



Are Ethnic Minorities a Barrier to Democratization?

A Comparative Study of Two Countries

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Abstract

The presence of numerically significant ethnic minorities often presents a challenge to democratization, since political actors in transitional societies may engage in ethnic mobilization in the absence of deeply entrenched political cleavages. The present study compares the views of ethnic majority and minority groups on attitudes toward democracy, civic participation and institutional trust at the individual level. We select the cases of Malaysia and Moldova, two countries rated as 'partly free' by Freedom House, contain sizeable minorities, and have a history of violent ethnic clashes, and focus specifically on Chinese- and Russian-speaking minorities. Results of our empirical analysis do not show consistent trends on trust in state institutions and patterns of political participation, but reveal that minorities have a significantly less favourable view of non-democratic regime types. This implies that, rather than identifying the presence of significant minority populations as a hindrance to peaceful transitions, such minorities can play a supportive role in democratization.

Keywords: Ethnic Minority, Democratic Support

Introduction

Many studies have noted that ethnic divisions constitute a significant impediment to democratic transition and consolidation (Diamond and Plattner, 1994; Lipset, 1994). Stepan argues that 'nation-state' and 'democracy' often present competing, sometimes even mutually destructive, logics (1994, p. 127), and a few scholars go further to assert that divided societies cannot develop as stable democracies (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972). Issue and party preferences can change, so that citizens who are in a minority today may join the majority tomorrow. By contrast, ethnicity is stable and mutually exclusive. In the absence of major boundary or demographic shifts, ethnic minorities are more likely to be 'losers' in political competition. Since the survival of democracy depend in part on losers' consent, minority views warrant close examination.

A long line of literature has emphasized the importance of public attitudes toward the regime, beginning with Easton's (1965) proposition of diffuse regime support. In the case of democracies, this refers to adherence to democratic principles regardless of which specific political actors are in power. While most comparative studies on democratic values treat whole countries as basic units of analysis, the present study concentrates what Almond and Verba (1963) label 'subcultures' found among different ethnic groups to investigate whether and how attitudes toward democratic principles as well as patterns of political activism differ between majority and minority ethnicities.

To investigate these factors, we choose to examine ethnic minorities in Malaysia and Moldova, two countries that have seen electoral contestation but are not deemed fully democratic, as indicated by their 'partly free' rating according to Freedom House. Parallels between these two minorities include a significant numerical presence, enjoyment of superior political and/or economic status, and the fact that ethnic relations had triggered violence in the past. Ethnic relations remain highly politically salient today, as evidenced by the long-ruling Barisan



Nasional often appealing to voters as the defender of Malay rights, and the interpretation of all election results in Moldova in terms of gains or losses for the pro-Russian side. Furthermore, the two minorities share the common characteristic of having ethnic 'homelands' which are significant global powers, namely China and Russia.

The paper is organized as follows: the next two sections review the literature on ethnic relations in the context of democratizing societies and propositions on democratic support, followed by brief backgrounds on the two cases. Section five describes the data, section six presents and analyzes empirical results on attitudes toward democracy and political engagement, and the last section summarizes the findings and concludes.

Democratization in Ethnically Divided Societies

Divided societies are defined as those where 'ascriptive ties generate an antagonistic segmentation of society, based on terminal identities with high political salience, sustained over a substantial period of time and a wide variety of issues' (Lustick, 1979, p. 325), and where membership in different societal groups remains distinct and fixed. Democratization in divided societies does not necessarily aggravate relations between ethnic groups; under certain circumstances 'the democratization process provides a window of opportunity to allay potential ethnic problems' (de Nevers, 1993, p. 31), if the new regime manages to accommodate the interests of different groups in a manner perceived as fair. Nonetheless, the risk of ethnic conflict is inherently higher in divided societies than in more homogenous ones.

A sizeable literature exists on ethnic conflicts. Compared with authoritarian regimes able to forcibly suppress such conflicts, and democratic governments which can employ institutional mechanisms to contain them, countries which are neither fully authoritarian nor democratically consolidated are likely to be more vulnerable. Opening up a previously restricted political system in a multi-ethnic polity permits political actors to seize 'an explosion of new opportunities to mobilize for power on an ethnic basis' (Cohen, 1997, p. 609). Given the former regime's efforts at muzzling social cleavages, unfamiliarity with democratic rules of the game, and inchoate parties without deep societal roots, political entrepreneurs may find that an easy route to power lies in arousing or reinforcing ethnic identities, resulting in a process of 'ethnic outbidding' (Horowitz, 1985; Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972).

This is related to what scholars have labeled societal or ethnic security dilemma, referring to competition between ethnic groups when one side takes measures to bolster its power and resources when feeling threatened by another, which in turn provokes equal or greater reactions (Posen, 1993). This phenomenon is more frequently found under democratic than in authoritarian countries, since in democratic elections politicians may inflame or exacerbate feelings on ethnic insecurity in their attempts to garner votes. While not unprecedented in countries with a long history of democracy, transitional societies are more vulnerable.

In the context of regime transition, ethnic identity in divided societies is likely to be a highly salient part of citizens' experiences and cultural commitments. Religious and linguistic divisions can also play prominent roles in new democracies – and these cleavages more often than not reinforce rather than cross-cut ethnic ones. Ethnicity constitutes a more deeply entrenched cleavage than others, as mobility from one ethnic group to another is much more difficult than, for example, class or regional mobility (see Horowitz, 1985).



Attitudes toward Democracy and Civic Participation

According to a typology developed by Norris (1999), attitudes toward democracy can be analyzed at different levels, from allegiance to one's political community at the most diffuse end of the schema to evaluation of individual political parties or actors at the most specific end. The three intermediate levels comprise of regime principles, regime performance and regime institutions. We focus on the first of these, since in transitional societies or semi-democracies citizens may only know democracy as a set of ideals but not how it operates in practice.

Unlike established democracies, in transitional societies a democratic system of government is considered merely one of several possible regime types (Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer, 1998). Having lived under two (or more) regimes, most citizens are able to appraise their relative merits and deficiencies. Since the term 'democracy' is widely regarded as normatively desirable. In view of this, support for democracy may be more accurately measured by examining citizens' views of undemocratic systems of government. We specifically examine three types of alternatives to democracy: rule by strongman, experts, and the military.

A variety of factors affect regime evaluations. Several studies on transitional societies have shown that consideration of political factors outweigh economic ones (Evans and Whitefield, 1995). When citizens assess the functioning of 'democracy' during and immediately following the transition period, their judgement stems more from whether the government refrains from abusing power than what policies it enacts to improve citizens' livelihoods (Hofferbert and Klingemann, 1999).

In addition to regime principles, one can also test support for democracy by looking at confidence in state institutions. Comparing attitudes toward institutions such as parliament and the civil service among different groups can offer clues as to which segments of the population feel well-represented in decision-making. This is particularly pertinent in divided societies, as any sense of marginalization on the part of an ethnic minority may weaken its sense of belonging or loyalty to the state.

Furthermore, scholars have pointed to the adverse influence of ethnic cleavages on consolidation (e.g. Diamond and Plattner, 1994; Lipset, 1994): transition may be impeded by the lack of support from one or more major ethnic groups, as well as fear that it might lead to violent clashes. Ethnically diverse countries face a higher hurdle because 'in divided societies democratic legitimacy involves representing the interests of minorities as well as majorities' (Evans and Lipsmeyer, 2001, p. 380). When assessing the likelihood of successful democratization in such countries, it is therefore important to examine attitudes not only among the population as a whole, but also among ethnic majority and minority groups separately.

Political participation among majority and minority groups also warrants attention. In addition to voting, scholars have studied more direct means of interest articulation. Some of these actions have been labelled 'elite-challenging', defined as activities which are 'likely to take place when one knows how to cope with elites and wants something different from what the elites want' (Inglehart and Klingemann, 1979, p. 209). Insofar as policies are more likely to cater to majority rather than minority demands, minorities have greater motivation to become engaged in political activities to ameliorate or altar the status quo in their own favour. Moreover, since participation can be driven by expressive as well as instrumental considerations, civic engagement may be a means to assert ethnic solidarity among minorities.



Cases

For the purpose of studying ethnic minority attitudes in transitional societies, we select the cases of Malaysia and Moldova. Both countries have been categorized as 'partly free' by Freedom House (Malaysia has been designated 'partly free' since 1974, and Moldova throughout its independent history), and contain significant minority populations. We focus in particular on the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia and Russians in Moldova, since these groups have long occupied leading economic positions (and in the latter case, politically as well), being concentrated in urban centres while members of the titular nationality predominate in rural areas. Furthermore, both countries have experienced violent ethnic clashes: the 1969 race riot that led to major policy adaptation in Malaysia, and the 1992 Transnistrian war that created a territorial division in Moldova that persists to this day.

Malaysia

The British colony of Malaya attained independence in 1957, and the incorporation of territories in northern Borneo brought the federation to completion in 1963. Initial laws aimed at furthering the interests of the titular nationality included limited franchise to non-Malays, reinforced by an ethnic 'state security map' (Enloe, 1980). An outburst of inter-ethnic violence on 13 May 1969, marked 'the breakdown of Malaysia's multi-ethnic consociationalism' (Teik, 1997, p. 53). In its wake the New Economic Policy (NEP) was developed, an affirmative action programme designed to enhance Malay dominance. Provisions include active state intervention to weaken the influence of Chinese capital through bureaucratic control and legislative impositions, in the hope that it could be replaced by a Malay middle class. Measures were also adopted to promote the Malay language in the education system.

While competitive elections are held at regular intervals in Malaysia, the same coalition (including its predecessor) has ruled the country continuously from independence until 2018, while opposition parties suffer from structural disadvantages. Crouch claims that 'the capacity of the hybrid system to reach ethnic compromises... would have been less likely under fully democratic or straightforward authoritarian rule' (1996, p. 155), since the ethnic minorities are too large to be suppressed and their interests must be incorporated into the political system. For example, there are parties within the long-term ruling coalition, such as the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), specifically catering to the interests of different minorities. Yet this has neither prevented the government from promoting Malay culture as the national culture, nor assuaged non-Malays' consequent resentment at their perceived status of second-class citizenship.

Moldova

The Soviet Union established an autonomous Moldovan republic in 1924, and its borders were redrawn to include territory east of the Dnestr river in 1940. Post-Soviet independence was accompanied by nationalist calls for union with Romania, which in turn provoked distrust and opposition from ethnic minorities. This spiral of competitive ethnic mobilization was evidenced in the 1990 election. Rejection of Moldovan legislation and calls for autonomy in Transnistria triggered a war between Moldova and the self-declared Dnestr Moldovan Republic with Russian military backing. The war left Moldova with 'partitioned territory, a bitterly divided society, a ruined economy, hundreds of people killed and thousands of refugees' (Juska, 1999, p. 538). Despite subsequent memorandums and agreements formally recognizing Transnistria as Moldovan territory, it continues to lead a de facto separate existence.

According to Crowther (1997), 80 percent of Moldovans in Transnistria supported a unitary state with Moldova, whereas less than half of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians did so. Some members of the latter groups



favoured federation, an idea endorsed by only 7 percent of Moldovans. Within Moldova as a whole, independent statehood was welcomed by seven out of ten Moldovans, compared with just 31 percent of Ukrainians and 38 percent of Russians. Regarding the treatment of ethnic minorities, half of Moldovans deemed the situation satisfactory, but only about one in six Russians and Ukrainians concurred. The latter groups were three times more dissatisfied with minority rights protection than Moldovans. These contrasts corroborate the assertion that 'all post-Soviet states were caught up in debates in debates over identity and culture, but in few places were they as strikingly evident as in Moldova' (King, 2000, p. 228).

Data

Data for the empirical section below are taken from the World Values Survey (WVS), which has the advantage of containing a broad battery of questions. Data for Moldova has not been added to the most recent sixth wave of the WVS, so we use the fifth wave (2005–09) in which data for both countries under discussion are included. The sample size is 1200 respondents in Malaysia, and 1046 in Moldova.

Minority groups can be disadvantaged, or at least perceive that they suffer from disadvantages, when they do not hold the reins of national power. Neither ethnic Russians in Moldova nor ethnic Chinese in Malaysia dominate the politics of their country. We thus hypothesize that minorities would be less trustful of political institutions mainly controlled by majority groups, and more inclined to reject rule by strongman, experts and the military, since a democratic system is more likely to guarantee their individual and collective rights.

The same rationale generates the hypothesis that ethnic minorities would be more engaged in various forms of political participation, since they have a greater incentive to ensure that their interests are not ignored or overridden. We consider not only whether survey respondents have actually engaged in several activities – signing petitions, joining boycotts, taking part in lawful demonstrations – but also their willingness to do so. We expect to find more active or potential participants among minority groups.

It lies beyond the scope of our study to discuss which characteristics are most appropriate for delineating ethnic groups. We opt for language as a suitable proxy, while recognizing the shortcomings of this choice. Surveys in Moldova were conducted in Romanian and Russian, and one can reasonably assume that members of the titular nationality answered in Romanian, while ethnic Russians and Ukrainians did so in Russian. Surveys in Malaysia were conducted in Chinese, English and Malay. Respondents who answered in Chinese most likely belong to the ethnic Chinese community, but those who answered in Malay and English comprised of respondents from different ethnic backgrounds. For the sake of simplicity we use Malay- and Chinese-language respondents as proxies for ethnic majority and minority groups, respectively. In Malaysia, 80.3 percent of respondents answered in Malay, 7.8 percent in Chinese (the remaining 12 percent answered in English). In Moldova, 76.6 percent answered in Romanian, and 23.3 percent in Russian.

Empirical Analysis

We begin by drawing a comparison between majority and minority groups on national identification, and employ the question of willingness to fight for one's country as a proxy. Responses in the two countries differ considerably: The percentage of positive responses among Russian-speakers in Moldova (63 percent) is almost as high as among Romanian-speakers (70 percent), suggesting that ethnic minorities are no less committed to



the idea of Moldovan statehood than the majority. In Malaysia, whereas more than four out of five members from the majority group express willingness to defend their country, Chinese-speakers are much more reluctant, with fully half giving a negative answer. One may surmise that scars of the 1969 riot continue to haunt the memory of the ethnic Chinese, and this sentiment could be further exacerbated by affirmative action policies advantaging the titular nationality.

Regime Type Evaluations

In contrast to findings reported above, figure 1 highlights important similarities between the two cases that lie at the heart of our argument. While ethnic majority and minority groups in both countries give high ratings to a democratic political system, majority-minority differences are considerably larger with respect to evaluation of alternative regime types. In Moldova, the proportion of Russian-speakers rejecting technocratic and military rule is at least 10 percent higher than Romanian-speakers, and when it comes to rule by strongman the gap widens to 25 percent. This does not mean that Russian-speakers are model democrats; nearly half of them find one-man dictatorship acceptable, and six out ten are open to a political system run by unelected experts. Nevertheless, they are more inclined to hold democratic values – or, more accurately, less enthusiastic about undemocratic regime types – than their Romanian-speaking countrymen.

One may interpret the numbers shown for Russian-speakers in figure 1 as a rejection of the political system found in their ethnic ‘homeland’ of Russia. a comparison of their responses to the previous wave of the WVS shows that the proportion of Russian-speaking respondents approving of strongman rule has decreased by nearly 10 percent during 1996–2006 (evaluation of the two other undemocratic regime types remained relatively stable). Interestingly, the same period saw a noticeable increase in positive appraisals of strongman and technocratic rule by Romanian-speakers.

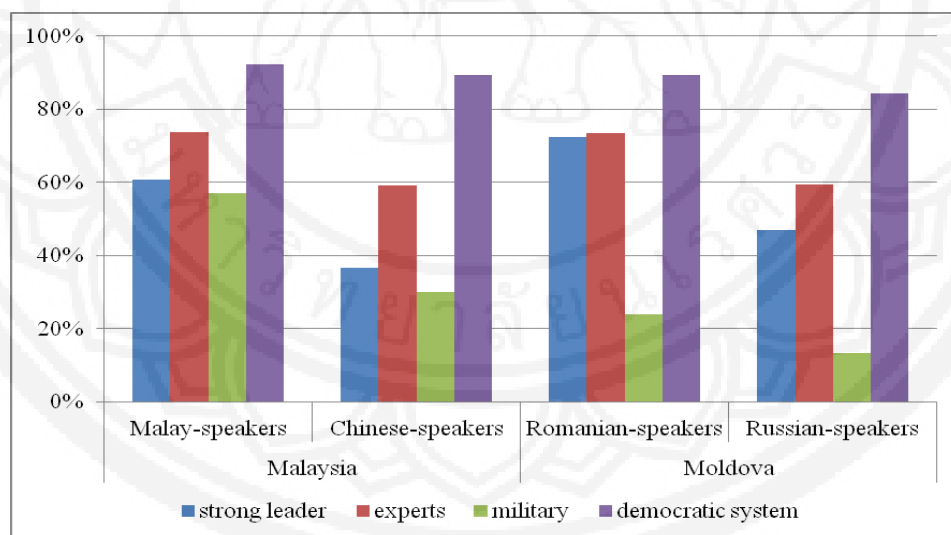


Figure 1 Favourable evaluation of regime types

Source: WVS, 5th wave

Note: Percentage of respondents who deemed each regime type ‘very good’ and ‘good’

Majority-minority differences on evaluation of undemocratic regime types are equally striking in Malaysia. Chinese-speakers adopt a much more sceptical view on each of the three options than Malay-speakers. The difference is especially conspicuous on opinions regarding the suitability of military rule, where the approval rate



among the Malay-speaking majority is almost twice as high as among the Chinese-speaking minority. Figure 1 leaves little doubt that the latter group is less tolerant of authoritarian rule. Once again, however, it bears noting that with more than a third of respondents favouring a one-man dictatorship and more than six out of ten endorsing an unelected technocracy, Chinese-speakers in Malaysia are by no means strong supporters of democracy; they only appear so in comparison with the titular nationality.

Confidence in State Institutions

To compare trust in state institutions, we select two political and two nominally non-political apparatuses: the government, parliament, civil services and the justice system. If minorities are marginalized from the political process, they would likely profess less confidence in these institutions. Figure 2 illustrates diverging patterns with respect to institutional trust. In Moldova, minority Russian-speakers have *more* confidence in the government, parliament and civil services than the Romanian-speaking majority, suggesting that they do not suffer from exclusion or discrimination in the political arena. Whatever causes for discontent in the functioning of governmental institutions, such as corruption in the bureaucracy, are shared between – not dividing – majority and minority groups.

Chinese-speakers in Malaysia have a similar level of confidence in state institutions as Russian-speakers in Moldova, but this is far lower than that held by Malay-speakers (with the exception of the justice system). As figure 2 shows, the gap is close to or above 30 percent with respect to trust in the government and the civil service. This can be explained by the ethnic Chinese being excluded from many important governmental positions for which ethnic Malays are given preference. Such affirmative action policies breed minority frustration and resentment, and sustain the gulf that has long characterized ethnic relations in Malaysia.

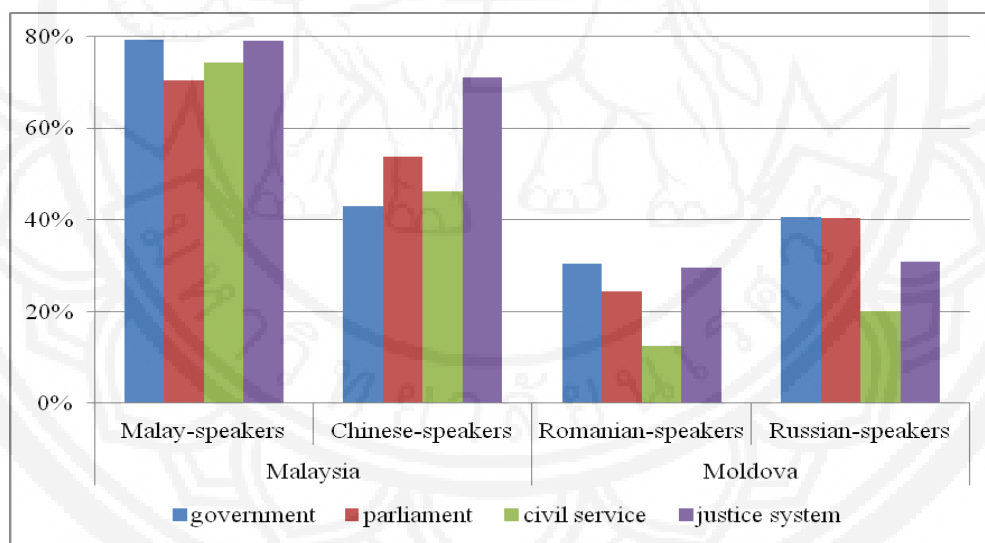


Figure 2 Confidence in institutions

Source: WVS, 5th wave

Note: Percentage of respondents who expressed ‘a great deal’ and ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in each institution

Civic Engagement

Next we turn to the question of whether minorities are active, or at least willing to take part in, various civic activities. Responses to civic engagement questions are summarized in figure 3. Once again, we find similar patterns of political behaviour between majority and minority ethnic groups in Moldova, the only difference being the latter’s hesitancy in signing petitions. A comparison of majority and minority groups in Malaysia



presents a more complicated picture: Chinese-speakers are much more active in signing petitions than their Malay-speaking counterparts, but show greater reservations when it comes to joining demonstrations (rates for boycotts are similar). In other words, the more demanding the form of civic engagement, the less the minority group is willing to become involved. This may be related less to calculations of how effective each mode of action would be, and more to potential risks of repression.

Note that while the bars for petitions and boycotts are of similar height in figure 3, both Romanian- and Russian-speakers in Moldova are much less anxious or fearful of joining demonstrations than Malaysians of any ethnicity. This reflects the difference in democratic freedoms in the two countries. However, in view of the large-scale anti-government demonstrations following the 2013 election and in the wake of a financial scandal involving former prime minister Najib Razak in 2015, and the mobilization leading up to the 2018 election, the proportion of respondents reluctant to partake in protests may have decreased among both Malay- and (especially) Chinese-speakers in the decade since the survey was conducted.

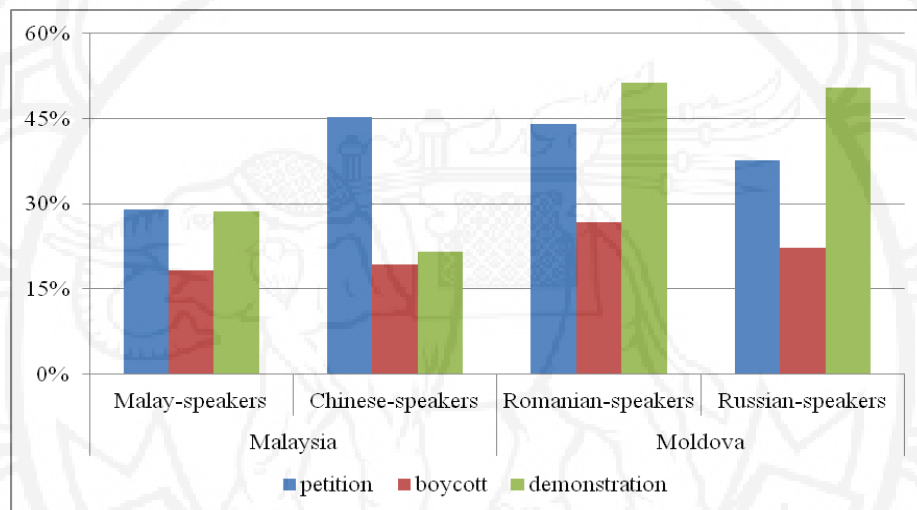


Figure 3 Civic engagement

Source: WVS, 5th wave

Note: Percentage of respondents who answered 'have done' and 'might do' for each type of activity

Multivariate Test

Next, we use OLS regression to test whether the relationship between ethnicity and support for democracy is attributable to other factors such as education or place of residence. The dependent variable is a composite index of democratic values; higher scores stand for endorsement of a democratic system and rejection of authoritarian forms. Two models are run: the first only including demographic traits; the second adding the dichotomous variable of ethnicity (1 = minority; 0 = majority). Results are shown in table 1.

The first model for Malaysia reveals that age, sex and income all exert some influence on democratic values. The impact of age and income remains in model 2, the ethnic dummy variable emerges as the most important factor. All else being equal, Chinese-speakers are much more likely to adhere to democratic principles than their Malay-speaking counterparts. Perhaps counter-intuitively, respondents who are older and less well-off are found to evaluate democracy more favourably, while education has no impact at all.

Turning to Moldova, model 1 shows that respondents with higher education and living in urban areas score higher on democratic values. Once the ethnic dummy variable is added in the second model, results show that



well-educated and female segments of the population are more likely to reject authoritarian rule. The most important finding is that Russian-speakers are indeed more likely to value democracy than Romanian-speakers. Just as in Malaysia, the explanatory power of model 2 supersedes model 1.

Many previous studies, both qualitative and quantitative, have pointed out that the existence of sizeable minorities can constitute an obstacle to successful democratization, since ethnic antagonism is easily mobilized at election time in countries that lack traditions of peaceful party competition. While results in Table 1 do not challenge this proposition, they permit a more optimistic view, namely that ethnic minorities in favour of democratic principles may contribute to consolidation. Their support for democracy is not surprising, precisely because their minority position means that they stand to benefit from constitutional guarantees of their collective rights under a regime which adheres to democratic norms and procedures.

Not surprisingly, citizens' attitudes toward democratic and authoritarian forms of government are not mainly explained through their demographic profiles. Their appraisal of the government's economic and political performance, or views toward various policies, would likely have a much greater impact. The aim of this study is simply to explore whether and how ethnic majority and minority groups differ in their attitudes toward democracy. A clear answer emerges: notwithstanding vastly different historical and contemporary conditions, ethnic minorities in Moldova and Malaysia are more inclined to reject non-democratic regime types than the majority populations. This conclusion holds true after controlling for socio-demographic traits.

Table 1 Impact of ethnic minority status on support for democracy

	Malaysia		Moldova	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Age	.003**	.003*	.001	.000
Sex	.054*	.052	.045	.060*
Education	-.001	-.001	.022*	.021*
Income	-.022**	-.020**	.012	.011
Community Size	.002	-7.59E-05	.017**	.009
Ethnic Minority		.257***		.195***
Constant	2.506	2.502	2.324	2.330
Adjusted R Squared	.009	.027	.013	.039

Note: Unstandardized Coefficients Shown; *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$

Summary and Conclusion

The present study examines whether and how members of ethnic majorities and minorities differ in political attitudes and behaviour, and tests the hypotheses that ethnic minorities are more supportive of democratic principles (while professing less faith in state institutions) and partake more in various political activities. We select the cases of Malaysia and Moldova, as countries with significant ethnic minorities, a history of ethnic tensions, and where democratic principles and procedures have long been under contention.

Regarding political participation, there is little difference between majority and minority groups in Moldova, whereas in Malaysia, the ethnic Chinese are more likely to sign petitions but less willing to join demonstrations than the majority Malays. Findings for confidence in state institutions also diverge between the two countries,



with the minority expressing less trust than the majority in the government, parliament and bureaucracy in Malaysia, but the reverse pattern being identified in Moldova.

Stepan's (1994) thesis on the competing logics of nation-state and democracy seems more in evidence in Malaysia than in Moldova. Yet one should also keep in mind that the Moldovan presidency and legislature at the time of the survey was dominated by the Communist Party, which made proposals favourable to the Russian minority, such as expanding the teaching of Russian in schools and adopting it as a second official language. The ethnic Chinese in Malaysia did not have similar parties in power championing their interests.

The most important finding concerns attitudes toward democracy. Regarding rejection of authoritarian forms of government, marked differences emerge between the attitudes of ethnic majority and minority groups: Chinese- and Russian-speakers in Malaysia and Moldova, respectively, are more positively oriented toward democracy. Moreover, we confirm that this relationship is not driven by other factors such as higher education or urban residence. Thus, one can expect that if and when Malaysia and Moldova move toward democratic consolidation, Chinese- and Russian-speaking ethnic minorities would more likely contribute rather than hinder this progress.

While support for democracy among ethnic minorities does not necessarily facilitate transition from authoritarian rule, our findings imply that the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia and ethnic Russians in Moldova would not prove a hindrance to liberalizing reforms. Although full democratization is still far from realized in Malaysia and Moldova, ethnic minorities are likely to contribute toward the achievement of this goal.

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