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Fit for parliament: a new index of electability, assessing the electoral success of group-based parties

Daniel Bochsler ^a, Bernard Grofman ^b and Miriam Hänni ^c

^aNationalism Studies and Political Science Department, Central European University (CEU), Vienna, Austria; ^bDepartment of Political Science and Center for the Study of Democracy, University of California, Irvine, CA, USA; ^cSwiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, Zollikofen, Switzerland



ABSTRACT


The openness of the political system for the representation of social or economic groups through their parties is mired in complexities. Extant scholarship has identified multiple electoral system hurdles that jointly determine the institutional opportunities for group representation: This article offers a simple metric to the institutional parts of the political opportunity structure for the electoral representation of social groups. A single variable summarizes the institutional opportunities for group representation, as determined jointly by electoral rules, the demographic structure of ethnic minority groups and their electoral geography. This new Index of Electability considers recent innovations in electoral rules, such as mixed electoral systems, legal thresholds or quotas, which occur in most contemporary democracies. Empirically, the index is applied to ethnic minority parties in 57 plural democracies worldwide. It shows that our index highlights the necessary conditions for parliamentary representation of minorities through their own parties. Contrary to widespread belief that many minority groups form ethnic parties, only one out of three ethnic minority groups worldwide which could, in principle, do so, actually form such a party.

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Introduction

Whether social and political minorities are represented in politics is an important issue in the comparative literature on political parties and electoral systems (Amorim Neto and Cox 1997). The representation of social groups in political

CONTACT Daniel Bochsler  bochslerd@ceu.edu  Nationalism Studies and Political Science Department, Central European University (CEU), Quellenstrasse 51, 1100 Vienna, Austria

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institutions can affect a number of economic outcomes (Persson and Tabellini 2003; Jusko 2017), and the likelihood of ethnic conflict (Ishiyama 2009).

Social science research has highlighted the impact of “political opportunity structures” for the mobilization and access of social groups¹ to the political arena. This article scrutinizes the first out of three dimensions of “political opportunity structures”, namely the degree of openness or closure of formal political access to electoral representation of social groups (Kriesi 1989). It translates the argument into a single, theoretically derived variable, as a metric for the openness of institutions for the representation of social groups by their own parties. Much research has relied on ethnic heterogeneity as a proxy, when studying the interplay of social diversity and political institutions. However, most of this research assesses the relevance of social divides indirectly, studying the effect of diversity on the overall proliferation of parties (e.g. Amorim Neto and Cox 1997; Riera 2023), while only few scholars have assessed the direct effect of institutional opportunities on the representation of social groups by their own parties. This research primarily analysed the electoral success of ethnic or regionalist parties (Lublin 2014; Bochsler 2011; Ishiyama and Stewart 2021).

The most important factor affecting the success of a group in gaining electoral representation through a party of its own is usually thought to be the electoral system. Though the common distinction between supposedly inclusive proportional representation (PR) rules and restrictive majoritarian rules (Ruedin 2009; Stockemer and Sundström 2018) needs more nuances to serve as a valid explanation for the representation of groups. First, the effect of electoral rules is mediated by population size and electoral geography (Lublin 2014; Stojanović and Strijbis 2019; Geese and Schacht 2019). Second, countries, which have introduced or reformed their electoral systems after the end of the Cold War, have increasingly resorted to electoral designs which bypass the common distinction between PR and majoritarian rules (Raabe and Linhart 2018). Three elements of electoral rules particularly affect the opportunity of group representation: legal electoral thresholds, operating either at the national or the district level, the move towards mixed electoral systems, and the diffusion of special electoral rules for the representation of ethnic minorities through separate parties (Bochsler 2010a; Bird 2014). Each of these three aspects requires us to move beyond the classical distinction between PR and plurality/majority systems. 42 out of 57 democracies covered in this study apply at least one of these rules.

One possible solution to deal with the complexity of these rules in measures of the institutional opportunity structures is to rely on outcome-based proxy measure, such as disproportionality scores (e.g. Webb, Scarrow, and Poguntke

¹We think of economic groups (e.g., industrial workers or farmers) or identity-based groups (e.g. cultural or ethnic minorities).

2022). This article aims for a general, unified approach of electoral system effects, which is based on institutional rules, rather than their outcomes.

The main contribution of this article is to establish how electoral systems condition the representation of social groups and determine the opportunity of group-based parties to win representation. It establishes generalized indices measuring institutional opportunities of groups to gain their own, party-based representation in parliament. While our new approach takes features of the group population (population size, geography) and institutions into account, it is parsimonious, as it reduces all information to single, continuous measures of electability, and as it requires less fine-grained information than previous approaches, which required detailed population data for every single electoral district for the same purpose. Thereby, the article contributes to the literature on electoral systems and the representation of social groups in three ways. First, the theoretical argument is translated into two new indices: a geography-sensitive version of Rae's threshold of exclusion, and an Index of Electability that assesses the chances of any group of voters to win representation in parliament. Second, it amends these indices in order to cover a comprehensive set of rules that are frequent in contemporary electoral systems, such as legal thresholds, mixed systems, or quota rules. Third, it shows how the study of institutional opportunities for group representation are key to analyse further contextual factors that might affect the formation of group-based parties.

We assess the empirical validity of our indices by analysing the success of ethnic minority parties. We analyse the parliamentary representation of 196 ethnic minority groups worldwide in a dataset with 57 multi-ethnic countries from six continents, all of which qualify as electoral democracies.² The *Index of Electability* identifies institutional opportunities that allow minorities to gain representation through ethnic parties in parliament.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. In section two, building on the Threshold of Exclusion, we introduce our new Index of Electability. In section three, we test the propositions using our new dataset.

Creating an index of electability

There are two main forms of institutional and structural barriers to minority ethnic parties achieving parliamentary representation. On the one hand, the ethnic group may not be large enough to gain representation given the electoral rules in place. On the other hand, even if large enough, in principle, to gain representation, the minority ethnic groups may have its voting strengths so scattered geographically that there is not even a single district

²Polity IV score of 6 or higher in the period 1990–2013 (countries/elections listed in [appendix A](#)), plus Bosnia and Herzegovina whose Polity coding is missing, due to ongoing international intervention. All countries covered have politically relevant ethnic groups.

where they satisfy the threshold condition of the *Index of Electability* we specify below. In this section we begin with a discussion of group size effects and then move to a discussion of geographic concentration effects.

Taking group size into account

To understand the basic effects of electoral rules we characterize electoral rules by their *Threshold of Exclusion* (T_D). For any electoral rule, the value of T_D is the maximum size a group can be without gaining representation even when all members vote for a single party or candidate (Rae, Hanby, and Loosemore 1971). There is a widespread understanding that proportional representation facilitates representation for social or political minorities, because it is associated with a lower threshold of exclusion than the plurality or majority vote. It is a direct transformation of district magnitude. The threshold of exclusion has been calculated for most simple electoral systems (Lijphart and Gibberd, 1977; Grofman, Feld and Fraenkel, 2017).

While the threshold of exclusion applies to the district level, the main interest in the literature on group representation is the inclusion at the national level. This is where group representation matters, inter alia for public policies, policy responsiveness, political economy or political violence (Jurado and León 2019, 86–87; Hänni 2017). In order to analyse the consequences of district-level institutions at the country level, we need to take electoral geography, and the interplay of geographic settlement patterns of the group's members and the geography of electoral districts into account (Pattie and Johnston 2009; Moser 2005; Bochsler 2011; André and Depauw 2018). In an attempt to do so, Lublin's (2014) index of "electorally relevant ethnic groups" counts for multi-ethnic countries the number of groups that can win parliamentary representation in the electoral districts where they reside.³

Taking geography and group size into account

In this section, we propose two universal measures to assess the institutional hurdles to win representation in parliament, for concentrated and for dispersed electorates. In this manner we extend Rae's Threshold of Exclusion, to cover a variety of rules that are frequent in contemporary electoral systems. In a second step, this extension allows us to calculate the new index of electability, a parsimonious and continuous measure for the institutional opportunities of social groups to win representation by political parties in parliament: the index depends on only three factors – the group population size, the electoral rule (district magnitude and the electoral

³Lublin therefore maps, country-by-country, and district-by-district, the distribution of ethnic identities. He calculates, for each district, the share of the minority population, assessing their chances to get access to office (see [appendix C4](#) for a conceptual and empirical comparison).

formula), and electoral geography. With a few simplifying assumptions (no systematic differences in suffrage rates or turnout between groups, no systematic district malapportionment affecting the representation of the group, but see discussion below), we can precisely define the conditions under which a group party might be successful and translate this into our index of electability. In a nutshell, a group can gain representation if its population is sizeable enough to pass the threshold of exclusion. Which of the two versions of the thresholds applies depends on the group's geography.

Parties gaining support *from dispersed groups* have an (approximately) even vote potential in any electoral district across the country, corresponding to the group's share of the national population. The remaining calculation is straightforward: For dispersed groups, and if district magnitude is equal across the country, the national-level threshold T_{NG} is identical to the threshold of exclusion at the level of districts T_D , a function of district magnitude m , $T_{NG} = T_D = 1/m + 1$.⁴ For elections under plurality or majority rules, irrespective of district magnitude, we set $T_D = 1/2$.

For groups with a territorially concentrated population, however, both the population size and its geographic distribution matter. Under a simplified, binary distinction of population geographies, we define groups as territorial if most of their members live in a region or locality where they numerically dominate. (In [appendix B3](#), we extend this to a more general discussion of geography.) The group's population size needs to surpass the threshold of exclusion at the district-level T_D in order to win a mandate. We convert it into the (national level) threshold of exclusion for concentrated groups T_G under the assumption of proportional seat apportionments.⁵ $T_G = T_D \cdot (m/S) = (1/(m+1)) \cdot (m/S)$. For instance, in Macedonia's 20-seat PR districts, a vote share of 4.8% secures a seat in parliament. A regional group, counting 4.8% of the electorate of any of the six districts, can win a seat. This corresponds to 0.8% of the national electorate. For plurality/majority vote systems, the national-level threshold for concentrated groups amounts to $T_G = (m/2 \cdot S)$.

However, knowing the electoral rule and m and S , and thus knowing T_{NG} and T_G in population size terms, is not sufficient to give us the preconditions for party success. The effect of electoral rules on any party is obviously affected by the size of the party's potential electorate, which we denote g . But how can we best combine information about the party supporters, the nature of the electoral rule in use, and the size of the legislature? In our view it makes most sense to treat these three variables jointly, as their

⁴For example, in a district electing three representatives under the D'Hondt form of list proportional representation, a group that constituted 25% of the district electorate could guarantee capturing at least one of the seats if all its members voted cohesively for a single candidate or party.

⁵The number of district seats m , in relation to the size of parliament S , is proportional to the ratio of the district versus the total national electorate (pop_D, pop_N), $pop_D/pop_N = m/S$.

relevance in affecting the chances for ethnic parties to be represented in parliament, is the result of an interaction of the three. Considering the discussion above, Equations (1a, 1b) below are a first approximation of a necessary condition for a group to gain electoral representation.

For parties with a geographically concentrated social support basis, we calculate the index of electability E as the quotient of group size and the threshold, i.e. $E = (g/T_G)$. Parties relying on the votes of the respective group are electable for quotients E above 1 and have no chances of winning representation in parliament if the quotient E is below 1.

$$E = \frac{g}{T_G} = \frac{g}{(1/(m+1)) \cdot (m/S)} \quad (1a)$$

For parties with a dispersed support basis, we rely on the threshold of exclusion for dispersed electorates:

$$E = \frac{g}{T_{NG}} = \frac{g}{1/(m+1)} \quad (1b)$$

The threshold changes only marginally if we consider that district magnitude within a country can be unequal (Kedar, Harsgor, and Tuttnauer 2021). Provided that seats are allocated to districts in proportion to their number of voters, the institutional hurdle to gain representation may be up to twice as high for groups living in single-seat districts than for groups living in very large electoral districts (see [appendix B3](#)). Thus, an index that is based on the average district magnitude might in some special cases deviate from the more sophisticated solution by a factor of less than 1.5. This potential effect is much smaller than any of the variables that vary between countries, and therefore, average district magnitude is a reasonable approximation, except for cases of malapportionment.

This group size-threshold ratio ($E \geq 1$) constitutes a necessary condition for the successful representation of a group of voters by their own party; it, therefore, serves as the basis for our Index of Electability. An index value slightly above 1 will only allow for the success of a minority party if a group's voters cohesively vote for a group-specific party. Deviations from cohesive voting or any of the assumptions (e.g. differences in turnout or suffrage rates, or malapportionment) might curtail the possibility of groups with an index value of 1 to win representation. However, substantially higher index values allow disunited groups, or those with lower turnout, to be represented by group-specific parties, e.g. an index value of 2 allows for group representation even if a group is split into two parties of equal size, or for dispersed groups whose turnout rates are half that of the average electorate. The index also plays a critical role for the degree of representation: only once it is above 1 does group size affect the degree of representation.

Calculating the threshold of exclusion in the light of special electoral features

In the previous steps, we have established our theoretical core model. It approximates the threshold of exclusion for simple PR rules and for plurality and majority systems. However, democratic electoral systems, including 42 out of 57 democracies covered in this study, increasingly use elements that complicate the simple relationship between district magnitude and electoral success, often several in combination: 32 countries use legal electoral thresholds (Renwick 2010; Bol, Pilet, and Riera 2015), 27 cases have applied or still apply mixed electoral systems (Shugart 2001) and 11 countries apply special rules for the representation of minority groups⁶ (Htun 2004; Bochslers 2010a; Bird 2014), such as party bans or quota rules (see next subsection).

In this section, we identify how we modify the *threshold of exclusion* to deal with the first two of these complications, and we also consider thresholds for some other distinctive electoral rules such as *limited voting* and *plurality bloc voting*. We discuss quota rules and related topics in the next section.

We first deal with legal electoral thresholds. Legal thresholds establish a certain minimum vote share for a party to be eligible for any legislative representation. Thirty of the countries in our data have national level legal thresholds (e.g. New Zealand, Serbia) and three have district level legal thresholds (Albania [2009-], Belgium and Spain). The two types of legal threshold differ in how they achieve their effects, but both exclude small groups of voters from parliamentary representation. National legal thresholds T_L are a particularly high hurdle for parties with a regional electorate, because they do not take into account that these parties may be very strong in their respective stronghold (Bochsler 2010b) but not that strong elsewhere.

When we have a threshold of exclusion operating in the usual way at the district level *and* a national threshold, T_L , again whichever of these is higher can be regarded as the most binding. For *concentrated electorates*, an election with 4 electoral districts of 4 seats each corresponds to a 5% threshold of exclusion nationally. Thus, a 5% legal national threshold will be more binding for any districts with more than 4 seats. For dispersed electorates, a 5% legal threshold at the national level will be more binding than PR electoral districts with a district magnitude above 19.

District-level legal thresholds, T_{LD} , set for every district a minimal vote share required to win seats in parliament. This makes them directly comparable to the *threshold of exclusion* at the district level. They are less restrictive for concentrated electorates than national thresholds. We make the analogous calculation as above and compare them at the level of districts to the district-level thresholds of exclusion (see [Appendix B2](#)).

⁶These numbers add up to more than 57 since some countries make use of more than one of these practices.

A second complication concerns mixed electoral systems. A growing number of democracies use multi-tier electoral systems which are either mixed electoral systems, or multi-tier PR systems. There are two approaches to deal with them: there are applications for which it is particularly advisable to analyse both tiers separately, because of the different implications that they might have for representation (e.g. Lublin 2014). For instance, the behaviour of members of parliament might be shaped by the mode how they got elected. For many other research questions, an integrated approach and a single score are needed, to capture the institutional opportunity structure offered by the electoral system in its entirety. This ranges from comparative analyses of institutional determinants of political outcomes (e.g. economic outcomes, political stability, social movements, cf. (Persson and Tabellini 2003; Jusko 2017; Ishiyama 2009)) to studies on the formation of party systems, and the impact of institutional constraints. An integrated approach also mirrors the considerations by lawmakers who design mixed electoral systems with the idea that one tier compensates for the weaknesses of the other tier, and it mirrors parties' strategic decisions to run either in both tiers, or not at all (e.g. Herron and Nishikawa 2001). Thus, our single index shall measure the overall degree of opportunities for representation, based on all tiers. Therefore, we follow a *lowest threshold logic* (similar to Milesi-Ferretti, Perotti, and Rostagno 2002).

The functioning of this *lowest threshold logic* can be best illustrated with the example of Lithuania's ethnic minorities. The country's parliament counts 71 MPs elected from single-seat districts, by a two-round majoritarian vote. 70 seats are allocated by PR in a single nationwide district to parties gaining more than 5% of the national vote. The Polish minority counts 6.8% of the population and is concentrated in a few districts. The Polish minority party kept running in both tiers, even though in most elections, it does only win seats in the district tier, because the 5% threshold, introduced in 1996, excludes it *de facto* from the allocation of seats in the upper tier. The more dispersed Eastern Slav minorities count jointly 7.6% of the population. While they have no majority of votes in any of the districts, a party gaining two-thirds of the Eastern Slavs' PR votes might enter parliament through the upper tier. Thus, each of the two minorities might be successful in one of the tiers but fail in the other one. We calculate the threshold of exclusion separately for each tier, allowing district magnitude to vary by tier, but for the overall index, the lower of the two values constitutes an *a priori* necessary condition for representation.

Because we are interested only in necessary conditions for minimal representation, the *lowest threshold logic* approach allows us to abstract from a variety of specific features of mixed systems such as the relative size of the two tiers, and whether or not there is linkage across tiers (Moser and Scheiner 2012). Also since we are interested in *a priori* necessary conditions

we can neglect considerations such as the possibility of non-Duvergerian equilibria (Cox 1997) that would allow parties to win with lower values than T_E because of a consistent proliferation of parties with little chance of victory.

Quota rules, reserved seats, party bans

Some social groups are subject to quota rules or reserved seats, while in other countries, specific categories of parties, e.g. religious, ethnic or regional parties are banned altogether (Bogaards, Basedau, and Hartmann 2010). These rules directly influence the opportunities of social groups to gain representation through parties.

For the formation of group-based parties, quotas or reserved seats may work similarly to (non-territorial) quasi-districts. This is the case when candidates or party lists running for quota seats are elected on a separate ballot, which is only available to voters registered as members of a particular group, or when they are elected from a general ballot, but a number of seats are reserved for group-based parties or lists. In these cases, we denominate the number of quota seats as an equivalent to district magnitude, m_Q , whereas the electorate of these quasi-districts consists entirely of the respective social group, and we calculate our index for the quota or reserved seats, E_Q :

$$E_Q = \frac{g}{T_D} = \frac{1}{1/(m_Q + 1)} = m_Q + 1 \quad (2)$$

When bans apply for specific group-based parties, the Index of Electability amounts to $E = 0$.

The main difference between two identical index-values for systems with and without quota rules is the role of unequal turnout across groups or the degree of unity in voting: in elections with quotas for group-based parties, party representation is not affected by these two factors, and in elections with reserved seats, unequal turnout does not matter. We discuss these special rules and the application to our index in more depth in [appendix D](#).

Empirical analyses

This section applies our Index of Electability to ethnic minority parties, analysing the success of parties representing ethnic minorities in parliament across 57 heterogeneous democracies on six continents, and for the period of 1990 to 2013. Ethnic minorities are one of the many types of social and economic groups to which our Index of Electability may be applied. They offer variance on all relevant variables which matter for the examination of our index – relative population size, geographic settlement patterns, and all facets of

electoral rules relevant for group representation and used in contemporary democracies.⁷ Data on the population of ethnic groups is available and comparable across many countries. We collected new data on ethnic political parties and electoral systems.

After offering some information on our dataset, and mapping the success of ethnic minority parties in gaining representation in parliament under different electoral rules, we estimate the effect of the Index of Electability on ethnic party success: we analyse the success of ethnic minority parties in gaining seats in parliament, and show that most of the ethnic groups that could, in principle, succeed in creating a successful ethnic party never actually do so. We distinguish *representation opportunities* and *realization rates* and compare them across world regions.

Data

Our new dataset offers information on ethnic political parties and electoral systems. Our units of analysis are ethnic groups. We rely on a list of groups worldwide as identified by the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset (Vogt et al. 2015). They define ethnicity based on the group members' "believe in shared cultural features and shared descent". To identify these groups, they asked regional experts to list the "ethnic categories most salient for national politics". Still, most of the groups in the EPR data set have no political party associated with them. Going beyond earlier work limited to particular countries or ethnicities (Chandra 2005; Dancygier 2014), or work which has a regional focus (e.g. Mozaffar, Scarritt, and Galaich 2003; Birnir 2007; Bochsler 2011), we look at 196 ethnic minority groups worldwide.⁸ The dataset assembles information on ethnic groups and group representation over several election periods, spanning up to 25 years for each country (see online appendix). We have cross-validated our Index of Electability with the most similar available measure, the Electorally Relevant Ethno-regional Groups (EREG) index by Lublin (2017), and for this purpose aggregated our data in a score, analogous to EREG, at the country level. Once we eliminate countries for which we consider an entirely different set of groups from the basis of comparison, we find a large agreement between the two aggregated scores ($r = 0.87$, see appendix C4).

To assess the explanatory power of our index, we have coded the success of ethnic parties in winning representation in national parliaments, for the

⁷The argument could be extended to other parties with clearly determined social constituencies, as illustrated by Siegfried's (1930, 162–164) studies of industrial strongholds and working class parties in France. Political economists analyse class representation (Jusko 2017).

⁸The only other equally broad data set measuring representation of ethnic groups (Ruedin 2009) does not distinguish between representation gained via ethnic parties and representation gained via non-ethnic parties.

said sample. For a political party to be considered as ethnic, it must make a claim to represent a particular ethnic group. In specific cases, parties with roots as ethnic movements aim to widen their electorate. For the classification, we rely on Zuber's (2013) conceptualization, considering non-ethnic claims as instances of "lateral bidding", and the requirement to be considered an ethnic party is that they uphold their appeal to their core ethnic electorate. Our data builds on literature published by regional experts and direct party sources for this classification (see [appendix A1](#)). We identified rare cases of ethnic parties mobilizing voters across several ethnic minority groups with a joint political agenda (Chandra 2011, 155–157; see also Posner 2004). There are strategies to circumvent institutional hurdles and win parliamentary representation where the electoral system would not allow for. One such strategy is the formation of electoral alliances with other (non-ethnic) parties. Our dependent variable captures ethnic parties that were elected with separate lists, whereas we do not count ethnic parties that won seats as allies to non-ethnic parties, running on joint electoral lists.⁹ Parties of ethnic majorities, or the largest ethnic group in a given country, are not considered. The analysis is limited to ethnic minorities.

The data is structured at the level of ethnic groups and elections. It has been complemented by the seats won by ethnic parties, data on electoral rules – including data on special provisions for the representation of specific ethnic groups in parliament (sources listed in [appendix A1](#)) – and information on the size and geographic concentration of ethnic groups (collected by EPR). Some descriptives of our data set are shown in [Table 1](#). It should be noted that in 88 of the 1131 cases (groups per election) in our dataset some types of quotas for the representation of ethnic parties exist. These are found in 11 countries. Two countries (Albania and Bulgaria) ban some parties running under an ethnic label and are therefore excluded from the main analysis.¹⁰

Electoral success for ethnic parties as a function of the index of electability

In this section, we examine the success of ethnic minorities in gaining seats in national parliaments via one or more political parties representing that ethnic group. We draw on our *Index of Electability* and find strong support for our geographic-institutional model. We report results only for those 1009 cases (ethnic minorities by election year) that are not privileged by some type of

⁹This operationalization is consistent with our interest for institutional opportunities for party representation.

¹⁰These bans are applying very selectively, so that in each country the minority with the largest population size (Greeks in Albania, Turks in Bulgaria) has been represented by its own parties throughout the history of democratic elections (Bochsler 2010a).

Table 1. Ethnic minorities and ethnic party representation.

Ethnic minorities by elections	Territorial ethnic minority groups		All ethnic minority groups		Ethnic minorities >5%	
	Ethnic party in parliament	N	Ethnic party in parliament	N	Ethnic party in parliament	N
no special rules such as quotas, reserved seats or bans	161 (24%)	658	168 (17%)	1009	102 (29%)	356
groups with special rules such as quotas, reserved seats or bans	44 (66%)	67	61 (50%)	122	28 (54%)	52
all groups (including reserved seats)	205 (28%)	725	229 (20%)	1131	130 (32%)	408

Note: Units of analysis: ethnic minority groups by election.

Table 2. Index of electability and ethnic party representation.

		Territorial groups			Dispersed groups			
		Represented in parliament with own party			Represented in parliament with own party			
Index of electability	prob.	No	yes	N	prob.	no	Yes	N
<1	0.10	71	8	79	0.01	270	2	272
1 to 2	0.00	57	0	57	0.00	20	0	18
2 to 10	0.23	181	54	235	0.09	48	5	53
>10	0.34	188	99	287	0.00	8	0	8
Total	0.24	497	161	658	0.02	344	7	351

Note: Units of analysis: ethnic minority groups by election. Analysis excludes groups which profit from electoral quotas.

special quota rule. We offer an extension to elections with special rules for ethnic minority parties, such as quotas, in [appendix D](#). These 1009 cases with no quota stem from 170 ethnic groups in 51 countries, with an average of six elections for each group.

Table 2 examines the success of ethnic parties in gaining representation in parliament as the *Index of Electability* increases. It distinguishes between territorial groups (left column) and non-territorial groups (right column), using the dichotomous coding of the EPR dataset. This analysis shows that there are two nearly universal conditions for the parliamentary representation of an ethnic minority party: First, apart from a handful of exceptions, only parties running on behalf of groups with a high index value win seats in parliament. While our theoretical model established that a minimum score of 1 is needed for parliamentary representation, for reasons given earlier the actual cut-off point is higher; empirically, it is around 2.

Second, parliamentary representation of minority parties is much more common among territorially concentrated groups than among dispersed groups. Remarkably, this is not an effect of the easier access due to territorial

electoral districts: it even holds when we control for the differential effect of thresholds, and might be related to non-institutional factors, such as group cohesion, identity, or territorial politics. Nevertheless, only one in four territorial minorities above the theoretical/empirical cut-off point wins parliamentary representation by its own party,¹¹ while only one in 16 dispersed groups above the threshold is represented by its own party. Our Index of Electability constitutes a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a successful ethnic minority party.

In rare cases, also minority groups with an index value below 1 can win representation with an own party. Our formalized model allows us to reassess the deviating cases in light of our assumptions. The analysis of outliers, reported in more detail in [appendix C3](#), shows that the deviations are a consequence of within-country differences in the district design: the single-seat districts in the Aosta Valley of Italy, and a very fractionalized competition in Macedonia, whereas the party of Hungarians in Czechoslovakia was successful due to an unusual threshold rule not accounted for in our model.

On the other side of the coin, it also turns out that many groups with an index value between 1 and 2 do not have parties. This can happen if a group with an index value just above 1 does not vote as a uniform block of voters.

Multivariate models

The previous analysis has demonstrated that our index comes close to a necessary condition for the success of ethnic minority parties in gaining seats in parliament. Multivariate models allow us to test whether all three elements of the index (population size, territorial concentration, electoral rules) contribute to the explanation, whether our index empirically improves over earlier models, and to complement the explanation with other factors contributing to the emergence of ethnic minority parties.

[Table 3](#) provides the results of our Index in two versions, as well as of the modified threshold of exclusion. The models testing our index consist of a single variable for the index of electability, which we test in two versions, as well as control variables for the relative group population size (which we also include in the classical institutional and in the geographic interaction model), and for the geography. Models 4–7 include a series of covariates, which are potentially related to the formation of ethnic parties. The first version of our index is naïve with regards to geography and applies the same equation (for concentrated groups) to all cases; the second one distinguishes concentrated and dispersed groups. The first two specifications

¹¹They win, on average, a seat share in parliament corresponding to a fourth of their share of the population.

Table 3. Explaining the representation of minority parties in parliament, logit analysis.

	INDEX OF ELECTABILITY MODELS					THRESHOLD MODELS	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Group population	3.495 (2.168)	3.161 (2.167)	1.854 (2.290)	0.874 (3.523)	0.79 (3.611)	5.107(*) (2.956)	6.155* (2.825)
Territorial conc. (bin)	2.775** (0.613)	1.931** (0.682)	1.447** (0.509)	2.077** (0.621)	2.008** (0.574)	2.738** (0.452)	2.693** (0.461)
INDEX OF ELECTABILITY							
Index of E. (non-aware of geog.), log	0.262(*) (0.155)						
Index of Elect. (geog.-aware), log		0.310* (0.154)	0.308* (0.130)	0.495* (0.195)	0.513* (0.214)		
Threshold of excl. (log, dispersed)						-0.218 (0.258)	
Threshold of excl. (log, geo.)							-0.921* (0.405)
Quota rules (bin)			2.150** (0.786)	2.017** (0.629)	1.160* (0.469)	2.590** (0.645)	3.053** (0.693)
Party-based quota (bin)					3.295** (0.863)		
Ethnic party ban (bin)			1.683** (0.327)	0.863(*) (0.486)	0.972(*) (0.553)	1.059* (0.435)	1.293(*) (0.678)
CONTROLS							
Region: Latin America				-4.366** (0.858)	-4.154** (0.781)	-4.083** (0.950)	-4.988** (1.148)
Region: Middle East North Afr.				-1.679 (1.720)	-1.565 (1.388)	-1.82 (1.496)	-1.791 (1.805)
Region: Sub-Saharan Africa				-2.752** (0.507)	-2.789** (0.501)	-2.075** (0.557)	-2.433** (0.499)
Region: W. Eur, N. Am, Oceania				-0.24 (0.572)	-0.326 (0.575)	0.614 (0.560)	-0.211 (0.629)
Region: Asia				-2.303** (0.652)	-2.257** (0.616)	-0.895 (0.814)	-2.007** (0.657)

Ethn. polarization (Reynal-Querol)				−0.265 (1.168)	−0.11 (1.201)	0.152 (1.228)	−0.029 (1.236)
Group: Roma				0.713 (0.611)			
Constant	−4.741** (0.678)	−3.983** (0.570)	−3.413** (0.470)	−3.061** (0.785)	−3.081** (0.747)	−3.324** (0.940)	−2.763** (0.751)
N	1009	1009	1131	1131	1131	1131	1131
LL	−374.36	−371.29	−452.95	−360.53	−346.91	−380.41	−372.29
AIC	756.71	750.58	917.91	745.05	717.82	782.81	766.59
BIC	776.38	770.25	948.09	805.42	778.19	838.15	821.93

Cases clustered at the level of countries. Reference category for regional variables Central & Eastern Europe + Former Soviet Union. For identical samples, higher Log-likelihood (LL) scores and lower AIC and BIC scores denominate a better model fit.

rely on the same sample as Table 2, whereas all other specifications also include countries with quota-based rules and ethnic party bans (see appendix D), and specific binary variables controlling for these. Specifications 6 and 7 test the modified threshold of exclusion.

Our Index of Electability, jointly with the territorial concentration of a group, has a clear and statistically significant effect on the likelihood of group representation. The geography-informed version of the index (model 2) improves over the geography-unaware version (model 1). The effect of group population size shrinks, both in its magnitude and its statistical significance, as we add more control variables to the specifications, and as we extend it to countries with special electoral rules. Our index considers the opportunities that quotas offer for minority representation, and still, we find that quota rules and special seats for ethnic minorities increase the likelihood of the formation of ethnic minority parties. The effect of a quota rule is in the same range of magnitude as the effect of geographic concentration, i.e. there is a genuine advantage for the representation of ethnic minority parties if their groups vote in minority-only territorial districts (for concentrated groups) or under a quota rule. Models distinguishing between reserved seats and party-based quota rules¹² corroborate our previous observation that the latter (evidently) have much stronger effects.

Models 4–7 include a set of further covariates that contribute to the explanation why some ethnic groups form parties, and others not, namely the world regions, the Reynal-Querol index of ethnic polarization (Reynal-Querol 2002; Stoll 2008), and a binary variable identifying Roma minorities. Some of these factors have been theorized in the literature, e.g. Roma groups are often considered as lacking the capacity to mobilize united support from their communities (Barany 2001). The results of our main variables remain stable.

The Index of Electability is, however, also well-suited to distinguish the effects of the institutional thresholds that parties face in elections from further factors that are decisive for the realization of these representation opportunities. In particular, once taking into consideration the *representation opportunities*, we find large differences in the representation through ethnic parties between the worlds' regions.

More specifically, in the presence of group-related quotas in parliament, territorial groups are represented in 60 out of 100 cases by their parties, and dispersed groups in 50 out of 100 cases. This is more than twice and more than eight times more often than for groups with no quotas. Further, our index allows us to calculate *realization rates* for ethnic groups across the world's regions to form parties and enter parliament, after controlling

¹²The variable perfectly predicts a positive outcome and is therefore incompatible with logit estimations. In order to estimate the effect, we add a small random component to the binary variable.

for the institutional differences. In Central and Eastern Europe, 58% of the territorial groups are represented, in Western Europe and North America, 51%, in the MENA region 28%, and in Asia 17%. The literature assigns these regional differences in the degree and shape of ethnic mobilization to different historical trajectories (e.g. Snyder 2000; Vogt 2019). To empirically study the effect of historical trajectories on group representation and compare results across regions requires a more comprehensive sample and an extension of the concept of institutional opportunities for group representation to hybrid regimes. For instance, our sample (with a cut-off point of Polity IV at 6) includes South Africa as the only country in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Our Index offers a methodological basis for comparative studies of ethnic party success. The coefficients reported for our index are robust to the inclusion of covariates. How does our model perform compared to alternative explanations? In [appendix C2](#), we compare the explanatory power of our Index of Electability to other prominent approaches explaining the entry of political parties in national parliaments, such as district magnitude (Rae, Hanby, and Loosemore 1971), legal thresholds (Lijphart 1994, 29), and electoral geography (Mozaffar, Scarritt, and Galaich 2003). Our Index of Electability relies on the same information as the geographic model but improves empirical fit because it combines information on demography and institutions in a theoretically meaningful way.

Discussion

This paper introduces a new approach to investigate the institutional hurdles to the representation of social groups in parliament. Theoretically, it relies on the classic *Threshold of Exclusion* (Rae, Hanby, and Loosemore 1971), but first, adjusts it to the increasing complexity of electoral systems in contemporary use. Complex elements of electoral systems, such as legal thresholds, mixed electoral rules, or group-based quota rules used to be rare, but now are present in 42 of 57 democracies analysed in this paper. Second, the paper introduces three new indicators for the institutional opportunity structure: a modified version of the threshold of exclusion for territorial and for dispersed electorates, respectively, as well as the Index of Electability, to assess whether a social group is strong enough on its own to win parliamentary representation.

Empirically, it evaluates the new Index of Electability by studying the formation and parliamentary representation of ethnic minority parties. For territorial groups, the institutional hurdles to access parliament are often considerably lower than for dispersed groups. This relates to the second contribution of this paper. For all practical purposes, in the absence of an ethnic party quota or some other form of special treatment for an ethnic group, only geographically concentrated ethnic minority groups have any plausible

chance of gaining representation via the ethnic party route, even in electoral systems where this is easy.

The new Index of Electability offers a powerful tool to study group representation. In our empirical tests, it improves over previous approaches, and in particular over Rae's threshold of exclusion. While classical approaches, based on Rae's threshold of exclusion or district magnitude remain relevant in their respective fields of application, our analysis shows that for social groups with varying population sizes and geographies, a group-specific measure is more pertinent in assessing the institutional opportunities of group-based parties.

The article does not resolve the puzzle which identities are politicized and become subject to party representation. In our empirical sample – pertaining to ethnic identities –, two out of three groups who might gain representation in parliament do not form their own parties. However, our index could also be applied to any other type of identities and social groups. Our approach facilitates distinguishing between dimensions of identities and groups that fail to become manifest in the electoral arena because of institutional factors, from other, non-institutional factors that account for the formation or the failure of group-based parties when there is, in principle, clear potential for their representation. In particular, when two groups have a positive Index of Electability (≥ 1), but their members overlap, their parties compete for the same voters (Howe, Szöcsik, and Zuber 2022). Thus, in countries with multiple overlapping social divides (e.g. economic, religious, linguistic), not all divides and not all groups with institutional opportunities for representation will have their own parties (cf. Stoll 2013). The Index of Electability offers a new, parsimonious solution to identify the institutional opportunity structures for party representation.

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ORCID

Daniel Bochsler  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6423-5560>

Bernard Grofman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2801-3351>

Miriam Hänni  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8540-4044>

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