

Where Are the Ethnic Minorities?

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The representation of citizens in their legislature lies at the core of liberal democracy. It is widely recognized that all citizens are of equal worth and therefore have the same right to be present in legislatures and institutions of decision-making.

There have been significant advances towards greater equality and inclusiveness in the last century, but ideals of inclusiveness are far from accomplished: In many places members from ethnic minorities remain systematically marginalized.

There are reasons to insist on demographic representation, especially since it does not contradict the representation of issues and preferences. For instance, legislatures that reflect the make-up of the population are widely considered more legitimate. More inclusive legislatures are also associated with lower alienation from the political system, and a lower likelihood of ethnic conflict.

Improved political communication and more inclusive policy outcomes are sometimes cited, but they are difficult to measure. The present study covers 101 countries with competitive elections, comparing the different ethnic groups in national legislatures with their size in the population.

It is frequently assumed that all minorities of power – women, ethnic minorities, immigrants, homosexuals – are disadvantaged in the same way. The focus on ethnic groups demonstrates that this view is not warranted.

For example, while the electoral system seems to play an important role for the inclusion of women, the same is not the case for ethnic groups. On average countries with proportional representation systems do not include ethnic groups in a more proportional manner than countries with other electoral systems.

By contrast, a strong association can be determined between attitudes towards marginalized groups in society and the inclusion of ethnic minorities. Differences in attitudes were approximated using

world regions – a common proxy in the literature – and measured directly using questions from the World Value Survey.

The idea is to capture attitudes reminiscent of sociological liberalism: the view that different religions, lifestyles, practices, and beliefs are as valid as one's own. Attitudes towards marginalized groups in society are the strongest predictor of the extent to which different ethnic groups are included in national legislatures.

Perhaps more troubling is the finding that on average, the presence of quotas is not associated with legislatures resembling the ethnic make-up of society a greater extent. This is even more surprising given that reserved seats are the most common form of quotas for ethnic minority groups.

Reserved seats mean separate electoral rolls, and by design they cannot be influenced by preferences in the population or the elite. A more careful look at the implementation of quotas in individual cases reveals that these measures are not always implemented in a diligent manner.

For example, they may exist only for a single minority group in a country where there are many ethnic groups, or the number of seats reserved may be disproportionately low given the size of the ethnic group in the population. While quotas appear ineffective for reasons of implementation, they may work well in individual cases and for particular groups.

Trying to understand why quota measures are often not implemented in a diligent manner, it is worth considering the incentives of the elite. Assuming that the majority of the elite are interested in being re-elected, it makes sense for members of the elite not to be too much out of touch with the attitudes of the population.

Applied to the inclusion of ethnic minority groups in legislatures, this means that a member of the elite would expose him or herself a great deal when calling for strict quotas to include more minorities in a place where the population is not supportive of such a move.

It follows that quotas are implemented in a way that do not contradict the prevailing attitudes in the population to a great extent, which may mean quotas that do not reflect the size or composition of the minority population.

The incentives to water down measures to include ethnic minority groups in a more proportional manner are reminiscent of those regarding the inclusion of more women in legislatures. It is wrong, however, to conclude from this that the reasons for numerical under-representation are the same for women and minority groups.

As we have seen, for the inclusion of ethnic minorities in a proportional manner, there are no real differences between electoral systems. This contrasts the situation for women and may be the case because the elites can adjust to the institutional reality: minority legislators can be included in mainstream parties, or indeed quotas and other measures ostensibly to include more legislators from minorities may be implemented in a way that reduces their effectiveness.

It is important to bear in mind that where ethnic divisions are not politicized or where the population is largely supportive of more minorities in the legislature, quotas can be considered as a means to increase political representation.

Where the population is not supportive of more minorities in the legislature, hard measures that cannot be sidestepped by the different political actors would be a possibility, but they pose a serious electoral risk to the elite introducing such measures. Electoral engineering is probably only sustainable if accompanied by attitudinal changes.

References

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