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ETHNIC PARTY FRAGMENTATION VERSUS UNITY:  
A NICHE-BASED EXPLANATION RESEARCH NOTE

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# **Ethnic party fragmentation versus unity:**

## **A niche-based explanation**

### **Research note**

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### **Abstract**

The paper provides a niche model for the lack and emergence of ethnic party fragmentation under different demographic conditions. The predictions are tested against the findings of Stroschein (2011) on Hungarian ethnic party success at municipal elections in three Romanian counties.

### **Keywords**

ethnic parties, political niche, Hungarian minorities

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In a recent special issue of Party Politics on ethnic parties, Stroschein (2011) analyses conditions of ethnic party outbidding on the example of Hungarian minority politics in Romania. She discusses how voter demographics and first-mover effects had prevented an emerging second Hungarian ethnic party (MPP) from making foothold besides the incumbent RMDSZ in two of the three Romanian counties with high Hungarian minority concentration. In logic language, Stroschein was looking for necessary conditions for ethnic party fragmentation without destroying the political positions of the ethnicity at hand. Where these conditions had not been met, the hegemony of the incumbent ethnic party was reserved. I provide a niche model, supported by graphical visualization, which recapitulates these results on the outbidding of a second minority party in these two regions. The model also explains why the newcomer MPP could well make a foothold in the third region. Putting differently, the niche-based representation also helps understanding what surplus added to the necessary conditions of fragmentation turns them into sufficient ones. The model is a locally adjusted version of a broader niche model (Otjes et al., 2011b) that explains the competition dynamics of fringe parties making appeal for voters with a peripheral and oftentimes oppositional stance relative to the mainstream.

Below, I recapitulate the core of Stroschein's arguments. This is followed by a brief description of the organizational niche model I am going to apply. Then, I adapt this model to the concrete political context and derive conclusions on ethnic party fragmentation.

## **1. Context**

A focal variable in Stroschein's argument is the size of the ethnic Hungarian voter base that sets, ecologically speaking, a carrying capacity for ethnic party formation (Otjes et al., 2011a). The three regions she investigated differ in their proportions of ethnic Hungarians relative to the Romanian national majority. In

Cluj (in Hungarian: Kolozs) county, Hungarians' proportion to Romanians was about 17% to 79 % in 2002. In Mureş (Maros) county, Romanians had a 53% to 39% majority to Hungarians, while in Harghita (Hargita) county Hungarians had 85% to 7% majority to Romanians. The incumbent ethnic organization RMDSZ (Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania) has been maintaining a hegemonic position in Hungarian ethnic representation since its late 1989 formation just after the fall of the Ceauşescu-regime. Since 1996, the RMDSZ has been acting as internal or external coalition member of different Romanian governments due to its ability of tipping the balance between Romanian parties. Its support for governments could be successfully traded in for political concessions to ethnic Hungarians. However, the same support also involved mildening its stance on claiming territorial – or even cultural - autonomy, an idea unison opposed by Romanian parties. The idea of Hungarian autonomy has not come from the blue. The three counties under investigation had been already forming a territorial autonomy between 1952 and 1968. Interestingly, the Hungarian autonomy territory was formed under Soviets' pressure with the goal of limiting ethnic hostility within communist satellite countries. But then, Hungarians' joint proportion was substantially higher than now in these three regions, 77.3% according to the 1956 census.

In reaction to the compromise-seeking, 'too soft' stance of the RMDSZ, a new movement, the Hungarian Civic Union was formed by secession from the RMDSZ in 2001. The new movement has adopted its current name, Hungarian Civic Party (MPP), in 2008. The MPP, still smaller in support than the RMDSZ, occupies a definitely sharper stance on autonomy and on minority rights in general, than the RMDSZ.

Building on earlier works of Mozareff et al. (2003) and Van Cott (2005), Stroschein (2011:194) found evidence for the following three hypotheses concerning local-level ethnic party fragmentation and strategy formation:

- When the state minority is also (relatively small) local minority, like Hungarians in Cluj county, then ethnic party fragmentation is expected to be low and the ethnic minority is likely to seek formal/informal coalitions with local majority groups.
- When the split between ethnic proportions is strong as ethnic minority and majority numbers are not far from being even, like in Mureş county, then ethnic party fragmentation is expected to be low and cross-ethnic coalition formation is unlikely.
- When state ethnic minority forms an enclave of local majority, like Hungarians in Harghita county, then ethnic party fragmentation is likely and local minorities (here: Romanians) seek coalition with local ethnic majority groups.

Note that these arguments rely on the tacit assumption that ethnic party fragmentation involves strong rivalry and also largely incompatible programs that render ethnic coalition formation unlikely. This was certainly the case between the RMDSZ and its break-off faction MPP, where the latter had been defining itself in terms of oppositional identity relative to the former.

## **2. Niche model**

I apply organizational ecology's resource partitioning theory (Carroll, Dobrev and Swaminathan, 2002; Boone et al., 2002; Hannan et al., 2007) after adjusting it to the particularities of the given political context. Resource partitioning theory was developed by Carroll (1985) with the goal of explaining the unexpected insurgence of small, specialized daily newspapers when the concentration of, potentially bullying, large generalist dailies soared high in the United States. The

theory explained the emergence of a division between the two groups' readership bases. Belonging to an opinion industry, newspapers face somewhat similar market positioning problems as political parties do in issue spaces.

Being a part of organizational ecology (Hannan and Freeman 1977; Hannan et al., 2007), resource partitioning theory considers audience's demand for services (e. g., for political representation) the focal scarce resource for organizational subsistence. People distributed along different taste positions, or along different socio-demographic traits, are the carriers of demand. Each trait constitutes an axis in a multidimensional resource space (in our case: political issue space). Resource partitioning theory assumes that mainstream tastes along issues constitute one, or sometimes more, market centre(s) surrounded by distribution tails standing for atypical peripheral tastes (Figure 1a). The theory explains a phenomenon surprising from the point of view of traditional thinking about competitive markets: increasing market concentration, which is supposed to be seen as an entry barrier, can suck in a new stream of small and specialized organizations at the market peripheries.

The explanation goes as follows. Large organizations face strong competition around the centre of the market constituted by abundant in demand; as they make appeal for the same typical customer groups, their niches strongly overlap. When competitive shake-out gradually decreases the number of large players, market concentration increases. In the same time, the few winners take over the best market chunks of their outforced competitors. This involves the repositioning of their engagement areas, niches, closer to the very heart of the centre. But overstretching their engagement area would normally have negative consequences because of a trade-off between niche width and fitness known as the principle of allocation in bio-ecology (Levins, 1968) and in organizational ecology (Freemann and Hannan, 1983; Péli, 1997, Hannan et al., 2007). In contexts of political parties, making an appeal for a too broad range of constituency decreases the chances of developing consistent political programs.

Therefore, parties' move towards the centre is normally coupled with abandoning some peripheral voters. In terms of organizational ecology, resource release takes place at the margins. This attracts specialized small organizations that can scavenge on the leftover resource with their dedicated political or economic offerings. At the end of the day, there is little niche overlap between the centre players of generalist offerings and the small periphery-specialists: the market is partitioned between the two.

Another type of resource partitioning occurs when mainstream generalist organizations do not abandon peripheral positions voluntarily. Rather, some small organizations raise new demand at the peripheries, for example, by introducing new issues, or new approaches to existing issues. Then, it is not the centre players' resource release, but small players' oppositional identities that secure specialized peripheral domains (Carroll et al., 2002). Oppositional identities are oftentimes raised and maintained by social movements. An emblematic example organizational example is the American microbrewery movement. Microbreweries have been defining their beers in oppositional terms to mainstream industrial brewery products via their meticulously scrutinized insistence to traditional small-batch brewing methods (Carroll and Swaminathan, 2000). Below, I argue that both ways of peripheral niche carving plays a role in ethnic party positioning.

### **3. Application**

The setting assumes the presence of a national majority and an ethnic minority at the country level and also a salient ethnic dimension in a possibly many dimensional political issue space. The salience of the ethnic dimension means that voters consider subduing their preferences along other dimensions if this prevents the victory of the other ethnicity or at least maintains some ethnic positions in case of losing. Figures 1-2 display niche positioning along the salient ethnic dimension. Adopting the representation of the directional voting theory

(Rabinowitz and McDonald, 1989), positions along the horizontal axis represent the sign and the degree of affinity towards the political requests of the ethnic minority group (here: Hungarians). We expect a unimodal voter preference distribution (except for the case of split voter base in Figure 1b) with tails standing for extreme endorsement/rebuttal along the ethnic dimension.

#### Cluj and Mureş counties

Ethnic Hungarians are in minority to Romanians in Cluj county; so the peak of voter distribution locates at the negative side of the affinity dimension (Figure 1a). The maximal voter base Hungarian parties can address is the zone under the curve that falls right to the neutral position. The incumbent RMDSZ could not span its niche towards the extreme positions on the right-hand side of the scale. The relatively small Hungarian minority's too radical ethnic stance would block local cooperation (formal/informal coalition) with Romanian parties, a way of securing ethnic Hungarian positions in the county.

Less straightforward is the representation of split voter base case in Mureş county. Though here the Hungarians are in minority to Romanians as well, the ethnic proportions are not too disparate. This close-to-draw situation has a polarizing effect on the constituency (Figure 1b). Normally, the neutral position in the middle of the graph is populated by voters for whom the ethnic dimension is not salient, though they might have characteristic stances along other dimensions not represented here. But polarization along the salient ethnic dimension, just like along the left-right division in other contexts, has the power of emptying the neutral position. The normally unimodal voter distribution transforms into bimodal.<sup>1</sup> Under such antagonistic conditions, inter-ethnic coalition is unlikely. It is known that the Hungarian minority is likely to lose the local election. To lessen the havoc, minority voters tend to cast their votes on the stronger incumbent RMDSZ, even those as well whose sympathy was with the newcomer MPP.

### Harghita county

Hungarians have an overwhelming majority in Harghita county: the peak of the voter distribution falls to the right-hand side of the graphs in Figure 2. This majority, in principle, gives enough room for more than one non-allying Hungarian ethnic party. Here, a variant of resource partitioning processes has taken place that combines the two partitioning mechanisms based on resource release and oppositional identity. Figure 2 illustrates the process in three phases. Figure 2a displays the fundamental niche breadth and the corresponding constituency base of RMDSZ just after its 1989 formation. The party had appeal on voters from modest to strong positive affinity along the Hungarian issue dimension.

Figure 2b is about the additional effects that jointly with the necessary conditions for new ethnic party formation (overwhelming local Hungarian majority) have formed sufficient ones. Figure 2b displays the modified RMDSZ niche after engaging in explicit/tacit coalitions with different Romanian political formations at the country level. Some coherence must exist between the national level political stance of an ethnic minority party and its local policies. The RMDSZ has moved its niche towards the centre along the ethnic dimension. Some positions seen 'too radical' by Romanian nationals had to be abandoned. This led to resource release at the tail of the distribution (Figure 1b). In the same time, the RMDSZ niche could be extended to neutral voters. But what have increased the coherence between the party's national (coalition-seeking) and local (dominance-seeking) policies have decreased the coherence between its voter groups within its niche. The RMDSZ faced that what was good for its neutral voters was too little for its remaining 'radicals' at the other edge of its niche; and what was good for the radicals was too much for the neutrals. The decreasing coherence within the niche increased the probability of faction formation. Moreover, the resource release at the tail left some former RMDSZ voters without

political representation completely. These two effects have led to the break-off of the MPP from RMDSZ.

Forming a new party by secession, like any divorce, comes normally with the new part's over-emphasizing its differences to the old organization. MPP has secured its niche from RMDSZ by developing a strong oppositional identity. This included assuming a more confrontational stance on territorial autonomy, an *anathema* for all possible Romanian coalition partners of the RMDSZ. As a result, the new MPP has not only occupied the tail positions abandoned by RMDSZ, but could also extend its niche towards more radical voters who were out-of-niche for the RMDSZ even before its move towards the centre (Figure 1c). The partitioning of the Hungarian voter-base is partial: the two parties have a substantial niche overlap in which they compete for the same 'medium-radical' Hungarian voters. Still, neither's loss of voters due to this overlap was large enough to endanger the Hungarian majority in Harghita county at the local elections.

Do the two parties mobilize more ethnic voters jointly than the RMDSZ could have mobilized alone? At least two effects increase mobilization, whilst at least one seems decreasing it. According to Downsian proximity theory (1957), abstaining from voting decreases with the party programs (here represented by their niche centers) getting closer to constituencies' ideal points. Covering the positive range of the affinity scale with not one but two niches decreases voters' average distance to the closest niche centre (compare Figures 1b-c), and so it is expected to increase participation rate. The split between two competing Hungarian parties may also have a mobilizing effect on both sides thus increasing Hungarian voter participation, just as the split between Hungarians and Romanians had in the Mureş county case. But harsh and lingering quarrels within the same ethnic community may also make some voters turning their back to ethnic politics. The measuring of these opposing effects against each other needs future research. However, some evidence on the vote-increasing aggregate impact of secession has already been obtained at the country level in 2007, at

Romania's first European elections. By that time, the MPP has not yet been officially registered as a party. Therefore Bishop László Tőkés, who played a key role in the 1989 Romanian revolution, has run as an independent candidate, while RMDSZ has run with its own list. Then, the gambling paid-off well: Tőkés was elected by mobilizing additional voters.

#### **4. Summary**

The niche model put forward in this paper contributes to the understanding the dynamics of ethnic fragmentation. Local ethnic majority is normally seen as a necessary condition of – non-suicidal – new ethnic party emergence. But even if this condition is met, triggers might be needed to turn the demographic possibility for new ethnic partner formation into reality. In the Hargitha county case, the trigger was the move of the incumbent RMDSZ towards the centre that has left some (semi)peripheral voter positions unserved. Moreover, this move increased the tensions between the opposite edges of the RMDSZ niche, respectively populated by neutral and medium-radical voters. These two effects, jointly, have set off the secession of the second Hungarian ethnic party MPP. The niche model may also be adjusted to contexts with non-ethnic niche parties (environmentalists, life-style specialists) that go for voters with a peripheral/oppositional stance relative to the mainstream along some salient issue space dimension.

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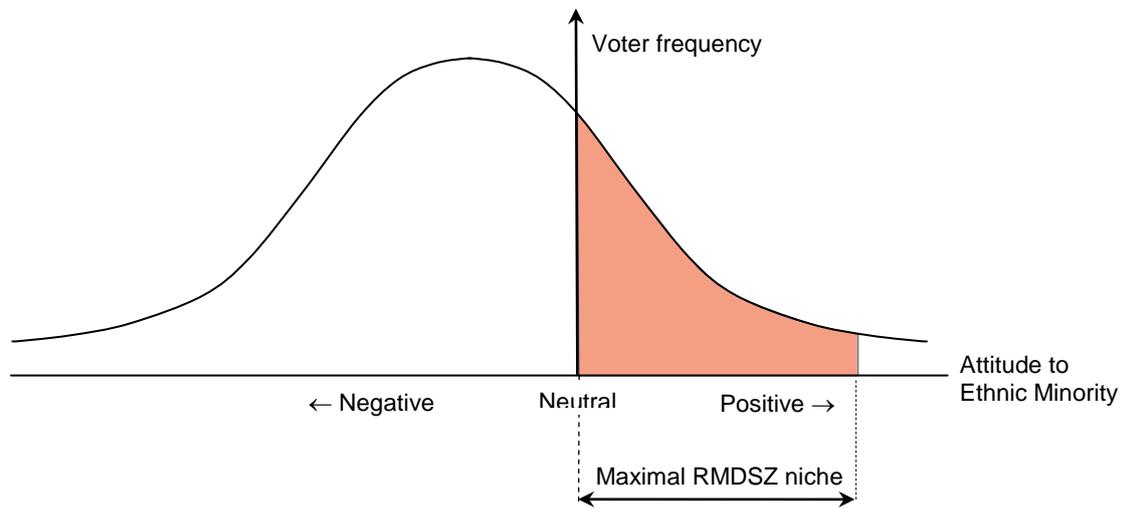
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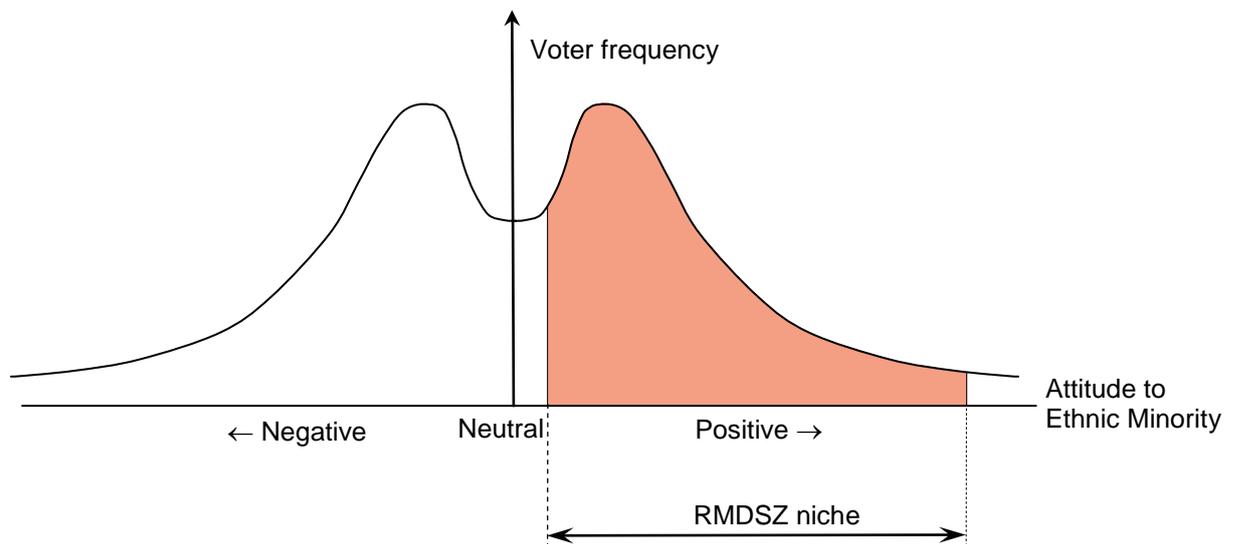
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**Figure 1.** Niche positioning in Cluj and Mureş counties

a. Cluj

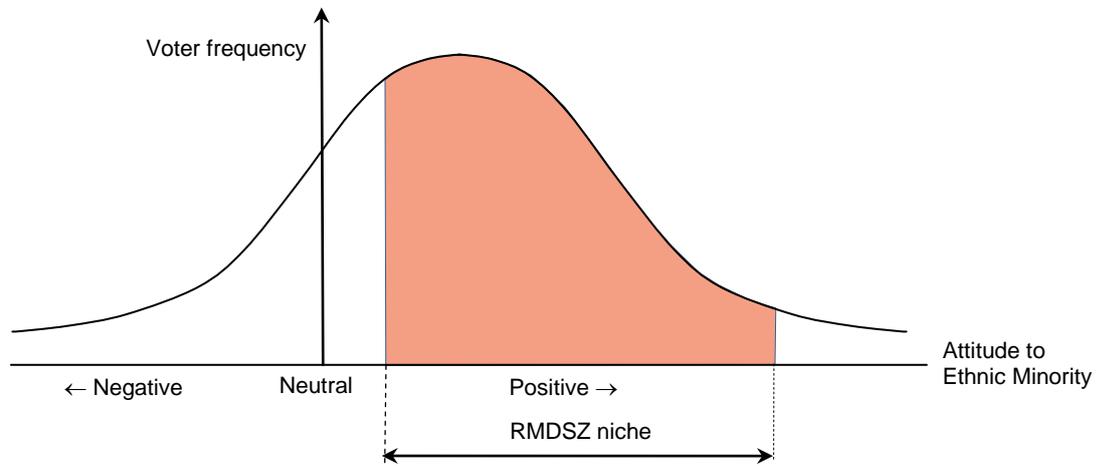


b. Mureş

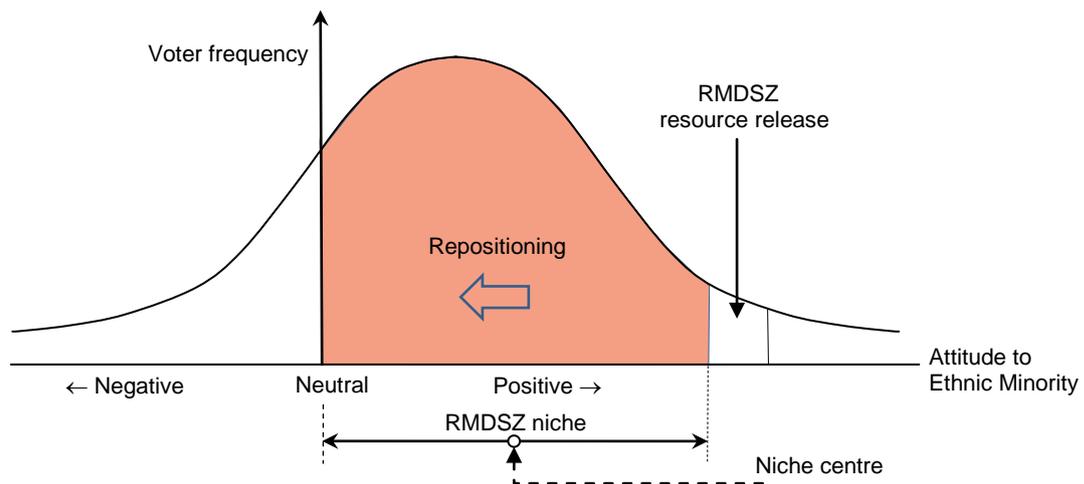


**Figure 2.** Niche positioning in Hargitha county

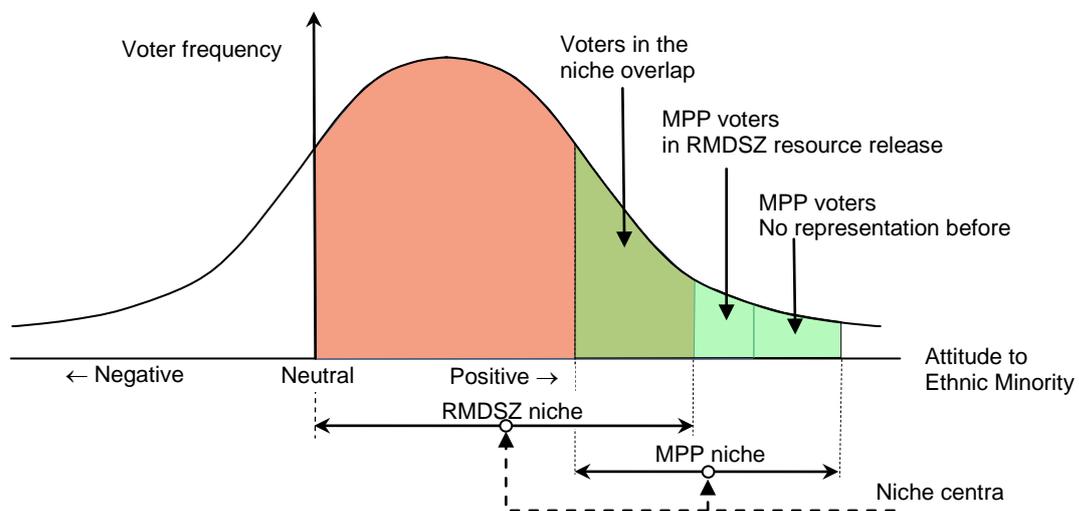
a. RMDSZ monopoly before entering country-level coalition



b. RMDSZ monopoly after entering country-level coalition



c. RMDSZ and MPP competition phase



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<sup>1</sup> Studying the dynamics of the Bulgarian newspaper industry in the post-communist era, Dobrev (2000) found evidence that political schisms along a salient dimension can induce adding political meanings to once apolitical dimensions. By the time of his research, the Bulgarian populace was divided into two large blocks: anti-communists and those with nostalgies towards the previous communist regime. Neutral positions have been emptied so much that not only the large dailies, but also specialised journals, like sport or sex magazines, assumed consensually known affiliations to one of the two political sides.