how it acquires such support in the

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electorate might change over time. The same party that champions the cause of one ethnic category in one election may redefine its target ethnic category, or reinvent itself as a “multiethnic” or “nonethnic” party, in subsequent elections. Precisely for this reason, we should think of the classification of a party as an ethnic party as a time-specific classification that captures the character of the party in some time periods but may not do so in others.

Note that this definition characterizes a party as “ethnic” even if it claims to speak for more than one ethnic group. It would be useful here to underline the essential distinction between ethnic parties and multiethnic parties. The line separating the two cannot be drawn, as we might initially suppose, by separating parties that speak for one ethnic category from parties that speak for many. A close look at any supposedly “single” ethnic category would reveal that it is simultaneously an amalgam of others. The category “Yoruba” in Nigeria, for example, might be interpreted as a single ethnic category, or as a conglomerate of smaller categories, including “Oyo,” “Ijebu,” “Egba,” and “Ekiti,” which are themselves conglomerates of still smaller units.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the category “Hispanic” in the United States might be termed a “single” category, or an aggregate category consisting of the smaller categories of “Mexican,” “Puerto Rican,” “Cuban,” and so on. The same is true of other ethnic categories in the United States, including “black,” “white,” “Asian American,” and “Native American.”<sup>5</sup> In a point to which I return repeatedly throughout this book, any ethnic party that claims to speak on behalf of a single ethnic category is typically trying to unify several previously disparate categories by claiming that such unity has always existed. The so-called subdivisions that nest within any supposedly “single” ethnic category are of critical importance in understanding the phenomenon of ethnic party success or failure.

The main distinction between an ethnic and a multiethnic party, therefore, lies not in the number of categories that each attempts to *include*, but in whether or not there is a category that each attempts to *exclude*. An ethnic party, regardless of how many categories it claims to speak for, always

first place. Defining an ethnic party based on its message, by separating the definition of the party from its base of support, makes it possible to investigate why a party obtains its support principally from some ethnic category or categories to the exclusion of others, and when it is able to expand this support to include the majority of its target ethnic category.

<sup>4</sup> David Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Melissa Nobles, *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

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identifies implicitly or explicitly the category that is excluded. A multiethnic party, while also invoking ethnic identities, does not exclude any group on the salient dimension(s) of identity.<sup>6</sup>

Let me illustrate with some examples. The Action Group (AG) in Nigeria in 1960 sought the support of all the tribal categories grouped together under the aggregate label of “Yoruba.”<sup>7</sup> Should we classify it as an ethnic or a multiethnic party? According to the criterion just identified, the AG would be classified as an ethnic party to the extent that it excluded non-Yorubas from its appeal. Similarly, the Movimiento Revolucionario Tupaj Katari de Liberación (MRTKL) in Bolivia in 1985 sought the support of the several ethnic categories grouped together under the label “indigenous,” including the Quechua, the Aymara, the Uru, and the Chipaya.<sup>8</sup> However, to the extent that it excluded non-indigenous categories from its appeal, it would be classified here as an ethnic party. On the other hand, the National Front in Malaysia, which in 1995 also mobilized several ethnic categories, would be classified here as multiethnic to the extent that it included parties from all salient ethnic categories, including Malays, Indians, and Chinese.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the African National Congress in South Africa in 1994 would be defined as a multiethnic party to the extent that it did not exclude any salient ethnic category in its overt message.<sup>10</sup>

## Success

I define the degree of success as the degree to which a party is able to capture the votes of members of its target ethnic category. A party is “successful” if it captures the votes of at least a majority of the members of its target ethnic

<sup>6</sup> For a somewhat similar point, see Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 299. Horowitz too argues that an ethnic party can serve the interests of more than one ethnic group. A party should be termed multiethnic, according to him, “only if it spans the major groups in conflict.”

<sup>7</sup> John Mackintosh, *Nigerian Government and Politics* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966).

<sup>8</sup> For a general discussion of the MRTKL, see Xavier Albo, “And from Kataristas to MNRistas?,” in Donna Lee Van Cott, ed., *Indigenous Peoples and Democracy in Latin America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 55–82. For the composition of the category “indigenous,” see the Minorities at Risk database: <<http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/mar/data/latintbl.htm>>.

<sup>9</sup> Based on a reading of campaign statements in 1995 as reported by FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service).

<sup>10</sup> Based on a reading of ANC campaign statements during the 1994 elections as reported by FBIS.

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category over successive elections, “moderately successful” if it captures the votes of a plurality, and “failed” if it is able to capture only a negligible percentage of votes from the members of its target category or categories. Note that the estimate of success is contingent upon the way in which an ethnic party defines its target ethnic category. If the ethnic category targeted by a political party changes, the estimate of success should be adjusted accordingly.

One could, by contrast, gauge success by the number of seats won by the party, its overall percentage of the vote, or its degree of influence in government. These definitions are not relevant to the theoretical purpose of this study. If an ethnic category is small or dispersed, a party that captures the entire vote of members of this category may still seem unsuccessful if we use the overall percentage of votes as a measure of success. However, the fact that it has managed to gather all the members of its target ethnic category into a single political mass is no small matter. It is this massing of ethnic groups behind ethnic parties, rather than behind their nonethnic or multiethnic competitors, that is the puzzle of interest to this study.

#### *Patronage-Democracy*

I use the term “democracy” in a minimal sense to mean simply a system in which the political leadership is chosen through competitive elections.<sup>11</sup> By the term “patronage-democracy,” I mean a democracy in which the state monopolizes access to jobs and services, *and* in which elected officials have discretion in the implementation of laws allocating the jobs and services at the disposal of the state. The key aspect of a patronage-democracy is not simply the size of the state but the power of elected officials to distribute the vast resources controlled by the state to voters on an *individualized* basis, by exercising their discretion in the implementation of state policy. This individualized distribution of resources, in conjunction with a dominant state, I will argue, makes patronage-democracies a distinct family of democracies with distinct types of voter and elite behaviour. A democracy is not patronage-based if the private sector is larger than the public sector as a source of jobs and a provider of services, or if those who control the distribution of state resources and services cannot exercise discretion in the implementation of policies concerning their distribution.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 7.

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The term “patronage–democracy” might be applied to a political system as a whole or to subsystems within it comprised of particular administrative areas or particular sections of the population. In the latter case, the relationship between these areas and/or sections of the population and the state would constitute a “pocket” of patronage–democracy within a larger system that is not patronage–based.

Currently available cross-national data do not permit a reliable operationalization of the concept of patronage–democracy within and across countries. The several available measures of government size can be misleading, since they typically underestimate the size of the state.<sup>12</sup> And there are no reliable measures of the degree of discretion available to state officials.<sup>13</sup> In order to construct trustworthy cross-national measures for the concept of patronage–democracy, therefore, it is necessary first to sift through country-specific data. I show here, on the basis of such data, that India is one example of a patronage–democracy. While conducting a similar analysis for other countries is beyond the scope of this work, secondary literature suggests that other examples of patronage–democracies are likely to abound particularly in Asia and Africa, where colonial rule left behind a legacy of state–dominated economies. Additional examples of patronage–democracies in these regions, apart from India, might include (intermittently) Nigeria, Zambia, and Senegal.<sup>14</sup> Patronage–democracies may also be found in the postcommunist world, because of the sprawling state

<sup>12</sup> The standard measure for size of government, with the most extensive coverage of countries, is government spending as a percentage of GDP, based on data published by the IMF *Government Finance Statistics Yearbooks*. This measure underestimates the size of the public sector for the following reasons: (1) it reports data only for central government spending and not for spending by subnational units; (2) it excludes a large sphere of public sector activity by not reporting data on expenditures by state-owned or state-managed enterprises that have even a partially commercial purpose; and (3) it does not capture the *regulatory* presence of the state. Other data on the size of the state are less comprehensive and less systematically collected.

<sup>13</sup> The closest proxy might be the Corruption Perception Index compiled by Transparency International, which measures the degree to which corruption is perceived to exist among public officials. However, the CPI is based on surveys that rely principally on the viewpoints of experts and the business community rather than of the general public. (See Transparency International, “Background Information to the CPI” <<http://www.transparency.de/documents/cpi/2000/qanda.html>>.)

<sup>14</sup> For Nigeria, see Richard A. Joseph, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); for Zambia, see Daniel Posner, “The Institutional Origins of Ethnic Politics in Zambia” (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1998); for Senegal, see Frederic Schaffer, *Democracy in Translation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

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apparatuses inherited from communist rule, and in some postindustrial states.<sup>15</sup> Finally, some large American cities have historically approximated the conditions for patronage-democracy during some periods, even when the United States as a whole might not qualify for such a classification.<sup>16</sup>

### II. Background

Although political parties are among the central disciplinary preoccupations of political scientists, we have not so far identified the *ethnic* political party as a distinct phenomenon, or treated the question of ethnic party performance as a puzzle deserving theoretical attention. Instead, a voluminous literature addresses the rise of ethnic parties as part of the broader puzzle of ethnic “identification,” a term used interchangeably with ethnic “participation,” ethnic “mobilization,” ethnic “collective action,” ethnic “conflict,” ethnic “competition,” and ethnic “group formation.”

Theories of ethnic “identification” and its purported synonyms fall into two broad families, distinguished by the assumptions that each makes about individual motivations. Materialist approaches, exemplified by the work of Robert Bates, Michael Hechter, Albert Breton, and Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth Shepsle, assume that individuals are motivated primarily by a desire for the material “benefits of modernity,” such as land, jobs, and markets.<sup>17</sup> Donald Horowitz’s influential study *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*

<sup>15</sup> Simona Piattoni, ed., *Clientelism, Interests and Democratic Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, William Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994), and Raymond Wolfinger, *The Politics of Progress* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974).

<sup>17</sup> Robert Bates, “Ethnic Competition and Modernization in Contemporary Africa,” *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (1974): 457–483; Albert Breton, “The Economics of Nationalism,” *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (1964): 376–386; Michael Hechter, “Group Formation and the Cultural Division of Labor,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (1978): 293–318; Michael Hechter, “The Political Economy of Ethnic Change,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 79, No. 5 (1974): 1151–1178; Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975). Nonmaterial benefits, when acknowledged in this family of work, are treated as derivative from material benefits. Russell Hardin, *One for All: The Logic of Group Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) might arguably also be included among materialist approaches to ethnic mobilization. Hardin describes economic malaise, combined with a state that controls the allocation of scarce resources, as the single most important



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presents an alternative, social-psychological theory of ethnic conflict.<sup>18</sup> Drawing upon social identity theory as developed by Henri Tajfel, Horowitz argues that individuals are motivated instead by a desire for greater self-esteem.<sup>19</sup> But despite their distinct assumptions about individual motivations and the distinct variables that they privilege in their analyses, both of these theoretical families assume, explicitly or implicitly, that the success of ethnic parties is a natural by-product of the process by which ethnic identities become politically salient.<sup>20</sup> As Horowitz puts it, political entrepreneurs who float ethnic parties in ethnically divided societies find “a ready-made clientele . . . waiting to be led.”<sup>21</sup>

But ethnic parties often fail to attract the support of their target ethnic categories across space and time, even when the ethnic identities they seek to mobilize are politically salient. Consider the following examples:

- Although the pro-Yoruba Action Group in Nigeria was successful in obtaining majority support among Yorubas in the Western Region in 1960, it failed to win the support of Yorubas in Ibadan, Ilesha, and Oyo. And its vote share was cut in half four years later.<sup>22</sup> Yet Nigeria is among the textbook examples of ethnically divided polities, and divisions between the Yorubas, the Hausa-Fulanis and the Igbos were salient during this period.<sup>23</sup>

reason for ethnic conflict (228, 152, 179). While he also allows for individuals to be motivated by a desire for intangible benefits such as the “epistemological comforts of home,” these intangible benefits are less important in Hardin’s discussion than material interests.

<sup>18</sup> Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*.

<sup>19</sup> Horowitz also identifies “a sense of belonging” as a second desired psychic good. This good, however, is secondary to his analysis of ethnic group behaviour.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, the discussion of tribally dominated parties in Bates, “Ethnic Competition,” 474. Hechter makes the same assumption in his *Internal Colonialism* (1975). In his later work, he recognizes the failure of the general theory of internal colonialism to account for variations in the patterns of support for the Scottish National Party in Scotland and revisits specifically the question of ethnic *party performance* in Margaret Levi and Michael Hechter, “A Rational Choice Approach to the Rise and Decline of Ethnoregional Parties,” in Edward A. Tiryakian and Ronald Rogowski, eds., *New Nationalisms of the Developed West* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985), 128–146.

<sup>21</sup> Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 308.

<sup>22</sup> John P. Mackintosh, *Nigerian Government and Politics* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), 430, 514.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture*.

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- The pro-Buganda Kabaka Yekka (KY) obtained the support of the majority of the Ganda in Uganda in 1962, but lost influence quickly thereafter, despite the salience of Ganda nationalism at the time.<sup>24</sup>
- The ethnoregional Scottish National Party (SNP) obtained the support of only 20 percent of Scots in the 1992 and 1997 general elections in Britain, with the rest voting for the Labour and Conservative parties.<sup>25</sup> Yet in surveys conducted during these elections, over 60 percent of Scots reported their “national identity” as more Scottish than British or Scottish rather than British.<sup>26</sup>
- In Sri Lanka, close to 50 percent of Tamils did not vote for the two principal Tamil parties, the Federal Party and the Tamil Congress, in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>27</sup> Yet the Tamil-Sinhala cleavage dominated postcolonial politics.<sup>28</sup>
- In the 1994 and 1999 elections, the pro-Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in South Africa obtained the support of a majority of Zulus in the province of Kwazulu-Natal but not in the provinces of Gauteng and Mpumalanga. And even in Natal, a substantial percentage of Zulus did not support the IFP.<sup>29</sup> Yet a Zulu political identity has been among the most salient political identities in post-independence South Africa.

<sup>24</sup> Nelson Kasfir, *The Shrinking Political Arena* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 124–126; Crawford Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 254.

<sup>25</sup> James L. Newell “The Scottish National Party: Development and Change,” in Lieven de Winter and Huri Tursan, eds., *Regionalist Parties in Western Europe* (London: Routledge, 1998); 105–124, p. 108 for 1945–1997. For 2001, BBC results as published at <[news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/vote2001](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/vote2001)>. For a discussion of the performance of the SNP, see Saul Newman, *Ethnoregional Conflict in Democracies* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 160–162, 166–169.

<sup>26</sup> Scottish national election studies 1992 and 1997, cited in Bonnie Meguid, “Understanding Policy Failure: The Overlooked Role of Ethnic Credibility in Party Strategic Success.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., September 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Estimated from election results for the Federal Party and the Tamil Congress between 1947 and 1977, as reported in A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Politics in Sri Lanka 1947–79* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 156–60, and the percentage of Tamils in Sri Lanka as reported by the 1971 census. See also Robert Kearney, *The Politics of Ceylon (Sri Lanka)* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 118–119.

<sup>28</sup> Stanley Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>29</sup> Estimated from election results published by the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa at <<http://www.elections.org.za/>> and census data from *South African Statistics 1995* (Pretoria: Central Statistical Service, 1997). For a general discussion of Zulu support for the IFP, see Andrew Reynolds, ed., *Election '94 South Africa* (New York: St. Martin's