

Linking Informal Social Networks and Ethnic Polarization: Survey Results from Novi Sad

Mila Dragojević, Brown University

Abstract

Does engagement in ethnically homogeneous social networks lead to ethnic polarization? This is a general question that this study addresses in its attempt to contribute to a larger body of theory on ethnic identity and nationalism. Specifically, the following questions are advanced: How does engagement in informal social networks influence *ethnic voting, strength of ethnic identification, and degree of tolerance toward other ethnic groups*? The data are collected as part of a pilot study and consist of 332 survey interviews conducted in Novi Sad. Individuals whose social networks are perceived as ethnically heterogeneous are more tolerant toward minorities. Also, those whose family networks are more heterogeneous are less likely to identify strongly with any ethnic group. Finally, the long-term residents are more tolerant to minorities and less likely to engage in ethnic voting.

Key Words

Ethnic identity, Polarization, Social networks, Voting, Survey, Serbia, Novi Sad

Povezanost etničke polarizacije i društvenih mreža odnosa: Rezultati ankete u Novom Sadu

Apstrakt

Postoji li povezanost između etničke polarizacije i homogenih društvenih mreža odnosa? Ovo istraživanje se bavi tim pitanjem u nameri da primeni poznate teorije o razvoju etničkog identiteta i nacionalizma. Preciznije, u članku se razmatraju sledeća pitanja: Da li i na koji način karakteristike društvenih mreža odnosa utiču na glasanje za etničke političke partije, jačinu identifikacije sa sopstvenom etničkom grupom, i stepen tolerancije prema drugim etničkim grupama? studija se bazira na anketi od 332 ispitanika koja je vršena u januaru 2006. godine u Novom Sadu. Rezultati pokazuju trend da je među onima koji imaju heterogene društvene mreže, etnička polarizacija manja kada se usporede sa ispitanicima čije su društvene mreže homogene. Među ispitanicima čije društvene mreže su heterogene, etnička distanca je niža, oni imaju viši stepen tolerancije prema drugim grupama, i niži slabije etničko samoopredeljenje. Međutim, kada je reč o ljudima koji su doselili u Srbiju u poslednjih 15 godina, niži stepen tolerancije i slični politički pogledi karakterizuju ovu populaciju, bez obzira na strukturu njihovih društvenih mreža.

Ključne reči

etnički identitet, polarizacija, društvene mreže odnosa, glasanje, anketa, Srbija, Novi Sad

Introduction

This study explores the influence of social networks on ethnic identity formation. The effect of community ties on the propensity of individuals to engage in nationalist movements or collective violence has already been addressed in the literature to a varying extent (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983; Barth 1998; Laitin 1998; Tilly 1998; Horowitz

2000; Petersen 2001; Varshney 2002). For example, in addressing the link between community and rebellions, Roger Petersen argues that one of the 'mechanisms' that explains the variation in violent resistance of the less powerful may constitute social networks norms (Petersen 2001, pp. 52-61). Namely, norms, such as norms of honor or conformity, may lower thresholds for participation in collective movements, by reducing risks associated with participation in the given movement (Petersen 2001, p. 53). However, although Petersen's model addresses both formal and informal networks' influence on collective action, it does not isolate the effect of network heterogeneity on political action of individuals.

In his study of formal heterogeneous social networks (i.e. where individuals engage in interethnic associations), Ashuntosh Varshney finds that inter-ethnic (i.e. heterogeneous), as opposed to intra-ethnic, formal associations lead to a lesser degree of polarization along ethnic lines (Varshney 2001; Varshney 2002). Nevertheless, while extensive literature substantiating evidence of the influence of both formal and informal social context on political behavior already exists (Berelson 1954; Campbell 1960; Lazarsfeld et al. 1960; Campbell 1966; Eulau 1986; Eulau & Rothenberg 1986; Huckfeldt 1986; Huckfeldt & Sprague 1987; MacKuen & Brown 1987; Huckfeldt et al. 2005; Zuckerman 2005), the impact of informal social context on ethnic identity formation, which is studied in the field of social psychology (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Turner 1999), still remains to be empirically tested. Within this framework, a more specific puzzle that this study addresses is: Does engagement in ethnically homogeneous social networks lead to ethnic polarization? The concept of ethnic polarization (i.e. ethnic identity) will be measured by *ethnic voting*, *strength of ethnic identification*, and *degree of tolerance toward other ethnic groups*.

Defining Ethnic Groups

Before discussing how ethnic polarization and network heterogeneity are conceptualized and measured in this study, it is necessary to define ethnic groups briefly. One question that arises is whether ethnic groups should be regarded as theoretically different from other social groups. While there is considerable disagreement on the definition of ethnic groups in the literature, a number of scholars acknowledge that a belief in common ancestry distinguishes these groups from other social entities (Weber 1968, p. 389; Anderson 1983, pp. 5-6; Smith 1991, pp. 11-2; Horowitz 2000, p. 57). However, this distinction relies too heavily on a notion of common ancestry, which may be subject to varying interpretations by individual members, who may play more or less prominent roles in their respective communities. In other words, what level of familiarity is sufficient for a group to have a belief in common descent? Also, how are these different interpretations reconciled within each group?

In order to shed light on the vague concept of common ancestry, scholars have attempted to include in the definition of ethnic groups shared cultural values, territory, and specific cultural attributes, such as language, religion, racial features, historic territory, symbols, rituals, and other characteristics that distinguish one group from another (Smith 1991, p. 21; Barth 1998, pp. 10-1; Horowitz 2000, p. 15). This effort, however, results in a more confounded conceptualization of ethnic groups for a number of reasons. First, it leads to added classification of social groups beyond the ethnic distinction – groups defined by religious, language, racial, or territory – which further

limits the ability of scholars who study conflict to understand why similar conflicts occur between groups that distinguish themselves on the basis of religion, language and race, for example. Also, this classification does not help us understand why conflicts occur within a community that shares the same religion, for instance (Horowitz 2000, p. 15). Most importantly, the above definitions assume that the 'boundary maintenance is unproblematic and follows from the isolation which the itemized characteristics imply: racial difference, cultural difference, social separation and language barriers, spontaneous and organized enmity' (Barth 1998, p. 11). Yet, if ethnic groups are so obviously bounded by their cultural traits, why do conflicts aimed at preservation or strengthening of group boundaries, such as inter-ethnic wars, ethnic cleansing, or genocide take place in the first place?

Thus, given the questions that definitions relying on such concepts as common ancestry or specific cultural characteristics raise, I propose to view an ethnic group as any other social group that is the outcome of social interaction, whereby membership in or exclusion from the reference group is signaled (Barth 1998, p. 15). There are two parts to the process of social interaction. One element is the *content* that is communicated to another party. Content, in turn, may be defined by *norms* that govern behavior in a particular group, *social purpose* or group interest, views and beliefs about other groups ('relational comparisons'), and 'cognitive models' (i.e. group rationalizations that form a basis for a collective identity) (Abdelal et al. 2005, p. 8). The other element of social contact is the degree of *contestation* of norms, social purpose, beliefs about other groups, or shared group understandings (Abdelal et al. 2005, p. 8). If the degree of contestation is low, the ethnic boundaries are maintained, while ethnic group differences become less pronounced when the degree of contestation is high (Barth 1998, p. 16; Abdelal et al. 2005, p. 16).

Another question that arises is: when is group identity content likely to be challenged? This is the broader question that this paper addresses. The facet of this larger topic that is examined is the link between the perceived ethnic heterogeneity of informal social networks and the degree of ethnic polarization. In other words, do more heterogeneous networks lead to a greater or lesser degree of ethnic polarization? The next section situates this question within the existing literature in social psychology, political behavior, and ethnic conflict.

Linking Social Networks and Ethnic Polarization

In attempting to understand how social networks influence the degree of ethnic polarization, I first draw on the social identity theory within the field of social psychology, which examines the sources of inter-group conflict (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Turner 1999). Four dimensions that are introduced by Tajfel and Turner are relevant to this study. The first two may be placed on a continuum starting with *interpersonal* behavior on one end (i.e. 'the interaction between two or more individuals is fully determined by their interpersonal relationships and individual characteristics') and *intergroup* (i.e. 'interactions between two or more individuals, or groups of individuals, which are fully determined by their respective membership in various social groups or categories') on the other end of the continuum (Tajfel & Turner 1979, p. 95). Along these lines, the closer the individuals are to the inter-group end of the continuum, the greater the degree of ethnic polarization.

In order to understand the mechanism that leads individuals to have a more pronounced group/ethnic identity, we need to introduce two additional elements that Tajfel and Turner discuss in their social identity theory model. First, *social mobility* is defined as a possibility for individuals to ‘move into another group which suits them better if they are not satisfied, for whatever reason, with the conditions imposed upon their lives by membership in social groups or social categories to which they belong’ (Tajfel & Turner 1979, p. 96). The term social mobility is, therefore, interpreted as a more relaxed notion of group membership. It corresponds to the interpersonal behavior, characterized by a greater degree of contestation of shared norms, social purpose, or shared views toward others. This implies that there is a *lesser degree of ethnic polarization*. On the other end of continuum is a situation when it is ‘impossible or very difficult for individuals to move from their own group to another group (Tajfel & Turner 1979, p. 96). It corresponds to the inter-group behavior, or a *greater degree of ethnic polarization*.

As mentioned earlier, norms, group cognitive understandings, collective purpose, and relational comparisons constitute the content of social/ethnic identities. As Petersen argues, particular shared norms, which may be triggered by existing community structures, help explain the formation of groups with a common purpose (Petersen 2001, p. 300). In addition, Abdelal et al. argue that identity content is the very ‘outcome of a process of social contestation,’ which, in turn, ‘can be thought of as a matter of degree – the content of collective identities can be more or less contested’ (Abdelal et al. 2005, p. 16). Higher levels of social contestation, posit Abdelal et al., are associated with the ‘identity that is fragmented into conflicting and potentially inconsistent understandings of what the purposes or relations of the group should be’ (Abdelal et al. 2005, p. 17). Hence, a greater degree of contestation of shared identity is associated with a lower degree of ethnic polarization.

Another question that arises is: how do we measure the social context determinants of ethnic polarization? A possible approach may be to measure it in terms of characteristics of individuals’ informal social networks, which consist of immediate family, distant relatives, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. This approach builds on the literature regarding the influence of social context on political behavior (e.g. voting, political participation, etc.), which shows that individual political preferences are formed as a result of the interplay of personal traits and social context (Berelson 1954; Campbell 1960; Lazarsfeld et al. 1960; Campbell 1966; Huckfeldt & Sprague 1987; Zuckerman 2005).

Heinz Eulau and Lawrence Rothenberg find that ‘social relations among particular neighbors result in an interpersonal context that has an impact on political behavior’ (Eulau & Rothenberg 1986, p. 152). More specifically, they confirm their initial hypothesis that individuals whose social networks support the same party tend to have stronger partisanship preferences than individuals whose social networks support a different party:

Persons with politically supportive NPZs (Neighborhood Primary Zones) should be more favorably disposed, in a partisan manner toward their own party and its candidate, all other things being equal; and vice versa, persons with politically conflictual NPZs should be less favorably disposed in a partisan manner (Eulau & Rothenberg 1986, pp. 147-8).

If social networks influence partisan identities, it may be possible to extend this finding to other types of social or political identities. Indeed, the social psychologists Kurt Lewin and Leon Festinger argue that a group is defined by interdependence of its members, rather than by specific social categories, such as 'social class, ethnicity, religion, or identification with a political party' (Lewine 1951; Zuckerman 2005, p. 9). Along these lines, Alan Zuckerman argues that 'the immediate social circumstances of people's lives influence what they believe and do about politics' (Zuckerman 2005, p. 3). Hence, the literature on the influence of social networks on political behavior shows that individuals whose social contexts are more heterogeneous tend to display less partisan political preferences.

In the literature on ethnic conflict, Ashuntosh Varshney explores the impact of 'civic networks' on the 'presence or absence of ethnic violence' (Varshney 2001, p. 363). While Varshney recognizes that civic networks may take the form of organized, or 'associational forms of engagement,' and quotidian, or 'everyday forms of engagement,' he focuses in his analysis on the former type. In the case of India, Varshney finds that association in ethnically heterogeneous organizations leads to lesser degree of polarization of ethnic communities (Varshney 2001, p. 363). In other words, Varshney posits that 'a multiethnic society with few interconnections across ethnic boundaries is very vulnerable to ethnic disorders and violence' (Varshney 2002, p. 12). Although my study focuses on the informal type of interethnic engagement, I expect to find a similar trend in the degree of ethnic polarization that Varshney found in his case. Thus, individuals who associate exclusively with members of their own ethnic group will tend to display a greater degree of ethnic polarization. For example, an individual whose social network is more ethnically heterogeneous may be less likely to engage in ethnic voting than an individual whose social network is more ethnically homogeneous. Hence, three specific hypotheses will be tested in this study:

H₁: The greater the perceived ethnic heterogeneity of one's social network, the less likely that the individual will engage in ethnic voting.

H₂: The greater the perceived ethnic heterogeneity of one's social network, the weaker will be the individual's ethnic identification.

H₃: The greater the perceived ethnic heterogeneity of one's social network, the more tolerant the individual will be to other groups.

Data and Measures

The dataset consists of 332 survey interviews (see Questionnaire in the Appendix A) conducted in Novi Sad, the capital of the northern Serbian province Vojvodina, where 65% of the total population of around 2 million people are Serbs, 14% Hungarians, 3% Croats, 3% Slovaks, 2% Montenegrins, 2% Romanians, and several other smaller ethnic groups, including Ruthenians, Roma, and others (Parliament 2006). Moreover, during the regional conflicts that took place in the 1990s, more than 300,000 refugees fled to Vojvodina, where most chose to settle permanently (Novi Sad Humanitarian 2006). According to the 2002 census, about half of the 379,135 refugees, who arrived mostly from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, settled in Vojvodina (i.e. 186, 463), while 10% (i.e. 37,599) settled in the city of Novi Sad (Ladjevic & Stankovic 2004, pp. 86-8).

The ethnic composition of the sample approximates the actual situation: 73% identified themselves as Serbs, 5% as Hungarians, 4% as Slovaks, 3% as Croats, 2 % as Montenegrins, 7% as *Vojvodjanins*, and 3% as Yugoslav. The sampling technique, which combined the method of systematic random sampling clusters with equal probability and a random walk method, was employed (Magnani 1997, pp. 27-8).

This paper will test only two of the identity content types from the above definition – collective social purpose and views toward other groups. While norms and cognitive models are not tested overtly within this study, I incorporate these two elements in the theoretical discussion below. In addition, given that this study is based on the survey data, I also include the intensity of one’s ethnic identification. The first measure of ethnic identity that I use is ethnic voting, or voting for an ethnic party. It roughly corresponds to Abdelal et al.’s ‘purposive content,’ which encompasses the ‘goals and purposes shared by an identity group’ (Abdelal et al. 2005, p. 11). Ethnic party has been considered as a measure of social purpose in other studies. For example, in investigating why ‘ethnic parties succeed in obtaining the support of members of their target ethnic groups,’ Kanchan Chandra defines an ethnic party as ‘a party that overtly represents itself as a champion of the cause of one particular ethnic category or a set of categories to the exclusion of others, and that makes such a representation central to its strategy of mobilizing voters’ (Chandra 2005, pp. 1-3). The dependent variable measuring ethnic voting corresponds to the questions 21 through 22 in the survey:

21. Did you vote in the last provincial parliamentary election on September 19, 2004?
22. Which party did you vote for?

The answers were then coded into a dichotomous variable, where 1 was assigned to ethnic parties (i.e. parties that send a message to the electorate that is aimed at a particular ethnic category and tends to exclude ‘other’ ethnic categories, such as *Serbian Radical Party, Socialist Party of Serbia, and Democratic Party of Serbia*) and 0 to non-ethnic parties (parties whose programs are widely encompassing and are not aimed at a particular ethnic group). Answers corresponding to *Other* and *Don’t Know* were not considered in the initial analysis.

However, given the sensitive nature of the question and a large incidence of non-response (i.e. *Don’t Know* or missing responses), there is a potential for selection bias in this question. Hence, I employ a two-stage Heckman probit selection bias model to verify if ‘self-censorship,’ non-random abstention from answering this question, was present in this survey (Berinsky 2002). This question was answered by 205 respondents of a total of 332 respondents, of which 36% declared that they voted for an ethnic party (see Descriptive Statistics and Frequencies in Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics*

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Ethnic Voting	205	.36	.48	0	1
ID Strength	320	2.98	.91	1	4
Feeling Therm. Toward Minorities	270	149.79	66.17	0	300

Heterogeneity of Relatives' Social Network	315	1.97	1.01	1	5
Heterogeneity of Non-relatives' Social Network	295	2.44	.92	1	5
Local Resident (>=15 yrs)	330	.79	.41	0	1
Frequency of Political Discussion with Spouses	250	2.38	1.28	1	6
Frequency of Political Discussion with Parents and/or Children	318	2.16	1.06	1	6
Frequency of Political Discussion with Other Relatives	320	2.04	1.06	1	6
Frequency of Political Discussion with Friends, Neighbors, and Co-workers	325	2.4	1.14	1	6
Volunteering Index	296	.98	1.09	0	4
Age	332	42	15	18	92
Occupational Status	209	2.87	1.09	1	4
Education	324	2.87	1.11	1	5
Religiosity	310	2.06	.81	1	5

The second element of ethnic identity that is used in this study is the intensity of self-ascription to one's own group. It is measured by the self-reported strength of identification with the respective group, which ranges on a scale from 1 (very weak) to 5 (very strong). While almost all respondents answered this question (320), there were only 8 responses in each of the *Very Weak* and *Weak* categories. Hence, I re-coded this variable into four categories (1=weak, very weak; 2=medium; 3=strong; 4=very strong). The mean of ethnic identification strength is 2.98 (see Table 1). Although the distribution remains skewed toward the *Very Strong*, as a result of this re-code, there are now around 5% of responses (of total 330) in the *Weak*, 28% in the *Medium*, 33% in the *Strong*, and 35% in the *Very Strong* categories (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Frequencies of Key Variables*

Categorical Variables	Categories and Frequencies				N
	Ethnic Voting	Ethnic (1) 36%	Non-ethnic (0) 64%		
ID Strength	Weak (1)	Medium (2)	Strong (3)	V. Strong	

	5%	28%	33%	(4) 34%		320
Heterogeneity of Relatives' Social Network	All the same (1)	Less than 25% different (2)	26-50% different (3)	51-75% different (4)	More than 76% diff. (5)	
	37%	39%	14%	6%	4%	315
Heterogeneity of Non-relatives' Social Network	8%	55%	25%	6%	6%	295
Local Resident (>=15 yrs)	Locals (1) 79%	Not locals (0) 21%				330
Discussion – Nonrelatives Family Discuss.	Never (1)	Sometimes (2)	Once/week (3)	Several times/week (4)	More frequently (5 +)	
	13%	61%	9%	10%	7%	325
	13%	16%	51%	4%	16%	313
Volunteering	0 act. (1) 43%	1 act. (2) 29%	2 act. (3) 17%	3 act. (4) 7%	4 + act. (5) 4%	296
Occupational Status Education	Low (1)	Med Low (2)	Med High (3)	High (4)	Grad.(5)	
	14%	25%	22%	39%		209
	8%	43%	8%	38%	3%	324
First Ethnic Identification	Serbian	Hungarian	Slovak	Croatian	Vojvodina (regional)	Other
	73%	5%	4%	3%	7%	7%
Religiosity	Never (1)	2	3	4	Frequently(5)	
	18%	67%	7%	5%	3%	310

Abdelal et. al explicitly exclude the concepts of 'salience' and 'intensity' from their framework/definition of social identities on the grounds that 'salience of individual identity is much less clear' when collective identities are examined because 'discrete groups of individuals often have multiple and overlapping identities that may be more or less salient' (Abdelal et al. 2005, p. 19). However, as David Laitin argues, 'when the actions or behaviors consistent with one identity conflict with those of another identity held by the same person, as they do when the two identities represent antagonistic groups on the political stage, people are compelled to give priority to one identity over the other' (Laitin 1998, p. 23). Hence, I regard intensity of self-identification with the group as a diagnostic of the individuals' choice to give priority to one identity over the other, which leads to the sharpening of group boundaries. Also, intensity has been a critical element in the literature on social identity and self-categorization. As a final clarification, I do not examine here the effect of the intensity of shared social identity on particular group behavior (Turner 1999, p. 14). Rather, I am only interested in finding why some individuals identify with a particular ethnic group more strongly than others.

Finally, the third measure of ethnic identity is tolerance toward other social categories. This measure corresponds to Abdelal et. al's concept of 'relational comparisons,' or 'views or belief about other identities or groups' (Abdelal et al. 2005, p. 8). Here I use three feeling thermometer questions, where the responses range on a scale from 0 to 100. Based on these questions, I construct an index that captures the views toward the three largest minorities in the region. Specifically, the total population in Vojvodina, according to the 2002 Census, was 2,031,992 (Parliament 2006). The three largest minorities, Hungarians, Slovaks, and Croats, numbered 290,207 (14.28%), 56, 647 (2.79%), and 56, 546 (2.78%), respectively (Parliament 2006). This index ranges from 0 to 300 (i.e. from least to most tolerant), while the mean is around 150 (see Table 1).

The choice of the measure of sentiments toward other groups as a measure of ethnic identity is grounded in the social identity theory research. Namely, Henri Tajfel and John Turner find that even 'trivial, ad hoc inter-group categorization (i.e. the mere awareness of the presence of the out-group) leads to in-group favoritism and discrimination against the out group' (Tajfel & Turner 1979, p. 99). Also, Donald Horowitz draws from social psychology in his discussion on ethnic group comparisons, antipathy, status, and stereotyping (Horowitz 2000, pp. 141-84). Horowitz argues that without 'feelings of antipathy, there can be no ethnic conflict,' or a collective action resulting from person's identification with a particular group (Horowitz 2000, p. 182). Moreover, Roger Petersen shows that group comparisons may create a feeling of resentment toward other groups, thus leading the individual to adjust the status incongruities (Petersen 2002, p. 19).

Social network heterogeneity is measured by the survey questions inquiring what proportion of respondent's social network, composed of close or extended family, friends, neighbors, or workmates, is of a different ethnic group than his/her own. A high response rate, 315 out of 332 for question 27 and 295 out of 332 for question 28, allows for the inclusion of these questions in my final model (see Table 1). The responses range on a scale from homogeneous network corresponding to 1 (*all members of my network have the same ethnicity as myself*) to the most heterogeneous network corresponding to 5 (*more than three quarters of my network have a different ethnicity from mine*). The mean responses fell around 2 for both questions, as evident in the Table 1. The distribution of responses to the question measuring the level of ethnic heterogeneity in respondents' immediate or distant family – 37% homogeneous, 39% medium level of heterogeneity (2), and 24% high level of heterogeneity (3 and above) – indicates that there is a significant number of respondents whose relative social networks are ethnically heterogeneous (see Table 2). Even more diverse is the respondents' social network composed of friends, neighbors and co-workers, as only 8% of respondents have an ethnically homogeneous non-relatives' social network, 55% medium level of heterogeneity (2), and 37% high level of heterogeneity (3 and above).

In addition to ethnic diversity of social networks, I also include a dummy variable for those who were a local resident for more than 15 years. The fifteen-year period was chosen because large migrations took place in the past 15 years as a result of the wars in the neighboring Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As mentioned earlier, around 300,000 refugees from those areas settled in Vojvodina (Novi Sad Humanitarian 2006). Indeed, around 21% of the survey respondents have resided in Vojvodina for less than 15

years (see Table 2). In line with David Laitin's findings from Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine, I expect to find that long-term residents tend to be 'less inclined toward ethnic mobilization' than those who immigrated to the area as a result of recent ethnic conflicts (Laitin 1998, p. 207). This finding is also consistent with the literature on the influence of social networks on political behavior, as it is likely that those who are long-term residents have closer social ties in their communities/neighborhoods, and are as a result more influenced by them than the newcomers (Eulau 1986; Huckfeldt & Sprague 1987; Zuckerman 2005). Since Vojvodina is characterized by a high rate of ethnic diversity, as evident from the 2002 census data presented earlier, I expect that long-term residents will have more heterogeneous social networks and will be less ethnically polarized than the recently-arrived residents.

Frequency of political discussion with members of one's network is another measure that comes from the social network literature. The greater the frequency of discussion about politics with members of one's network, the greater is the presumed influence that the network exerts on an individual (Eulau 1986; Huckfeldt & Sprague 1987; Zuckerman 2005). The answers to the questions measuring the frequency of discussion with family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers range from 1 (*respondent does not discuss politics with members of his/her network*) to 6 (*respondent discusses politics more than once per day with members of his/her network*). I created a new variable measuring discussion among family members, which is a sum of discussion among distant relatives and between parents and children. Discussion between spouses was not included in this measure because only about half of all respondents have spouses, and this would reduce my sample size substantially.

Volunteering or community work is also included as an independent variable, as it is expected that community involvement will lead to strengthening of ties with one's social networks. If those networks are ethnically heterogeneous, Varshney purports, ethnic polarization will be less pronounced (Varshney 2002). Questions on volunteering were combined into an index measuring the number of volunteering activities in which the respondent participates, ranging from 0 volunteering activities to 4 (see Table 1). More than a third of respondents, 43%, do not participate in any volunteering activities, 29% take part in one unpaid activity, and 27% take part in two or more unpaid activities (see Table 2).

Standard socio-economic variables, such as education, occupational status, religiosity, and age are used as control variables in predicting ethnic voting or tolerance toward other groups. These variables have been used in the studies of cultural assimilation and voting (Huckfeldt & Sprague 1987; Laitin 1998; Levine 2005). The occupation question is re-coded into four levels of occupational status, where 1 corresponds to the lowest and 4 to the highest level. The low response rate (see Table 1) in the question on occupation is a result of the large number of respondents (i.e. 18% of 262 who responded) who chose option 10 and wrote in 'retired' or 'unemployed.' Moreover, the measure of occupational status is somewhat skewed toward higher-level positions, as 39% of those who have employment report having professional or managerial positions (see Table 2). There were more respondents who answered the education question than the occupation question (i.e. 324 answered this question, see Table 1). This variable is measured in five ordered categories, where 1 corresponds to the education level below high school and 5 to graduate level education. The results concur

with the occupational results, as around 41% of respondents report having university degrees or higher, 51% have high school education or associate degrees, while only around 8% of respondents have less than high school level of education (see Table 2).

Additionally, religiosity is included in the models. It is expected that more religious respondents will tend to socialize with individuals of the same ethnic identification and will, as a result, tend to display a greater degree of ethnic polarization. For example, in studying assimilation in Kazakhstan, Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine, Laitin finds that the higher level religiosity of Russians in Ukraine predicts that they are less likely to assimilate than nonreligious Russians (Laitin 1998, p. 208). In other words, more religious Russians are also more ethnically polarized. Here, religiosity is measured in an ordered scale, which ranges from 1 (nonreligious) to 5 (highly religious). There were 310 interviewees who responded to this question, where the mean is 2 (low level of religiosity) (see Table 1). However, the variation in this question is somewhat limited, as 67% of respondents report a low level of religiosity (2), while only 15% have a somewhat higher level of religiosity (3-5), and 18% of respondents never attend church services (see Table 2).

Finally, the self-reported ethnic identification is only included for the ethnic majority, Serbs, as this survey contains only 332 observations, of which 73% report their first ethnic identification as Serbs (see Table 2). In other words, since minorities were not over-sampled for this project, the separate analyses for each minority group would not be possible due to the limited number of observations.

When looking at correlations, I find that the measures of relative and non-relative heterogeneity are positively and relatively highly correlated (.6), meaning that people who have an ethnically diverse family also tend to have ethnically diverse non-family networks. Since both measures are theoretically relevant, I will run two separate models including one of the two variables in each model. Moreover, measures of political discussion are also highly correlated (.6 or higher). Therefore, I will use measures of political discussion within non-family networks in the model where the non-relative heterogeneity is included. Similarly, I will use the immediate family political discussion (between parents and children) in the model where family heterogeneity is included as an explanatory variable. Also, education and occupation are highly positively correlated (.8), and education will be included in the final model since it has a greater number of valid responses.

Findings

Ethnic Voting Probit and Heckman Probit Models with Selection

The first measure of ethnic polarization that I examine is ethnic voting. Given the sensitive nature of the voting question and the high non-response rate (there are only 205 valid responses, see Table 1), it is possible that there is a certain degree of selection bias in the results (Berinsky 2002). Thus, I run the Heckman probit model with selection to correct for the possible non-response bias. I proceed by first creating a new dichotomous variable that captures respondents who answered the voting question (coded as 1) and those who did not (i.e. those selected 'Don't know' or skipped the question, which are coded as 0). Then, I estimate the selection equation model by running a probit regression,

where the dependent variable is the ‘R Responded to Voting Question.’ The selection equation independent variables include: education, religiosity, family heterogeneity, whether respondent (R) is married, whether R is a child, and whether R is employed. It is likely that married couples and family members in more heterogeneous families avoided answering the voting question since most questionnaires were completed in the presence of all family members. Also, dependents (family members who are not employed) may be more hesitant to answer the voting question in the presence of other family members.

Columns 1 and 3 in Table 3 represent probit models, with family and non-relative social network characteristics, respectively. Columns 2 and 4 are the same models that are run using the Heckman probit two-step selection bias procedure.

As is evident in the Table 3, ρ is not statistically significant in the first model (column 2), while it is significant in the second model ($p < .10$) (column 4). Hence, it may be concluded that there is no bias (non-random pattern) in the responses to the voting question in the model with family heterogeneity, and that there is some bias in the model that includes non-relative heterogeneity characteristics. Nevertheless, most coefficients and significance results in the simple probit and the Heckman probit models are similar.

When models with family heterogeneity are considered (see column 1 and 2, Table 3), we find that only educational level, degree of religiosity, and the residency status are significant. In both models, individuals with greater level of education and greater degree of religiosity would be less likely to vote for ethnic parties. Moreover, individuals who have resided in the region for less than 15 years (i.e. refugees) tend to vote for ethnic parties. The same trends may also be observed in the models with non-relative heterogeneity (see columns 3 and 4, Table 3). Contrary to my expectations, family and non-relative heterogeneity were not significant in any of the four models. In addition, in the two models with non-relative heterogeneity characteristics (see columns 3 and 4, Table 3), respondents who identify with majority Serb ethnicity are more likely to vote for ethnic parties ($p > .1$).

Table 3. Ethnic Voting

	Ethnic Voting with Family Heterogeneity		Ethnic Voting with Non-relative Heterogeneity	
	(1) Probit Model	(2) Heckman Probit Model	(3) Probit Model	(4) Heckman Probit Model
Outcome Equation				
Constant	.86 (.76)	.94 (.75)	1.33 (.89)	.77 (.90)
Age	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Education	-.29***(.11)	-.30***(.10)	-.36***(.11)	-.27**(.11)
Religiosity	-.34** (.16)	-.34**(.16)	-.62***(.21)	-.51**(.21)
Volunteer	.08 (.11)	.07 (.10)	.08 (.12)	.06 (.11)
Family heterogeneity	.20 (.13)	-.21 (.13)		
Non-relative heterogeneity			-.12 (.15)	-.05 (.15)
Non-relative discussion	.04 (.09)	.04 (.09)	.07 (.10)	.06 (.52)
Refugee	1.18***(.46)	1.15**(.45)	1.43***(.50)	1.30***(.48)
Ethnic identity (majority Serb)	.37 (.29)	.37 (.28)	.55* (.31)	.53*(.29)
Selection Equation				
Constant		3.05***(.89)		2.9***(.82)

Education		-0.25 (.18)		-0.22 (.18)
Religiosity		-0.29 (.20)		-0.32 (.21)
Family heterogeneity		-0.19 (.16)		-0.23 (.16)
R is employed		.18 (.38)		.22 (.39)
R is married		.64*(.39)		.70*(.41)
R is a child		.40 (.55)		.76 (.51)
P		.56 (.87)		-.91*(.21)
N	164	266	160	260
Log likelihood	-91.54	-120.97	-82.98	-110.01

Note: Coefficients are listed in the cells with corresponding standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels are represented in the following manner: ***p<.01, **p<.05, *p<.1.

Given that there is some bias (ρ is not zero, $p < .10$) in the Heckman probit model with non-relative heterogeneity, I also conduct a Wald test for each coefficient in the outcome equation in order to compare the coefficients of the simple probit model (column 3) and the Heckman probit model (column 4). As no significant differences were found between the coefficients in the two models, I proceed by estimating the predicted probabilities based on probit models below.

Table 4 displays the results of the predicted probabilities for the likelihood of voting for ethnic parties at different levels of network ethnic heterogeneity, which are based on the two probit models presented earlier in the Table 3 (see columns 1 and 3). Both models show that as network heterogeneity increases, individuals are less likely to vote for ethnic parties. This trend is somewhat less pronounced in the model with non-relative heterogeneity.

Table 4. Likelihood of Voting for Ethnic Parties

When Are Respondents Likely to Vote for Ethnic Parties?		
What Proportion of Social Network is of Different Ethnicity?	Model 1 Family Social Network	Model 2 Non-relative Social Network
None – it is ethnically homogeneous.	.43	.37
Less than 25%	.35	.32
26-50%	.28	.28
51-75%	.22	.24
More than 76%	.17	.21

Note: All values other than family and non-relative heterogeneity are set at their means. Model 1 means are age=45.96, education=2.84, religiosity=2.01, volunteer=.89, political discussion=2.54, refugee=.07, ethnic identity=.72. Model 2 means are age=45.88, education=2.84, religiosity=2.01, volunteer=.86, discussion=2.49, refugee=.07, ethnic identity=.72.

Strength of Ethnic Identification Ordered Logistical Regression Models

Table 5 includes two models predicting the strength of ethnic identification. Model 1 displays the estimates of ordered logistical regression analysis, where the measure of social network heterogeneity is ‘Family Heterogeneity.’

Table 5. *Strength of Ethnic Identification OLS and Ordered Logistical Regression Models*

DV = Strength of Ethnic Identification (1-weak, 2-medium, 3-strong, 4-very strong)

Independent Variables	Ologit Model 1	Ologit Model 2
	Family Heterogeneity	Non-relative Heterogeneity
Age	-.01 (.01)	-.00 (.01)
Education	-.02 (.11)	.00 (.11)
Religiosity	.14 (.16)	.17 (.16)
Volunteer	-.00 (.12)	.01 (.12)
Family heterogeneity	-.33**(.13)	
Non-relative heterogeneity		-.17 (.15)
Family Discussion	.04 (.07)	
Non-relative Discussion		-.01 (.11)
Refugee Ethnic Identity (Majority Serb)	.25 (.40)	.21 (.39)
N	243	237
Pseudo R²	.0146	.0061

Note: Coefficients are listed in the cells with corresponding standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels are represented in the following manner: ***p<.01, **p<.05, *p<.1.

Only family heterogeneity is significant (p<.05), and it may be concluded that individuals whose family social networks are more heterogeneous, tend to have a weaker sense of ethnic identification. This finding is in line with the hypothesized relationship that ethnic polarization increases as the heterogeneity of one’s social network decreases. To interpret the results of the ordered logistical regression Model 1 substantively, it is necessary to estimate predicted probabilities.

Model 1 in Table 6 illustrates that when all other variables are set at their means, the probability that individuals will identify strongly with their ethnic group will decrease from .42 when their families are homogeneous to .16 when their families are highly heterogeneous (i.e. when more than 75% of family members belong to different ethnic groups). Model 2 presents the results of the ordered logit analysis, where the measure of social network heterogeneity is ‘Non-relative Heterogeneity.’

Table 6. *Predicting Strong Ethnic Identification*

When Are Respondents Likely to Identify Strongly With Their Ethnic Group? What Proportion of Social Network is of Different Ethnicity?	Model 1	Model 2
	Family Social Network	Non-relative Social Network
None – it is ethnically homogeneous.	.42	.40
Less than 25%	.34	.36
26-50%	.27	.32
51-75%	.21	.29

More than 76%

.16

.25

Note: All values other than family and non-relative heterogeneity are set at their means. Model 1 means are age=42.81, education=2.88, religiosity=2.03, volunteer=.94, political discussion=4.22, refugee=.10, ethnic identity=.71. Model 2 means are age=42.75, education=2.87, religiosity=2.05, volunteer=.96, discussion=2.45, refugee=.10, ethnic identity=.73.

While none of the coefficients are statistically significant, the predicted probabilities of Model 2 in Table 6 show that there is a trend of decreasing probability that individuals will strongly identify with their ethnic group as their non-relative social network heterogeneity increases.

This trend is, however, somewhat less pronounced than when family heterogeneity was included as an explanatory variable in Model 3. More precisely, the results in the second column in Table 6 reveal that the expected probability of identifying strongly with any ethnic group when the non-relative social network is homogeneous (.40) decreases to .25 when the non-relative social network is highly heterogeneous (i.e. more than 75% of family, friends, or neighbors belong to a distinct ethnic group).

Tolerance toward Minorities OLS Models

The models in the Table 7 estimate the level of tolerance toward the three principal minorities of the region – Hungarians, Croats, and Slovaks. As mentioned earlier, the index measuring tolerance toward minorities is constructed using the feeling thermometer scores for each minority group, and it ranges from 0 (least tolerant) to 300 (most tolerant).

Table 7. Tolerance toward Minorities OLS Models

Independent Variables	DV = Feeling Thermometer (Minorities Index 0-300)	
	OLS Model 1 Family Heterogeneity	OLS Model 2 Non-relative Heterogeneity
Constant	110.38***(28.30)	102.58***(29.95)
Age	.01 (.27)	.02 (.27)
Education	6.25 (4.01)	6.27 (4.05)
Religiosity	3.97 (5.56)	4.39 (5.80)
Volunteer	-3.37 (4.11)	-5.39 (4.14)
Family heterogeneity	10.10** (4.45)	
Non-relative heterogeneity		12.10**(5.39)
Family Discussion	6.06**(2.38)	
Non-relative Discussion		12.49***(3.65)
Refugee	-33.71***(13.90)	-23.28*(13.84)
Ethnic Identity (Majority Serb)	-33.78*** (10.43)	-38.33***(11.16)
N	210	205
Pseudo R²	.1599	.1810

Note: Coefficients are listed in the cells with corresponding standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels are represented in the following manner: ***p<.01, **p<.05, *p<.1. This model was run using robust standard errors.

Model 1 in Table 7 uses the characteristics of family social network as explanatory variables, while Model 2 uses the variables pertaining to the social network, which is composed of friends, neighbors, and co-workers.

There is no substantial difference between the two models. In models, the social network heterogeneity, discussion, length of residency, and majority ethnic identity variables are statistically significant. As hypothesized the greater the social network heterogeneity, the greater the tolerance toward minorities. More specifically as family heterogeneity (Model 1) increases by a quarter (25%), the tolerance toward minorities increases by 10 points on a scale from 0 to 300 ($p < .05$). Similarly, as heterogeneity of the social network constituted by friends, neighbors, and co-workers (Model 2) increases by a quarter (25%), the tolerance toward minorities rises by 12 points on a scale from 0 to 300 ($p < .05$).

The evidence of socialization within these respective social networks is further supported by the frequency of discussion, which is also positively related to the increase in tolerance toward minorities. The increase in the frequency of discussing politics with family by 1 point on a scale from 1 (never) to 6 (more than once a day) leads to an increase in tolerance by 6 points on a scale from 0 to 300 ($p < .05$). Likewise, as individuals discuss politics more frequently (by one point on a scale from 1 to 6) with their friends, neighbors and co-workers, their tolerance toward minorities increases by 12 points on a scale from 0 to 300 ($p < .01$). Furthermore, as hypothesized, those who have resided in the region for less than 15 years tend to have tolerance toward minorities scores that are 34 points lower in Model 1 ($p < .01$) and 23 points lower in Model 2 ($p < .1$) on a scale from 0 to 300. Finally, when respondents identify as members of the ethnic majority, the tolerance toward minorities decreases by around 34 ($p < .01$) and 38 ($p < .01$) points, respectively.

In sum, if ethnic polarization is measured by tolerance toward other ethnic groups (i.e. minorities), it may be concluded that those with higher levels of social network heterogeneity, greater frequency of interaction with the networks, longer residency in the region, and higher levels of education, tend to display greater tolerance toward others, or a lesser degree of ethnic polarization.

Conclusion

The influence of informal social networks on ethnic polarization still remains understudied in the literature on ethnic conflicts and nationalism. Thus, I draw on extensive literature on the influence of social networks on political behavior and social psychology to conceptualize and operationalize possible measures of social networks and ethnic polarization. It has been posited in the social psychology literature that when individuals are tied closely (structurally or normatively) to their particular ethnic communities (networks), inter-ethnic boundaries become more pronounced. Social network norms, Petersen contends, may provide impetus for involvement in movements of resistance, for instance (Petersen 2001, p. 300). Moreover, Varshney argues that inter-ethnic associations may contribute to less polarization along ethnic lines (Varshney 2001; Varshney 2002). Hence, if formal networks have such an effect, it might be expected that informal associations also influence the degree of ethnic cleavages. The vast political behavior and social context literature in American politics also confirms that informal

networks influence political behavior (Berelson 1954; Campbell 1960; Lazarsfeld et al. 1960; Campbell 1966; Eulau 1986; Eulau & Rothenberg 1986; Huckfeldt 1986; Huckfeldt & Sprague 1987; MacKuen & Brown 1987; Huckfeldt et al. 2005; Zuckerman 2005). Moreover, Eulau and Rothenberg find that the lack of partisanship diversity in social networks contributes to stronger partisanship preferences of individuals compared to respondents whose social networks were more diverse (Eulau & Rothenberg 1986, pp. 147-8). This paper draws on these past findings in related fields to operationalize the link between informal social networks and ethnic polarization.

While the initial results may appear mixed at first glance, this analysis identifies a trend that individuals who perceive their close or distant family social networks as more ethnically heterogeneous tend to display less ethnic polarization compared to respondents whose close and extended families are perceived to be more ethnically homogeneous. The former have more positive views of minorities and identify less strongly with any ethnic group. In addition, when social networks consisting of neighbors, friends, and co-workers are perceived as more ethnically heterogeneous, greater tolerance toward other groups is exhibited. Finally, in both types of social networks, those who have resided in the region for less than 15 years, have more negative views toward other groups and engage in ethnic voting. In sum, these results indicate that perceived heterogeneity of informal social networks may indeed have some effect on ethnic polarization. Nevertheless, the proposed explanation for this influence still remains to be tested in further studies. Also, additional network characteristics that may play an important role in deepening ethnic cleavages need to be defined and tested.

Summary

How do ethnic groups form? This is a general question that this study addresses in its attempt to contribute to a larger body of theory explaining nationalist movements, extremism, and political violence. I draw on constructivist-oriented literature, which views ethnic identities as socially constructed categories that “can and do change over time,” in contrast to the primordialist view that ethnic differences are “essential and unchanging characteristics” that lead to hatred and violence between groups. More specifically, I ask: Does the perceived ethnic make-up of small social networks influence *ethnic voting*, *strength of ethnic identification*, and *degree of tolerance toward other ethnic groups*? Based on the literature on the influence of social networks on voting behavior and the social identity theory, I formulate my general hypothesis: persons who perceive their immediate social networks as more ethnically homogeneous are more socially dependent and are less likely to contest their ethnic identity than individuals who are socially independent and perceive their social networks as more ethnically heterogeneous.

The dataset consists of 332 survey interviews conducted in five randomly selected neighborhoods of a multiethnic city of Novi Sad, capital of the northern Serbian province Vojvodina, where 65% of the total population of around 2 million people are Serbs, 14% Hungarians, 3% Croats, 3% Slovaks, 2% Montenegrins, 2% Romanians, and several other smaller ethnic groups. As hypothesized, I find that individuals who perceive small networks as ethnically heterogeneous are less likely to engage in ethnic voting, have weaker sense of ethnic identification, and are more tolerant toward other groups than those who perceive their networks to be more ethnically homogeneous. Moreover, I find the same trend in the group of long-term residents, who have stronger ties to their local social networks than refugees and others who resided in the city for less than 15 years.

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