Nearly all multi-ethnic political systems contain more than one dimension of ethnic cleavage. Israel is divided by religion, but its citizens are also divided by their places of origin and their degrees of secularism. South Africa is divided by race, but also by language differences and by tribe. India is divided by language (which serves as the basis for its federalism) but also by religion and caste. Switzerland is divided by religion and by language. Nigeria is divided by religion, region and tribe. Even sub-national units are frequently ethnically multi-dimensional: cities like New York, Los Angeles and Miami all contain prominent racial cleavages, but also cleavages based on their residents’ countries of origin, languages of communication, and length of residence in the United States.

Given these multiple bases of ethnic division, when does politics revolve around one of them rather than another? Journalists and scholars who write about the politics of ethnically divided societies tend to take the axis of ethnic cleavage that serves as the basis for political competition and conflict as a given. They write eloquently about hostilities between Hindus and Muslims in India but never pause to ask why that country’s conflict takes place along religious lines rather than among Hindi-speakers, Bengali-speakers, and Marathi-speakers. They discuss the competition among Hausas, Yorubas, and Igbos in Nigeria but never stop to question why the political rivalries in that nation rage among these broad ethnoregional communities rather than between Christians and Muslims. They probe the conflict between Blacks and Latinos in Miami but never think to inquire why the city’s tensions revolve around racial differences rather than divisions among Haitians, Cubans, Dominicans, and other Caribbean immigrants, or between immigrants and non-immigrants. In country after country and city after city, they provide

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1 “Tribe” is a loaded word. Here, and throughout the book, I use the term to refer to an ethnic community that is (or was historically) organized under the authority of a traditional chief. Membership in a tribe is determined by the answer to the question: are you (or were your parents) subjects of Chief X? For an
detailed accounts of how and why politicians “play the ethnic card.” Yet they almost never bother to ask why politicians play the particular ethnic card that they do.

Why, given multiple potentially mobilizable bases of ethnic division, does political competition and conflict come to be organized along the lines of one ethnic cleavage rather than another? Why do politicians emphasize (and why do people respond positively to appeals couched in terms of) race rather than language, religion rather than tribe, caste rather than state? Under what conditions does the dimension of ethnic cleavage that is salient change? When does politics shift from being about religious differences to being about language differences, from being about country of origin to being about race? These are the question that this book seeks to answer. It seeks to account for when and why, given multiple axes of ethnic division in a society, one becomes the basis of political competition and conflict rather than another. It builds its explanation from the bottom-up by treating the salient cleavage outcome as the aggregation of individual identity choices, and it seeks to account for why people choose the ethnic identities they do. There are a number of possible approaches one might adopt to answer this question. The one I adopt here emphasizes the incentive-shaping role of political institutions.

THE ARGUMENT

Political institutions are the formal rules, regulations and policies that structure social and political interactions. This book shows how they help to determine which ethnic cleavage becomes politically salient in two stages, and via two distinct causal mechanisms. First, they shape the repertoires of potentially mobilizable ethnic identities that individuals possess. That is, extended discussion of how “tribes” were created during the colonial era, and why “tribe” and “language” cannot be used interchangeably, see Chapters Two and Three.

2 This definition is significantly narrower than, for example, North (1990: 3), who defines institutions as “the rules of the game in a society, or, more formally...the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction.” North’s definition, like that of others (e.g., Bates 1988, World Bank 2002), would include such social phenomena as markets, traditional lineage structures and even norms of behavior. In the more restricted definition used here, institutions are the formal, codified rules, regulations, or policies to which the existence of these structures and norms might be traced, not the structures and norms themselves. Markets, lineage structures and behavioral norms are (or may be) products of institutions, but, by the
they determine why some of the myriad of objectively identifiable bases of cultural difference in society come to be viewed as at least potentially politically salient, and why others do not. Second, they shape peoples’ incentives for selecting one of these potentially salient ethnic identities rather than another, and then coordinate these choices across individuals so as to produce a society-level outcome. To borrow the metaphor of a card game, political institutions explain, first, why players’ hands contain the cards they do and, then, why they play one of these cards rather than another. They also explain why one player or set of players ultimately wins the game.

The part of the argument about how political institutions shape individuals’ identity choices – about why players play the cards that they do – is built from three simple, well-established propositions: People want resources from the state. They believe that having someone from their ethnic group in a position of political power will facilitate their access to those resources. And they understand that the best way to get someone from their ethnic group into a position of political power is to build or join a political coalition with fellow group members. Taken together, these propositions suggest that ethnic politics can be viewed in terms of the politics of coalition-building, and that ethnic identity choice can be seen in terms of the quest to gain membership in the coalition that will be most politically and economically useful. This is the central intuition on which the argument developed in this book is based.

Ethnic coalition-building is straightforward in a world where individuals have only a single ethnic identity. In such a context, political actors turn to ethnicity because of the mobilizational advantages it brings (Bates 1983; Hardin 1995; Hechter 2001; Chandra 2004) or because of the ability it affords them to limit access to the spoils that successful mobilization provides (Fearon 1999; Caselli and Coleman 2001). However, matters become more complicated when we recognize that individuals possess multiple ethnic identities, each of which might serve

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3 The idea that ethnic politics can be seen as the politics of coalition-building is also the perspective adopted by Bates (1983: 152), who describes ethnic groups as “coalitions which have been formed as a part of rational efforts to secure benefits created by the forces of modernization.” My innovation is to
as a basis for coalition formation. Given multiple ethnic group memberships, the question is: which coalition should a political actor interested in gaining access to state resources seek to mobilize or join? The one with their fellow tribesmen? The one with their fellow language-speakers? The one with their co-religionists? Which will be the most advantageous identity to select?

To the extent that access to resources is determined through a process of electoral competition, the most useful identity to mobilize will be the one that puts the person in a winning coalition (or, if more than one coalition is winning, then the one that is minimum winning – the one that contains the fewest fellow members with whom the spoils of power will have to be shared). Individuals will consider each of the identity groups in which they can claim membership (and which others will recognize as meaningful) and embrace the one that defines the most usefully sized group. They will consider each of the principles of group division that divide the political community (religion, language, race, clan, etc.), compare the size of their own group with that of the other groups that each of these cleavages defines, and then select the identity that puts them in a minimum winning coalition. Thus, a Sinhalese Christian from Sri Lanka would begin by comparing the size of her religious group (Christians) with the sizes of the other religious groups in the country (Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus) and the size of her language group (Sinhalese) with the sizes of the other language groups (Tamil and English). Then, she would select the ethnic affiliation that puts her in the most advantageous group and attempt to build or join a coalition with fellow members of that group. In this particular case, she would choose her language group, since Sinhalese-speakers are a majority vis-à-vis other language groups in Sri Lanka, whereas Christians are a minority vis-à-vis other religions.

Why, then, do political institutions matter? First, they matter because the usefulness of any coalition will depend on the boundaries of the arena in which political competition is taking

apply this argument not just to the question of why ethnicity is politically useful but to the question of why individuals choose to emphasize the particular ethnic identities they do.
place, and these boundaries are products of institutional rules. As the formal rules governing political competition change, the boundaries of the political arena will often expand or contract, and this will cause memberships in ethnic groups of different sizes to become more or less useful as bases for political coalition-building. For example, our Sinhalese Christian found it advantageous to emphasize her language group identity because she was engaged in a competition for political power at the national level and, at that level, being Sinhalese was more useful than being Christian. If she had been competing for a share of power in her town (say, in the context of a mayoral race) or in her region (say, in the context of an election to a provincial council), her choice might have been quite different. The particular ethnic coalition in which it will make sense for her to seek membership, and thus the particular identity she will invoke to try to do so, will depend on the boundaries of the arena in which she is competing. To the extent that these boundaries are defined by institutional rules – in this example, rules devolving power to municipalities or sub-national units – those rules will be central to our explanation of her identity choices.

The second reason institutions matter is because, in addition to shaping the strategic choices that individuals make, they also coordinate these choices. People’s decisions about which identity will serve them best are influenced by a great many contextual factors, including who their interacting partners are, the events or issues of the moment, and the physical location in which they find themselves at the time they are making their choice. What makes the choice-shaping effects of political institutions different from these more fleeting and individualized sorts of contexts is that political institutions affect everyone in society that is subject to them. They define a uniform context in which coalition-building calculations are made. Moreover, everyone knows that this is the case, so individuals are able to choose the strategies that are best for them in

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4 Institutions may also affect ethnic identity choices more directly by providing for the preferential treatment of members of certain groups (Weiner and Katzenstein 1981; Horowitz 1985), prohibiting appeals made in terms of certain kinds of identities (Brass 1991), or facilitating political representation by small groups and thereby creating incentives for mobilization along such lines, as, for example, in PR electoral systems (Reilly and Reynolds 1997). The emphasis here on how political institutions affect
light of what they can infer about the best strategies for others. Institutions provide common knowledge (Chwe 2001). This gives them the power to shape not just how individuals identify themselves, but also to coordinate these identity choices so as to affect which ethnic cleavage becomes politically salient in society more generally.

But before political actors even face the choice about which ethnic identity to mobilize, political institutions will have already affected their decisions in another, less proximate, way by shaping the universe of possible ethnic identities from which they are choosing. To suggest that individuals can choose their ethnic affiliations strategically is not to suggest that the range of options from which they are choosing is infinite. The identities they seize upon must be ones that both they and other members of society view as commonsensical units of social division and political self-identification. While appeals to race or language might resonate in most societies, appeals to “Hazel-eyed people” or “left-handed people” will be unlikely to lead to energetic political mobilization, since neither eye color nor left-handedness is understood as a meaningful principle of groupness – at least not in any society of which I am aware. Ethnic mobilization requires coordination, and this requires that the identity around which the mobilization is to take place be understood by would-be mobilizers as at least potentially politically salient.

The kinds of identities that are understood to be potentially politically salient will vary from society to society. For example, the distinction between religious and non-religious people might resonate in Holland (where it has served as a basis for its party system), but not in Iran or Afghanistan, since nobody in these countries sees themselves, or others, in terms of these categories. Only those identities that are part of society members’ shared understandings of how the social landscape of the polity might conceivably be divided up can serve as viable bases for political coalition-building. Thus, before we inquire into why political actors embrace or seek to mobilize the ethnic identities they do, we must first account for why some identities are understood to be meaningful candidates for mobilization and others are not. We need to explain identity choices by defining the arena of political competition is a somewhat different argument from these more familiar ones.
why, when people think about politics and reflect on who they are, they conjure up the range of identities they do.

This is where the second part of the argument about the role of political institutions comes in. In addition to shaping players’ choices about which cards to play, political institutions also help to determine the cards that they hold in their hands. They affect the process of subconscious socialization and conscious investment that determines the contents of individuals’ identity choice sets. Most instrumentalist accounts of ethnic identity choice simply take people’s identity repertoires as given and begin their analysis by stipulating that the individuals in question have the particular identities that they do. In contrast, I seek to account for these identity repertoires. I do this by showing that the ethnic identities that people use to define who they are can often be traced to specific state policies, regulations and administrative structures: that is, to institutions. Further, I demonstrate that the numbers, sizes and distributions of the groups that these identities define can also be shown to be products of administrative structures and policies. As we shall see, the relative sizes and physical locations of groups are important, since these factors determine whether or not they will serve as useful bases of self-identification and political mobilization.

This book thus treats the question of why political conflict in a given community comes to revolve around the particular dimension of ethnic division that it does as the outcome of two separate but equally important processes: the process by which the menu of people’s identity options is generated and the process by which the choices from this menu are made. It separates the process of identity construction from the process of identity choice. The former operates over the long-term and, as I shall show, involves a mix of subconscious social learning and conscious investments by individuals in particular group memberships. The latter is a short-term process that is immediately sensitive to alterations in the rules of the political game and is viewed here as an outcome of strategic choice. The process of identity construction operates in keeping with the “sociological institutionalist” tradition; the process of identity choice operates in keeping with a
“rational choice institutionalist” perspective (Hall and Taylor 1996). Although the two are different, both mechanisms are products of the formal institutional environment in which political and social life is carried out. The complementary roles that each of these processes play in shaping the ethnic cleavage outcome are depicted in Figure 1.1.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1.1: The Institutional Origins of Ethnic Cleavage Outcomes**

To demonstrate how political institutions shape ethnic cleavage outcomes in both of these ways, this book draws on empirical materials from Zambia. In Zambia, political actors identify themselves in terms of (and can build political coalitions around) ethnic groups defined either in terms of tribal affiliation or language group membership. The tribal cleavage divides the country into roughly seventy small groups, whereas the linguistic cleavage partitions it into four broad regional coalitions. To explain Zambians’ ethnic identity choices, the first task, accomplished in Part I of the book, is to account for why tribe and language, but not other bases of social identity,
have come to serve as the key components of Zambians’ identity repertoires, and thus as the central bases of potential ethnic political cleavage in the country. The second task, accomplished in Parts II and III, is to account for why one of these axes of ethnic division emerges as the basis for political competition and conflict rather than the other. As it turns out, the salient cleavage in Zambia changes over time. The specific question that I address is therefore: When (and why) does political competition in Zambia revolve around tribal divisions and when (and why) does it revolve around language group distinctions? My answer is that the relative political salience of the linguistic and tribal cleavages depends on the nature of the country’s formal political institutions – in particular on whether the country is operating under a multi-party or one-party political system. I show that, during periods of multi-party rule, language group cleavages serve as the central axis of coalition-building and political conflict in Zambia whereas, during periods of one-party rule, tribal cleavages play this role. Chapter Five presents a simple model to account for this pattern of variation in ethnic cleavage salience. Chapters Seven and Eight test a series of observable implications that follow from this model, drawing on data from the Zambian case.

The analysis I present is not meant to provide an all-encompassing theory of how institutions shape ethnic cleavages. The particular institutional rules that I emphasize (party system type) are only one of a larger set of formal institutional arrangements that might affect people’s ethnic identity choices. Moreover, even if we restrict our focus to the specific rules that I treat here – that is, even if we try to generalize about the effects of shifting from a one-party to a multi-party political system in a context of single member plurality electoral rules – the specific tribal and linguistic cleavage outcomes that I show this change to generate in Zambia are not generalizable in themselves. The kinds of ethnic cleavages that will become salient in one-party and multi-party elections in other countries and political arenas will depend on the contents of the option set from which political actors in those places are choosing. This will become clear in Chapter Nine, where I apply the model to other African cases. In Zambia, it just happens that, for
reasons I will explain at length, language and tribal identities are the only two options in the
option set.

My purpose, instead, is to provide (and apply) a simple, general model of the power of
formal institutional rules to determine the kinds of identities that individuals will embrace and,
through these identity choices, the social cleavages that will emerge as politically salient. The
“discovery” – and, over the last forty years, gradual acceptance – that ethnic identities are
situational and strategic constitutes probably the most important general insight that has yet been
made in the study of ethnicity and ethnic politics. From the standpoint of heightening awareness
of the complexity of ethnic identifications, this insight has been extraordinarily useful.

Descriptive inferences about the nature of ethnic identities are made much more carefully today
than in the past. Research techniques designed to measure ethnic loyalties and their political and
social consequences are becoming increasingly nuanced and sophisticated (Banton and Mansur
1992; Laitin 1986, 1998; Wilkinson 1999). But from the standpoint of theory-building, the
discovery that ethnic identities are fluid and situation-bound has been paralyzing. The
recognition that ethnic identities may shift from situation to situation has made students of
ethnicity hesitant to propose general hypotheses about people’s identity choices that apply to
more than a unique context or a single individual. As a consequence, the literature on ethnic
politics is almost entirely devoid of generalizations about the conditions under which one ethnic
identity or cleavage will be likely to emerge as politically salient rather than another. The
principal purpose of this book is to develop and document the empirical basis for an argument
that can begin to fill this gap.

ETHNICITY AND ETHNIC CLEAVAGES

To even pose the question that this study seeks to answer, let alone answer it in the way
that I propose, is to embrace a conceptualization of ethnicity and ethnic cleavages that differs in
important ways from how these subjects have traditionally been treated in the literature. Before
proceeding with the discussion in the chapters that follow, it will be useful first to explain and justify in greater detail the perspective that this book adopts.

*Ethnicity*

As I have noted, a first way in which the treatment of ethnicity in this book differs from that in most studies is in the outcome it seeks to explain. Whereas most studies of ethnic conflict seek to explain when and where conflict occurs, this study seeks to explain why it is carried out in the name of one set of identities rather than another. A second way in which this book differs from many studies of ethnic conflict is that it focuses its attention not just on ethnic violence but on the logic and dynamics of ethnic political competition more generally. Headline-grabbing events in Rwanda, Bosnia, Nigeria, and Indonesia notwithstanding, communal riots, civil war, and other forms of violent ethnic conflict are the exception rather than the rule in multi-ethnic societies. Even in stereotypically violent places like Africa, ethnic divisions only rarely generate inter-group violence: Fearon and Laitin (1996) estimate that there has only been one instance of ethnic violence in Africa for every two thousand cases that would have been predicted on the basis of ethnic differences alone. Thus, while trying to understand the roots of communal violence may be a worthy goal, limiting our theory-building efforts to accounting for ethnic bloodshed risks leaving us without the appropriate tools for understanding ethnicity’s contribution to voting patterns, policy choices, government formation, and other important yet non-violent political outcomes. A goal of this book is to introduce a way of thinking about ethnic politics that provides new leverage on issues of these sorts. Of course, an implication of such an approach is that, to the extent that the dynamics of ethnic violence are different from the dynamics of non-violent ethnic politics, the account presented here may be applicable only to explaining the latter.

Apart from the way this book defines its dependent variable, it also differs from many treatments of ethnic conflict in the way it conceptualizes ethnicity itself. Following the lead of
constructivist scholars such as Mitchell (1956), Epstein (1958), and Barth (1969), this book adopts a conceptualization of ethnic identity as fluid and situation-bound. I assume that, rather than being hard-wired with a single ethnic identity, individuals possess repertoires of identities whose relevance waxes and wanes with changes in context. Eric Hobsbawm (1996: 87) captures this idea well when he writes that “whether a Mr. Patel in London will think of himself primarily as an Indian, a British citizen, a Hindu, a Gujarati-speaker, an ex-colonist from Kenya, a member of a specific caste or kin-group, or in some other capacity depends on whether he faces an immigration officer, a Pakistani, a Sikh or Moslem, a Bengali-speaker and so on.” Hobsbawm’s point is that Mr. Patel is all of these things. But the circumstances in which he finds himself will determine which of the identities in his repertoire – Indian, British, Hindu, etc. – will become relevant for how he understands who he is.

Following such scholars as Cohen (1969, 1974), Patterson (1975), Young (1976), Kasfir (1979), Bates (1983), and Brass (1991), I assume further that ethnic identities are not just situational but instrumental. My argument turns on the assumption that the context in which a person finds herself does more than simply provide a perceptual frame that shapes the person’s way of thinking about who she is and how she relates to her environment. I suggest that it also affects the conscious choices she makes about which identity will serve her best. This book thus views the link between a person’s environment and her identity not as the outcome of some passive psychological process (although sometimes it may be) but as the product of a deliberate decision designed to maximize payoffs. These payoffs need not be material. Sometimes they will involve non-material ends like prestige, social acceptance, or protection against shunning, as, for example, when an upper caste Indian identifies herself as a Brahmin rather than more broadly as Hindu, or when a Thai villager identifies himself as Lue (a high-status group) to distinguish himself from the lower-status hill people among whom he lives, or when an Arab-American wears an American flag on his lapel in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.
to make his national loyalties clear. My contention is that, irrespective of the specific nature of the payoffs, the identity that is chosen is selected because of the rewards to which it provides access.

This much is fairly well-accepted. Where I enter somewhat more controversial waters is in my contention that the connection between the identity the person chooses and the payoff she receives lies in nothing more than the size of the group that the identity defines. Indeed, the argument this book presents is built on the claim that ethnic groups are mobilized or joined not because of the depth of attachment that people feel toward them but because of the usefulness of the political coalitions that they define – a usefulness determined exclusively by their sizes relative to other coalitions. Conceptualizing ethnicity in this way strips it of its affect. Ethnic labels cease being sources of pride or markers of stigma and become simply conveyors of information about which coalition a person belongs to. Ethnic groups are transformed (conceptually at least) from organic entities with symbols, traditions, and histories into merely the units from which political coalitions are built. Ethnicity becomes simply an admission card for membership and a decision-rule for determining the political coalitions to which others belong.

Some readers will find this approach dubious. They will point to the incompatibility between the thinness of ethnic loyalties that such a perspective assumes and the depth of attachment that ethnicity often entails. They will dispute the implication that ethnic identities can be adopted and discarded like articles of clothing. They will point to the difficulties that members of disadvantaged groups face when (as the logic of the instrumentalist argument implies they will) they try to “pass” as members of more advantaged groups. And, while conceding that identities certainly do change, they will emphasize that they do so within strict limits and certainly not through the kind of overtly strategic coalition-building calculations that I assume. These are important critiques, and I have several responses.

5 The Lue example is from Moerman (1968). For similar discussions, see Nagata (1974) and Horowitz (1985).
First, when I strip ethnicity of its affect I am not denying that ethnic identities are sometimes sources of extremely strong feelings. Like ethnicity itself, the applicability of the strict instrumentalist approach I adopt is situational. In many contexts (for example, during times of civil war where a person’s life is threatened on account of her ethnic group membership, or in a non-political setting where a person’s choice of ethnic identity will have no bearing on her access to political or economic resources), viewing ethnic identity change as a product of strategic calculations about coalition size will be counter-productive and lead to misinterpretations of the motivations for social behavior. I am not claiming that suicide bombers are motivated by a desire to build minimum winning coalitions. Nor do I want to suggest that emotions such as fear, hatred, or resentment do not trump rational calculations in motivating ethnic behavior in some contexts (Horowitz 2001; Petersen 2002; Varshney 2003). Of course ethnicity can be a source of great passion. But it can also be a tool deployed by coolly calculating political actors. My rationale for adopting a purely instrumental view of ethnicity in this study is simply that, while not appropriate for every explanation, it is appropriate for the expressly political context that this book treats. Moreover, the assumption that ethnicity is situational and strategic can be treated as a working hypothesis, to be tested along with the model that employs this conceptualization. If the model is not able to account for the behavior that it purports to explain, then we can conclude that the assumption on which it is based is probably flawed. Skeptics will be surprised, however, at how much the spare understanding that this book employs is able to explain.

Second, even if we allow that one of the things that makes ethnic group memberships different from non-ethnic group memberships is the depth of feeling that people attach to them, leaving affect aside can still be justified – indeed may even be necessary – for the answering question of why people choose the ethnic identities they do. The problem is that all of the identities in a person’s repertoire are deeply felt. As I underscore in Chapters Two and Three,

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6 For a recent review of the instrumentalist/constructivist perspective and the cumulative research findings
this is part of what it means for an ethnic affiliation to be part of a person’s identity repertoire. But precisely because this is the case, “depth of feeling” is an inadequate explanation for why one ethnic identity becomes politically salient rather than another. Edmund Burke wrote that “to be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society is the first principle (the germ, as it were) of public affections” (quoted in Huntington 1996: 128). The problem is that individuals belong to many platoons, and they love all of them. “Attachment to the subdivision” provides no leverage in accounting for why a person chooses to identify himself in terms of one ethnic affiliation instead of the next. Conceptualizing ethnicity as I do is simply a way of focusing attention on what I claim is doing the work in accounting for changes in the salience of different identities over time and across contexts.

Moreover, reducing ethnic groups to units distinguishable only by their sizes and distributions is far from new. Studies that trace the likelihood of ethnic violence to the shares of different groups in the social arena (e.g., Spilerman 1976) or that locate the character of democratic politics in the numbers and sizes of ethnic groups that are competing for power (e.g., Dahl 1971, Collier 2001) are adopting a view of ethnicity that is identical to the one that I employ here. The voluminous literature that attempts to explain political, social and economic outcomes in terms of a political system’s degree of ethnic fractionalization also implicitly embraces a conceptualization of ethnic groups as nothing more than units of a particular size. The difference between my treatment and these others is simply that I am being explicit about the fact that I am doing this.

Finally, when I assert that individuals are able to change their identities strategically in response to situational incentives, I am not claiming that people can choose any identity they want. Their choices are limited to the identities that are in their repertoire. Take the case of an Igbo-speaking Ikwerre Christian from Nigeria. Depending on the context in which he finds himself, and the usefulness, given that context, of each affiliation, this person could unproblematically claim membership in the community of fellow Igbo-speakers, fellow Ikwerres, it has generated, see Chandra (2001).
or fellow Christians, for he is all of these things. But he could not easily claim membership in the community of Hausa-speakers, Tivs or Muslims – that is, in other Nigerian linguistic, tribal or linguistic communities – no matter what the payoffs for identifying himself in such terms might be. In Waters’ (1990) terms, the former are “ethnic options” for him, but the latter are not. Similarly, a Chinese Buddhist from Malaysia could easily “switch her ethnicity” from Chinese to Buddhist, since these are both in her repertoire: she is both of these things. But she would find it extremely difficult, and perhaps impossible, to “switch her ethnicity” from Chinese to Malay or from Buddhist to Muslim. We would never refer to the first kind of identity change as “passing” – a term that implies an attempt to pass oneself off as something one is not. But that is exactly how we would characterize her attempt to shift her identity in the second way.

Identity changes within a person’s repertoire are natural; changes outside the repertoire are not. In response to instrumentalist assumptions about the flexibility of ethnic identities, most primordialists take a position summarized by the biblical refrain: can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? My response is that while the Ethiopian cannot change his skin, he can choose to define himself in terms of a component of his identity repertoire other than skin color – for example, as a Christian, an Oromo, or a Southerner. When instrumentalists insist that ethnic identities are fluid, they almost always have examples of this sort of within-repertoire identity change in mind. When their critics retort that ethnic identities are not nearly so plastic as the instrumentalists claim, they are almost always thinking of the impossibility (or extreme difficulty) of identity changes outside of a person’s repertoire (e.g., the Ethiopian trying to adopt an identity as “Muslim,” “Tigre” or “Northerner”). The two perspectives do not necessarily contradict one another. They just locate their supporting or disconfirming examples in different types of identity change.

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7 Of course he could claim membership in these groups, but such claims would almost certainly be rejected by members of the groups into which he is seeking entry, particularly if, by admitting him, they would be forced to share the resources the group controls.
Ethnic Cleavages

The outcome this book seeks to account for is the dimension of ethnic cleavage that becomes the axis of political competition and conflict. The concept of an ethnic cleavage is thus central to the analysis. But what, exactly, is an ethnic cleavage? And what is the relationship between ethnic cleavages, ethnic groups, and identity repertoires?

A useful way to answer these questions, and also to clarify the terminology I will employ throughout the book, is to build on a distinction made by Harvey Sacks (1992) between “identity categories” and “category sets.” Identity categories are the group labels that people use to define who they are. They include classifications like “Swedish,” “Muslim,” “Tutsi,” “Northerner,” and “Spanish-speaker.” Category sets, by contrast, are the broad axes of social division into which these categories can be sorted. They include things like religion, race, tribe, nationality, region, and language. Sacks calls them “‘which’-type sets” because they lend themselves to the question “which, for some set, are you?” – for example, which region do you come from? to which tribe do you belong? which religion do you practice? – and he underscores that “none” and “both” are not permissible answers to such questions. In other words, if region, tribe, and religion are bases of ethnic division in a given society, then everyone in that society should have a regional ancestry, a tribal membership, and a religious affiliation, and nobody should be have more than one of each.

To illustrate, and to introduce a notation that I will employ again in Chapter Five, take the example of a hypothetical community in Los Angeles whose population can be sorted on the basis of language, race, and religion into nine distinct groups (with obviously overlapping memberships): English-speakers, Spanish-speakers, Korean-speakers, Blacks, Latinos, Asians, Whites, Catholics, and Protestants. In this example, language, race and religion are the category sets and English-speaker, Spanish-speaker, etc. are the identity categories. Together, these nine

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8 Chandra and Boulet (2003) make a similar distinction, though they also add a third component, attributes, which refer to the observable characteristics – skin color, education, surname, dietary practices, dress, etc. – that allow people to sort others, and gain entry themselves, into ethnic categories.
identity categories constitute the complete universe of social units into which community members might sort themselves or be sorted by others. Each individual community member, however, can only assign herself (or be assigned) to one of these categories for each set; that is, one language category, one racial category, and one religious category. The community’s ethnic cleavage structure can be depicted as \( (L, R, F) \), where \( L \) = language, \( R \) = race, and \( F \) = religion (faith), and

\[
L \in \{l_1, l_2, l_3\}, \text{ where } l_1 = \text{English-speaking}; l_2 = \text{Spanish-speaking}; \text{ and } \\
l_3 = \text{Korean-speaking}
\]

\[
R \in \{r_1, r_2, r_3, r_4\}, \text{ where } r_1 = \text{Black}; r_2 = \text{Latino}; r_3 = \text{Asian}; \text{ and } r_4 = \text{White}
\]

\[
F \in \{f_1, f_2\}, \text{ where } f_1 = \text{Catholic and } f_2 = \text{Protestant}
\]

The difference between ethnic cleavages, ethnic groups and identity repertoires can now be stated clearly. *Ethnic cleavages* are what Sacks calls category sets. In this example they are language, race and religion \((L, R \text{ and } F)\). Throughout the book I will refer to each category set as a different dimension of ethnic cleavage. *Ethnic groups* are the identity categories that each set contains (in this example, \( l_1, l_2, l_3, r_1, r_2, r_3, r_4, f_1 \) and \( f_2 \)). Together, the number of cleavage dimensions that the community contains and the number and relative sizes of the groups on each cleavage dimension define its *ethnic cleavage structure*. Finally, *identity repertoires* are the inventory of ethnic group memberships that individuals possess – one from each cleavage dimension. In our example, we can depict them as \((l_n, r_m, f_k)\). Thus, Jose, a Spanish-speaking Latino Catholic, has an identity repertoire \((l_2, r_2, f_1)\) and Janet, an English-speaking Black Protestant, has an identity repertoire \((l_1, r_1, f_2)\). Note that individuals have as many identities in their repertoires as the cleavage structure has cleavage dimensions.

In addition to helping define our terms more precisely, Sacks’ terminology also helps to clarify the goals and argument of this book. Restated in Sacks’ vocabulary, the objectives of this study can be stated as follows: First, it develops an argument to account for the contents of
actors’ identity repertoires by explaining which category sets (or cleavages) come to be viewed as commonsensical alternatives for dividing up the political landscape. Here the outcome to be explained is the country’s ethnic cleavage structure: why it contains the number of ethnic cleavages it does and why the groups on each cleavage dimension have the relative sizes they do. Then the book presents an explanation for which of the multiple dimension of ethnic cleavage that the cleavage structure contains will emerge as the axis of political competition and conflict. It does this by comparing the relative benefits that actors will receive by identifying themselves in terms of each of the identity categories (or group memberships) they have in their identity repertoires. I argue that these benefits are a function of the sizes of these groups relative to the other groups that are located within the same category set. Thus Jose, with identity repertoire \((l_2, r_2, f_1)\), would compare the size of his language group \((l_2)\) with the sizes of the other language groups \((l_1\) and \(l_3\)), the size of his racial group \((r_2)\) with the sizes of the other racial groups \((r_1, r_3, \) and \(r_4)\), and the size of his religious group \((f_1)\) with the size of the only other religious group in the community \((f_2)\) and choose the one that puts him in the most advantageous ethnic coalition vis-à-vis the others. This is precisely the exercise in comparison to which I am referring when I say that actors will compare the size of their ethnic group with that of all the others located on each cleavage dimension.

**WHY ZAMBIA?**

The question this book addresses is a general one. To develop and test a theory to answer it, I might, in principle, draw on empirical materials from any country or political system that contains more than one dimension of ethnic cleavage. Why Zambia?

Zambia is a fortuitous case for studying the association between political institutions and ethnic cleavages for several reasons. First, the Zambian case provides variation on the
institutions that structure political competition. From independence in 1964 through 1972, Zambia operated under a multi-party political system. Between 1973 and 1991, it became a one-party state. Then, following a political transition in late 1991, the country returned to multi-party rule. Zambia thus has gone through three distinct institutional periods (or Republics). This variation in regime type allows us to test the theoretical expectations that the book develops by checking whether the shifts from multi-party to one-party rule (and back) generated the predicted changes in patterns of ethnic coalition-building. An additional advantage stems from the fact that the two multi-party eras were separated by twenty years and corresponded with periods of dramatically different economic well-being. As I stress in Chapter Six, this pattern of variation makes it possible to control for a key competing explanation for the observed changes in our dependent variable.

A second advantageous feature of the Zambian case lies in its ethnic cleavage structure. As I have noted (and shall elaborate further), Zambia’s ethnic cleavage structure contains two dimensions of cleavage, and each defines a very different ethnic landscape. The language cleavage divides the country into four large regional groups, while the tribal cleavage divides it into roughly seventy small and highly localized ones. The very large differences in the linguistic and tribal cleavage landscapes guarantee that the strategic dynamics of coalition-building will be very different on each cleavage dimension. The fact that Zambian ethnic cleavage structure has just two potentially mobilizable axes of cleavage also simplifies the analysis considerably. These facts, combined with Zambia’s single member plurality electoral system, which gives power to the greatest vote-winner even if they fail to achieve a majority, turn out to be quite important for generating clear theoretical expectations about how changes in institutional structures affect people’s incentives for building or joining political coalitions constructed along one cleavage line rather than the other.

Finally, the Zambian case is highly advantageous for reasons of data availability. Studies of politics in developing nations are frequently hampered by the unavailability or unreliability of
basic social and economic data (Kapur, Lewis and Webb, 1997: 726-29). Treatments of ethnic politics in developing countries face even greater obstacles, since the potentially inflammatory nature of accurate information about ethnic demographics means that ethnic demographic data are rarely collected, let alone made public. Yet having such data is essential for investigating and documenting the patterns of ethnic voting and coalition-building that are at the heart of most theories of ethnic politics. A final reason why Zambia is such a good place to study the issues that this book addresses is because the country’s 1990 census included an item on the questionnaire about respondents’ tribal affiliations. Although this information was dropped in all official publications of the census results, it remained as part of the complete census data set, and I was able to gain access to it through the Zambian Central Statistical Office. A number of the central analyses that I undertake in this study to document the effects of political institutions on ethnic cleavage outcomes would have been impossible without this unique data source.

THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

The book is organized in four parts. Part I, comprising Chapters Two and Three, accounts for why Zambian political actors have the coalition-building options that they do. It shows how a series of policies and regulations implemented by the colonial state and its missionary and mining company allies led to a situation where, when Zambians think about who they are and who their potential ethnic coalition partners might be, they think of themselves either as members of one of the country’s seventy-odd tribes or as members of one of the country’s four broad language groups, and why, for each of these bases of ethnic cleavage, the landscape of social divisions has come to look as it does.

Having established the nature of Zambia’s ethnic cleavage structure in Part I, Part II then addresses the central question of the book: why and when do tribal and linguistic differences

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9 The census asked respondents “What is your Zambian tribe?” Enumerators coded the respondent’s exact answer according to one of the 61 different options in the census code book. If the respondent’s answer did not match any of the available options, the response was coded as “other.”
emerge as the basis of political coalition-building. Chapter Four builds a foundation for the analysis by showing how and why ethnicity matters in Zambian politics and illustrating how political actors exploit and manipulate the country’s ethnic multi-dimensionality. Chapter Five then presents a simple model to explain why political actors make the ethnic identity choices they do and how the shift from one-party to multi-party settings creates incentives for them to alter these choices. The model thus shows how institutional change is responsible for the pattern of variation we observe the relative salience of tribe and language across Zambia’s three Republics.

Part III of the book draws on a broad variety of qualitative and quantitative data to tests a series of observable implications of this model. Drawing on secondary source materials, interviews, original survey and focus group data, and a combination of electoral returns, ethnic demographic data, and information I collected on the tribal backgrounds of more than 2,200 parliamentary candidates, I ask: Do politicians “push the ethnic buttons” that the model expects they will? Do they choose the constituencies in which they run and invest in ethnic civic associations in the way that the model would predict? Do voters behave in keeping with the model’s expectations? Do they support candidates from their own tribes in one-party elections and candidates associated with their language groups in multi-party contests? After ruling out alternative explanations in Chapter Six, Chapter Seven focuses on the model’s implications for the behavior of political elites, while Chapter Eight focuses on its implications for non-elite behavior, principally voting patterns.

Part IV takes the argument of the book beyond Zambia to test its explanatory power in other contexts. Chapter Nine explicitly tests the model’s performance in an additional African country: Kenya. Chapter Ten then shows how the arguments developed in Chapter Five can account for why political actors choose the identities they do and why particular social cleavages emerge as axes of political competition and conflict in a number of settings outside of Africa. The chapter concludes by underscoring the need to treat the ethnic cleavages that organize
politics as outcomes to be explained rather than simply as the unquestioned “social facts” out of which analyses and explanation are built.