Electoral Systems and the Representation of Ethnic Minorities

Evidence from Russia

Robert G. Moser

Scholars have long noted that states with significant ethnic cleavages face difficult obstacles to the maintenance of democracy and that these problems are most severe in new democracies. As a result, scholars have looked primarily to institutions as a means to help ethnically divided states overcome these obstacles and successfully implant democracy in the face of deep ethnic cleavages.

Achieving broad representation of different ethnic groups has important implications for the stability and quality of democracy, particularly in polities just emerging out of long periods of authoritarian rule. Legislative representation carries powerful symbolic power for ethnic minorities and often becomes an end in itself even when minorities have little or no chance of participating in the governing coalition.

It is often taken as a matter of faith that proportional representation (PR) increases minority representation while electoral systems with single member districts (SMD) exclude minorities from legislative representation. Lijphart argues that proportional representation, for example, is not only better than single member districts but is superior to all other electoral institutions (for example, the alternative vote, reserved seats for minority groups, and mixed electoral systems) in promoting minority representation. While advocates of proportional representation acknowledge the possibility that minorities can gain representation under certain conditions in other electoral systems, it is still viewed as providing crucial advantages. As Lijphart explains, “the beauty of PR is that in addition to producing proportionality and minority representation, it treats all groups—ethnic, racial, religious, or even noncommunal groups—in a completely equal and evenhanded fashion. Why deviate from full PR at all?”

Despite the scholarly consensus in favor of proportional representation, there is surprisingly little empirical evidence that PR systems provide better representation of ethnic minorities than SMD systems. This article offers a model of electoral system effects on minority representation and a set of hypotheses concerning how PR and SMD electoral rules will affect different categories of ethnic minorities under certain conditions. Patterns of minority representation under PR and SMD electoral arrangements are then...
examined in Russia using a unique dataset that identifies the ethnicity of individual legislators. Russia employed a mixed electoral system during the period of investigation, which allowed voters to cast two ballots, one for a party list in a PR contest and one for an individual candidate in a single member district. This system affords the opportunity to examine the impact of different electoral rules on minority representation while holding social conditions constant through the comparison of the PR and SMD tiers of mixed systems in a single country. This study also has the advantage of examining minority representation at the level of individual legislators rather than studying the electoral success of ethnic parties. Data on individual legislators are essential to capture minority representation through both ethnic and nonethnic parties. Finally, the Russian case is important because of the virtual absence of ethnic parties in this country. The lack of ethnic parties is a product of demography (most notably small ethnic groups) and actions by the Russian state, which has passed legislation that severely restricts the formation of ethnic or religious parties and campaigning on explicitly ethnic issues. Thus, this study examines the impact of electoral rules in a context where ethnic parties do not play a significant role in electoral politics.

The findings presented here offer a challenge to the conventional wisdom that PR systems generally are more conducive to minority representation than SMD systems. Instead, it is shown that, first, the effects of electoral systems are highly conditional on a number of demographic and institutional factors, second, more assimilated ethnic groups witness no significant differences in representation across electoral systems, and third, each type of system provides advantages over the other for certain types of ethnic minorities, with neither PR nor SMD elections being advantageous more often than the other. Consequently, various demographic and political factors, including group size, geographic concentration, ethnic federalism, and cultural assimilation, mitigate the influence of electoral systems on minority representation and thus must be taken into account when examining this relationship.

Electoral Systems and Minority Representation in National Legislatures

The ability of ethnic minorities to win legislative seats is usually seen as a consequence of electoral systems and the size and geographic concentration of minority populations. The argument that PR systems foster the representation of ethnic minorities has typically rested on the idea that they encourage the emergence of ethnic parties. Proportional representation encourages their emergence by lowering the electoral threshold necessary to gain representation, thereby increasing the number of parties and making smaller ethnic parties more viable. This result can be seen particularly in ethnically divided societies with PR systems that have very high district magnitudes and very low legal
thresholds, which provide few obstacles to election for even the smallest parties. Perhaps
the best example of how proportional representation can promote the election of minor-
ity ethnic groups through ethnic parties is Israel, which had seven parties representing
specific ethnic or religious constituencies out of a total of twelve parties winning seats in
the 2006 parliamentary elections to the Knesset. Additionally, the greater proportiona-
ility of PR systems provides incentives for all parties to field a more diverse set of candi-
dates in order to capture ethnic voting blocs, since even small increases in a party’s vote
share could mean more legislative seats.

While generally viewed as inferior to PR systems, single member districts also can
be conducive to minority representation under certain conditions. The election of ethnic
minorities in SMD systems tends to be based on geographic concentration and the abili-
ty of a minority group to constitute a critical mass within a given electoral district. In so-
called majority-minority districts, opportunities exist for the emergence of ethnic parties,
which can displace one of the major parties within their home regions (for example, the
Bloc Québécois in Quebec), while major parties feel pressure to nominate more minori-
ty candidates, as seen in the United States. Thus, geographic concentration can over-
come the bias against small (ethnic) parties and minority candidates under plurality
systems.

Thus, under the right circumstances, both PR and SMD systems allow for minority
representation. The distinction between them lies in the conditions that promote mobi-
lization around ethnic parties and/or nomination of minority candidates by major parties.
Essentially, proportional representation is expected to provide any ethnic minority,
whether it is geographically concentrated or not, the ability to gain representation
through an ethnic party and/or ethnic balancing on major parties’ lists, whereas plurality
systems are expected only to promote minority representation for ethnic groups that
reach a critical mass within majority-minority electoral districts. From this perspective,
given that proportional representation is expected to promote minority representation
under a greater number of circumstances than single member districts, its preferred sta-
tus remains intact even when acknowledging the prospect of minority representation
under other systems.

A Model of Ethnic Representation

Clearly, studies of electoral system effects on ethnic representation tend to view the elec-
tion of ethnic minorities through the prism of ethnic voting —the tendency of ethnic
groups to vote for coethnic candidates or parties when given the opportunity. However,
to view minority representation as solely emanating from ethnic mobilization is too sim-
plistic, for members of ethnic minorities gain election through a variety of ways, often
with considerable support from the majority population. In contrast, a model of ethnic
representation can be based on the notion of a continuum from ethnic mobilization to assimilation. The central causal element of this continuum is the relative level of support from their coethnic voting constituency that minority candidates must rely upon to gain election. Figure 1 illustrates the major assumptions of the model.

Ethnic mobilization represents the most common conception of how minority candidates and ethnic parties gain election. In this model, the election of ethnic minorities is contingent upon the electoral mobilization of coethnic voters.16 It is assumed that the winning minority candidate or ethnic party gains all or a vast majority of its electoral support from its target ethnic constituency. Under PR rules, this type of mobilization is manifest through ethnic parties. In SMD systems, ethnic mobilization is marked by the mobilization of coethnic support for a minority candidate. Such mobilization may be channeled through an ethnic party (for example, the Bloc Québécois in Canada), a nonethnic party (for example, the Democratic Party in the United States), or no party at all. Regardless of the nature of partisanship, the central dynamic of ethnic mobilization remains the same: the candidate relies primarily upon coethnic voters for electoral victory.

Minority representation through ethnic mobilization requires that the winning candidate or party assemble an ethnic-based constituency capable of overcoming the electoral threshold for representation. The conventional wisdom presumes that the relative threshold of PR systems tends to be much lower (depending on the district magnitude of the system) than that of plurality systems, in which the winner must capture a plurality of the
vote, typically approaching 50 percent. This lower relative threshold lies at the heart of the greater proportionality between seats and votes under PR rules. However, plurality systems in countries with noninstitutionalized party systems such as Russia tend to have greater party fragmentation than countries with more institutionalized party systems, thus creating conditions usually associated with proportional representation. Moreover, it must be remembered that the absolute vote threshold for gaining a single seat in the legislature is actually lower in SMD systems, since it usually takes fewer votes to win in one district than to gain even a small percentage (for example, 5 percent) of the national vote. This caveat is important to keep in mind for very small ethnic groups with geographically concentrated populations. Under a PR system, such groups may be unable to field an ethnic party that could be viable and may be less attractive as candidates in a ticket-balancing strategy but may still constitute a winning electoral constituency within a single or handful of single member electoral districts.

The assimilation model assumes that members of an ethnic minority require minimal or no support from coethnics in order to gain representation. This model represents the diametrically opposite set of outcomes compared to those seen through ethnic mobilization because, unlike representation achieved through ethnic mobilization, the ethnic background of the candidate from assimilated minorities becomes a virtual nonfactor, allowing the minority candidate to win election with support from the majority population. Under PR rules this outcome is characterized by the election of minority candidates among parties across the political spectrum rather than minority nominations concentrated in ethnic, multiethnic, or nonethnic parties that make some sort of appeal to attract minority voters. In SMD elections minority representation through assimilation is marked by election of minority candidates in electoral districts with high concentrations of voters from the majority ethnic group.

The two perspectives of ethnic mobilization and assimilation are presented as a continuum rather than a dichotomy because there are scenarios under which minority candidates are elected that combine elements of minority and majority support. Parties may have incentives to nominate less assimilated minority candidates but not rely solely or even predominantly upon the support of those minorities for election. Particularly in PR systems, one can imagine that certain parties would nominate members of minority groups in order to attract support from particular ethnic groups as part of a larger electoral constituency that also includes interests within the majority population.

Hypotheses

Based on this model, several hypotheses can be offered regarding the impact of electoral systems on minority representation conditioned by the size, geographic concentration, and relative assimilation of minority groups. In general, differences in the level of minor-
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ity representation between PR and SMD tiers are driven by demographic characteristics that provide advantages for the group in one type of electoral system while at the same time producing disadvantages under the other system. Conversely, similar levels of representation between the two tiers are produced either when demographic characteristics produce the same dynamic in both tiers (for example, assimilation) or when a combination of characteristics produce advantages in both tiers (for example, large and geographically concentrated groups).

**Assimilation Hypothesis**  Highly assimilated ethnic minorities will experience no difference in the level of legislative representation between SMD and PR tiers, regardless of their size or geographic concentration.

Assimilation tends to diminish the impact of electoral systems on minority representation by lessening the perceived differences between the assimilated minority and the majority population. Highly assimilated ethnic minorities will be able to garner support from the majority population to gain election, given that their ethnic identities are a less salient issue (and often a less perceptible voting cue) than the ethnicity of members of less assimilated groups. Consequently, like members of the majority ethnic group, members of more assimilated minorities should be attractive candidates for PR party lists and SMD contests. There are other crucial distinctions in the patterns of representation of highly assimilated minority groups. In the SMD tier, members of these ethnic categories are expected to gain election in single member districts dominated by the majority population and to be nominated by major political parties (as opposed to running as independents or members of minor parties). In the PR tier, highly assimilated minority candidates also are expected to have distinct partisan backgrounds, being nominated by more conservative and sometimes even nationalistic parties that tend not to nominate other minority groups.

**Small, Concentrated Group Hypothesis**  Groups that are small, geographically concentrated, and less assimilated will achieve higher levels of legislative representation in the SMD tier than in the PR tier of mixed-member electoral systems.

Because they tend to be more displaced from the majority culture, less assimilated groups are likely to rely on ethnic mobilization to elect representatives to the national legislature. Small groups face disadvantages in PR elections because they are not large enough to sustain ethnic parties or to be nominated in large numbers on the party lists of major, nonethnic parties. However, if these small minorities are geographically concen-
trated, single member districts provide the best opportunity to gain election because they are most likely to constitute a majority in at least one single member electoral district.

*Large, Dispersed Group Hypothesis*  Groups that are large, geographically dispersed, and less assimilated will achieve higher levels of legislative representation in the PR tier than in the SMD tier of mixed-member electoral systems.

Large, geographically dispersed ethnic groups that are less assimilated will gain greater representation in PR as opposed to SMD systems due to two countervailing dynamics. One provides an advantage in proportional representation, while the other presents a disadvantage within single member districts. First, larger ethnic groups can marshal the support of a significant voting bloc on a national scale. This ability makes such groups potent electoral forces in PR systems because they can sustain a viable ethnic party and/or command a significant minority voting bloc that make them attractive candidates for multi- and nonethnic parties.

*Large, Concentrated Group Hypothesis*  Groups that are relatively large, geographically concentrated, and less assimilated will experience no difference in the level of legislative representation between SMD and PR tiers.

Unlike assimilated minorities, which downplay the impact of electoral systems, certain ethnic groups have similar rates of PR and SMD representation because they combine demographic characteristics that provide advantages in each tier. Large, unassimilated ethnic minorities that are geographically concentrated enjoy two advantages over other minorities that enable them to achieve relatively high rates of representation under both PR and SMD electoral arrangements. In the PR tier, larger ethnic groups have the potential to mobilize larger voting blocs and thus should be better able to field viable ethnic parties or be more attractive candidates for mainstream political parties hoping to capture significant voting constituencies. In the SMD tier, these same large ethnic minorities should also possess an electoral advantage as long as they are geographically concentrated because such groups should have at their disposal a cohesive voting bloc capable of overcoming the electoral threshold in a (relatively) large number of single member districts. By constituting a critical mass of the electorate nationally and within numerous single member districts, large, geographically concentrated ethnic groups should be able to find electoral success at roughly equivalent levels in both PR and SMD tiers.

Of course, these hypotheses are not particularly surprising. They match the general propositions of studies of electoral systems and minority representation, but with two important caveats. First, current scholarship does not highlight the potential for ethnic minorities to experience no difference in levels of representation under different types of electoral systems. Second, the conventional wisdom allows for SMD systems to produce

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levels of representation that would equal those expected under a PR system when ethnic groups are concentrated but does not argue that there are situations when SMD systems would actually produce levels of minority representation that would exceed those that would be produced in a PR system.

**Data and Variables**

Ethnicity is a socially constructed source of identity based on racial, religious, linguistic, cultural, or regional backgrounds. While often based on seemingly primordial properties such as skin color or language, most recent scholarship has emphasized the malleability of ethnic identity and its manipulability as a political force, particularly by the political elite. These aspects of ethnic identity have made it a difficult concept to examine systematically. Clearly, the phenomenon of ethnic mobilization is an important element in democratic politics, but capturing, much less measuring, its influence remains problematic.

Scholarship on legislative representation of ethnic minorities faces even more fundamental data problems. While there are extensive and reliable databases on the number of women in legislatures around the world, no analogous source provides information regarding the ethnic identity of legislators. Thus, much is known about how electoral systems, cultural attitudes, and socioeconomic factors influence the election of women around the world, but very little is known about how these factors affect the election of ethnic minorities. This situation is hardly surprising given the sensitivity of such information in many contexts.

As a result of this lack of information, theoretical propositions regarding the factors that influence minority representation tend not to be directly tested using empirical data or are examined through the use of questionable proxy measures such as the proportion of women elected to the legislature or the electoral success of ethnic parties. Such indirect measures of the ethnic identity of legislators may fail to capture the full extent of minority representation, particularly in countries that do not have strong ethnic parties.

For the case examined here, information on the ethnic identity of individual legislators was available. The election of minority candidates, rather than the success of particular ethnic parties, was used as the dependent variable. The data come from official handbooks published by the Russian State Duma, presumably from information supplied by the deputies themselves or their staffs.

**Ethnic Minorities in Russia**

Russia is unique among postcommunist states in terms of its ethnic composition. It has a significant minority population—around 20 percent—similar in size to many countries...
Table 1 Ethnic Federalism, Relative Assimilation and Geographic Concentration of Select Ethnic Minorities in Russia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Minority</th>
<th>Population in Thousands</th>
<th>Ethnic Homeland</th>
<th>% with Russian as their First Language</th>
<th>Largest % of the Population of a Single Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ukrainians</td>
<td>2943</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belorussians</td>
<td>815</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germans</td>
<td>597</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgians</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koreans</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenians</td>
<td>1130</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatars</td>
<td>5593</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bashkirs</td>
<td>1674</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chuvash</td>
<td>1637</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ossetians</td>
<td>516</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buryats</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yakuts</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Komi</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of the region, such as Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia. However, unlike these states Russia lacks a single major minority group. Instead, the non-Russian population is composed of literally dozens of very small groups. The largest minority group of the Russian Federation, Tatars, makes up less than four percent of the population, and only three groups (Tatars, Ukrainians, and Chuvash) comprise over one percent of the country’s population.

The composition of Russia’s ethnic population can not be properly understood without acknowledgment of its institutionalization within a system of ethnic federalism. The Russian Federation has continued the Soviet practice of defining some of its federal units along ethnic lines. Russia is composed of eighty-nine subjects or regions that are divided into twenty-one republics, forty nine oblasts, six krais, two cities (Moscow and St. Petersburg), ten autonomous okrugs, and one autonomous oblast (the Jewish Autonomous Oblast). Republics, autonomous okrugs, and the Jewish Autonomous Oblast make up the thirty two regions named after a non-Russian ethnic group.

As Harris has demonstrated, Russia’s ethnic federalism has had a strong influence on the ethnic identity of non-Russians. Groups provided with “ethnic homelands” managed to retain their native languages and resist assimilation efforts to a much greater extent than (often larger) minority groups that lacked their own designated federal region. Moreover, regional governments in ethnic homelands have cultivated ethnic mobilization in center-periphery relations. The very designation of ethnic federal units has produced incentives and resources for the promotion of an ethnic cadre of elites and mass mobilization tied to ethnicity. Thus, ethnic federalism has indirectly affected
minority representation through its influence over ethnic identity and behavior itself, creating, in most cases, less assimilated and more geographically concentrated ethnic groups that have certain political opportunities and resources that other groups without their own ethnic homelands lack.

The confluence of certain levels of cultural assimilation and geographic concentration with federal or nonfederal status within Russia's ethnic federal system has produced two discernible categories of ethnic minorities within Russia. The first category, nonfederal minorities, includes groups that do not have their own ethnic homeland within the Russian federal system. Consequently, these groups tend to be more geographically dispersed and more culturally assimilated than those groups with an ethnic homeland. This category is quite ethnically diverse with groups with a Slavic background (Ukrainians and Belorussians), as well as groups with origins from Europe (Germans, Greeks, and Finns), Eurasia (Latvians, Georgians, and Armenians), and Asia (Koreans).

The second category, federal minorities, is made up of groups that have their own federal subunit. These groups tend to be more geographically concentrated than other minorities — on average, 66 percent of titular nationalities live in their designated federal units — and are relatively unassimilated into the majority Russian culture. Table 1 shows the federal designation, relative assimilation (measured as percentage claiming Russian as their first language), and level of geographic concentration of select minority groups in Russia.

By and large, the figures in Table 1 conform to the characterization that ethnic federalism has produced two broad categories of minorities — one relatively unassimilated and geographically concentrated and the other relatively assimilated and geographically dispersed. On average, 26 percent of federal minorities speak Russian as their first language, and they comprise 36 percent of the population in one of Russia's federal units, while 50 percent of nonfederal minorities are native Russian speakers and they tend to make up only 7 percent of the population in any particular Russian region. Jews present the one exception to the pattern that federally designated ethnic groups are geographically concentrated and less assimilated than minorities without an ethnic homeland. While Jews in Russia have their own ethnic homeland, they are not geographically concentrated in that homeland. Less than 2 percent of Jews living in Russia resided in the Jewish Autonomous oblast in 1989, and the Jewish population comprised only 4 percent of the region's population. Jews are also arguably the most highly assimilated ethnic minority group in Russia, with over 90 percent speaking Russian as their first language.

**Minority Representation in Russia**

Given the ethnic make-up of Russia, one might expect both the PR and plurality tiers of its mixed electoral system to underrepresent non-Russian ethnic groups, based on the assumption that minority representation is primarily driven by the mobilization of coeth-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>1993 Election</th>
<th>1995 Election</th>
<th>1999 Election</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td># Elected in the PR tier</td>
<td># Elected in SMDs in Russian Regions</td>
<td># Elected in SMDs in Ethnic Homelands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ukrainian</td>
<td>Belorussian</td>
<td>Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Federal Minorities</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bashkir</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chuvash</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Minorities</td>
<td>Tatar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bashkir</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chuvash</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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nic voters. No single ethnic minority constitutes a large enough share of the population plausibly to field an ethnic party capable of overcoming the five percent legal threshold in the PR tier, and only the largest minority groups such as Tatars or Ukrainians offer a potentially cohesive bloc of voters that is large enough to compel a nonethnic party to include members of these groups on their PR lists to capture the “ethnic” vote. One could imagine minorities faring better in plurality elections, given the geographic concentration of certain federal minorities within their designated homelands. However, there were only twenty-four majority-minority districts out of a total of 225 in 1995, and of these only fifteen had a Russian population under 40 percent.26 Despite these demographic obstacles, both the PR and plurality tiers of Russia’s mixed system elected a relatively large percentage of non-Russians to the State Duma. Neither the PR nor the SMD tier overrepresented the majority ethnic group, despite the advantages Russians possessed under both systems. Russians were elected to the legislature in almost identical numbers in both tiers and in nearly equal proportion to their population. However, there were important differences in the overall representation of federal and nonfederal ethnic minorities and the impact of electoral rules on these two categories. Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of individual minority group representation through three avenues: election in the PR tier, election in single member districts in Russian regions, and election in single member districts in ethnic homelands.27

**Cultural Assimilation, Ethnic Mobilization, and Modes of Minority Representation in Russia**  
Several differences in the patterns of representation for nonfederal and federal minorities deserve special attention because they highlight the impact that cultural assimilation and ethnic mobilization have had on minority representation in Russia. First, despite several geographic disadvantages, nonfederal minorities were better represented in the State Duma than their federal counterparts. While nonfederal minorities made up only 32 percent of the minority population in Russia, they constituted 56 percent of the total number of minorities elected to the State Duma from 1993 to 1999.28 Moreover, this overrepresentation was fueled primarily by the success of the most assimilated groups within this category, Ukrainians and Belorussians, who share a common ethnic, religious, and historical background with Russians. These two groups made up 39 percent of the total number of minorities elected to the State Duma from 1993 to 1999, even though they comprised only 13 percent of the non-Russian population. The non-Slavic groups without ethnic homelands (for example, Armenians, Koreans, Germans), which possessed significant ethnic and religious differences from Russians, did not gain the same degree of representation. This subset of the nonfederal category of minority groups gained roughly the same percentage of minority representatives (17 percent) as their share of the minority population (19 percent). This difference is likely due to the fact that candidates with Slavic backgrounds were less distinguishable by name and appearance from Russian candidates than non-Slavic candidates. Essentially, some groups were more easily assimilated and thus probably more attractive to Russian voters.
By contrast, federal minorities, which enjoyed majority status within certain electoral districts in their ethnic homelands, were relatively underrepresented. Even though they comprised 67 percent of the minority population, federal minorities made up only 44 percent of the minorities elected to the State Duma. The implication is clear: the impact of cultural assimilation on minority representation in Russia not only affected the avenue by which minority candidates were elected but also had an impact on the overall success of candidates from certain ethnic groups. Members of more assimilated, nonfederal ethnic groups appear to have done better at the polls than fellow minority candidates from more culturally distinct groups, even though the latter possessed greater resources for electoral mobilization of coethnic voters.

Second, the data in Table 2 strongly suggest that the key to nonfederal minorities' electoral success was support from the majority Russian population. Unlike less assimilated federal minorities, nonfederal minorities gained election in political contexts dominated by Russians. As Table 2 vividly shows, there were dramatic differences in the types of single member districts that elected nonfederal and federal minorities. The more assimilated nonfederal minorities won the vast majority of their seats in regions where Russians were in the majority, whereas the less assimilated federal minorities won virtually all of their SMD seats in non-Russian ethnic homelands.

Jews pose the one exception to the two patterns discussed above because, although they have their own ethnic homeland, Jewish candidates gained representation in contexts associated with the election of nonfederal groups. As shown in Table 2, unlike other federal minorities Jews tended to be overrepresented in the State Duma (given their small numbers), and Jewish candidates gained almost all of their seats in the PR tier and SMD contests in Russian regions. However, this exception actually bolsters the argument. As discussed above, the demographic and cultural profile of Russian Jews is much more similar to nonfederal minorities than to federal ones. Jews tend to be geographically dispersed and highly urbanized and are perhaps the most linguistically assimilated minority in Russia (see Table 1). Thus, in gaining election through venues dominated by the majority population, the experience of this group has simply followed general patterns of minority representation in Russia. This observation also suggests that the impact of ethnic federalism on minority representation is primarily indirect, through its impact on cultural assimilation and geographic concentration. If the existence of an ethnic homeland does not create insulation from cultural assimilation and provide pressure toward geographic concentration, then the minority group with an ethnic homeland will not have electoral experiences typically found among other federal ethnic groups.

**Partisanship, Social Background, and Minority Representation** Finally, one must consider other potential factors that may interact with or supersede ethnicity as a mobilizational resource for candidates. The electoral success of members of certain ethnic groups may be rooted in the relative status such groups occupy in a country's social, political, and economic hierarchy. Perhaps certain minority groups achieved
Table 3 Social and Occupational Background of Non-Russian Duma Deputies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group Category</th>
<th>Election year/tier</th>
<th>Residence in Moscow # (%)</th>
<th>Residence in Russian Region # (%)</th>
<th>Residence in Ethnic Homeland # (%)</th>
<th>National Elite # (%)</th>
<th>Regional Elite # (%)</th>
<th>Econ. Elite # (%)</th>
<th>Other # (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Federal</td>
<td>1993 SMD</td>
<td>2 (13)</td>
<td>13 (81)</td>
<td>1 (6)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>3 (19)</td>
<td>6 (38)</td>
<td>7 (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Federal</td>
<td>1993 PR</td>
<td>16 (73)</td>
<td>5 (23)</td>
<td>1 (5)</td>
<td>3 (14)</td>
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greater or lesser success overall or under particular electoral rules because candidates from these groups possessed other influential social characteristics, such as partisan affiliation, higher education, and positions of power in prestigious national or regional organizations. In particular, members of nonfederal minorities who gained election through greater support from Russian voters may have had electoral advantages as candidates that were unrelated (or at least indirectly related) to their ethnic identities. As Horowitz and others have shown, ethnic groups are often situated hierarchically within the social structure of a society, and thus ethnic cleavages are cumulative rather than competing sources of identity along with other social divisions based on economic prosperity, education, and occupational specialization. In countries with ranked ethnic groups, certain minorities may have advantages over other groups (including the majority), while other groups suffer from chronic economic and social disadvantages.29 Such disparities in economic and social resources and status can be expected to have a direct impact on the ability of members of ethnic minorities to gain legislative representation.

Do members of different ethnic groups who have gained election to the Russian
national legislature display distinct patterns of partisanship and social backgrounds that would suggest that some groups have social advantages over others? Analyses of the partisanship and social background of minority deputies elected in the PR and SMD tiers of Russia's mixed electoral system suggest that these other factors can not account for the differences observed in the modes of representation for federal and nonfederal minorities in Russia.

Deputies from nonfederal and federal minorities did have distinct patterns of partisanship, and affiliation.30 However, these distinctions are better conceived of as effects rather than intervening causes of the way that ethnicity has intersected with electoral politics in Russia. First, in the SMD tier federal minority deputies were much more likely to be independents than nonfederal minority deputies. Over the three elections examined here, there were forty-one independents among deputies belonging to federal minority groups but only nineteen independents among the deputies from nonfederal minorities. It could be argued that this increased partisanship may have played a role in the ability of nonfederal ethnic minorities such as Ukrainians to gain election in Russian-majority districts. However, it is more likely that increased partisanship among more assimilated, nonfederal ethnic groups was an effect of the inherent differences in the electoral context in which SMD candidates from federal and nonfederal ethnic groups found themselves. Since federal minority deputies elected from single member districts tended to gain election in majority-minority districts, ethnicity may have replaced party as a central voting cue. Conversely, nonfederal minority candidates who gained election almost exclusively in Russian-majority districts could not use their ethnicity to mobilize support and thus needed other resources that political parties could provide. Moreover, in the absence of significant ethnic parties, all major parties tended to have a constituency dominated by Russians. It stands to reason that, when nominating minority candidates, such parties would be more likely to nominate members of ethnic minorities deemed closer culturally to the majority population. Indeed, the power of ethnicity as a mobilizing force is made manifest here because federal minorities managed to gain election in significant numbers despite the fact that many ran without party backing.

Other differences in partisanship between nonfederal and federal minority groups can also be derived from the fact that the former are more assimilated than the latter. Nationalist parties elected over twice as many assimilated, nonfederal minorities than members of unassimilated, federal groups for obvious reasons. Conversely, parties with a regionalist platform elected more than twice as many federal minorities as nonfederal minorities because their platform brought greater electoral success in areas (ethnic homelands) that produced these deputies.

Similar conclusions arise from an analysis of the social background of minority deputies offered in Table 3. The most striking feature of the social background of nonfederal and federal minority deputies is the degree of similarity between the two groups. Both categories had similar levels of Moscow-based politicians, as well as members of national, regional, and economic elites. Both categories had a similar proportion of
deputies coming from the “other” group, which included members of professions and occupations such as artists, academics, and low-level bureaucrats that tended to be less prevalent in the national legislature. The key distinction lay in residence in Russian versus non-Russian regions. Members of nonfederal and federal ethnic groups were virtual mirror images of one another in terms of patterns of regional (outside of Moscow) residency patterns. Thus, minority deputies tended to be local rather than national politicians who resided among their constituents. Nonfederal minority deputies’ constituents simply lived in Russian-majority regions, while federal minority deputies’ constituents lived in ethnic homelands.

In short, analyses of levels of partisanship and social background suggest that other factors related to partisanship and social status provide much less explanatory power for the distinct patterns of election of different minority groups than the influence of ethnicity itself and, in particular, the impact of cultural assimilation for one subset of ethnic minority groups and geographic concentration for the other.

Secondary Electoral Rules, Proportional Representation, and Federal Minorities

While federal minorities tended to gain more representation in SMD elections, the difference in the level of representation between the two tiers dropped significantly after the initial postcommunist election in 1993. This change over time was driven by the fact that the number of PR deputies among federal minorities doubled after the initial election in 1993 (see Table 2).

This increase of representation for geographically concentrated minorities in the PR tier is most likely due to an institutional factor: a change in the electoral law instituted after the initial postcommunist election. Beginning with the 1995 election, parties were required to draw up a national list of twelve (later eighteen) candidates, followed by regional sublists established by parties themselves.31 If a party won enough seats to go beyond the national list, the remaining seats were distributed according to the relative proportion of votes won in each region outlined by the party. Regions with the greatest number of votes for a given party were the first to receive parliamentary seats. This change may have provided more opportunities for candidates from geographically concentrated ethnic groups with their own federal units to obtain a winning position on major party lists if support for such parties was more concentrated in non-Russian regions than other parts of the country.

Conclusions

The contours of minority representation in Russia have several important implications for the study of the effects of electoral systems on ethnic representation. First, contrary to conventional wisdom, proportional representation did not display any greater propensity to elect minorities to the national legislature than plurality elections. In every elec-
Second, the Russian experience suggests that there is a complex interaction among assimilation, geographic concentration, and institutions. Minority groups appeared to gain representation at varying levels under PR and SMD rules and in different demographic contexts depending largely on how well assimilated they were with the majority Russian population. Thus, more assimilated, geographically dispersed minorities gained substantial representation (well beyond what could be expected based on their share of the population) in both the PR and SMD tiers of Russia’s mixed system. Given the absence of a critical mass of coethnics, one must assume this electoral success was attained through support from the Russian majority. The reason that proportional representation did not favor the election of these groups was their ability to gain election in a substantial number of Russian-majority single member districts. While many geographically dispersed groups (Jews, Armenians, Germans), followed this pattern, the striking success of the most assimilated Slavic minorities suggests that assimilation is a key factor that needs to be taken into consideration when ascertaining the causes of minority representation.

Conversely, less assimilated, geographically concentrated minorities appeared to gain election much more through the mobilization of coethnics. Thus, these groups gained most of their representation in the SMD tier, predominantly in districts within federally designated ethnic homelands. The reason that the electoral advantages within the SMD tier declined after 1993 was a change in the electoral law. When Russia changed its PR system to include regional sublists in each party list, geographically concentrated ethnic minorities benefited because they represented regional voting blocs and had their own federal entities.

Finally, electoral laws are not the only institutional instruments affecting the electoral mobilization of minorities. In the Russian case, ethnic federalism was the most important institutional factor influencing ethnic representation. The establishment of federal subunits designated as ethnic homelands for certain minorities substantially influenced all other factors that played a role in minority representation. Those groups with their own federal region tended to be less assimilated and more geographically concentrated than their nonfederalized counterparts.

These findings suggest the need for caution when considering the impact of electoral systems in ethnically diverse societies. Proportional representation may not provide ethnic minorities with the avenue to legislative representation its proponents claim, especially in countries that do not have strong ethnically based parties. While the introduction of proportional representation may increase the likelihood that ethnic parties will emerge, it provides no guarantee. Other electoral rules governing party formation and registration will affect this outcome, as will the existence or nonexistence of ethnic groups that are large and cohesive enough to sustain such parties. In Russia, the absence of ethnic parties can be traced to both demographic factors (small minority groups) and actions by the state that legally curtailed party elites from forming ethnic

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parties and campaigning on ethnic themes. In a more permissible legal environment, ethnic parties (for example, a Muslim party) may attain greater influence and thus change the interrelationship between electoral rules and particular ethnic minorities.33

Finally, electoral systems do not affect all minorities in the same way. More assimilated minorities that can attract substantial electoral support from the majority population may not need special institutional mechanisms such as majority-minority single member districts to attain legislative representation, while such institutional devices may be the only way for less assimilated minorities to achieve representation.

NOTES


9. The 2001 federal law On Political Parties explicitly prohibits the formation of political parties on a racial, national, or religious basis (Art. 9, 3) and prohibits parties from using names and symbols that may offend racial, national, or religious feelings (Art. 6, 5 and Art. 7, 3). Moreover, the law requires that political parties have regional branches in over half of Russia’s federal regions (Art. 3, 2), which undermines parties with concentrated geographic support. The 2002 federal law On the Election of Deputies of the State Duma prohibits electoral campaigning and the production of any type of electoral propaganda by charity and religious organizations and organizations founded by them (Art. 57, 5). This same law prohibits electoral campaigning that would violate the integrity of the Russian Federation or excite racial, national, or religious hatred or enmity (Art. 64, 1). Full English-language texts of these laws are available at www.democracy.ru.


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12. Determination of the Israeli parties considered to be ethnic or religious parties was based on descriptions of parties found in Europe World online, www.europaworld.com.
17. Moser, Unexpected Outcomes, ch. 2.
24. Harris, pp. 553, 573.
25. Geographic concentration is measured as the largest share of a single region’s population that is comprised by the group in question.
26. These observations are based on data for the 1995 election from Michael McFaul and Nikolai Petrov, eds., Political Almanac of Russia (Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1998), 668–71.
27. Russian regions are all oblasts and krai, and all have majority-Russian populations. Ethnic homelands are all republics, autonomous oblasts, and the Jewish Autonomous Okrug. Some nonfederal minorities such as Ukrainians gained election in single member districts located in the ethnic homelands of other (federal) minorities.
28. The proportion of the total minority population comprised by federal and nonfederal minorities was calculated by totaling the numbers of all groups within each category found in the dataset and then dividing by the total population of non-Russians. All figures came from the 2002 census.
30. Due to space considerations, a full breakdown of the partisanship of minority deputies is not provided here
but is available upon request from the author.

31. It is important to note that parties used dramatically different boundaries for their regional sublists, often combining several federal units into one regional list. Thus, this reform was not equivalent to the establishment of regional multimember districts.


33. It is unclear whether ethnic parties would have flourished in Russia in the absence of legal limitations. A Muslim social movement called Nur (light in Arabic) was allowed to contest the 1995 election, and a party originally named the Islamic Party of Russia was allowed to register in 2001. The latter changed its name to True Patriots of Russia due to fears of losing its registration before contesting the 2003 election. Nevertheless, this party retained its leadership, organization, and profile, which originated in Dagestan and had definite Islamic roots. Each party won less than 1 percent of the PR vote. As Ware notes in the case of Dagestan, any attempt at a pan-Islamic electoral association would face serious obstacles of internal ethnic differences and competition.

→ Robert Bruce Ware, “Recent Russian Federal Elections in Dagestan: Implications for Proposed Electoral Reform,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 57 (June 2005), 583-600.