Electing to Fight or to Make Peace?
Electoral Systems and Ethnic Violence in Post-Conflict Societies

Paper prepared for presentation at the 10th Dutch-Flemish Etmaal
Amsterdam, 9/10 June 2011

Work in progress – please do not cite without authors’ permission!

Abstract
Democratization has become a standard element in any effort of peace building in societies torn by violent ethnic conflict. However, due to their competitive nature, elections in post-conflict societies come with a considerable risk of re-igniting violent conflict. Scholars of peace building have therefore discussed the merits of different electoral systems for minimizing the risks of post-electoral violence. Two main schools of thought can be distinguished: Consociationalists argue that systems of proportional representation fit divided societies best as they provide an institutionalized guarantee of political representation of all relevant ethnic groups which makes cooperating in the democratic process less costly than resorting to violence. Centripetalists, on the other hand, argue that systems of proportional representation tend to aggravate divisions in post-conflict societies and instead recommend the Alternative Vote system that encourages political leaders to reach out beyond their ethnic constituency. In this paper we argue that it depends on the ethnic composition of a post-conflict society whether Proportional Representation or Alternative Vote systems have the lowest risk for re-igniting conflict. We furthermore present the outline of a research design on how to test this argument empirically.

Authors’ Contact Details:
Sofie Dreef, LLM
sofiedreef@gmail.com

Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Wagner
Department of Political Science
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
De Boelelaan 1081
1081 HV AMSTERDAM
THE NETHERLANDS
new email: w.m.wagner@vu.nl
homepage: http://home.fsw.vu.nl/wm.wagner/
1 Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, building peace in societies torn by violent ethnic conflict\(^2\) has become a key challenge to the international community. The United Nations as well as regional security organizations not only brokered cease fires but also deployed ever larger peace support missions to fulfil an ever more complex set of peace keeping, peace building and even state- and nation-building functions.\(^3\)

For various reasons, democratization became a standard element of such peace building efforts: The demise of the Soviet Union and its allies meant an end to the main ideological challenger to liberal democracy. At the same time, the third wave of democratization made democracy a widespread form of government throughout the world. Finally, academics kept presenting ever more evidence for the beneficial effects of democracy on peace. Although the so-called Democratic Peace only applied to relations between mature democracies, research inspired by it also suggested that democracies are less likely to experience civil wars.\(^4\) Democracy thus became a key element in the security strategies of the United States,\(^5\) the European Union\(^6\) and the United Nations\(^7\). As a consequence, democratization became a natural goal of peace building missions.

However, the enthusiasm of the early post-Cold War years soon gave way to a more nuanced view on democratization in post-conflict societies. Early elections in particular became the centre of much criticism as they often not only failed to establish stable and democratically legitimate governments but frequently even ignited new hostilities and a relapse into the civil war it was designed to overcome. As Edward Mansfield, Jack Snyder, Roland Paris and others have pointed out,\(^8\) the competitive logic of elections easily aggravates tensions as post-conflict societies typically lack both institutions and a political culture that would mitigate polarization and foster peaceful conflict resolution. Especially if the parties to a civil war were primarily organized along ethnic lines, the very subject of democracy (i.e. the \textit{demos}) may be contested as ethnic groups

---

\(^1\) This paper is based on Sofie Dreef’s final thesis for the LLM program Law and Politics of International Security at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The thesis was supervised by Wolfgang Wagner. The authors like to thank Lars-Eric Cederman and Brian Min for generously sharing their data and Andrea Ruggeri for helpful suggestions.

\(^2\) Scholars of civil war increasingly acknowledge that ethnic wars are categorically different from civil wars that are fought over ideology. This argument has been advanced most explicitly by Sambanis (2001) but also forms the basis of the work by Cederman, Min and Wimmer (2009) and is implicitly acknowledged by all those studies that control for the type of civil war (e.g., among others, Mattes/Savun 2009; Doyle/Sambanis 2006; Hoddie/Hartzell 2005; Fortna 2004 and Hoddie/Hodde/Rothchild 2001). We follow a non-essentialist understanding of ethnicity as a “sense of collective belonging, which could be based on common descent, language, history, culture, race, or religion (or some combination of these)” (Varshney 2007: 277, with reference to Horowitz (1985)). Such a sense of collective belonging is socially constructed and therefore malleable in principle. However, as other social identities, ethnic identities are often sticky, i.e. difficult to change in practice.

\(^3\) On the “generations” of peace operations see Doyle/Sambanis 2007.


\(^6\) According to the EU Security Strategy “A Secure Europe in a Better World” of 2003, “The best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states” (p.10).

\(^7\) See Boutros-Ghali 1996

often have fought precisely because they did not consider themselves as a part of a multi-ethnic society but aimed at a state of their own instead (Mann 2005). Such unsettled issues about the very subject of democracy are of course brought to the fore by elections. All in all, even though stable democracies may build and maintain a zone of peace, democratizing states appeared rather more than less conflict-prone and early elections in particular seemed a very risky strategy (see also Cederman/Hug/Krebs 2010).

Despite some sobering experiences with elections in post-conflict societies, the peace building community has not jettisoned democracy as the normative ideal, not the least because no possible alternative seemed acceptable on normative grounds. Therefore, the challenge has become to design elections in ways that minimize the risks of renewed violence.

This paper presents a research design that aims at contributing to this debate about electoral engineering by identifying context conditions under which different electoral systems can be expected to have the least detrimental effect on a recurrence of violent conflict. Section 2 gives an overview of the debate about the conflict proneness of electoral systems Section 3 then introduces our main argument that the ethnic composition of society is a main context condition for the conflict proneness of electoral systems. Section 4 presents our research design.

2 Electoral engineering and ethnic violence: the debate

Scholars of elections in post-conflict societies have emphasized that elections should be carefully designed on a case-by-case basis (see, among many others, Paris 1997: 82-85). Most importantly, the timing of elections should be made dependent on the peculiar security situation in a respective country that peace builders should assess carefully before embarking on elections. In contrast to the timing of elections, less attention has been paid to the choice of the electoral system. As Benjamin Reilly points out, most electoral systems are not even deliberately chosen but often result from former colonial ties or influential neighbouring countries (2001: 14). However, the setbacks of the 1990s have given rise to some debate about the appropriate electoral system for post-conflict societies. In this debate, two main schools of thought have emerged, namely consociationalism and centripetalism.

2.1 Consociationalism

Consociationalism was first put forward by Arend Lijphart (1969) who was inspired by democratic politics in the Netherlands. Because of the deep divisions in Dutch society, Lijphart argued, a Westminster-style winner-takes-it-all system of democracy would have been

---

9 Dutch society consisted of four so-called pillars, namely Protestants, Catholics, Liberals and Social Democrats. Although two of these pillars are based on ideology and class, the other two qualify as ethnic by the standards of contemporary scholarship on ethnic conflicts.
detrimental to peaceful and democratic conflict resolution. Instead, an institutionalised guarantee of political representation of all main groups in society and power-sharing were key to democracy in the Netherlands. To scholars of democracy in divided societies, the Dutch model seemed attractive because it makes the dominance of any group over others difficult, if not impossible.\textsuperscript{10} Although the electoral system is only one element in a more complex system of power-sharing, it is a particularly prominent one:\textsuperscript{11} consociationalists have a strong and clear preference for proportional representation as the basis of a consociational democracy. This electoral system guarantees ethnic minority representation in parliament in proportion to each community's share of the population as a whole and so creates the basis for an inclusive system of democratic governance.\textsuperscript{12}

Proportional representation has been subject to a number of criticisms. First, critics argue that the use of PR in divided societies carries the risk of exacerbating ethnic tensions. PR systems lack the incentives for candidates to attract votes across ethnic lines and to compromise on divisive issues. On the contrary, they institutionally reinforce ethnic divisions and freeze ethnic group boundaries in the political system. This might work well to consolidate the precarious peace in the short run, but may not be conducive to further peace building and state building in the long run (Cohen 1997; 628; Reilly 2002: 156; Sisk 2009: 221). Second, the success of the ethnic conflict management strategy of PR systems is largely dependent on the attitude of the political elites. The consociationalist model supposes that “[political] leaders are motivated by a desire to avert the danger of mutual destruction” (Horowitz 2003b: 147). The question is if this assumption is indeed realistic or merely optimistic (or even naïve) for post-conflict societies. In their struggle for power or even their very survival, there are no guarantees that majority group leaders are willing to share their power with leaders of minority groups. A related problem is that proportional representation risks party-system fragmentation and government instability if parties cannot create a stable coalition. This could thwart the effective policy-making that is necessary in war-torn societies (Lijphart 1991: 76)\textsuperscript{13}. Last, the geographic link between voters and individual


\textsuperscript{11} The other three key features of consociationalism are: (1) a grand coalition of all significant ethnic communities are included in the executive; (2) mutual veto when one of the communities’ vital interests are at stake; and (3) each community is internally self-governing in matters that are exclusively of concern to it (Noel 2005: xiii note 2).

\textsuperscript{12} Lijphart expresses a particular preference for list-PR over Single Transferable Vote, because the system is simpler, has a higher level of proportionality and is less vulnerable to gerrymandering (Lijphart 1990: 11). Open-list PR better ensures accountability between voters and candidates than closed-list PR, because in open-list PR the ordering of the candidates on the list is determined by voters’ preferences instead of the party top (Samuels 2005: 679). Yet closed-list PR is the most commonly used proportional representation system in post-conflict societies.

\textsuperscript{13} Bosnia and Herzegovina offers an interesting example of the trade-off between the positive and negative effects of list-PR in post-conflict countries. Taking into account the ethnic composition of the country, the history of violence and consequent deep divisions in society and the maximalist objectives of the dominant parties, list-PR has been effective in fostering stability in the country (Caspersen 2004: 569). Yet the system has been unsuccessful in promoting moderate and accommodative politics. Negotiations following the most recent parliamentary elections of 3 October 2010 are deadlocked; parties fail to come to an agreement about a working coalition, the division of ministerial posts and reform agendas, or refuse to participate in the negotiations altogether (ICG Crisis Watch 90, 2011).
candidates is weak in PR systems, causing low levels of accountability and responsiveness between the electorate and its representatives. This is particularly problematic in post-conflict countries as they often have a high demand for constituency service at the local level (Reilly 2003: 9).

2.2 Centripetalism

An alternative approach to post-conflict elections has been proposed by Donald L. Horowitz (1985, 1991, 2003) and Benjamin Reilly (2001). Their theory of centripetalism\(^{14}\) claims that interethnic accommodation is a necessary precondition for successful democracy in divided societies. Benjamin Reilly defines centripetalism as a political system or strategy designed to focus competition at the moderate centre rather than the extremes – primarily by presenting rational, office-seeking politicians with incentives to seek electoral support from groups beyond their own ethnic community (2001: 11).

By providing incentives for candidates to campaign for the votes of members of other ethnic groups, electoral systems can encourage interethnic bargaining and promote accommodative behaviour. Whereas consociationalists prefer proportional representation, centripetalists favour systems of preferential voting such as the Alternative Vote (AV).

AV requires voters to rank all candidates in order of preference, instead of declaring only their first candidate of choice. As candidates are reciprocally dependent on the votes of members of ethnic groups other than their own, the system provides a strong incentive for candidates to broaden their support base beyond the own ethnic group and to form pre-electoral inter-ethnic coalitions in order to gain election. The key merit of AV is thus that it requires a moderate and accommodative attitude of the candidates in order to effectively gain votes from other groups. Furthermore, it guarantees local representation through the use of small single-member electoral districts (Horowitz 2003a: 122-124).

Alternative Vote is a plurality-majority system. The main problem of using such a system in divided societies is that it may produce highly disproportional results and may lead to permanent minority exclusion. As Lijphart puts it, the use of plurality-majority systems in divided societies “spells majority dictatorship” (1985: 102).

Horowitz’ approach is theoretically criticized because of the lack of empirical evidence. Only two divided societies have used Alternative Vote: Papua New Guinea\(^{15}\) and Fiji. Papua New

---

\(^{14}\) According to Benjamin Reilly (2001: 11), the term ‘centripetalism’ has been coined by Timothy Sisk (1995: 19).

\(^{15}\) Whether Papua New Guinea qualifies as an ethnically divided society is contested. Whereas Reilly (2001) considers it one of the world’s most divided societies, Cederman/Min/Wimmer do not include its civil war in their list of ethnic wars.
Guinea held three pre-independence elections under AV rules, in 1964, 1968, and 1972. As Horowitz’s theory predicts, candidates showed more accommodative behaviour during these elections than during subsequent elections in which Alternative Vote was replaced by first-past-the-post on the grounds that the system was unnecessarily complicated (Reilly & Reynolds 1999: 34). Under FPTP, the level of electoral violence increased. It was no longer in the candidates’ interests to appeal to voters beyond ethnic boundaries, but rather to stop supporters of opposing candidates from voting. Candidates could be successful with very limited support; in the 2002 parliamentary elections, over half of the parliamentary seats were filled with candidates who attained less than 20% of the votes. AV was therefore re-adopted as the electoral system in 2003 (Reilly 2008b: 17). In Fiji, Alternative Vote did not have the intended moderating effect. On the contrary, in the 2001 elections the system explicitly channelled votes towards more extreme parties. The OSCE experimented with AV in the 2000 presidential elections in the Republika Srpska, but it did not have the desired moderating effect. The elections were won by a hard-line Serb candidate, because the Bosnian electorate gave their second preference votes to minor Bosnian parties rather than supporting moderate Serb parties (Samuels 2005: 678).

The debate about the merits and drawbacks of consociationalism and centripetalism is inconclusive, and there is no agreement on which electoral system would best serve peace and stability in post-conflict societies. The theories take a different perspective on the relationship between electoral systems and ethnic groups: in the consociationalist model ethnic groups constitute the foundation on which the political structure is built, whereas the political structure in the centripetal model transcends ethnic divisions. Both sides consistently neglect the relation between electoral systems and ethnic composition. The next sections research this relationship by looking at electoral systems, ethnic composition and political stability in post-conflict countries.

3 One size does not fit all: ethnic composition as a context condition

The debate about electoral systems in post-conflict societies has, by and large, discussed consociationalism and centripetalism as general strategies to minimize the risks of a relapse into armed conflict. Context conditions for either strategy to succeed have only been discussed at the fringes of this debate, for example by Benjamin Reilly in the conclusion to “Democracy in Divided Societies”:

“According to Lijphart, the optimal number of segments for a consociationalist approach to work is three or four, and conditions becoming progressively less favourable as more segments (i.e. groups) are added (1977, 56). For the centripetal approach to succeed, the situation is reversed: assuming parties are ethnically based, three parties or groups would be the minimum number necessary for vote-pooling to work, and prospects for successful vote-pooling would increase as the number of groups increases.” (2001: 186)\(^{16}\)

\(^{16}\) See also Sisk (1993: 79).
In this paper, we want to examine the significance of post-conflict societies’ ethnic composition more systematically. We share Reilly’s assumption that the number of ethnic groups is an important context condition for consociationalism or centripetalism to succeed. In addition to the number of ethnic groups, we propose to consider their size as equally important. Thus, while we agree that centripetalist strategies require a minimum of three groups we would add that none of them must exceed 50% of the population. For example, although pre-genocide Rwanda consisted of three ethnic groups, Hutus accounted for ca. 84% of the population (with Tutsis accounting for ca. 14% and Twas for ca. 1%). Under these circumstances, centripetalist strategies cannot be expected to succeed as there are few if any incentives for candidates of the majority ethnic group to reach out beyond their core constituencies. Under such circumstances, a consociationalist strategy seems much more promising as it guarantees proportional representation for all ethnic groups.

4 Research Design\textsuperscript{17}

In this section we present our research design to test empirically whether the ethnic composition of a post-conflict society conditions the success of electoral systems, i.e. whether it has an impact on the likelihood that the parties recur to the use of armed force after a parliamentary election.

We test this hypothesis for all cases of ethnic conflict that came to an end since the end of the Cold War and where parliamentary elections were held within five years after its termination. Thus, our unit of analysis is the conflict episode, rather than the conflict itself as every episode allows for an independent test of the impact of electoral systems if elections were held. Our dependent variable is whether ethnic conflict decreased or intensified as indicated by the use of force, disarmament and the return of internally displaced persons to their homes.

The Uppsala Armed Conflict Dataset\textsuperscript{18} which covers all armed conflicts between 1946 and 2009 serves as a starting point. We then select those conflict episodes that 1) are coded as internal or internationalized internal wars and that 2) are terminated after 1989, yielding a total of 164 cases.

Unfortunately, the Uppsala Armed Conflict Dataset does not distinguish between ethnic wars and other types of civil wars.\textsuperscript{19} To overcome this limitation, Lars-Erik Cederman, Brian Min and Andreas Wimmer have “coded each conflict for whether rebel organizations pursued ethnonationalist aims and recruited along ethnic lines” (Wimmer et al. 2009: 326; see also

\textsuperscript{17} Please not that all assessments of cases and the subsequent case selections are preliminary and subject to further refinement!
\textsuperscript{18} See Gleditsch et al. 2002 and Harbom/Wallensteen 2010.
\textsuperscript{19} UCDP only distinguishes between conflicts over territory from conflicts over governments but both can be combined with either ethnic/religious or ideological/other motives.
Cederman et al. 2009). We follow their coding to single out ethnic wars from other civil wars. This leaves us with 112 cases of ethnic war episodes.

Finally, for each of these cases we establish whether parliamentary elections took place within five years after the conflict and gather data on the electoral system used. This results in a list of 65 cases. Of these, 23 elections used a list-PR system as recommended by the consociationalist school of thought. Most other elections used First-Past-The-Post systems or Two-round systems; none used the Alternative Vote system as recommended by centripetalists. As a consequence, we cannot test empirically whether the Alternative Vote system indeed works if no single ethnic group has a majority of the population in a post-conflict society. However, we can test the hypothesis that PR systems are ceteris paribus more successful in de-escalating ethnic conflict if a single ethnic group has a majority of the population in a post-conflict society.

To test our hypothesis about the ethnic composition of post-conflict societies we furthermore draw on the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) data set by Cederman, Min and Wimmer (2009). This dataset contains data on politically relevant ethnic groups for the period between 1946 and 2005. We specifically use the data on the number of ethnopoliitically relevant groups as well as on the size of the largest group in the country during the election year.

In 18 of the 23 post-conflict societies that held elections using a list PR system, the largest ethnic group accounts for more than 50% of the population. In these societies, a first-past-the-post system would yield a legislature in which the largest ethnic group dominates and other ethnic groups are underrepresented. Centripetalist strategies seem bound to fail as the majority ethnic group has few if any incentives to appear attractive to voters from other ethnic groups. In contrast, a list PR system strategy seems most promising in preventing the re-escalation of ethnic conflict as it ensures the representation of all ethnic groups according to their population share.

---

20 Wimmer et al. “distinguish between ethnic and nonethnic conflicts using the aims of the armed organization and their recruitment and alliance structures.” They “identify as “ethnic” the aims of achieving ethnonational self-determination, a more favourable ethnic balance-of-power in government, ethnoregional autonomy, the end of ethnic and racial discrimination, language and other cultural rights, and so forth. In ethnic wars, armed organizations also recruit fighters predominantly among their leaders’ ethnic group and forge alliances on the basis of ethnic similarity” (326).

21 Data on electoral systems come from three sources which cover different time periods on different depths, namely 1) the Election Guide that was launched by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in 1998, 2) the Parline database of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and 3) the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network (Reynolds, Reilly and Ellis, 2005). Because these sources only cover national, but not regional elections, we exclude cases of ethnic war that were confined to a specific region (e.g. United Kingdom/Northern Ireland).

22 Ten more elections used parallel or mixed systems combining elements of proportional representation with elements of majority systems. We will have to take a closer look into these systems to determine whether we should include them in our sample.

23 As mentioned above, Cederman/Min/Wimmer do not code Papua New Guinea as an ethnic war and for reasons of consistency, we follow them and exclude this case from our sample as well. For an overview of the various systems and their assessment in terms of consociationalism see Norris 2008.
In 6 of the 23 post-conflict societies that held elections using a list PR system, no ethnic group accounts for more than 50% of the population. In these cases, a centripetalist strategy, e.g. by using an Alternative Vote System would seem most appropriate. We would therefore expect a consociationalist strategy, using a system of proportional representation to contribute to a de-escalation of ethnic conflict.

When testing our hypothesis, we control for the three most important further influences on successful peace-building, namely war outcome, third-party enforcement and the intensity of the conflict.

Controlling for war outcome is important because the recurrence of armed conflict is less likely when one side has militarily defeated the other (Kreutz 2010: 247; Wagner 1993; Licklider 1995). We use data on war outcome from UCDP’s conflict termination data set (Kreutz 2010). UCDP distinguishes seven types of conflict termination but we will only distinguish conflicts that ended with a victory from all other outcomes.

The importance of third-party enforcement has been highlighted by scholars who regard the weakening of a state’s monopoly of force as the main cause of civil wars. Under conditions of weak statehood, ethnic groups find themselves in a security dilemma (Posen 1993) which easily spirals into civil war. As a consequence, the re-establishment of a monopoly of force is considered inevitable for building peace. This can be done by third parties who agree to send sufficient troops with a robust mandate for providing security. The presence/absence of a credible third party security guarantee thus has an important impact on the prospects of maintaining peace (Walter 2002; Hartzell/Hoddie/Rothchild 2001).

Various studies of civil wars found that the likelihood of maintaining peace after a conflict is inversely related to its intensity: the longer the fighting endured, the more brutal the war was fought, and the more victims it generated, the more difficult it is to overcome hostilities once the fighting stopped. Studies of civil wars have used different measures for a conflict’s intensity: Doyle/Sambanis (2006: 82) discuss a number of measures such as the number of death and displacements, the type of war, the number of factions and the outcome of the war; Page Fortna (2004) uses the natural log of the death toll including civilians; Hoddie/Hartzell (2005) take the number of conflict-related deaths, divide them by the duration of the conflict in months and then log the data. We opt for what seems the most straightforward measure, namely the logged number of total casualties.

---

24 We do not control for a country’s previous regime type because although Hartzell/Hoddie/Rothchild 2001 found evidence that previous experience with democracy increases the likelihood of post-conflict peace, Fortna (2004) and Mattes/Savun found no evidence for that.

25 UCDP further distinguishes termination by 1) peace agreement; 2) ceasefire agreement with conflict regulation; 3) ceasefire agreement; 4) low activity and 5) other.
References


Cederman, Lars-Erik/Min, Brian/Wimmer, Andreas 2009: "Ethnic Power Relations dataset", http://hdl.handle.net/1902.1/11796 UNF:5:k4xxXC2ASI204QZ4jqvUrQ== V1 [Version]


