



Heterogeneous Electoral Constituencies Against Legislative Gridlock

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Abstract

Legislative gridlocks, driven by social partisan sorting, pose a significant threat to contemporary democracies. In this paper, I argue that this problem can be addressed by replacing *geographic* electoral constituencies, which group voters by area of residence, with *heterogeneous* electoral constituencies, which are based on random assignment and thus reflect the diversity of the entire electorate. I show that geographic electoral constituencies are likely to crystallise cleavages that *reinforce* geographic divisions, whereas heterogeneous electoral constituencies are likely to dilute deep social divisions. I argue that heterogeneous constituencies have this effect not because they *suppress* intergroup difference, as is commonly held, but rather because they encourage political parties to *express cross-cutting* social identities. The politicisation of cross-cutting social cleavages prevents social partisan sorting and moderates political conflict. Heterogeneous electoral constituencies should therefore be considered as part of an expressive institutional response to the democratic threat of legislative gridlock.

Keywords Electoral systems · Constituency · Political representation · Legislative gridlock · Social partisan sorting

Introduction

Legislative gridlocks pose a significant threat to contemporary democracies. In the U.S. the political parties' reluctance to make compromises has frequently hindered the passing of crucial legislation. Similarly, in Belgium the deep division between the Flemish and French-speaking communities has led to extended periods without an elected government. These legislative standstills undermine the normative legitimacy of democratic systems, as they impede the democratic capacity of the

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people to rule themselves. Procedurally, legislative standstills encourage the transfer of political power to other branches of government that are not directly authorised and held to account by the people. Substantively, legislative standstills may lead to the perpetuation of a *status quo* that is neither favoured by a majority nor supported by the protection of minority rights. As a consequence, detrimental “drifts”, such as increasing climate change risks and growing wealth inequalities, may be allowed to continue (Gutmann and Thompson 2012, pp. 30–35; Warren and Mansbridge 2013, pp. 87–89).¹

One of the major causes of legislative gridlock is *social partisan sorting* (Mason 2015). This is characterised by an alignment between partisan identity and several different social identities, such as those defined by ethnicity, race or residency.² When political parties become socially sorted, they become more homogeneous and more distinct in terms of social identity. Increased social partisan sorting makes it difficult to build governing majorities and diminishes the willingness to make compromises (Davis 2019, p. 407; McCoy and Somer 2019, pp. 257–67). This is not only because socially sorted parties have little to no overlap in terms of social identities but also because social partisan sorting heightens conflict: it drives *affective polarisation*, where citizens experience negative feelings of animosity, anger and distrust towards those associated with another political party (Mason 2015; Rostbøll 2024, p. 3).

In this paper, I hypothesise that the design of *electoral constituencies* shapes political parties’ incentives to represent certain social identities and, as a consequence, affects the likelihood that political parties become socially sorted.³ In many democracies around the world, electoral constituencies are defined in expressly geographic terms, meaning that the electoral rolls consist exclusively of voters who reside in the same geographical area. In the absence of a viable alternative, the geographic nature of electoral constituencies has remained largely unquestioned. However, technological advancements now enable us to replace geographic electoral constituencies with *heterogeneous electoral constituencies*, which are as diverse as the entire electorate.⁴ In these heterogeneous constituencies, all salient social identities are present *in the same proportion* as in the entire electorate. These constituencies can be formed by randomly assigning voters to a constituency when they become eligible to vote. Designed as such, the underlying groupings of voters are geographically dispersed

¹ See also Mansbridge (2012) and Warren (2017, pp. 44–45) on why ‘getting things done’ is one of the main functions that a democratic system should accomplish, as well as Pildes (2023) on the democratic value of effective government.

² *Social* partisan sorting should be distinguished from *ideological* partisan sorting, which refers to the alignment between partisan identity and ideology. Both kinds of partisan sorting are often described as forms of polarisation: see also Rostbøll (2024).

³ An electoral constituency (or electoral district) is a list of voters who are eligible to vote for a defined number of representatives for the legislature (Carlsen Häggrot 2023, p. 302; Rehfeld 2005, p. 35). According to a comparative survey by Handley (2008), at least 84 states around the world, of which 52 are distinctly democratic states, have geographic electoral constituencies. See also Carlsen Häggrot (2023, p. 303, n. 2).

⁴ Note that heterogeneous constituencies can also be described as maximally diverse around issue positions instead of social identities (Bishin 2009, pp. 121–136).

and created purely for political purposes (Rehfeld 2005; Ciepley 2013).⁵ I show that replacing geographic by heterogeneous constituencies can likely contribute to preventing social partisan sorting and, consequently, serve as an institutional remedy to the growing threat of legislative gridlock.

Two approaches to addressing social partisan sorting can be distinguished. A *suppressive* approach involves designing electoral constituencies such that they incentivise political actors to suppress intergroup differences. By contrast, an *expressive* approach aims to design electoral constituencies such that they facilitate the expression of those intergroup differences that can help traverse group boundaries (cf. Williams 2008, p. 240). Whereas Andrew Rehfeld (2005) and David Ciepley (2013) contend that (single-seat) heterogeneous electoral constituencies have suppressive effects, I suggest that heterogeneous constituencies can potentially serve an expressive function, which I argue to be more desirable from a democratic perspective.

The paper is structured as follows: In Sect. "Two Approaches: Suppressive and Expressive", I argue that a suppressive approach to preventing social partisan sorting is undesirable from a democratic perspective and outline an alternative expressive approach involving the politicisation of *cross-cutting*, rather than *reinforcing*, social cleavages. In Sect. "Electoral Constituency Design and Cleavage Formation", I posit two hypotheses about the effects of the geographic and heterogeneous delineation of electoral constituencies on the type of cleavages that are politicised. The first hypothesis is that geographic electoral constituencies incentivise political actors to reinforce geographic social divisions. The second hypothesis is that heterogeneous electoral constituencies incentivise political actors to politicise cross-cutting social divisions. These hypotheses are supported by the theoretical case of the *Hypothetical Harmonious Society* along with several real-world empirical examples in, respectively, Sect. "Geographic Constituencies and Reinforcing Cleavages" and Sect. "Heterogeneous Constituencies and Cross-Cutting Cleavages". If these two hypotheses prove to be correct, then geographic electoral constituencies foster social partisan sorting, whereas heterogeneous constituencies provide an expressive approach to addressing social partisan sorting. In Sect. "The Democratic Virtues of Electoral Constituencies", I respond to the objection that heterogeneous electoral constituencies are not justified by their potential contribution to addressing social partisan sorting and, thus, preventing legislative gridlock, as they may fail to provide other democratic benefits that are offered by systems with geographic electoral constituencies. My response suggests that the four main reasons for a multi-constituency system are best fulfilled by heterogeneous, rather than geographic, electoral constituencies. Therefore, I conclude the paper by suggesting that

⁵ While I focus on 'random' constituencies, heterogeneous constituencies can also be geographically based. If there would be a finite, known and permanent list of salient group identities, heterogeneous constituencies could be created by pooling homogeneous constituencies (Bogaards 2003; Stone 2008, pp. 249–251). Alternatively, geographic constituencies can be made more diverse by increasing their size. The heterogeneous *electorate-wide* constituency, which encompasses the entire electorate, is currently used in countries such as the Netherlands and Israel.

heterogeneous electoral constituencies should be considered as part of an expressive institutional response to the democratic problem of legislative gridlock.

Two Approaches: Suppressive and Expressive

Two distinct approaches to addressing social partisan sorting and the consequent problem of legislative gridlock can be identified. The first *suppressive* approach aims to ‘design political institutions so as to ensure that [intergroup differences] have no means of expression that can influence political outcomes’ (Williams 2008, p. 240).

Both Rehfeld (2005, pp. 225–227, 231–234) and Ciepley (2013, pp. 146–148) have suggested that replacing single-seat geographic constituencies by single-seat heterogeneous constituencies could serve such a suppressive function.⁶ They expect that a system of single-seat heterogeneous constituencies will lead to a homogeneous legislature in which representatives focus on common interests, shared by different identity groups. Since all constituencies look like the electorate as a whole and elect a single representative by majority vote, even a slight majority among the population could translate into a unanimity of interests in the legislature. Furthermore, provided that no single identity group has an overwhelming majority in the electorate as a whole, candidates and their political parties would be unable to secure and maintain majority support in their constituencies when they appeal to interests that are particular to one identity group (Ciepley 2013, p. 146). A homogeneous legislature might not only prevent social partisan sorting by diminishing identity politics, but it might also signal the end of party politics altogether. As Rehfeld (2005, p. 227) observes, single-seat heterogeneous constituencies ‘could give rise to the formation of a kind of non-partisan, professional legislator less electable under the current, highly partisan electoral system.’

An alternative *expressive* approach involves multiplying instead of minimising the representation of intergroup differences in the legislature (Williams 2008, pp. 239–240). To understand how the expressive approach works, we have to look at the cleavage structures underlying social partisan sorting. Socially sorted political parties are divided by *reinforcing* social cleavages. Suppose that there is a geographic divide between the North and the South and a linguistic divide between Dutch- and French-speakers. These cleavages are *reinforcing* when geographical area and language are correlated so that, for example, almost all Dutch-speakers are northerners and almost all French-speakers are southerners. By contrast, these cleavages are *cross-cutting* when geographical area and language are uncorrelated so that there is a substantial number of French-speaking northerners and French-speaking southerners (Clark, Golder and Golder 2017, p. 636). Two political parties are considered socially sorted when they represent, respectively, Dutch-speaking northerners and

⁶ With a single seat, I assume the use of plurality rule. With multiple seats, I assume the use of a proportional electoral formula, but I will not draw fine-grained distinctions between proportional representation systems in this paper.

French-speaking southerners, and the geographic and linguistic cleavages are reinforcing; however, they are not socially sorted if those cleavages are cross-cutting.⁷ Examining the underlying cleavage structures reveals that social partisan sorting can be addressed by incentivising political parties to politicise cross-cutting social identities.

The politicisation of cross-cutting cleavages not only enhances effective governance by reducing social partisan sorting, but also fosters an environment that is more conducive to compromises. Given the partial overlap between cross-cutting groups, cross-cutting cleavages create so-called “cross-pressures” for voters: The different group affiliations pull them in different political directions. These cross-pressures reduce the intensity of feeling with which certain identities are held, including partisan identities, and therefore generate moderation in political conflict. This moderating effect on political conflict, in turn, enhances the parties’ ability and willingness to make compromises (Goodin 1975; Rae and Taylor 1970, pp. 85–89; Powell 1970, pp. 37–38; Lipset 1960, pp. 83–90, 203–216).⁸

By politicising cross-cutting identities, political parties can, furthermore, help traverse group boundaries. This is illustrated by the political landscape in the Netherlands in the 1960s, which was known for a deep religious cleavage between Protestants and Catholics as well as a cross-cutting class conflict. The two dominant religious parties, the Catholic People’s Party and the Protestant Anti-Revolutionary Party, crossed class lines for their support, while the two other major parties, the Liberals and Social Democrats, sought votes from both religious denominations. By making cross-boundary appeals, the Liberals and Social Democrats encouraged Protestants and Catholics to unite under a partisan identity. While they had modest success in gaining support from members of both religious denominations, their

⁷ The political landscape in the U.S. provides a good example of social partisan sorting. In the U.S. partisan identities largely reflect the urban–rural divide, which in turn correlates to socio-economic and cultural differences. Accordingly, all political competition between the two major political parties is forced into one overarching urban–rural conflict with two ‘mutually hostile, geographically divided camps’ (Rodden 2019, pp. 10–12). Rodden proposes to introduce a single constituency proportional representation system in the U.S. as a solution to this problem. Such a system likely leads to more than two political parties, but does not yield the benefits that a multi-constituency system can provide, as I discuss in Sect. “The Democratic Virtues of Electoral Constituencies”. Replacing geographic by heterogeneous constituencies, by contrast, would retain those benefits and would therefore also likely be more feasible.

⁸ It should be pointed out that the extent to which cross-cutting cleavages have moderating effects depends on several factors. The first factor is the degree to which cleavages are cross-cutting: when cleavages are cross-cutting to a higher degree, the moderating effects are expected to be clearer (Lijphart 1977, pp. 75–81). The second factor is the intensity or salience of the cleavages. When the cleavages are of equal intensity, cross-cuttingness might lead to a division into multiple antagonistic groups that are implacably at odds with each other. Alternatively, if one cleavage is superimposed on the other, representatives can give way to their secondary demands in order to fulfil their primary demands, without having to fear for negative electoral consequences (Dahl 1966, pp. 372–380; Schattschneider 1960, pp. 76–78).

attempts nonetheless had a moderating effect on the religious cleavage (Dahl 1966, p. 379).⁹

From a democratic perspective, an expressive approach is more desirable than a suppressive approach. First of all, whereas an expressive approach facilitates the presence of a diversity of interests and perspectives within the legislature, a suppressive approach eliminates it. Interest and perspectival diversity is widely recognised as an essential condition for high-quality deliberations.¹⁰ After all, there are reasons to doubt that we are capable of identifying what is good for all if not all interests are reflected in deliberations, and of determining the impact of policies on those with distinct perspectives (cf. Williams 2008, p. 244). A homogeneous legislature would be devoid of any such diversity. Rehfeld (2005, p. 213) expects single-seat heterogeneous constituencies in the U.S. to produce a legislature that not only represents unanimous interests but also consists predominantly of white legislators, as minorities do not have the opportunity to elect representatives that are ascriptively similar. Motivated by electoral success, those white legislators may be incentivised to appeal to a common good, rather than group-specific interests, but may not be capable of actually going beyond their own shared interests and perspectives in order to determine the common good.¹¹ By sacrificing heterogeneity in the legislature, Rehfeld's and Ciepley's proposal thus risks enhancing effective governance at the cost of "good" or "democratic" governance.¹²

Second, the suppressive approach may so severely diminish the political power of minorities that minority rights can no longer be adequately protected in legislative decision-making. For example, Rehfeld (2005, p. 231) expects that a system of single-seat heterogeneous constituencies effectively 'magnifies the power of national majorities.' But are the potential harms posed to minorities by a "majority

⁹ The extent to which political parties help traverse group boundaries depends on the number and type of political parties that are formed. Political parties have to appeal to people across one line of conflict in order to have a moderating effect. For example, if the major class-based parties in the Netherlands in the 1960s had not crossed the religious line of conflict but had, instead, been either Protestant or Catholic, then they would not have attempted to unite the Protestants and Catholics under one partisan identity and thus would not have contributed to the moderation of the religious conflict (cf. Dahl 1966, p. 379).

¹⁰ Instead of interest and perspectival diversity, Landemore (2020, pp. 102–103) highlights the importance of *cognitive* diversity for the quality of deliberations. Based on the 'Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem' by Hong and Page (2004), she claims that cognitive diversity is more important than competence for the quality of deliberations, as a group of very smart or competent deliberators may get stuck in their 'local common optimum' and fail to see another 'global optimum'. See also the critique on this theorem by Thompson (2014) and responses to this critique by, *inter alia*, Kuehn (2017) and Page (2015).

¹¹ In particular, members of marginalised groups may have distinct perspectives as a consequence of their distinct experiences (Mansbridge 1999, pp. 643–648; Young 2002, pp. 98–136).

¹² Rehfeld (2005, pp. 237–238) also recognises the importance of social diversity in the legislature, and therefore suggests introducing legislative seat quota. By ensuring the legislative presence of certain groups, legislative seat quota may generate connections of trust between representatives and members of those groups, and may change the historically embedded social understanding that members of those groups would be unfit to rule (Mansbridge 1999, pp. 628, 648–652). However, assuming that any member of a social group could represent the interests and perspectives of all other group members fails to recognise the internal diversity within groups and thus risks falling into the trap of essentialism. On this point, I agree with James (2011) that the best way to ensure substantive representation is through mechanisms of authorisation and accountability.

tyranny” a problem of democratic legitimacy? Rehfeld (2005, pp. 231–234; 2008, pp. 256–257) draws a sharp dichotomy between requirements of democracy, which he considers to be procedural, and requirements of justice, which he considers to be substantive. He claims that “majority tyranny” is a problem of social justice and not of democratic legitimacy. However, many democratic theorists argue that requirements of democracy are not only procedural but also partly substantive, meaning that they encompass certain substantive rights. For example, one could think that democracy is essentially about a core set of values, such as political autonomy and equality, that has both procedural and substantive implications (Brettschneider 2006, 2009). A majority decision that disregards those rights of minorities is then not only unjust but also undemocratic (Stone 2008, pp. 252–253). On this mixed understanding of the democratic ideal, severely magnifying the power of majorities thus addresses the democratic threat of legislative gridlock at the cost of increasing the threat of substantively undemocratic decisions.

In the next Section, I show that, in contrast to what Rehfeld and Ciepley suggest, single-seat heterogeneous constituencies do not necessarily lead to a homogeneous legislature where intergroup differences are stifled. Instead, heterogeneous constituencies may facilitate the politicisation of all salient cleavages that exist in society, including *cross-cutting* ones. Replacing geographic by heterogeneous electoral constituencies may thus serve as an expressive, rather than a suppressive, response to social partisan sorting and the consequent threat of legislative gridlock.

Electoral Constituency Design and Cleavage Formation

Let me posit two hypotheses about the effects of the geographic or heterogeneous delineation of electoral constituencies on the type of social cleavages—reinforcing or cross-cutting—that are politicised.

Hypothesis 1 Geographic electoral constituencies incentivise political actors to politicise cleavages that *reinforce* geographic divisions.

Hypothesis 2 Heterogeneous electoral constituencies empower political actors to leverage all salient *cross-cutting* axes of social division that exist in the society as a whole.

These hypotheses are based on the assumption that political actors (individual representatives and political parties) seek to be re-elected and, therefore, want to satisfy electoral pressures. These electoral pressures incentivise them to make a particular *identity choice*. This is a rational choice to politicise the identity, from a set of potentially mobilisable social categories, that provides a useful vehicle for political competition and helps the political party secure membership in the politically and economically most useful coalition (Posner 2004; 2005, pp. 2–6, 138–139). I expect electoral constituencies to shape the identity choice of political actors *within* a particular constituency and to coordinate this choice *across* constituencies. At

the constituency level, constituency boundaries determine whether a group is large enough in size to win a seat in the constituency. At the national level, electoral constituencies create a ‘uniform’ context in which it is ‘common knowledge’ that certain groups are more politically viable at the constituency level than others (cf. Posner 2005, pp. 5–6). In this way, electoral constituency design coordinates the identity choices by national political parties and influences which cleavages become politically salient in the nation as a whole.¹³

If the two hypotheses prove to be correct, then geographic constituencies foster social partisan sorting and, thereby, exacerbate the threat of legislative gridlock, whereas heterogeneous constituencies help to prevent social partisan sorting and, consequently, the threat of legislative gridlock. While I will substantiate these hypotheses with empirical illustrations and existing empirical evidence, comprehensive and systematic testing of the hypotheses is beyond the scope of this paper.

Geographic Constituencies and Reinforcing Cleavages

To see how geographic constituencies shape and coordinate strategic identity choices by political actors, imagine a *Hypothetical Harmonious Society* (HHS). In this society, there are two potentially politically salient cleavages that are cross-cutting: a religious cleavage between the Protestants and Catholics, and a linguistic cleavage between French-speakers and Dutch-speakers. Assume that both cleavages provide an equally viable basis for political competition and coalition-building at the national level when there are no electoral constituencies, and that political actors have perfect information about this. Political actors have perfect information when they know the exact numbers in the row and column totals (though not necessarily in each cell) of the society’s identity matrix (Posner 2005, p. 132). Table 1 shows the identity matrix of the HHS. It shows that at the national level, political parties could choose to politicise the linguistic cleavage and build a majority coalition among French-speakers. Alternatively, they could choose to politicise the religious cleavage and build a majority coalition among Protestants.

Now suppose that the electorate in the HHS is evenly distributed over three single-seat geographic electoral constituencies (a Northern, Central and Southern constituency) with a plurality voting rule, meaning that one winner is elected in each constituency based on the highest number of votes. Tables 2, 3 and 4 show the identity matrices for each constituency. The Northern and Central constituencies have an equal number of French-speakers and Dutch-speakers, but an unequal number of Protestants and Catholics. As there is a large majority of a particular religious

¹³ Another prominent explanation for what drives the identity choice of political actors refers not to the size of identity groups but to the *intensity* of feeling or depth of attachment that individuals have to one identity rather than another. Political actors often choose to emphasise identities that are intensely felt, as small but intense groups are more easily mobilised than larger but less intense groups (Bishin 2009; Hill 2022). Political actors may thus not only be stimulated by electoral constituency design to politicise identities for which the group sizes are larger *vis-à-vis* the constituency boundaries, but may also have incentives to take into account the intensity with which those identities are felt.

Table 1 The Hypothetical Harmonious Society

	Protestants	Catholics	Total
French-speakers	100	60	160
Dutch-speakers	60	80	140
Total	160	140	300

Table 2 The Hypothetical Harmonious Society: North

	Protestants	Catholics	Total
French-speakers	40	10	50
Dutch-speakers	40	10	50
Total	80	20	100

denomination in these geographic constituencies, the religious cleavage becomes the most viable basis for political competition. In the South, both cleavages provide a useful vehicle for political competition but since political representatives form political parties and build coalitions with representatives from the Northern and the Central constituencies, they are also likely to emphasise the religious cleavage that dominates the other constituencies. The result is a not so harmonious society that is split into Protestant and Catholic factions, and a legislature ruled by the Catholics, given that they win two out of three constituencies, even though they form a minority in the nation as a whole.

It should be noted that these strategic effects are amplified when geographic constituencies are combined with a single seat. Under larger constituency magnitudes, these effects would diminish as the system becomes more proportional.¹⁴ However, the effects can still be observed under relatively low constituency magnitudes. Suppose that the constituency magnitude is three, meaning that the minimum number of votes with which a group can win a seat in the legislature under the least favourable circumstances (when the opposition is united around a minimum number of candidates) is 25% under a proportional electoral formula.¹⁵ The Protestants would then be able to get all three seats in the Northern constituency, as they have 80 of the 100 votes. In response, Catholics would likely try to get four seats in the Central and Southern constituencies. The fact that there is one predominantly Protestant constituency may thus also coordinate the choice of political parties to focus on the religious cleavage in a PR system with a low but not minimal constituency magnitude.¹⁶

¹⁴ The constituency magnitude refers to the number of legislative seats electable in an electoral constituency. Holding the number of seats in the legislature fixed, the constituency magnitude will be lower when there are more constituencies.

¹⁵ In particular, the threshold of *exclusion* would be 25% under the D'Hondt rule.

¹⁶ It is easier to see the effects of the geographic constituency definition on cleavage formation in SMP systems because a unique equilibrium exists only in those systems (cf. Posner 2005, p. 150).

Table 3 The Hypothetical Harmonious Society: Central

	Protestants	Catholics	Total
French-speakers	20	30	50
Dutch-speakers	20	30	50
Total	40	60	100

Table 4 The Hypothetical Harmonious Society: South

	Protestants	Catholics	Total
French-speakers	40	20	60
Dutch-speakers	0	40	40
Total	40	60	100

The HHS demonstrates how single-seat geographic electoral constituencies may affect identity choice. By labelling and separating voters, geographic constituencies condition citizens and representatives to engage in primarily group located politics. They coordinate this identity choice across political actors, thereby structuring national electoral competition around one particularly politically salient cleavage.

These effects of single-seat geographic constituencies could explain, for example, why language is the main political cleavage in Belgium, and why ethnicity is the primary political cleavage in Malawi. In Malawi, there are at least two potentially salient cleavages: an ethnic cleavage and a religious cleavage. Malawi has three relatively large religious groups—Catholics, Protestants and Muslims—and two relatively large ethnic groups—the Tumbukas and the Chewas. Each of these groups are large enough *vis-à-vis* the nation as a whole to provide a viable basis for party competition and national coalition-building. But only the ethnic groups are geographically concentrated. The Tumbukas are heavily concentrated in the Northern region, the Chewas are heavily concentrated in the Centre region and the Southern region consists of a mix of different other ethnic groups.¹⁷ As each of these regions is again divided into geographic electoral constituencies, the safest path to electoral success for representatives in the North and the Centre of Malawi is by fully embracing their partiality in favour of one ethnic group and further consolidating this ethnic cleavage.¹⁸

¹⁷ See also the ethnic map provided by Robinson (2016, p. 376).

¹⁸ Posner (2004) argues that group sizes explain why the Chewas and Tumbukas have become political rivals in Malawi but not in Zambia. As he compares two countries with geographic electoral constituencies, his analysis is not meant to explain the effects of the constituency definition on the activation of this ethnic cleavage.

Heterogeneous Constituencies and Cross-Cutting Cleavages

Heterogeneous constituencies are neutral with respect to the cleavages around which politics should revolve: the groups that are potentially politically viable at the national level, without constituencies, are also potentially politically viable in heterogeneous constituencies. For example, in the HHS political actors face the same electoral opportunities when they politicise the religious cleavage as when they politicise the linguistic cleavage, and are thus not conditioned to engage in politics on the basis of one particular cleavage. Heterogeneous constituencies, therefore, do not create convergence among political actors on one particular cleavage. In this way, heterogeneous constituencies already help to prevent legislative gridlock.

But what incentives do heterogeneous electoral constituencies create instead? Ciepley (2013) and Rehfeld (2005) argue that single-seat heterogeneous constituencies, in which the election winner is decided by plurality rule, inhibit the politicisation of all cleavages in the legislature and thus provide a suppressive response to social partisan sorting and the consequent threat of legislative gridlock. According to Duverger's law, there are in single-seat plurality systems generally two political parties competing for the seats in the legislature.¹⁹ In the face of heterogeneity, these parties cannot win the majority of votes by appealing to the particularity of any group. As they have to seek electoral support across group divisions in order to win a seat, they are incentivised to depoliticise deep social divisions and make "moderate" policy proposals that are accommodative of different groups.²⁰ In particular, following the *median voter theorem*, political parties would be pulled towards the position of the median voter. The median voter has an equal number of voters lying to her left as to her right. Although the median voter does not need to represent a "centrist" political ideology, she is more likely to be centrist in heterogeneous than in homogeneous constituencies (Rehfeld 2009, p. 226, n. 36). As the median voter is the same in all heterogeneous constituencies, a single-seat plurality system with heterogeneous electoral constituencies would incentivise all political actors to represent positions on policy issues that are located closely around the same median voter. The result is a unanimity of interests and opinions in the legislature.²¹

However, heterogeneous constituencies are expected to have these suppressive effects only if we assume a two-party political race. When a third party can potentially enter the political arena, the existing parties have incentives to deter

¹⁹ According to Duverger's law, the number of political parties in single-member plurality (SMP) systems ultimately reduces to two, whereas PR systems foster the formation of multiple political parties. In theory, the number of political parties competing in PR constituencies is expected to be equal to the constituency magnitude plus one (Cox 1990).

²⁰ Ciepley (2013, pp. 146–148) contends that heterogeneous constituencies create a centripetal 'vote pooling' effect in deeply divided societies: the electoral pressures to seek electoral support and thus to 'pool votes' from groups across deep political divides would drive political actors towards moderation and accommodation. See also Bogaards (2003, pp. 64–65) for a similar argument.

²¹ Rehfeld (2005, pp. 226–227, 231) appeals to the median voter theorem in his defence of heterogeneous constituencies. It should be noted that the median voter theorem only applies under certain conditions: there must be exactly two candidates and an odd number of voters with single-peaked preferences on a single-issue dimension.

its entrance, which might make it less likely that the two existing parties converge around the median voter. Suppose that voters are divided along a single cleavage. In that case, a third party is most likely to enter when it takes more extreme positions, as more extreme parties have a realistic chance of gaining the highest number of votes by attracting voters on the left- or right-side of the political spectrum and have more to gain from entering to avoid others' policies than moderate parties (Palfrey 1984; Grosser and Palfrey 2014). Since existing political parties want to deter a third party from entering, they will also strive to retain support from extremists on its flanks. Consequently, an alternative equilibrium emerges in which the two political parties are equidistant from the median, and only a third party, if it exists, will be around the centre (Callander 2005; Cox 1990; Powell 2000, pp. 177–178, 187, 196–200).²² Political competition in single-seat heterogeneous constituencies thus does not need to drive political parties towards adopting a “centrist” political ideology, but may rather lead to the expression of intergroup differences in the legislature.

Moreover, heterogeneous constituencies are unlikely to exhibit suppressive effects when a particular identity group is in a majority. Consider again the HHS, in which both French-speakers and Protestants form majorities. A political party could secure all legislative seats in the HHS by appealing to either all French-speakers, regardless of their religious denomination, or all Protestants, irrespective of their language. Political parties thus have an incentive to represent an identity group that forms a majority, if one exists, rather than to converge towards the median voter.

Although single-seat heterogeneous constituencies may not automatically have expressive effects simply because they lack suppressive ones, they can in fact be expected to generate such effects. Suppose that the religious cleavage in the HHS is politicised: a Protestant and Catholic Party have campaigned in the previous elections, and, since the Protestants form a majority, the Protestant Party has won all legislative seats. At the next elections, a French-speaking Catholic wants to become a candidate. She has a strategic choice to either enter the scene under the label of the existing Catholic party or under the label of a new French party. As the French-speaking population is in the majority but the Catholic population is not, the French Catholic has the most realistic chance of winning a seat under the label of a new French party. Because of the heterogeneous nature of the constituencies, both the Protestant and the French Party have a chance at major legislative success. Single-seat heterogeneous constituencies thus provide favourable conditions for a political landscape in which the two dominant political parties leverage cross-cutting cleavages.²³

²² The divergence among political parties, furthermore, increases when the voter group is polarised. Voters may threaten to abstain from voting when political parties take centrist positions and political parties are, consequently, incentivised to seek more extreme positions on pain of losing votes (Dahl 1966, p. 376; Jones, Sirianni and Fu 2022).

²³ The number of political parties depends not only on the incentives created by an electoral system, but also on the number of cross-cutting cleavages (Neto and Cox 1997, p. 155; Clark, Golder and Golder 2017, pp. 641–644). My arguments thus suggest that the delineation of electoral constituencies (heterogeneous or geographic) can undermine or sustain the effects of the existing cleavage structures on the number of political parties.

The conditions for politicising cross-cutting cleavages are even more favourable when heterogeneous constituencies are combined with multiple seats to which representatives are elected by proportional representation. Smaller parties that politicise cross-cutting minority identities can then enter the political arena. Multi-seat heterogeneous constituencies can thus help avert legislative standstills by facilitating the politicisation of all the cross-cutting cleavages that are present in society at large.

It should be noted, however, that there is a risk to increasing the constituency magnitude: when the constituency magnitude is higher, the legislature is more likely to become *fragmented*.²⁴ The power to make political decisions then becomes dispersed over a large number of political parties, making it challenging to form a governing majority that is capable of providing effective and stable governance (Pildes 2021, pp. 146, 148–149; Rae 1995, p. 66). Multi-seat heterogeneous constituencies, therefore, ultimately only contribute to preventing legislative gridlocks when they have a relatively low constituency magnitude.²⁵

The Democratic Virtues of Electoral Constituencies

The potential contribution of heterogeneous constituencies to preventing legislative gridlock may, on its own, not be enough to justify replacing geographic constituencies with heterogeneous ones. A concern could be that heterogeneous constituencies do not offer the advantages that justify the adoption of a multi-constituency electoral system in the first place. In response to this concern, I examine the four main benefits that are typically attributed to systems with multiple electoral constituencies and argue that heterogeneous constituencies can yield those benefits at least as good as geographic constituencies. The upshot is that on these four major grounds, there is no objection to introducing heterogeneous electoral constituencies in multi-constituency electoral systems.²⁶

First, electoral constituencies create a direct relationship of authorisation and accountability between voters and their representatives, as a designated number of representatives is elected within each constituency. Sustaining this connection requires stability in constituency membership, so that representatives are held accountable during re-election by largely the same group of individuals who initially elected them. Heterogeneous constituencies can provide unparalleled stability, as

²⁴ I refer here to fragmentation *between* parties, not *within* parties. Fragmentation within parties hinders effective governance by impeding the formation of a unified party agenda, and is more likely to occur in multi-constituency single-member plurality (SMP) systems, as these systems tend towards two major political parties (Pildes 2021, pp. 151–152).

²⁵ I consider a low constituency magnitude to lie between one and six, as the cognitive capacity of voters to make a clear preference ordering over the options sharply drops off once the number of options is seven or higher (Carey and Hix 2011, p. 385).

²⁶ It is a separate question whether replacing single-seat by multi-seat electoral constituencies is justified: the benefits of (low magnitude) multi-seat constituencies in the fight against legislative gridlock may be outweighed by other grounds for sticking to single-seat constituencies. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

membership can be made permanent such that changes only occur upon the passing away of constituents or the addition of new members to the electorate. Geographic constituencies do not ensure the same degree of stability, as voters may change constituency membership due to relocation or redrawn constituency boundaries throughout their lives (Ciepley 2013, p. 144; Rehfeld 2005, pp. 40–41). Heterogeneous constituencies thus fare better in sustaining relationships of authorisation and accountability between voters and representatives.

Second, electoral constituencies enable practices of constituency service. Legislators have the ability to aid their constituents in navigating specific administrative procedures and act as intermediaries between constituents and government agencies. This facilitates opportunities for citizens to challenge administrative processes and decisions, thereby enhancing citizen engagement and oversight within governmental operations. Legislators will only be motivated to spend time and energy providing such services to individuals that belong to their constituency and can thus electorally reward them. To sustain the provision of constituency service, legislators must therefore be able to clearly identify which individuals belong to their constituency (Carlsen Häggrot 2023, p. 309). In geographic constituencies, constituents are identifiable by their area of residence. In heterogeneous constituencies, constituents can be made clearly identifiable to legislators by their constituency number. To facilitate constituency service, there must thus be a publicly accessible constituency number book, similar to the address book.

Third, electoral constituencies sustain deliberation among constituents. Geographic constituencies create ample opportunities for constituents to deliberate, as they ensure that voters who live close to each other generally belong to the same constituency.²⁷ But to facilitate communication and thus deliberation among *all* constituents, geographic constituencies have to be of a rather small size. Modern-day geographic constituencies can only enable deliberation ‘within the many subgroups that will be nested within each geographic constituency’ (Carlsen Häggrot 2023, p. 310). Since the deliberative benefits of geographic constituencies only derive from these small “neighbourhoods”, the same benefits arise in heterogeneous constituencies that are formed through the pooling of such neighbourhoods (Rehfeld 2005, p. 172). But even in fully random constituencies, communication between subgroups of constituents can be facilitated through the establishment of online deliberative platforms and constituency meet-ups. The advantage of such randomly constituted subgroups is that they are inherently diverse, which is widely endorsed as a necessary condition for good deliberations (Rehfeld 2005, p. 26).

Fourth, electoral constituencies shape practices of voter mobilisation. Geographic constituencies enable legislative candidates to mobilise voters with relatively easy and inexpensive methods, such as door-to-door campaigns, local political gatherings

²⁷ Rehfeld (2005, p. 220) observes that, in the U.S. ‘under the current territorial system, it is very likely that geographical neighbors are members of the same electoral constituency. With national, randomized constituencies, the odds that any neighbor would be a member of a citizen’s electoral constituency would be only $[\frac{1}{435} \approx] .0023$. The flip side of this is that any United States citizen would have a .23 percent chance of being a member of the same constituency with any other citizen he met, no matter where each lived.’

and the dissemination of political advertisements through local media (Carlsen Häggrot 2023, pp. 308–314). In heterogeneous constituencies, political parties are expected to play a more prominent role in campaigning. They will continue to both utilise national media advertisements, the internet and social media platforms, and organise cross-country meet-ups where constituents can engage with the parties' candidates (from their own and other constituencies). This closer alignment between candidates and their political parties in political campaigns, arguably, serves as an advantage, as it makes political parties the primary locus of accountability and mitigates the tendency of candidates to shift blame onto their party if their campaign promises go unfulfilled (Ciepley 2013, p. 145). Moreover, the greater prominence of political parties is likely to centre political campaigns around national party platforms. Arguably, this is also a democratic virtue of heterogeneous constituencies, as it appropriately transfers the power to address local issues to provincial and local governments, ensures that local concerns only inform national decisions when they are directly affected by such decisions and prevents national interests being hindered by the lobbying efforts of individual representatives who advocate solely for their own constituents (Ciepley 2013, pp. 143–144).

Hence, multiple heterogeneous constituencies may not only contribute to preventing legislative gridlock but may also be more effective than multiple geographic constituencies in delivering the four main benefits typically associated with multi-constituency electoral systems. This underscores the desirability of substituting geographic by heterogeneous constituencies. Since voters already enjoy these benefits, turning geographic into heterogeneous constituencies may also be more feasible than abandoning a multi-constituency system altogether in the fight against social partisan sorting and the consequent threat of legislative gridlock.²⁸

Conclusion

In the absence of a viable alternative, the geographic definition of electoral constituencies in many democracies around the world has largely gone unchallenged. However, recent technological advancements present the opportunity to replace geographic constituencies with heterogeneous ones, which can be created purely for political purposes by randomly assigning voters to constituencies. In this paper, I have argued that such a transition offers a promising institutional remedy to the contemporary democratic threat of legislative gridlock, especially when legislative gridlocks arise from social partisan sorting.

Through the example of the *Hypothetical Harmonious Society*, I have supported the hypothesis that the geographic definition of electoral constituencies increases the

²⁸ The feasibility of electoral reform often depends on whether the changes benefit the party or coalition of parties in power. However, instead of therefore rejecting certain electoral reforms as unfeasible, we should question the legitimacy of letting elected representatives decide on the procedure for their re-election. Along these lines, Abizadeh (2017) argues that electoral rules should instead be decided by a randomly selected citizen assembly.

chances that political parties become socially sorted, leading eventually to legislative gridlocks. Geographic constituencies are likely to incentivise political actors to crystallise *reinforcing cleavages* along geographic lines. The politicisation of reinforcing social divisions tends to result in social partisan sorting, which is known to heighten political conflict and diminish the willingness to make compromises. There are thus compelling reasons to rethink our geographically based electoral systems.

Heterogeneous electoral constituencies, on the other hand, present an opportunity to address social partisan sorting. A distinction can be made between suppressive and expressive approaches to the problem. While the suppressive approach aims to minimise the representation of intergroup differences in the legislature, the expressive approach encourages the representation of diverse social identities in the legislature. The idea of heterogeneous electoral constituencies has, thus far, received relatively little support as it is believed that, in combination with a single seat, heterogeneous constituencies have suppressive effects with potentially anti-democratic consequences. However, in this paper, I have argued that heterogeneous constituencies may instead have expressive effects. In particular, I have suggested that heterogeneous constituencies are likely to empower political actors to politicise the salient *cross-cutting cleavages* that exist in society. The politicisation of cross-cutting social divisions prevents social partisan sorting. It is also known to moderate political conflict and thus to foster an environment conducive to political compromises. As such, substituting geographic with heterogeneous electoral constituencies may not only address immediate challenges to ineffective governance but may also pave the way for a more inclusive and resilient political landscape.

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Declarations

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