

When Racist Voters Discriminate Against Minority Candidates

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Imagine that you are a small fish and the pool owner tells you that you have the freedom to swim in his pool. And then he adds: "But notice that the pool is full of white sharks." Does the notion of freedom have any meaningful value in such a situation?

Now imagine that, in a democracy, voters belonging to a given identity group (e.g., white people), that happens to be in a numerical majority, systematically vote only for candidates from that group and not for candidates of a minority group (e.g., black people). Imagine, moreover, that this decision is based on morally objectionable forms of prejudice (such as racism, xenophobia, or sexism). We could call such a voting behavior "electoral discrimination". It may result in a massive statistical underrepresentation of citizens from the minority group in democratic institutions (parliament, government). Apparently, no democratic rule has been broken: voters were free to choose whomever they wanted and their votes were counted equally, candidates were free to run for office and no legal provisions restricted their equal chance to run for office. And yet we intuitively realize that something is wrong here, that the voters' freedom of choice has caused harm to minority candidates. In other words, the freedom

to run for office becomes an empty shell if it is constantly undermined by voters' choices. Just like the freedom to swim in a pool full of white sharks. Indeed, in many countries of the world there has been evidence that majority voters tend to discriminate against minority candidates. African-Americans have been traditionally underrepresented in the U.S. Congress; about 5 million people of Maghrebian origin live in France but very few got elected to the National Assembly; Catholics used to be poorly represented in Northern Ireland, etc. Increasingly, politicians and scholars consider the underrepresentation of minority groups a major problem for the legitimacy and stability of democratic institutions. Indeed, what if not the (real or perceived) existence of electoral discrimination can explain the growing use of specific tools such as quotas on party lists, reserved seats in parliament, or the redrawing of electoral districts?

In the project "Racist voters and minority candidates", supported by the SNFS (the Ambizione grant), I will first explore the theoretical aspects of electoral discrimination in order to come up with a normative and conceptual roadmap for tackling this phenomenon. As a matter of fact, it is far from obvious that we can use the concept of discrimination

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in the electoral sphere. Secondly, I will try to measure the existence of electoral discrimination in Switzerland empirically, taking into consideration the fact that we can hardly find any empirical studies that have explored representation of minority groups in this country, whereas many such studies have been conducted in other Western democracies (e.g., Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, the United States).



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