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# Candidate Ethnic Identification in Post-Soviet Latvia

Benjamin P. McClelland<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This paper examines how political entrepreneurs politicize ethnic cleavages in a recently democratized country. Using a novel data set of politicians' appeals to voters in post-Soviet Latvia, I show that in the absence of explicit legal protections for ethnic groups, minority groups are less likely to campaign on ethnicity than majority groups. Balancing concerns of political irrelevance because of their smaller group size with the incentives to represent their own group's unique interests, minority candidates are more likely to campaign on platforms that emphasize policy or ideology than ethnic identities. Candidates from majority groups, on the other hand, are far more likely to promise voters to represent ethnic interests, and to win election by doing so.

## Keywords

Ethnic Voting, Political Parties, Party Systems, Post-Communism, Latvia

In ethnically diverse societies, ethnic identities are thought to be important cleavages for political party formation. Whereas in ethnically homogenous societies parties are most likely to mobilize around class-based social divides (e.g., labor versus capital, urban versus rural, etc.), ethnically diverse societies are likely to see parties divided between ethnic communities. Ethnic mobilization is thought to be most likely among ethnic minorities in a society demographically dominated by a titular majority group. These groups, such as Māori in New Zealand, French-speakers in Canada, or Hungarians in Romania are thought to support candidates who represent their ethnic groups because of common interests stemming from cultural, linguistic, and geographic commonalities (Bates 1983; Csörgő 2007; Liu 2015). Ethnic mobilization is also thought to be particularly likely in newly democratized countries. In this context where political parties lack resources or infrastructure to mobilize voters, candidates may rely on kin networks in order to garner citizen support (Bowles and Gintis 2004), or use ethnic cues to overcome difficulties in obtaining reliable information on candidates and parties (Birnie 2007; Ferree 2006).

Yet there is an underappreciated countervailing force that is likely to discourage active ethnic campaigning. Since ethnic attributes are overtly visible and difficult to change in the short-term, ethnic identities help political actors eliminate a certain degree of *ex ante* uncertainty. Because campaigning to represent one group and exclude all others is likely to alienate voters from excluded groups, the amount of support a candidate can expect to receive by appealing to voters on the basis of ethnic identities has an upper limit imposed by the size of the group to which she belongs.

This paper proposes that the politicization of ethnicity in a divided democracy ultimately benefits ethnic majority groups. Electoral democracy is ultimately a system of majority rule. In a pure ethnic census vote (i.e., an election where ethnicity perfectly predicts to voting behavior) with a majoritarian electoral system, majority groups will win

and minority groups will lose. For this reason, minority group members have stronger incentives to politicize non-ethnic cleavages than majority group members do. Group identities which crosscut ethnicity such as class, region, or ideology may produce winning electoral coalitions that contain substantial numbers of ethnic minority group members. Politicizing ethnicity, however, may produce permanent exclusion of minority groups from winning elections or forming coalitions with parties dominated by the majority group. Majority groups face a much smaller penalty for mobilizing along ethnic lines and excluding minority group members. Doing so alienates a smaller proportion of the population and does not preclude them from forming a majority.

This paper demonstrates the divergent incentives for ethnic campaigning between majority and minority groups over time in a single country under a period of democratic consolidation. Using an original data set of every candidate for the national parliament in post-Soviet Latvia between 1995 and 2014, I show how political elites have employed appeals to represent ethnic communities in their campaign promises during Latvia's democratic post-communist period. The data demonstrate that over time, ethnic appeals to the majority group become far more common than appeals to the minority groups. Votes for parties which claim to represent the interests of titular majorities become a more common characteristic of winning candidates, while appeals to ethnic minority groups, on the other hand, effectively disappear from Latvian mainstream politics. I further show that individual candidates who contest multiple elections

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in a row and change their positions in between elections hardly ever take up the cause of ethnic minority groups. Instead, they are far more likely to adopt positions appealing to ethnic majority group members, or to abandon ethnic appeals entirely in favor of civic nationalism or multiethnic populism.

The paper contributes to the study of ethnic politics and democracy in divided societies in several ways. First, it shows how the decisions made by political elites during a period of democratic consolidation translate identity group distinctions into formal political parties. Secondly, it suggests that while ethnicity may indeed be an important factor in voting behavior, it is not the case that minority groups are mobilizing coethnics into political parties. Minority group candidates are more likely to attempt building non-ethnic political coalitions, while majority members rely on exclusionary policy proposals and campaign rhetoric. In other words, it is not minority mobilization driving observed outcomes, but exclusionary choices made by the majority group.

This paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, I discuss the link between ethnic cleavages and political parties, and argue why titular majorities and ethnic minority groups have different preferences for the politicization of ethnicity. I then discuss the Latvian case and the data used to document the politicization of ethnicity in the Latvian context, and present the findings of the quantitative analysis. The final section concludes.

## Cleavages and party systems

A rich literature on parties and elections demonstrates that ethnicity is one of many cleavages along which political parties mobilize their voters (Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2018; Lipset and Rokkan 1967). While parties must ultimately be founded on social divides which differentiate citizen from each other, divides which produce solidarity between members are the most likely to produce enduring political parties. Empirically, the parties which have the most long-term electoral success are those that incorporate ethnic identity, cultural values, and positions on economic redistribution (Bartolini 2011). But as Sartori (1969) noted, interests and identities do not become the basis of political activity without political actors who do the work of “translating” the social groups into political forces by politicizing specific issues and organizing voters into blocs capable of gaining power. Party systems are not handed down by some divine authority, but rather are the results of choices made by both political entrepreneurs and everyday voters. Ultimately, a social category only becomes the basis of a political party through the interactive decisions of elites and masses: candidates need to campaign to people in that group and voters need to support them in doing so.

The literature on ethnic voting sees ethnicity as unique among social cleavages and especially important to understanding voting behavior in new democracies or contexts prone to volatility and instability. Because ethnicity is both difficult to change in the short term, and frequently highly visible to voters, ethnicity can be useful as a proxy for other political interests (Birnie 2007; Chandra 2011; Ferree 2006; Tavits 2008). In the absence of other information

provided by independent media, party outreach efforts, and candidate reputations, voters may infer that common ethnic identity correlates to common societal position and political interest. In the absence of developed independent media or partisan outreach infrastructure, ethnic community and kinship networks may also facilitate the mobilization of voters (Manning 2005). In these interpretations, ethnic identities serve as an informational heuristic, filling in for a lack of reliable information on party’s positions or intentions on other issues. Ethnic cleavages are not the same as other social cleavages, in that they help voters not only identify commonalities between themselves and candidates for office, but also help to identify likely electoral constituencies and their relative group size. In the same way that a voter can easily observe a candidate’s ethnicity from their name, dress, language, or mannerisms, leaders can easily identify constituents and likely supporters. What is less clear, though, is the degree to which voters and elites have incentives to maintain the ethnic cleavage as the basis of political organization.

The ethnic cleavage, then, is unique in that unlike ideological stance or policy preference, ethnic identities are credibly assigned to individuals prior to any political campaign. “Faking” an ethnic identity—while not impossible—is more difficult than misrepresenting one’s true competence or intentions if elected. A candidate can easily show that she is a member of a specific ethnic group, and has been since she was born, whereas it takes much more work to establish credibility as a supporter of free markets, traditional social values, or other ideological positions. Candidates have the option to present themselves as champions of specific ethnic groups, and many do. The choices of which labels and identities to invest in is especially important in the early years of democratization and democratic consolidation. In a cross-national survey of party system development, Mair observed that “while cleavage structures act to stabilize electorates, they tend to do so slowly, with the result that almost regardless of region or timing, the early years of party systems, and the early years of newly democratized electorates, tend to prove the most unstable (Mair 1998, p.182).” While political cleavages in long-standing democracies may exhibit some institutional inertia and be slow to change (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), party systems and political issues in young democracies may be much more dependent on the immediate decisions made by political elites. In the early stages of democratic consolidation, elections may focus on foundational and transitional issues, and then evolve over several electoral cycles as democracy consolidates Kitschelt (1992). Building party reputations and establishing linkages between parties and voters takes time and investment of resources, and reliable political constituencies may not be developed until several electoral cycles have passed (Brader and Tucker 2001; Lupu and Stokes 2010; McAllister and White 2007). While the literature on ethnic voting suggests that ethnic identities may present an efficient way of mobilizing voters in the early phases of democratization and democratic consolidation, it is less clear whether we should expect these ethnic bases of mobilization to endure as dominant cleavages or to give way to other social cleavages.

To understand the relationship between ethnicity and party system development, we need to understand which

political actors will see ethnic mobilization as advantageous. To do this, it is important to acknowledge another unique aspect of ethnic identities that are different from other social cleavages: the way in which they eliminate *ex ante* uncertainty. Because ethnic identities are visible, political elites can gauge what level of support might exist for an ethnic-based candidacy before the election takes place. If, for example, a specific group represents thirty percent of the population, then political entrepreneurs know in advance that appealing directly to that group and excluding all others will never yield more than thirty percent of the vote. While there may be some exceptions due to informational availability and other idiosyncratic factors, all else equal, successfully mobilizing a large group will produce more votes than mobilizing a small group. This produces different incentives to mobilize coethnics based on group size.

In this way, politicizing ethnicity is not equally appealing to all groups, as the power that a group is likely to achieve through ethnic voting is dependent on its size. In a pure ethnic census vote—where ethnicity perfectly corresponds to vote choice—the biggest group wins and the smallest group loses. This has important implications for party system development in countries divided between majority and minority groups. Minority groups have strong reasons to desire representation on the basis of ethnicity which stem from their unique policy interests. They may benefit from state support to their language or cultural practices, or they may fear assimilation or discrimination coming from the majority group (Rovny 2014). But in a majority-rules democracy, they also can only exercise any political power through their relationship with the majority group. Barring some unusual form of minority government, they are likely unable to influence policy on their own. As such, campaigning exclusively to coethnics is a less viable strategy for victory for minorities than it is for majority group members. Minority members have strong incentives to politicize some cleavage that crosscuts ethnic identities.

Over time, then, as democracy consolidates and political parties and candidates become more sophisticated, certain type of political actors should be more likely to politicize ethnicity than others. Candidates from the majority group should be more likely to pursue strategies of mobilizing coethnics and excluding ethnic outsiders, while minority candidates should be more likely to depoliticize ethnicity, building multi-ethnic coalitions along social cleavages which cross-cut ethnicity.

### Ethnic mobilization in post-Soviet Latvia

Post-Soviet Latvia presents an important opportunity to observe variation in the behavior of political actors which politicize ethnic identity. It is a clear example of a country divided between a titular majority and a sizable ethnic minority. Ethnic Latvians comprise a majority of the Latvian population at roughly 62%. Approximately 27% of the population is ethnically Russian, with the remaining proportion composed mostly of other Slavic peoples such as Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Poles (Centrālā Statistikas Pārvalde 2015). The Latvian Parliament is elected through PR open-list ballots in five electoral districts with a high district magnitude ranging from 13 to 30. Latvia is therefore

a highly proportional electoral system, but one which has no overt legal protections for ethnic minority groups.<sup>1</sup>

In this context, the literature on voting institutions would expect that the effective number of parties should be quite high, supporting parties representing a diverse array of social groups, including ethnic communities (Rae 1967; Sartori 1976; Lijphart 1994). However, even in this context, ethnic mobilization should not be taken for granted. Since ethnic minority Russian-speakers know that they are ultimately less than a majority of the population, they should be more hesitant to alienate ethnically Latvian voters and coalition partners. Since ethnic Latvians do constitute an absolute majority of the country, Latvian ethnicity should be more frequently politicized.

As Latvian democracy consolidates, appeals to majority group members should increase or stay consistently high, while appeals to ethnic minority group members should decrease or stay consistently low. This produces a series of testable hypotheses in the Latvian context.

*H*<sub>1</sub>: Vote share going to parties that appeal directly to ethnic Latvians should increase or remain high over time.

*H*<sub>2</sub>: Ethnic appeals to Russians should decrease or remain low over time.

If these pressures are present, then candidates should also change their behavior over time. Seeing appeals to the majority group as a more viable path to political power than appeals to the minority group, political elites from each group should modify their campaign and mobilization strategies accordingly:

*H*<sub>3</sub>: Candidates who make appeals to ethnic Latvians will continue to do so.

*H*<sub>4</sub>: Candidates who make appeals to ethnic Russians will change their appeals.

*H*<sub>5</sub>: Candidates who make non-ethnic appeals will be more likely to change to ethnic Latvian appeals than ethnic Russian appeals.

### Data and variation

To measure ethnic campaigning and voting in Latvia, I rely on an original data set of all political parties and candidates contesting all elections between 1995 and 2014—the two decades following Latvia's first post-Soviet election.<sup>2</sup> During this period, Latvia successfully reformed from a socialist command economy to a liberal market economy, joined the European Union and the Eurozone, and is generally seen to have consolidated democracy.

One of the biggest challenges to measurement is that Latvia is one of the most volatile party systems in the post-communist world. This volatility is partly the result of voters changing their support, but more frequently the product of new party formation and the reorganization of old parties between elections (Sikk 2005). Nevertheless, while the configuration of specific parties is in constant flux, there is also remarkable consistency in Latvian political cleavages. Individual candidates often contest multiple elections in a row, even if they do change parties repeatedly during this

period. Moreover, the programmatic and policy positions offered to voters often remains the same between electoral contests (Borbáth 2020; Casal Bértoa 2017; Rovny and Polk 2017).

To generate a precise measure of ethnic campaigning in this chaotic environment, I exploit a unique institution in Latvian elections: the pre-electoral party program. Latvian electoral law does not allow for independent candidacy. To appear on the ballot, individuals must join a party list, and that party must submit an official party platform. These pre-election programs are not only part of the public record, but are distributed to media to be published in newspapers and broadcast on TV and radio, and also provided to voters on election day when they receive their ballots (Ikstens 2017). As a result, these programs are not just a bureaucratic obligation, but state-sponsored free advertising. They are the only legal way that a party can communicate to voters while they are actually in the voting booth, and parties have strong incentives to portray themselves in the best possible light. These programs are limited by law to 4,000 characters, meaning that Latvian political programs are extremely short by international standards.<sup>3</sup> Four thousand characters can easily be printed on a pamphlet and read relatively quickly by a typical voter, and Latvian citizens are far more likely to have seen and considered official party programs than their counterparts in other democratic countries. The character limit also forces parties to identify only those issues most important to communicate to voters. The limit also facilitates comparability across parties for the purposes of comparative research, as it forces all parties, regardless of electoral viability or professionalization, to declare their most important campaign themes and present them to voters in a standardized format.

I first obtained party platforms from all elections since 1995 directly from the Latvian Election Commission in Riga. I then hand-coded a total of 118 programs over all electoral cycles from 1995 to 2014 according to pre-determined coding criteria. In coding parties, I employ the definition of “ethnic party” developed by Chandra (2004). For a party to be classified as ethnic, it must clearly identify itself with a specific ethnic group. It must also exclude other ethnic groups from their agenda, making it obvious who the “outsiders” are who will not benefit from the policies enacted by the party once in power. The party must also make its ethnic identity central to its brand, with ethnically defined group interests as the central mission of the party’s political agenda. The standard employed is whether or not a typical voter would be able to clearly and quickly identify which ethnic group a party claimed to support using information made readily available by the party itself. These data were then mapped to the full candidate lists and vote totals for all candidates registered to contest national-level parliamentary elections. Unfortunately, candidate lists from the 1995 election are not publicly available, and so while party programs from that election are coded, candidate-level data from that election is not included in the dataset. The resulting data contains 8,767 observations listing every candidate who contested elections in the period surveyed, and whether or not they explicitly identified with a specific ethnic group in each electoral contest.

This is not the first study to approach Latvian party programs as primary data sources. The Manifesto Research on Political Representation Project (“MARPOR”) has analyzed a subset of the same primary source documents. This project departs from the MARPOR data set in two important ways. The first is in scope. MARPOR analyzes the party platforms only of those parties which win seats in Parliament. While this approach is entirely appropriate for research into the programmatic positions of political actors as they relate to policy outcomes or coalition formation, it is not appropriate for one focused on the use of ethnic appeals to voters. Since the purpose of this study is to determine when ethnic appeals are successful and when they fail, it is important to include those parties which fail to clear the threshold for representation in parliament. This number is substantial in Latvia. As a highly fractured party system with as many twenty parties contesting each election, the potential for coordination failure and vote wasting is quite high in the Latvian context. This is especially true in the early democratizing period, as many parties lacked organizational capacity, voters lacked political sophistication, and candidates had little in the way of reputational resources to campaign on. Over the six electoral cycles in this study, 9.04% of votes went to parties which ultimately failed to win any seats in parliament. There is also (consistent with expectations of varying voter sophistication and party capacity during the period of democratic consolidation) a substantial decrease in wasted votes over time. Nearly 16% of votes went to parties that failed to win seats in 2002, but only 5% of votes were “wasted” in this way in 2014. Including all parties in the dataset—regardless of their ability to win seats in parliament—reflects the total range of political choices available to voters at each election, and is more appropriate for the purposes of this study.

The second main difference between this and the MARPOR approach is that the coding scheme is tailored specifically for Latvian political and social context. Rather than relying on a single left-right policy spectrum, this paper follows Zulianello (2014) by re-analyzing party manifestos from scratch in way sensitive to a specific policy or substantive area. As the focus is the variation in ethnic appeals over time within a single country, the coding scheme embraces cultural, social, and political issues specific to the Latvian context. This results in a deeper and more specific assessment than the MARPOR data provides, and one that reflects more closely how Latvian voters are likely to understand the appeals made to them in the programs.

An illustrative example is the divergent codings between my data set and the MARPOR data regarding the National Alliance. The National Alliance is regarded by many journalistic and academic sources as one of Europe’s far-right populist parties, having taken vocal anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, anti-LGBT, and ethnic nationalist positions (Mudde 2014; Martyn-Hemphill 2016; Zakharov and Law 2017). The MARPOR coding, though, includes several determinations of “Multiculturalism: Positive”, the same code assigned to the parties which campaign to Latvia’s ethnic Russian community. The discrepancy stems from appeals made by the National Alliance to other ethnic groups in its pre-election program. Specifically, they promise

that, “we will strengthen the role of the Latvian language, especially in the media and in commerce. We will ensure the preservation of the Livonian language, the Latgalian culture, and the dialects of the Latvian language”. While this technically is an appeal to multicultural cosmopolitanism, it is important to understand exactly *which* cultures the appeal is directed towards. Livonian is, practically speaking, a dead language, its last native speaker having died in 2013 at the age of 103 (Charter 2013). The Livonians are regarded as an indigenous people native to the northwest coast of modern Latvian territory, and thus the preservation of the Livonian language is a largely academic and cultural exercise in preserving Latvia’s ancient (and therefore obviously pre-Soviet) history. Likewise, Latgalian is considered by many scholars to be a historical antecedent of modern standardized Latvian. It is mutually intelligible with Latvian, and sometimes used in an official capacity in the Latgallia region. While the appeal to Livonian and Latgalian languages may technically be an appeal to a form of multiculturalism, it almost certainly would not be perceived as a tolerant and welcoming stance to the ethnic Russians who are unlikely to speak either of those languages, and who actually form a local majority in many areas of Latgallia. Likewise, when PCTVL, a Russian interest party, advocates for more university instruction conducted in Russian, such an appeal is also technically a form of “multiculturalism.” Yet it is likely to be perceived as a direct challenge to ethnic Latvian nationalists, who view Latvian as an endangered language that must be preserved by state authority. In this example, classifying both types of policy proposals as “multiculturalism” misses the fact that by appealing to specific language communities, these two policies are extremely divisive and appeal only to a narrow ethnically delineated set of voters.

For this reason, the coding scheme employed separates not based on whether an appeal is ethnic or non-ethnic, but which specific group it is an appeal towards. The two examples discussed above would therefore not be coded as multicultural appeals, but cultural appeals to specific linguistic groups: Latvians, Livonians, Latgallians, and Russians. This distinction allows for appeals which are truly multicultural to be coded as such, as is the case with the Free from Fear, Hate and Anger party’s assertion that: “Nationality and language differences are no obstacle to a united country. The people should not be divided by national origin. Everyone has the right to their own identity, to build their own societies and schools.”

Under this measurement strategy, a party can make ethnic appeals to Russians, or not. It can make ethnic appeals to Latvians or not. In this way, the classifications are qualitative, not quantitative, relying on a system of dichotomous variables. This is against the advice of some scholars who argue that issue salience is a crucial component of understanding ethnic voting, especially since voters may be basing their decision on the degree to which parties make the ethnic issue central to their brand more than the actual position they take (Meguid 2008; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2009). The logic behind this decision is based both on the particularities of the data environment in Latvia, and the relationship of the data to the research question. Because parties are limited to only 4,000 characters, many

platforms do not dwell on any single issue, instead trying to convey as many policy positions as possible in the fewest words. Ethnic Latvian parties especially will often establish their ethnic credentials in the very first paragraph of the platform, before moving on to discuss tax or spending policies they would implement if elected. A measure of party salience based on coverage in the platform would likely therefore under-report the degree to which political parties rely on ethnic messaging. Moreover, this dichotomous measure may more accurately reflect the way voters understand party platforms. A party that represents itself as an advocate of ethnic interests first and foremost is likely to be understood as an ethnic party by voters, regardless of what percentage of their text allotment they dedicate to espousing these positions.

This measurement strategy also ignores other positions that parties take with regards to other issue dimensions. Under my coding scheme, it is possible to claim to be an ethnic party representing the interests of ethnic Latvians, but also espouse a pro-business agenda centered on low levels of redistribution, laissez-faire economics, and property rights. It is also possible to claim to represent the interests of ethnic Latvians but argue for high taxation, guaranteed employment, state control of the economy, and high social spending. This is not to say that these other dimensions are unimportant ways that parties vary. But to include all possible interactions between ethnicity and other policy areas sacrifices statistical power in a study using within-country data. As the main question asked here is when political elites have incentives to mobilize along ethnic identities, I employ a measurement system that remains agnostic as to the role of other issue dimensions. In this, I follow Protsyk and Garaz (2013) by treating ethnic identification as a completely separate axis of political competition, independent of traditionally-understood left/right positioning on economic and social issues.

## Findings

With this data set, I conduct an analysis of over-time variation, both in voter behavior and elite behavior. The data suggest that there are divergent trajectories between ethnic majority group Latvians and ethnic minority Russians. The importance of appeals to ethnic majority group members stays constant or increases over time. The importance of non-ethnic or multicultural appeals to voters also increases over time. Appeals to minority groups, however, decreases steadily and is eventually relegated to the fringes of Latvian political discourse.

## Voting results

In Figure 1, I present a stacked area chart of all electoral returns in the period under study. This chart shows the relative share of the vote going to parties that make each of three types of appeals: ethnic Latvian, ethnic Russian, and non-ethnic. Appeals to ethnic Latvians remain relatively constant over the entire period. With the one notable exception of the election in 2002, parties portraying themselves as champions of ethnic Latvian interests win roughly 50% of the votes in all Latvian elections. The drop in 2002 is likely the result of Latvia’s referendum to join the

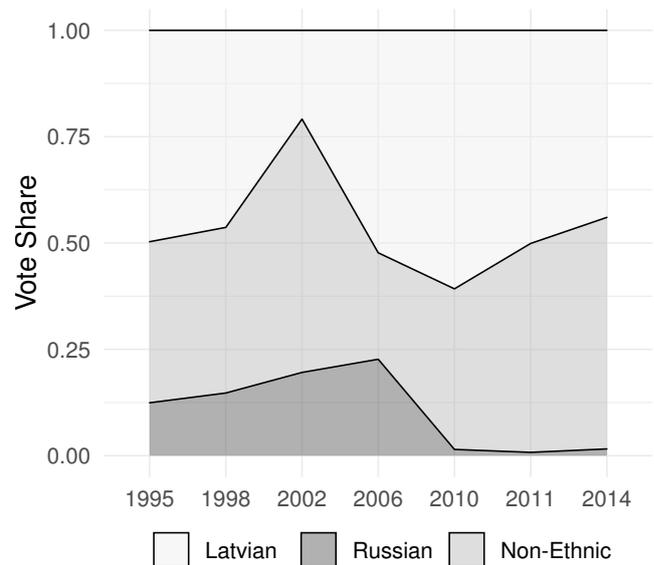
EU in 2003. Many parties that support the EU campaigned that year by describing themselves as internationalists or European integrationists, rather than in ethnic terms. Some of those that were against Latvia joining the EU did so by describing themselves as committed to national sovereignty and the independence of the Latvian state, which technically they defended on non-ethnically defined terms. Many of the rightist and Latvian nationalist parties therefore, for this election only, did not make explicitly ethnically defined appeals.<sup>4</sup> However, the general pattern returned in 2006, providing strong support for  $H_1$ .

Consistent with  $H_2$ , vote share for ethnic Russian parties follows a different trajectory. First, parties that make explicit appeals to Russian ethnic interests never reach the level of ethnic Latvian appeals. This most likely reflects the natural ceiling imposed on ethnic Russian appeals by demographics. Since ethnic Russians make up less than 40% of the population of Latvia, it is extremely unlikely that ethnic Russian parties would ever amass more than 40% of the vote. The highest value this ever reaches is 22.7% in 2006. Yet the gradual increase of each election cycle leads to a sudden drop-off following the 2006 election. While the gradual increase in the first four elections is most likely the result of increasing number of Russian voters gaining citizenship throughout this period, citizenship laws fail to account for the sudden drop in 2010. Ironically, the greatest number of naturalizations happened in the mid-2000's, and by 2010 the number of ethnic Russians eligible to vote in Parliamentary elections was almost certainly *higher* than it was in 2006, yet the explicit Russian ethnic identification plays a relatively minor role in the Latvian party system beyond this point. Instead, Russians voters tend to support parties not campaigning on specific ethnic identification, but rather on issues that appeal to ethnic minority voters on non-ethnic grounds. This is reflected in the corresponding increase in the support for non-ethnic parties.

Figure 1 depicts a party system-level overview of Latvian politics<sup>5</sup>. The figure suggests that parties which campaign on explicit Russian ethnic identification wane in importance over time, as a smaller and smaller segment of Latvian voters support them. Parties which make ethnic Latvian appeals, though, do not diminish in the same way, maintaining constant support. These observations are focused on voting outcomes, and combine two separate processes: the politicians proposing positions, and then voters choosing what to support. I now turn to examine these dynamics through a separate quantitative analysis of candidates.

### *Candidates elected*

The analyses that follow use the candidate-year as the unit of analysis, which allows for an individual to appear in the data set multiple times. If, for example, a candidate appeared on a party list at every election between 1998 and 2014, then that candidate appears in the dataset six separate times. Indexing by year has the benefit that candidates are not assumed to be consistent in their ethnic messaging. A candidate can campaign on ethnic appeals in one election, but not in the next, (or vice-versa) and that variation will be captured in this measurement strategy. Over six electoral cycles, a total of 8,767 observations are recorded, produced by 4,508 unique



**Figure 1.** Vote share in Latvia by appeal type over time

individuals. Of those 4,508, a total of 1,041 individuals contested multiple elections, creating a complete picture of the Latvian political class and all possible legislators of the country. These large numbers facilitate analyses using even relatively demanding statistical models requiring large- $N$  data sets. The use of candidate-years also takes full advantage of the Latvian law on party platforms. As every candidate must sign her name to a party platform at every election to appear on the ballot, all candidates can be matched to a position on ethnic issues.

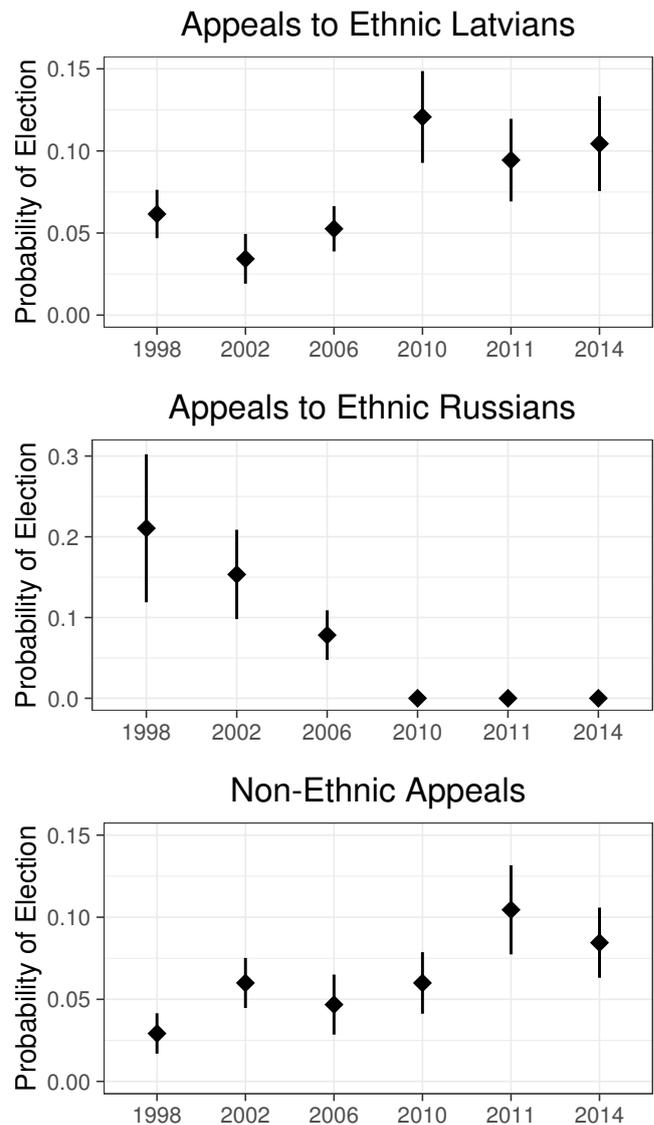
Nevertheless, the linking of candidate-years to party platforms in order to provide measurements on candidate ethnic positioning is not without some controversy. The biggest concern is that because party lists consist of large number of candidates, the number of candidates is much larger than the number of party platforms. The project thus uses roughly a hundred documents to code thousands of individuals. It may be argued that since party platforms are generated collectively by multiple candidates and party members, that a candidate-level analysis is inappropriate, and that a party-level analysis would be more suitable.

This concern has some validity, but should be taken as cause to limit the appropriate conclusions that can be drawn from the analyses that follow, not to reject them entirely. It is true that since the candidate coding schemes are drawn from sources which do not produce variation within parties, the analyses cannot provide any information on which candidate within a party list is most likely to eventually be seated in parliament. This is unfortunate, given how significant intra-party competition is in Latvia. But the most important variation for this study—the difference between candidates who make ethnic appeals and those that do not—exists at the party level not the individual level. This variation is captured by the coding of party platforms, and therefore the measurement strategy is still valid for the research question. Moreover, the use of candidate-years is the easiest way to avoid difficult, almost existential questions about what constitutes a “political party” in Latvia which could undermine any attempt at systematic study. Given

the extremely high volatility, and the frequent occurrence of schisms, mergers, and new party foundations, over-time analyses of party positioning are extremely difficult. If, for example, a party has a completely new name, new logo, and new platform, but almost all of its candidates had previously been members of the same party, it is not clear if this a new party or not. Given that parties are frequently formed and registered as combinations of multiple loosely organized factions, factional shifting can create big difficulties for defining party continuity. It is not uncommon for a party to fold and one portion of its candidates go into one party, while the rest go into another. Party-level measurement ignores those dynamics, and require potentially controversial *a priori* decisions about which parties are continuations of previous parties, and which are new.

Using the candidate-year as the unit of analysis, I conduct a regression analysis using a logit model with a dichotomous indicator of whether the candidate won a seat in parliament as the dependent variable, and the independent variable a vector of dummies indicating whether the candidate explicitly identified as a champion of ethnic Latvian interests, ethnic Russian interests, or neither. In order to avoid collinearity, the coding scheme treats non-ethnic appeals as a residual category. The strength of the logit analysis here is that it is fundamentally probabilistic. The theory does not presume a deterministic relationship between ethnic campaigning and electoral appeals: it merely predicts that there should be differences in the success rates of ethnic appeals between majority and minority group. I therefore use the estimates produced by the analysis to generate predicted probabilities with 95% confidence intervals for each type of appeal at each electoral cycle, which I present in Figure 2. The *x* axis on this chart represents the elections, while the *y* axis represents the estimated probability that a candidate would win that election after making either an ethnic appeal to Latvians, an ethnic appeal to Russians, or no ethnic appeal at all. In 1998, for example, an estimated 6.1% of candidates who made ethnic appeals to Latvians won election to the national parliament, while an estimated 21% of candidates who made ethnic appeals to Russians won, and 2.9% of candidates who campaigned on non-ethnic platforms won.

The predictions are somewhat noisy. This is not particularly surprising, as the measurement strategy puts a large amount of variation into the error term. The classification system measures variation only on ethnic positioning, but no party in this data set takes positions *only* on ethnic identification. Most platforms which explicitly declare for either ethnic Latvians or Russians also articulate positions on foreign policy, taxes, social spending, etc., which these data do not address. Those positions are nevertheless likely highly relevant in the decision-making process of Latvian voters. Many of the most salient issues in electoral politics, such as incumbents versus opposition and retrospective and prospective assessments of candidates, are ignored here. The “bouncing” pattern seen in some of the estimates is likely the result of government turnover, as voters support for specific parties ebbs and flows over time. However, there is a clear divergence in the long-term trajectories of the candidate appeals to ethnic Latvian and non-ethnic parties in contrast to ethnic Russian appeals. Consistent with  $H_3$  and  $H_5$ , the success of both ethnic



**Figure 2.** Probability of election in Latvia by appeal type over time

Latvian appeals and non-ethnic appeals increases in the period under study; while there is some variation year-to-year, there is a distinct upward trajectory for both. Russian appeal success, however, drops off, eventually reaching zero. This suggests that a candidate today making an appeal to ethnic Latvians has a higher chance of winning office as a result of that appeal than she did in 1998, and is consistent with  $H_4$ . The same is true of a candidate making non-ethnic appeals, or ignoring the issue entirely. But the exact opposite is true for a candidate making an ethnic appeal to Russian voters. Whereas in 1998 a Russian ethnic appeal was associated with a comparatively high chance of winning office, in 2014 that chance is, statistically speaking, zero.

This trajectory is the opposite of what might be expected given the citizenship politics in Latvia during this period. As the greatest number of naturalizations happened in the mid-2000’s, by 2010 the number of ethnic Russians eligible to vote in Parliamentary elections was drastically higher than it was in 2006. This would suggest that the natural constituency for ethnic Russian appeals was growing, even as

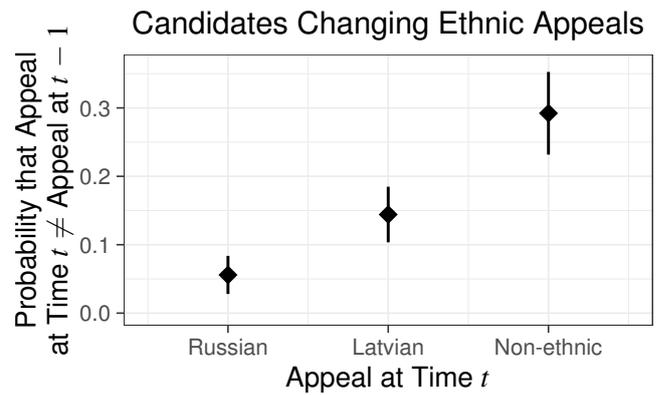
the likelihood of candidates winning office by campaigning on a platform of Russian ethnic appeals was shrinking. It also suggests that even though some voters are still supporting parties which campaign as ethnic Russian champions—as seen in Figure 1—those parties which do so are relegated to the fringes of Latvian politics; those appeals are not able to actually elect anyone to office. This is in stark contrast to the general upward trend of electoral victory for Latvian ethnic parties and parties which do not explicitly identify as ethnic.

### Candidate Behavior

Given these tendencies over time, candidates have incentives to adjust their campaign strategies. Electoral experience should demonstrate that non-ethnic and ethnic majority appeals are easier paths to electoral victory than ethnic minority Russian appeals. These patterns are evident in the data. To test these predictions outlined in  $H_3$ ,  $H_4$ , and  $H_5$ , I look specifically at those candidates who ran in multiple elections. Pooling all this data allows for an estimation of the over-time trajectories of candidate strategies and outcomes.

The data suggest that revising one's position on ethnic appeals is quite common among Latvian parliamentary candidates. Of the 1,047 individuals who appeared on party lists in more than one consecutive election in the period under study, 435 of them have changed their position regarding ethnic identification at least once. These changes happen either when a candidate switches parties—moving from a non-ethnic party to an ethnic party, for example—or when a candidate stays within a party which changes its position on ethnic representation. To identify patterns in these switches, I regress whether or not a candidate changed her ethnic identification between elections  $t$  and  $t - 1$  on the indicators of the type of appeal made at election  $t$ . The predicted probabilities, plotted in Figure 3, are estimates of the average likelihood of a candidate making a specific type of appeal during an election after having made a different type of approval in the contest before. In other words, the predicted probabilities indicate the likelihood that a candidate will abandon a previous position in order to adopt either an ethnic Russian position, an ethnic Latvian position, or a non-ethnic position. Overall, an estimated 11.21% of candidates making appeals to Russians changed their party platforms in order to appeal directly to ethnic Russians. This is a much lower figure than the estimated 27% of candidates making Latvian appeals, who had switched their position in order to represent ethnic Latvians. The highest rate of change is in those making non-ethnic appeals. Pooling over all the electoral contests under study, the model estimates that 42.95% of the candidates changed their platform to non-ethnic from something else.

The findings above are constrained to the 1,047 candidates who contested more than one election in a row. While these repeat contenders are the career politicians who make up the Latvian political class, most candidates do not fall into this category. There are 3,760 candidates who contested only a single election in the period under study. In a party list system like Latvia's, parties may believe it is in their best interest to fill out the entire list of open slots, to maximize their ability to take as many seats as possible. No party has ever won an outright majority in Latvia, and in an electoral system with 100 seats and as many as 20 parties



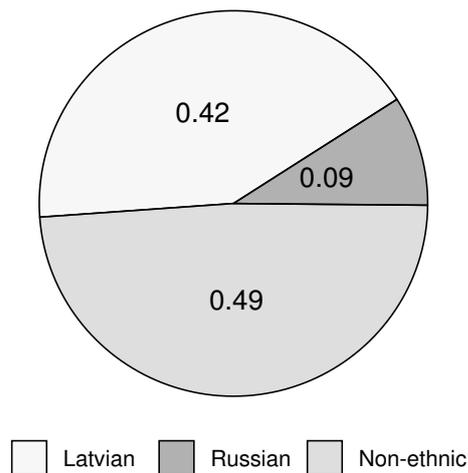
**Figure 3.** Likelihood of candidate changing ethnic appeal in Latvia 1998-2014

contesting elections, it is extremely unlikely for a single party to need a full 100 candidates on the ballot. Many parties put 100 candidates on their ballot so that it is mathematically possible, albeit highly unlikely for the party to sweep all seats in Parliament. Some parties even put more than 100 candidates on the ballot, suggesting that candidates may be seeking to give voters choices on the open-list ballot. While the majority of Latvia's parliamentary seats are won by repeat candidates, one-time candidates represent a significant portion of Latvian elected officials. A full 30.33% of the parliamentary seats were won by candidates who had never contested elections before. While many elected officials are first-time candidates, most first-time candidates do not win election: only 5.1% of these candidates actually won a seat. Most of these candidates are placed extremely low on the party list, and likely enter with the full knowledge that will never be seated in the parliament.

The data indicate that new candidates contesting elections follow the same trends with regards to ethnic campaigning as those candidates which switch their affiliation. The pie chart in Figure 4 indicates the proportion of new candidates who joined parties making each type of appeal. Candidates making appeals to ethnic Russians constitute 9.22% of first-time candidates, while candidates making appeals to ethnic Latvians constitute 42.05% of the new candidates. This is hardly proportionate to the ratio of Latvians to Russians in the population. There are 2.41 ethnic Latvians for every Russian in Latvia, but a new candidate is 4.55 times more likely to espouse an ethnic Latvian agenda than an ethnic Russian agenda. The ratio is similar for first time candidates espousing non-ethnic party platforms, who comprised 48.72% of all new candidates in the data set.<sup>6</sup>

Altogether, the data show divergent trends between the various types of appeals. Support for ethnic Russian parties diminishes until it is statistically zero, while the proportion of winning candidates making ethnic Latvian and non-ethnic parties increases. Candidates joining parties and contesting elections for the first time are more likely to join non-ethnic parties or Latvian parties than they are Russian parties. Candidates contesting elections repeatedly are more likely to abandon Russian platforms for non-ethnic platforms, and abandon non-ethnic platforms for Latvian ones. Over time, the party system converges on an ethnic cleavage that should really be understood as “ethnic Latvian versus non-ethnic,” rather than “Latvian versus Russian.”

## First Time Candidates by Appeal Type



**Figure 4.** New candidate entry in Latvia by appeal type 1998-2014

## Conclusion

Latvia is an ethnically divided society where ethnicity is a strongly salient identity. Ethnic tensions have historically been high, and ethnicity is strongly correlated with vote choice. However, these findings suggest it is a mistake to understand Latvian politics as a division between ethnic Latvians and ethnic Russians. Rather, these results suggest that there is a group of parties that mobilize ethnic Latvian supporters, promising to support them and their unique ethnic interests; and a group of parties that attract ethnic minority support not through ethnic appeals, but by promising not to politicize ethnic identities. Even in this highly ethnically polarized environment, majority groups and minority groups respond to different incentives to politicize ethnicity.

There are some scope conditions to the argument which should be acknowledged. Latvia is a highly proportional parliamentary system, where political rights for minorities are ensured only by the rule of law and regular elections. There are no explicit legal protections for minorities, such as guaranteed parliamentary representation, self-rule, or local autonomy. In other countries, however, national-level minorities are frequently given special legal protection, and could effectively function as local-level majorities. This would drastically alter their strategic calculations. In decentralized states or consociational regimes, guaranteed representation may incentivize ethnic voting by overcoming institutional challenges to exercising political power (Bochsler 2019; Lublin 2014). While the Latvian case suggests that minorities and majorities may have different strategic incentives to politicize ethnic identities, these incentives may be contingent on institutional environment and vary between local- and national-level elections (McClelland 2020).

The Latvian case also stresses the importance of examining ethnic minority issues through their relationship to the majority group. While “ethnic politics” is often used as shorthand to discuss the politics of minority groups,

this paper suggests that in the absence of any explicit protections for ethnic minority groups, ethnic campaigning is actually a privilege of ethnic majority groups only. In Latvia, it is true that ethnicity is a reliable predictor of vote choice. But Russian voting decisions may be less a result of direct campaigning to represent Russian interests than the product of other majority-dominated parties adopting ethnonationalist Latvian positions that exclude them. In other words, minorities are not mobilizing in support of their own issues, but rather they are being driven away from parties which increasingly define themselves as representatives of the majority group.

This paper further sheds light on a dilemma of representation best appreciated by examining this asymmetry between majority and minority groups. In an electoral democracy, majority groups by definition have an advantage that minority groups don't. While mobilizing group support may be a reliable means to achieve power for majority groups, minority groups can only ever wield power through their relationships with other groups. Ethnic extremism may therefore ultimately be a viable strategy only for majority groups. In this case, the ethnic majority group can force moderation in the minority group, but the minority group has no such power over the majority group. This dynamic may account for circumstances by which minority electoral success encourages ethnic extremism in the majority (Bustikova 2014; Meguid 2008). It also suggests that democratic accountability and representation may be governed by fundamentally different rules for ethnic majority groups and ethnic minority groups (Aha 2019).

Perhaps most importantly, the evidence here suggests that researchers need to more explicitly question assumptions about which group has the strongest incentives to politicize ethnicity. While it is true that ethnic minorities may be vulnerable to oppression by the majority group and aware of their own specific policy concerns, they are also the group with the strongest incentives to depoliticize ethnicity. In a purely ethnic election, minorities lose and majorities win. As such, we should hardly be surprised to see minority political actors taking steps to organize voters along non-ethnic cleavages.

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## Notes

1. While beyond the scope of this paper, Latvian law denied many ethnic Russians of voting rights in the years before EU accession. Even today, a small number of ethnic Russians hold “non-citizen” passports and are ineligible to vote in parliamentary elections. For a discussion of Latvian citizenship policy, see Agarin (2010) and Commercio (2008).
2. The founding election of 1993 is omitted due to data availability issues.
3. For comparative purposes, the German Christian Democratic Union's 2017 party program was over 150,000 characters. The American Republican Party's platform for the 2016 election was over 240,000 characters. The party program of Law and Order in Poland before the 2020 Presidential Elections

was roughly 400,000 characters. This page contains 5,216 characters.

4. See Mikkel and Pridham (2004), Ikstens (2007), and Schulze (2018). Euroscepticism was much lower in Latvia in comparison to other Baltic states, possibly because it was presented in terms that comported with nationalist ideology and ethnic Latvian interests. Both pro- and anti-European Union candidates defended their position with relation to Latvian “sovereignty,” seeing threats to Latvian independence coming from Russia or the EU respectively. However, in the platforms, many of these parties defend these positions with relation to the Latvian state, not the ethnically defined Latvian nation. By the coding criteria used, these are not ethnic appeals, even if the target audience was exclusively coethnics.
5. Note that elections are distributed evenly on the horizontal axis, even though they the actual time between elections may vary.
6. Descriptive statistics are presented here because a logit analysis is not possible. The dependent variable in a logit model to measure new candidate entry would be whether or not a candidate decided to contest an election in a given year. However, this is impossible to observe, since that would require us to identify all the “potential” candidates who chose not to seek election. Since we observe only those candidates who did enter the party lists, it is only possible to describe the relative frequency with which they attach their names to the three types of platforms described here.

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