



When and why do some social cleavages become politically salient rather than others?

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ABSTRACT

Building on Posner (Posner, Daniel N. 2005. *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa*. New York: Cambridge University Press), this article describes a framework for organizing the information about a community's social cleavage structure so as to identify the incentives that individuals face to adopt particular social identities. The framework is parsimonious but powerful: it generates predictions about the social cleavages that will emerge as salient in politics, the lobbying we can expect to see regarding the social categories with which community members should identify, and the attempts that will be made to assimilate or engage in "identity entrepreneurship" to fashion entirely new social identities. The framework also clarifies why partition is unlikely to be a remedy for intractable ethnic conflicts.

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Conflicts and controversies can arise out of a great variety of relationships in the social structure, but only a few of these tend to polarize the politics of any given system. There is a hierarchy of cleavage bases in each system and these orders of political primacy not only vary among polities, but also tend to undergo changes over time. Such differences and changes in the political weight of sociocultural cleavages set fundamental problems for comparative research: When is religion, language or ethnicity most likely to prove polarizing? When will class take the primacy and when will denominational commitments and religious identities prove equally important cleavage bases? ... Questions such as these will be on the agenda of comparative political sociology for years to come. There is no dearth of hypotheses, but so far very little in the way of systematic analysis. – Lipset and Rokkan, *Cleavage Structures, Party Systems and Voter Alignments* (1967)

Individuals possess multiple social identities, and societies can accordingly be divided in terms of multiple bases of social cleavage. This raises a critical question: Under what circumstances do political competition and social

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conflict come to be organized along the lines of one cleavage rather than another? When does politics revolve around religion rather than language? When is a society's fundamental basis of social division rooted in differences of race rather than country of origin? When does conflict manifest itself along lines of tribe rather than sub-tribe or clan?

Lipset and Rokkan (1967) posed this question nearly fifty years ago and, as they predicted, it remains central to the agenda of comparative political sociology to this day. Some who have tackled the question have located their answers, as Lipset and Rokkan did, in the gyre of history. For these authors, the salience of particular social cleavages depends on the stage of historical development in which the political system happens to be located at the time (e.g. Kronenberg and Wimmer 2012). Others have pointed to the impact of colonial institutions in reifying particular social cleavages over others (e.g. Laitin 1986). Still others have emphasized the emotions attached to particular social cleavages that render them stable (Petersen 2012) or the innate characteristics of particular groups that make attachments to them particularly strong (Horowitz 1985) or that make cross-group differences particularly salient (Sambanis and Shayo 2013). A large number of scholars have, following Schattschneider (1960) and the foundational work of Tajfel et al. (1971), located their answers in the competition inherent in politics. These authors emphasize how the struggle for political power and public resources generates incentives for political actors to embrace or discard particular social distinctions in order to win elections (e.g. Bates 1983; Brass 1991; Chandra 2004; van der Veen and Laitin 2012).

The approach outlined here, which draws on and expands upon the discussion in Posner (2005), adopts this expressly instrumentalist and political orientation. Where it goes beyond other work in this vein – and where it distinguishes itself sharply from primordialist and constructivist approaches to identity politics – is by expressly laying out the implications of the insight that communal groups can be thought of as political coalitions mobilized to secure political power and public resources (Bates 1983).¹ The characterization of communal groups as political coalitions is usually deployed as a metaphor to underscore the tendency for social identities to be politicized. The contribution here is to take this approach literally and to trace the implications for both individual-level actions and society-level outcomes of viewing social identities in this manner. The result is an analysis that goes beyond the constructivist recognition that social identities can change to identify the conditions under which they will, the forms they will take, and the actors who will support and oppose these changes.

To do this, I employ a tool called a social identity matrix to organize the available information about a polity's social cleavage structure. As I show, the tool can be used to identify the incentives individuals face to adopt particular identities and to generate predictions about the social cleavages that

will emerge as salient. The power of the framework is that it also provides insights into the lobbying we can expect to observe for the adoption or rejection of particular identities, as well as who is most likely to be engaged in such lobbying. It also generates predictions about the types of individuals who will be most likely to engage in “identity entrepreneurship” – attempts to create novel attachments, and novel social divisions, that might organize the polity in new ways. By pinpointing who stands to lose from the identity-based conflict, the approach also helps us to identify individuals who will have incentives to change their group memberships and hence generates predictions about the social boundaries that are likely to become contested.²

Generating these predictions requires accepting certain assumptions about what individuals value and how the political system is structured. However, these assumptions are consistent with considerable empirical evidence and accurately describe the real-world settings in which many individuals find themselves. Moreover, accepting these assumptions generates substantial payoffs for our understanding of identity politics. The objective is not to suggest that the framework described here provides the only way to think about why some social identities or cleavages become salient rather than others. The goal is to provide a simple, parsimonious way of thinking about social identity that, notwithstanding its sparse foundations, provides powerful insights into the dynamics of identity politics.

A particular benefit of the approach is the illumination it provides regarding the (likely un-) usefulness of partition as a solution to ethnic conflict. By clarifying how changing the boundaries of the political arena alters the kinds of identities that become socially and politically salient, the social identity matrix shows how dividing a socially diverse polity into homogeneous new states is not likely to solve the problem of communal conflict. The approach makes it clear that as soon as the boundaries of the political arena change, actors’ incentives change too, and this will give rise to new cleavages in the post-partitioned states. All that partition will do is shift the locus of competition and conflict from one dimension of social cleavage to another. Whether this alters the intensity of the conflict depends on the nature of the intergroup competition on each cleavage dimension, but partition itself will do nothing to change the inevitability of group competition itself.

Some preliminaries

The framework outlined in this article is built around a conceptualization of social identity as fluid and situation-bound. It assumes that individuals possess repertoires of identities whose relevance depends on the context in which the individuals find themselves. It assumes further that social identities are not just situational but instrumental: context affects not just how

individuals understand who they are; it also affects the strategic calculations they make about which identity, if adopted, will generate the highest payoffs.³

What, then, determines the payoffs for a given identity choice? Although the rewards of membership in particular groups run the spectrum from material benefits such as access to jobs to non-material advantages such as prestige, social acceptance, or protection against shunning, the approach adopted here focuses on just one factor: the size of the group that the identity defines. The framework assumes that individuals will choose the identity that conveys membership in the group that, by virtue of its size vis-à-vis other groups, puts them in a minimum winning political coalition – and thus in a position to maximize their consumption of state resources. In sharp contrast to accounts that explain identity choices by invoking the deep attachments individuals have to particular social categories, the account here emphasizes the usefulness of the political coalition that the group defines – a usefulness determined exclusively by its size relative to other potentially mobilizable political coalitions (Posner 2004). Indeed, a key implication of the analysis is that “depth of attachment” may be more productively viewed as a *product* of identity mobilization rather than as a prior, innate condition that can be treated as an input to the identity choices we observe.

This is a quite radical way of thinking about the sources of social attachments. It strips them of their affect. Group labels become simply conveyors of information about the coalition to which a person belongs, and group memberships become simply admission tickets to political coalitions (as well as a source of information about the coalitions to which others belong). Symbols, history, customs, and traditions – the usual stuff of identity politics – still matter, but as *post hoc* explanations for why people should embrace particular social groupings rather than as first-order sources of the salience of those groupings.

Let me be clear: in adopting this approach, I am not claiming that this is the only reasonable way to think about social identity or that this is the most appropriate approach for every question. Indeed, for questions relating to why individuals are sometimes willing to kill in the name of their group, it is almost certainly not the right approach. I am simply trying to be clear about the assumptions that underlie the framework that I develop in this article, which should be judged based on the insights it provides into the processes of identity politics and the power of the predictions it generates about the social cleavages that are likely to animate politics in a given setting.

Social cleavages

A useful way to think about social cleavages and the relationship between cleavages, groups, and identity repertoires is to distinguish between what Sacks (1992) calls “identity categories” and “category sets”.⁴ Identity

categories are the labels that people use to describe themselves. They include classifications such as “Serbian”, “Hindu”, “Xhosa”, “Northerner”, “Latino”, and “English-speaker”. These categories, in turn, can be sorted into category sets: broad axes of social division such as race, religion, language, or nationality. Sacks (1992) calls them “which-type sets” because they provide answers to the question “which, for some set, are you?” – for example, to which race do you belong? which religion do you practice? So, if language, religion, and country of origin are bases of social division in a given society, then everyone in that society should have a linguistic identity, a religious affiliation, and a national ancestry, and nobody should have more than one of each.

To illustrate, take the example of a hypothetical neighbourhood in London whose population can be classified on the basis of race, religion, and immigrant status into ten distinct groups (with obviously overlapping memberships): South Asians, African/Afro-Caribbeans, Chinese, whites, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, foreign-born, and British-born. In this example, race, religion, and immigrant status are the category sets and South Asian, African/Afro-Caribbean, Hindus, and so on are the identity categories. These ten identity categories constitute the complete universe of social units into which community members might be sorted. Each individual community member, however, can only assign herself (or be assigned) to one of these categories for each set; that is, one racial category, one religious category, and one place-of-birth category. The community’s social cleavage structure can be depicted as (R, F, and B), where R = race, F = faith (religion), and B = birth status (foreign-born or British-born), and

$$R = \{r_1, r_2, r_3, r_4\}, \text{ where } r_1 = \text{South Asian}; r_2 = \text{African/Afro-Caribbean}; r_3 = \text{Chinese};$$

and $r_4 = \text{white}$

$$F = \{f_1, f_2, f_3, f_4\}, \text{ where } f_1 = \text{Christian}; f_2 = \text{Muslim}; f_3 = \text{Hindu}; \text{ and } f_4 = \text{Buddhist}$$

$$B = \{b_1, b_2\}, \text{ where } b_1 = \text{foreign-born and } b_2 = \text{British-born}$$

In this example, race, faith (religion), and place-of-birth (R, F, and B) are the *cleavages* and $r_1, r_2, r_3, r_4, f_1, f_2, f_3, f_4, b_1,$ and b_2 are the *groups*. Together, the number of cleavage dimensions that the community contains (in this case, three) and the number and relative sizes of the groups on each cleavage dimension define its *social cleavage structure*. Finally, *identity repertoires* are the inventory of group memberships that individuals possess – one from each cleavage dimension. In our example, we can depict them as $(r_i, f_j,$ and $b_k)$, where i and j are numbers from 1 to 4, and k is either 1 or 2. Thus, Karthik, a South Asian Hindu who migrated from Gujarat as a child, has an identity repertoire $(r_1, f_3,$ and $b_1)$ and Adebisi, a British-born Christian whose parents came from Nigeria, has an identity repertoire (r_2, f_1, b_2) . Note that individuals have as many identities in their repertoires as the cleavage structure has cleavage dimensions.

The social identity matrix

We can organize the information about a community's cleavage structure using a social identity matrix like the one depicted in [Figure 1](#). In this example, A and B are the social cleavages and $a_1, b_1, a_2, b_2, \dots, a_n$, and b_m are the groups located on each cleavage dimension.⁵ By convention, we list them in order of decreasing size, so that $a_1 > a_2 > a_3 > \dots > a_n$ and $b_1 > b_2 > b_3 > \dots > b_m$. Every individual in the community can be placed in one of the cells in the figure (note that some of the cells may be empty). Each therefore has a column identity (an a_j) and a row identity (a b_k). The question is: which will they use to identify themselves?

To answer this question, we need some assumptions. The first is that individuals will choose the social identity that will maximize their access to resources. Although this is, of course, not the only motivation for choosing one identity over another, a large literature suggests the plausibility of this assumption for many circumstances. Second, assume that resources are made available through a distributive process in which a single power-holder shares resources only with, but equally among, members of his own social group. Evidence for such an assumption, and for the organization of politics in this way, is also ubiquitous (Horowitz 1985; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Posner 2005). Assume further that the power-holder is elected under plurality rules. Finally, assume that all individuals have information about at least the relative sizes of all groups (i.e. they know the ordering of the rows and columns in the matrix, though not necessarily the values in each cell).

These assumptions have a number of important implications. They imply that coalitions across group lines (i.e. across rows or across columns) will be very difficult to form, since individuals will be willing to support only those leaders who will share resources with them and they believe that only leaders from their own groups will do so. In addition, the condition that resources will be shared equally among group members means that sub-divisions of the group will not take place after power has been won. For the purposes of the model, groups are taken to be unitary blocks: uncombinable and internally undifferentiable.⁶ Instances in which two or more groups might be

		B				
		b_1	b_2	b_3	...	b_m
A	a_1					
	a_2					
	a_3					
	...					
	a_n					

$$a_1 > a_2 > a_3 > \dots > a_n \text{ and } b_1 > b_2 > b_3 > \dots > b_m$$

Figure 1. A social identity matrix.

combined under a single umbrella label – for example, Bisa and Bemba in Zambia as “Bemba-speakers”, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans in New York as “Latinos”, and Episcopalians and Presbyterians in Ireland as “Protestants” – can be accommodated in the framework not by allowing them to form a coalition but by adding another cleavage dimension (Bemba-speakers/Tonga-speakers, Latino/non-Latino, and Protestant/Catholic).

Four different categories of people can be identified, each with a different optimal strategy. I depict them in [Figure 2](#) as w , x , y , and z .

Individuals located in the dark-shaded cell, w , are members of both the largest A group (a_1) and the largest B group (b_1). They will therefore be included in the winning coalition irrespective of whether power is held by the a_1 s or the b_1 s (the set-up of the matrix is such that, given plurality rules, power has to be held by one of them). They are the pivot. Their choice will determine which coalition wins. If they choose to identify themselves and to vote as a_1 s, then a_1 s will win power; if they choose to identify themselves and to vote as b_1 s, then b_1 s will hold power.

Individuals in the unshaded cells, x and y , are the possible co-power-holders with w . Individuals in x will always do best by identifying in terms of their row identity, a_1 , whereas individuals in y will always do best by identifying in terms of their column identity, b_1 . However, whether or not they are ultimately part of the winning coalition depends on what w chooses. Individuals located in the light-shaded cells, marked z , are members of neither a_1 nor b_1 , so they will never be part of the winning coalition. In many situations, they will outnumber w , x , and y combined. But because of their inherent internal divisions – the people in z are a collection of discrete communities grouped together only for analytical purposes – they will, for the reasons described above regarding the challenges of building coalitions across columns or rows, have great difficulty banding together to wrest power from the a_1 s or b_1 s.

Which identity will individuals in w choose? Although they stand to win either way, they will maximize the resources they receive if they select the identity that puts them in the *smaller* of the two possible winning coalitions, since this will require them to share the spoils of power with fewer other

		B				
		b_1	b_2	b_3	...	b_m
A	a_1	w	x			
	a_2		z			
	a_3	y				
	...					
	a_n					

Figure 2. Four categories of actors.

people. Their choice will therefore depend on the relative sizes of x and y . When $x > y$, they will prefer to build a coalition with y by identifying themselves as b_1 s. When $y > x$, they will prefer to ally with x by identifying themselves as a_1 s. Only when $x > w + y$ or $y > w + x$ (i.e. when x or y are so large that they beat the minimum winning coalition of $w + y$ or $w + x$) will individuals in w not necessarily do best by choosing the identity that puts them in the smaller winning coalition. In such a situation, whether the winning coalition is made up of a_1 s or b_1 s will be out of their control, so choosing membership in the smaller group is not necessarily advantageous.

What about the individuals in x and y ? Since their fate will depend on w 's choice, they will devote their political energy to lobbying w . People in y will insist that politics is really about cleavage B and that b_1 s need to stick together against the b_2 s, b_3 s, and so on. People in x , meanwhile, will argue that A is the more important axis of political division and that the social cleavage that really matters is the one that separates a_1 s from the other a_j s.

Individuals in z are an interesting case, since they have no way of ever being in the winning coalition under the present cleavage structure. Their best strategy will therefore be to engage in "identity entrepreneurship" – that is, to try to change the game by pushing for the introduction of a new cleavage dimension (as, for example, members of scheduled castes did in India by invoking a common label as "poor" (Chandra 2004) or as Jewish intellectuals did in early twentieth-century Europe by attempting to mobilize people along class lines).⁷ Their plea will be that politics is not about either A or B but about some different cleavage, C. In theory, they should try to invoke a cleavage that defines them as members of a new minimum winning coalition. But they cannot choose – and expect people to mobilize in terms of – just any principle of social division. For the strategy to be effective, the cleavage they propose must be an axis of social difference that others will recognize as at least potentially politically salient, and not all bases of social division will resonate.⁸ So, a big part of their energy will be put towards making the case – by invoking history and symbols and traditions – for the salience of the new cleavage they are pushing.

An alternative strategy for individuals in z (or in the larger of x or y) is to attempt to assimilate into the winning category – a sort of identity entrepreneurship aimed at themselves rather than at others in society. However, this strategy requires investments in language competency, religious observances, and other cultural practices that may take a generation to master (Laitin 1998). Furthermore, insofar as membership in the winning category provides access to scarce resources, attempts to claim membership in that category are likely to generate resistance from its members, who face the prospect of sharing the spoils with a larger number of people. So, while theoretically possible, the assimilationist path is rarely a practical option, at least in the short-term.

The social identity matrix helps to account for the identities individuals embrace, the lobbying they undertake, and the efforts they make to create wholly new identity categories. How do these individual choices then aggregate to shape the social divisions that animate the political system more broadly? The answer lies in the fact that, once w chooses x or y as its coalition partner (and thus a_1 or b_1 as its identity), the social landscape is transformed. As soon as w makes its choice (or as soon as other players figure out what choice w will make), the distinctions among members of a_1 , a_2 , and a_3 or among members of b_1 , b_2 , and b_3 disappear and a new division emerges between those that are in power (the “ins”) and those that are not (the “outs”). Whatever dimension of cleavage that defines the difference between the “ins” and “outs” becomes the axis of conflict in the political system. Note that the “outs” will still not be able to do anything to overturn the situation, since cross-group coalitions are not feasible. But they will come to share the perception that political conflict is about what makes the “ins” different from everybody else.

An illustration

To illustrate how the approach might be applied to an actual case, consider the hypothetical London neighbourhood described earlier. Recall that this neighbourhood was divided by three different ethnic cleavages: race, religion, and foreign/native birth status. Leaving this last basis of social division aside for the moment to keep things simpler, we can represent the community’s social cleavage structure in the matrix depicted in [Figure 3](#). As in [Figure 2](#), the w and z coalitions are shaded and the groups on each cleavage dimension are ordered from largest to smallest. To make the incentives facing people clear, the share of the population contained in each cell, row, and column is provided.

South Asian Christians are the pivot. They will be in the plurality coalition irrespective of whether it is formed based on religion or race. Note that they are the pivot even though they are a minority in both coalitions: more Christians are from other, non-South Asian racial groups and more South Asians are Muslim or Hindu than Christian.

In terms of which group membership will they choose to identify themselves? South Asian politicians and community members will urge them to

		Religion				
		<i>Christian</i>	<i>Muslim</i>	<i>Hindu</i>	<i>Buddhist</i>	
Race	<i>South Asian</i>	5	20	15	0	40
	<i>African/Afro-Caribbean</i>	25	10	0	0	35
	<i>Chinese</i>	7	0	0	8	15
	<i>White</i>	10	0	0	0	10
		47	30	15	8	

Figure 3. A social identity matrix for a hypothetical London community.

turn their backs on their fellow Christians and ally with other South Asians. Christian politicians and community members will campaign equally strongly for them to ally with their fellow Christians and to reject the appeals from their non-Christian South Asian brothers and sisters. Indeed, we can imagine people standing at the end of each row and the top of each column urging their fellow row- and column-members to join forces with others who share their group membership as Muslims, Chinese, Hindus, and so on.

If maximizing their access to state resources is their goal, then South Asian Christians should ally with the smaller of the two groups in which they might claim membership. Since non-Christian South Asians make up 35 per cent of the population and non-South Asian Christians comprise 42 per cent, South Asian Christians should choose their racial identity and build a coalition with their fellow South Asians. African/Afro-Caribbean, Chinese, and white Christians will urge them to choose otherwise, insisting that religion is the cleavage that really matters and that they should embrace their shared Christian faith to ally against the Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. But if what matters most is controlling the greatest share of resources that one can, then the lobbying of fellow Christians will go unheeded.

Once South Asian Christians have chosen to identify themselves in terms of their race, we should see the politics of the community polarized along racial lines. As the plurality group, South Asians can be expected to use their numerical strength to elevate one of their own as the community's leader. Once they have done this, whether that leader is Christian, Muslim, or Hindu will be immaterial to non-South Asians. In their eyes, all that will matter is that the leader is a South Asian, that he took advantage of racial loyalties to get elected, and that he can be expected to be beholden to the interests of the South Asian sub-community. Grievances about how resources are distributed within the community will thus be framed in terms of why South Asians are getting more than their fair share.

The key point – and the fundamental way in which the framework differs from traditional approaches to the study of identity politics – is that race becomes the basis of political division in the community not because racial identities are inherently or historically stronger than religious attachments and not because the politicians who mobilize supporters in terms of racial differences are somehow more skilful than those emphasizing religion. Race becomes politically salient because of the relative sizes of the community's racial and religious groups and, in this specific example, because the coalition of South Asians is smaller (and thus more politically valuable to the pivot) than the coalition of Christians. Group size is what determines the individual-level identity choices and, through them, the social cleavage that comes to organize political conflict.

Changing boundaries; changing outcomes

One of the most powerful aspects of the social identity matrix framework is that it helps to clarify how the identity choices individuals make – and the society-level outcomes that follow – are sensitive to changes in the boundaries of the political community. To see why this is so, imagine that London is redistricted and that our hypothetical neighbourhood is divided into two separate electoral districts: “east” and “west”. If racial and religious groups were evenly distributed in the original neighbourhood, then this division would have no effect on people’s coalition-building strategies, since the distribution of groups in the two new neighbourhoods would be identical. But suppose that groups were residentially segregated and that the redistricting created a new district that was homogeneously South Asian. With no other racial group in the new district (i.e. with $y = 0$), the only cleavage that would matter would be the one that divides Christians, Muslims, and Hindus. Religion would thus become the primary basis of social division, and political coalition building and conflict would take place along religious lines.

But suppose that the redistricting created new districts that were more racially mixed. Suppose that most (but not all) of the South Asian population from the original neighbourhood wound up in the new “east” district and that all of the African/Afro-Caribbean population wound up in the new “west”. The population distributions for each new community might look something like the matrices in Figures 4 and 5.

The relative sizes of the racial and religious groups are dramatically changed in the two new districts, both vis-à-vis the original district and each other, and these changes bring corresponding alterations in the coalition-building strategies that actors will find it advantageous to pursue. In the new “east” district, the shift in relative size between Christians and Muslims changes the pivot. Whereas South Asian Christians were the pivot in the original community, South Asian Muslims play this role in new one. South Asian Christians still do best by identifying themselves in racial terms, but this time whether or not they will share power is out of their hands. Meanwhile, whereas South Asian Muslims did best in the pre-redistricting situation by lobbying fellow South Asians to join them in a coalition along racial lines, they do best in the post-redistricting context by identifying themselves in

		Religion				
		<i>Muslim</i>	<i>Christian</i>	<i>Hindu</i>	<i>Buddhist</i>	
Race	<i>South Asian</i>	35	5	25	0	65
	<i>Chinese</i>	0	10	0	10	20
	<i>White</i>	0	15	0	0	15
	<i>African/Afro-Caribbean</i>	0	0	0	0	0
		35	30	25	10	

Figure 4. A social identity matrix for the new “east” district.

		Religion				
		<i>Christian</i>	<i>Muslim</i>	<i>Buddhist</i>	<i>Hindu</i>	
Race	<i>African/Afro-Caribbean</i>	50	20	0	0	70
	<i>South Asian</i>	5	5	0	5	15
	<i>Chinese</i>	4	0	6	0	10
	<i>White</i>	5	0	0	0	5
		64	25	6	5	

Figure 5. A social identity matrix for the new “west” district.

religious terms and turning their backs on their Christian and Hindu South Asian brothers and sisters. This is because the coalition of fellow Muslims is smaller than the coalition of fellow South Asians. Whereas politics in the old neighbourhood was about race, in the new “east” it will be about religion.

Residents of the new “west” district will also experience changes in their optimal strategies. African/Afro-Caribbean Christians still do best by identifying themselves in religious terms. This time, however, they are the pivot and wind up in the winning coalition. Meanwhile, South Asian Christians, who in the original community did best by allying with their fellow South Asians, now have the best chance of capturing power and resources by identifying themselves as Christians. For both of these groups, as for both the South Asian Christians and Muslims in the new “east”, changing the boundaries of the political arena either changes their incentives for identifying themselves in terms of a particular identity or, because of the altered behaviour of others, changes the payoffs they will receive for having done so.

In addition to altering the choices that these actors make about which identities to emphasize, some actors (especially those in *z*) will have strong incentives to try to change the contents of their identity repertoires. Just as Russian speakers had incentives to learn the titular languages in the newly independent countries in which they found themselves in the aftermath of the break-up of the Soviet Union (Laitin 1998), Chinese Christians and Buddhists and white Christians in the new “east” may have incentives to adopt Islam and Chinese Buddhists and South Asian Hindus and Muslims in the new “west” may have incentives to convert to Christianity.

Implications for partition as a solution to ethnic conflict

In the example just discussed, the original multi-ethnic community was divided into two new communities that were also multi-ethnic. Sometimes, however, such divisions are made with an eye towards transforming a multi-ethnic space – especially one marked by seemingly intractable intergroup violence – into two or more homogeneous ones. The rationale, articulated most forcefully by Kaufmann (1996, 1998; see also Tullberg and Tullberg 1997), is that stable resolutions of ethnic conflicts are possible only when the opposing

groups are segregated into separate polities. Advocates of decentralization and ethnic federalism (Horowitz 1985; Hechter 2000; Selassie 2003) make similar arguments. Assertions about the desirability of such remedies have been criticized by a number of researchers on several grounds (e.g. Sambanis and Schulhofer-Wohl 2009). The social identity matrix framework makes clear another deficiency, which is that partition or the creation of federal states is highly unlikely to generate ethnically homogeneous units – at least not permanently. Even if groups are sufficiently segregated to make the messy post-partition transfer of people who wind up on the wrong side of the new border non-issue – an assumption that history shows almost never to be met – the idea that the populations in the new units will be homogeneous is a fantasy.

To see why, consider Figure 6, which provides a social identity matrix for a different hypothetical community in London facing deep conflicts along racial lines between a South Asian majority and African/Afro-Caribbean minority. The problem with simply partitioning the community into two separate units, one for South Asians and one for African/Afro-Caribbeans, is that, as the matrix makes clear, these racial groups are internally divided by country of origin. The fact that some South Asians come from India, others from Pakistan, others from Bangladesh, and still others from Sri Lanka might be totally irrelevant in the context of a heated conflict between South Asians and African/Afro-Caribbeans (who themselves are divided into Nigerians, Jamaicans and Kenyans). But as soon as the community is partitioned, the homogeneity would give way to diversity (along a different cleavage dimension) as political actors in the new setting scrambled to create new minimum winning coalitions along country-of-origin lines. As Figure 7 illustrates, the ostensibly homogeneous South Asian and African/Afro-Caribbean blocks would immediately fragment. In the South Asian district, Indians would ban together against Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankans; in the African/Afro-Caribbean district, Nigerians would ban together against Jamaicans and Kenyans. By changing the boundaries, one dimension of social cleavage

		Race		
		<i>South Asian</i>	<i>African/Afro-Caribbean</i>	
Country of Origin	<i>India</i>	30	0	30
	<i>Pakistan</i>	20	0	20
	<i>Nigeria</i>	0	18	18
	<i>Bangladesh</i>	12	0	12
	<i>Jamaica</i>	0	10	10
	<i>Kenya</i>	0	8	8
	<i>Sri Lanka</i>	2	0	2
		64	36	

Figure 6. Another hypothetical London community with (what looks like) two groups.

		Race		
		South Asian	African/Afro-Caribbean	
Country of Origin	India	47	0	47
	Pakistan	31	0	31
	Bangladesh	19	0	19
	Sri Lanka	3	0	3
		100	0	

		Race		
		African/Afro-Caribbean	South Asian	
Country of Origin	Nigeria	50	0	50
	Jamaica	28	0	28
	Kenya	22	0	22
		100	0	

Figure 7. Homogeneity gives way to diversity post-partition.

would simply be displaced by another. The *depth* of conflict might be lessened (if for some reason racial conflict was more disruptive than national origin conflict), but the *fact* of conflict along group lines will remain, as long as there is a competition for who will control access to resources.

Figure 8 makes this point again in a different context. Here, the setting is Nakuru, a multi-ethnic district in Kenya that has witnessed significant inter-group violence in recent years (Gettleman 2008). The figure provides a social identity matrix for a hypothetical community that, for simplicity, is comprised of just two groups: Kikuyu and Kalenjin (Nakuru also contains significant numbers of Luo and Luhya). Would partitioning the community along tribal lines solve the problem? Perhaps. But as Figure 8 makes clear, the internal sub-tribe and clan divisions present within each seemingly monolithic

Pre-Partition

		Tribe		
		Kikuyu	Kalenjin	
Sub-tribe/clan	Nyeri Kikuyu	40	0	40
	Kipsigi	0	23	23
	Kiambu Kikuyu	15	0	15
	Tugen	0	12	12
	Turkana	0	5	5
	Nandi	0	3	3
	Keiyo	0	2	2
		55	45	

*Post-Partition:
A New Kikuyuland*

		Tribe		
		Kikuyu	Kalenjin	
Clan	Nyeri Kikuyu	73	0	73
	Kiambu Kikuyu	27	0	27
	100	0		

*Post-Partition:
A New Kalenjinland*

		Tribe		
		Kalenjin	Kikuyu	
Sub-tribe	Kipsigi	51	0	51
	Tugen	27	0	27
	Turkana	11	0	11
	Nandi	7	0	7
	Keiyo	4	0	4
	100	0		

Figure 8. A community in Nakuru, Kenya.

tribal block would emerge as salient in each of the post-partition units. In the new “Kikuyuland”, divisions between Kikuyu from Nyeri and Kikuyu from Kiambu – a cleavage that has animated Kikuyu politics for a generation (Throup and Hornsby 1998) – would almost certainly become salient. In the new “Kalenjinland”, divisions among the several Kalenjin sub-tribes that live in Nakuru, previously subsumed beneath the broader conflict between Kikuyu and Kalenjin, would emerge as bases of social differentiation.⁹ Again, the partition would simply shift the locus of competition and conflict from one dimension of social identity to another. The displacement of the North–South conflict in Sudan by the conflict between Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups in post-independence South Sudan offers a clear – and tragic – real-world example of this phenomenon (Human Rights Watch 2014).

The social identity matrix framework even offers insight into the most famous example of partition in modern history: the partition of India in 1947. Born from a desire to separate Hindus and Muslims, the partition was

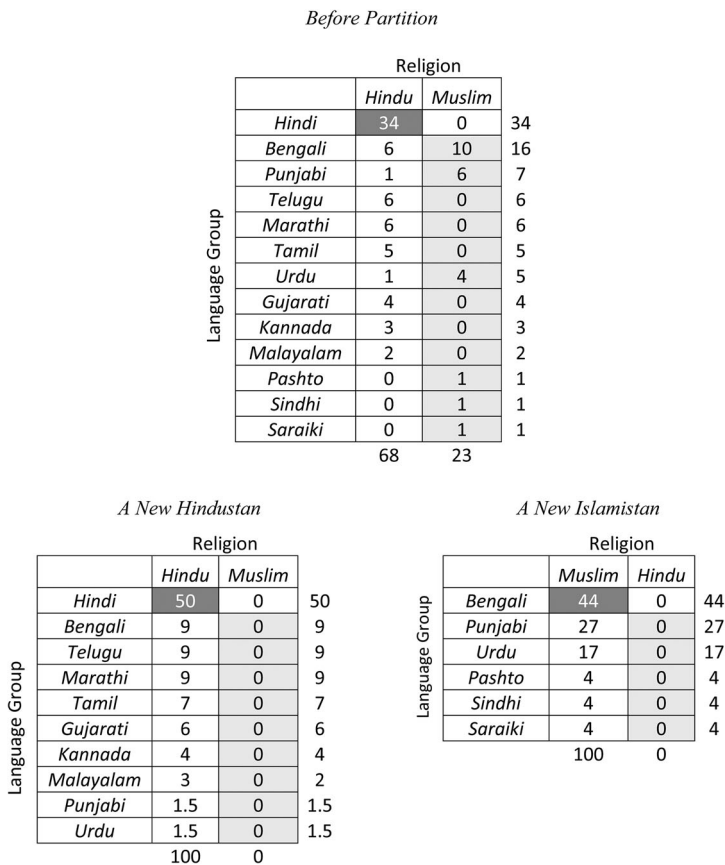


Figure 9. The partition of India.

anything but neat (Pandey 2002; Wolpert 2006). As many as a million civilians died in the reshuffling of peoples that ensued following the drawing of the new borders of India and Pakistan. Figure 9 depicts an idealized version of partition in which, as was intended by its architects, Hindus and Muslims were somehow able to separate themselves into separate, religiously homogeneous states.

The matrix at the top of the figure divides pre-partition India along two dimensions: religion and language.¹⁰ The two at the bottom depict how a “new Hindustan” and “new Islamistan” would look. Both are homogeneous with respect to religion, but are now divided by language group differences. Indeed, this is what actually happened in both India and Pakistan after 1947. As Horowitz (1975, 135) writes:

hardly had the Indio-Pakistani subcontinent been partitioned along what were thought to be hard-and-fast Hindu-Muslim lines when, in 1948, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who had done so much to foster subnational identities in undivided India, ironically found it necessary to warn against the ‘curse of provincialism’ in undivided Pakistan.

The separation of Pakistan and India led simply to the replacement of one basis of social division by another. As in the other examples, partition does not do away with ethnic conflict; it just shifts it to a different dimension of social cleavage. Indeed, in Pakistan, these new divisions led to a second partition in 1971 and the formation of an independent Bangladesh.

Conclusion

This article has described a simple framework for understanding the politics of socially heterogeneous societies. Rooted in a set of strong assumptions about the instrumentality of social identities and the role of communal groups as “coalitions which have been formed as part of rational efforts to secure benefits” (Bates 1983, 152), the approach generates predictions that are consistent with key features of the world we observe. It offers explanations for why certain cleavages emerge as socially salient rather than others, the kinds of identity-based appeals that different types of individuals are likely to make, and even the kinds of individuals we would expect to see undertake new identity-building projects. The framework also demonstrates how these outcomes and behaviours will change when the boundaries of the political arena are altered, and it traces the implications of these insights for the usefulness of partition as a remedy for ethnic conflict. Traditional approaches to identity politics that locate their explanations in historical trends or in the “depth of attachment” that people naturally feel towards some social identities provide useful accounts. But they cannot illuminate as broad a range of outcomes and processes as the framework described here.

Notes

1. The analysis most closely resembles Fearon (1999).
2. Chandra (2012) provides a similar treatment, but her focus is more narrowly on the identities that individuals choose.
3. A key question that I do not address in this article is what determines the roster of social identities that are potentially available for an individual to adopt. For a discussion of this issue, see Posner (2005).
4. Chandra (2012) makes a similar distinction, although she adds a third component, *attributes*, which refers to the observable characteristics – skin colour, education, surname, dietary practices, dress, and so on – that allow people to sort others, and gain entry themselves, into social categories. This is an important additional issue, but I leave it aside here.
5. While the example contains only two cleavages, the logic of the model extends to cleavage structures with three or more cleavages.
6. Such undifferentiability is emphasized by Ernest Renan in his famous 1882 lecture “What is a Nation?” in which he highlights that a key ingredient of a nation is the ability to forget. His point is that to constitute a nation (or presumably any social group), we need to forget the complexity of who we are, including our within-group divisions. In the terms of the model discussed here, it implies that thinking of oneself in terms of one’s row or column identity means forgetting about the others, as well as about the divisions within the row or column.
7. Only in one special situation can people in z affect w ’s choice: when there exists within z a sub-coalition of a_j s or b_k s that is greater than w plus the smaller of x and y – that is, greater than the winning coalition that would otherwise form. If this is the case, then w will have no choice but to identify itself as a_1 (b_1) and ally with x (y). The existence of this sub-coalition within z , while altering w ’s choice, will not affect the fate of anyone in z : as soon as w joins with y (x), everyone in z will still be shut out of power. Situations of this sort frequently occur when the A and B cleavages are organized such that groups from one cleavage dimension nest inside groups from another (as, for instance, when the regions of a country each contain distinct sets of region-specific tribes, when a tribe is divided into clans, or when a linguistic community is divided into speakers of multiple dialects).
8. Just how encompassing that roster of potentially relevant cleavages might be is a matter of some debate. Chandra (2012) takes the position that any combination of descent-based attributes serves as a potential basis of social mobilization, whereas Ferree (2012) and Petersen (2012) stress that many of these theoretically possible combinations are not viable in practice.
9. For an excellent treatment of the internal divisions within the Kalenjin block, and the artificiality of the “Kalenjin” category more generally, see Lynch (2011).
10. For the sake of space, I include only the thirteen largest language groups; hence, the column totals do not sum to 100.

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