

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# 1 Electoral incentives for cross-ethnic voting: evidence 2 from a natural experiment

3 Nenad Stojanović<sup>1,\*</sup> and Oliver Strijbis<sup>2</sup>

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4 <sup>1</sup>Département de science politique et relations internationales, Université de Genève, Genève 4, Switzerland and <sup>2</sup>Institut für  
5 Politikwissenschaft, Universität Zürich, Zürich, Switzerland

6 \*E-mail: [nenad.stojanovic@unige.ch](mailto:nenad.stojanovic@unige.ch)

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## 8 Abstract

9 Prospects for democracy in multi-ethnic societies are generally more promising if elections are not mere  
10 ethnic censuses, in which people vote predominantly for co-ethnic parties and candidates. But what  
11 institutions facilitate or hinder ethnic voting? Unlike past studies, this article explores ethnic voting by  
12 conducting a natural experiment (rather than surveys or laboratory experiments). It examines the case  
13 of Fribourg, a bilingual (French/German) Swiss canton where elections at different levels of government,  
14 within the same electoral district, are held under both majoritarian and proportional systems. Coupled  
15 with the high territorial homogeneity of the linguistic groups, this unique setting allows us to conduct  
16 a robust empirical analysis of voter behaviour. We find that cross-ethnic voting is significantly more  
17 frequent in multi-member majoritarian elections than in list-PR elections or in two-member majoritarian  
18 elections. Our results yield qualified support to the centripetalist approach to electoral design in  
19 multi-ethnic societies, that favours majoritarian systems, rather than to the consociational school that  
20 advocates PR.

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21 **Keywords:** electoral systems; ethnic voting; multi-ethnic societies; centripetalism; consociationalism; Switzerland

## 22 Introduction

23 One of the most controversial issues in the literature on electoral behaviour is whether, and under  
24 what circumstances, people tend to vote on the basis of their ascriptive identities – especially  
25 ethnic identities – rather than to choose parties and candidates that match their political beliefs  
26 and preferences (see, e.g., Lau and Redlawsk, 2006; Achen and Bartels, 2016; Arzheimer *et al.*,  
27 2017: Part 2). In particular, scholars have explored the question of whether citizens with a specific  
28 ethnic identity tend to support their respective ethnic parties and/or co-ethnic candidates  
29 (Wolfinger, 1965; Parenti, 1967; Stokes-Brown, 2006; Birnir 2007; Dunning and Harrison,  
30 2010; McConnaughy *et al.*, 2010; Hoffman and Lang, 2013; Fisher *et al.*, 2015; Heath *et al.*,  
31 2015; Portmann and Stojanović, 2018)? If they do, are such patterns of ethnic voting – also called  
32 ‘ethnic bloc voting’ (Ishiyama, 2012), ‘census elections’ (Horowitz, 1985, 1991: 98; Chandra, 2005;  
33 Ferree, 2006; Birnir, 2007) and ‘ethnic headcount’ (Hoffman and Long, 2013) – beneficial or  
34 detrimental to democracy?

35 Generally speaking, there seems to be a consensus among scholars that ethnic voting is inimical  
36 to the development of democracy (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1971; Horowitz, 1991; Ishiyama, 2012;  
37 Moehler and Conroy-Krutz, 2016; Houle, 2018).<sup>1</sup> Ishiyama (2012: 761), for example, argues that

<sup>1</sup>Only a handful of scholars think that under some circumstances ethnic voting can be beneficial. For Rosenblum (2008: 417), ethnic and other ‘particularist’ parties, as well as bloc voting, ‘should not be uniformly depreciated’ because they are ‘key