

Divided by Design: Electoral Systems and Inter-Ethnic Conflict in Post-Colonial States

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Abstract

Electoral systems are frequently proposed as institutional solutions to ethnic conflict in divided societies, yet their independent causal role is often overstated. This paper examines the relationship between majoritarian electoral systems and inter-ethnic conflict, arguing that electoral rules function as institutional amplifiers of pre-existing structural conditions rather than independent causes of conflict. Through an analysis of historical institutionalism, pre-bendalism, and ethnic outbidding theory, this paper identifies a causal mechanism through which majoritarian competition incentivizes ethnic mobilization and systematically excludes minority groups from political participation, creating the conditions for inter-ethnic conflict.

Introduction

In societies rich with an amalgamation of different ethnicities, the design of electoral systems carries consequences beyond the action of voting. How a state structures political competition shapes whose interests are served and whose are ignored, making political office the primary gateway to resources, security, and representation. In these conditions, elections can become instruments of **ethnic mobilization**, where identity supersedes political ideologies and winning means the survival of your ethnic group [1].

Yet the relationship between electoral systems and inter-ethnic conflict is neither simple nor direct, as ethnic divisions have cultural, historical, and economic roots that predate any constitutional arrangement that exists modern-day. In my research, I attempt to explain why some societies descend into conflict while others manage peaceful coexistence despite the **presence of different ethnic groups**. Finally, outlining these trends in domestically violent divided societies is critical to evaluate what kinds of institutional reform are genuinely capable of reducing **tension** rather than merely redistributing it.



Group denounces political marginalization of Tiv in Taraba



Nigerian electoral crisis, 2023

Results

Pre-bendalism dictates much of the taxpayer and oil revenue in Nigeria. Political competition is structured around ethnic identity, so parties and coalitions are built through “ethnic gang-ups” aimed at securing majorities, rather than national integration. In response to these tensions, **informal institutions like zoning** emerged as a stabilizing mechanism to reduce conflict; however, these practices embedded cleavages into Nigeria’s electoral system. The sentiments left behind by British colonizers **encouraged hostility and in-group bias within Nigeria**. Settlers relied on creating connections with native authorities in order to manipulate local policies, creating a hierarchy that “artificially inflated” majority group power. Thus, indirect rule encouraged friction between ethnic groups. Emphasizing differences between groups, the British were able to prevent the threat of mobilization that would have been a massive threat to colonial authority. As a result, each ethnic group became compelled to create their own political culture and socialization contained within their own region or constituency. Furthermore, case studies revealed that **Tiv riots and other conflicts were a “direct response to the continuation of colonial-era subjugation”**, which was undoubtedly increased by Nigerian pre-bendalism. The Hausa-Fulani and Tiv case demonstrates that inter-ethnic conflict between majority and minority groups in Nigeria is structurally produced. A cycle results in which structural exclusion produces ethnic mobilization, ethnic mobilization deepens cleavages, and deepened cleavages set the conditions for conflict.

Methods

To prove my hypothesis, I used a **comparative case study analysis** of a majority and minority ethnic group in Nigeria. The relationship between the Hausa-Fulani and the Tiv provides a strong case for understanding how Nigeria’s majoritarian electoral system intensifies inter-ethnic competition. In northern and Middle Belt politics, where the Hausa-Fulani have historically dominated state structures since independence in 1960, electoral competition is shaped less by policy than by bloc-based identity mobilization, as political elites deliberately frame elections as contests between ethnic and religious communities. The independent variable was **majoritarian electoral systems**, and the dependent variable was **inter-ethnic conflict**. I aimed to outline the approximate “steps” between each major concept, using process tracing to properly identify the mechanisms of my hypothesis. To ensure that the academia used as a backbone for this paper is as accurate as possible, I prioritized triangulation while determining plausibility from sources. Finding overlaps and repeated information between **research papers, news articles, and archival data** was extremely helpful as I navigated this novel area of study.

Discussion

My findings partially proved my hypothesis, as the mechanism is more indirect than a causal relationship. I originally hypothesized that Nigerian regional governments embodied colonial legacies and continued to exclude minority groups, resulting in building tensions and eventually visible conflict. As I proved this to be true, evidence also suggests that **political and institutional conditions determine whether ethnic divisions become politically mobilized and transformed into violent conflict**. My findings proved my hypothesis correct in the sense that **pre-bendalism and ethnic outbidding together help explain how majoritarian electoral systems intensity inter-ethnic conflict in Nigeria**. In pre-bendalist practices, political offices are treated as a reward system, with elected officials expected to distribute state resources and opportunities to favoured majority ethnic groups. This creates conditions for ethnic outbidding, maximizing electoral support often solely from their ethnic group. As a result, majoritarian systems encourage politicians to mobilize voters through **ethnic loyalty, deepening group polarization and increasing the likelihood of inter-ethnic conflict**.

Conclusion

Electoral systems do influence inter-ethnic conflict in divided societies, but not as an independent or primary cause. The causal mechanism this paper identifies moves through a series of interconnected steps: majoritarian rules incentivize candidates to campaign along ethnic lines, which promotes patronage politics and pre-bendalism within Nigeria, systematically excluding minority groups. This deepens social and political cleavages, ultimately creating the conditions for inter-group violence. Thus, the hypothesis that majoritarian electoral systems greatly influence inter-ethnic conflict is **partially proved**. The evidence confirms that majoritarian rules meaningfully contribute to ethnic conflict through the mechanism described above, but **the degree of their influence is conditioned by pre-existing structural factors**.

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