Mobilizing Political Engagement and Reducing Inequalities in Diverse Societies

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Abstract: The process of democratization in an increasing number of diverse societies has focused attention on how best to devise electoral systems (as well as other institutions) in order to manage ethnic conflict. Institutional arrangements that allow for power-sharing between groups or arrangements that encourage political actors to appeal to those outside their groups are thought to increase legitimacy and reduce (or channel) conflict. This paper investigates how electoral systems influence political support and engagement across 33 countries using data from the European Social Survey. Contrary to what we might expect from consociational accounts, the results suggest that majoritarian systems tend to reduce differences between ethnic minorities and non-minorities in both political engagement and satisfaction with democracy.

Introduction

Calls for group or descriptive representation are based on several different arguments. First, under-representation of minority groups may occur from discriminatory practices and enhancing or assuring group representation is one way of overcoming this systematic discrimination. If people belonging to a minority community express preferences as members of that community, electoral arrangements ought not to prevent these interests from being expressed (Kymlicka 1995). Second, representation of minority interests is assumed to influence policy outcomes. While Pitkin (1967) questions the effectiveness of descriptive representation, others such as Mansbridge (1999, 2000) suggest that descriptive representation can serve to facilitate communication between representative and the represented and to “crystallize” unexpressed minority interests that may not be on the political agenda. Third, not only may policy consequences be influenced by descriptive representation but the actual behavior and attitudes of minority populations may be positively influenced by being descriptively represented (see, for example, Bobo and Gilliam 1990).

The question of fair minority group representation in democratic societies has taken on greater importance with the dramatic increase in the number of democracies worldwide. Concerns about democratic stability in diverse societies have led some researchers to focus on how institutions can incorporate minority group voices into the policymaking process. For example, Lijphart (1995) argues that institutions designed to share power (with features such as a federal structure, coalition governments and proportional representation) are better at giving voice to minority groups. Special
arrangements may also facilitate group representation in parliament for previously underrepresented groups (Htun 2004). Research in the United States, for example, has focused on the consequences of electoral arrangements or redistricting on the representation of African-Americans and Latinos at the local level (Bowler, Donovan and Brockington 2003; Davidson and Grofman 1994).

Another line of research addresses the question of how representation influences the attitudes and behaviors of citizens belonging to minority groups (Banducci, Donovan and Karp 2004; Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Tate 2001) and political participation of minority groups (Barreto, Segura and Woods 2004; Gay 2001; Tate 1991). Much of the research on these latter questions has tended to focus on the representation of Latinos and African-Americans in the U.S. case, while research on the influence of institutional design on democratic stability has taken a comparative approach.

In this paper we bridge these two main areas of research and examine, from a comparative perspective, how institutional arrangements influence political support and behavior among minority populations.¹

**Electoral Systems and Ethnic Minority Representation**

The debate over the appropriate institutions necessary to promote ethnic representation has been, in part, driven by the question of how best to promote democratic stability in diverse societies. The two sides of the debate disagree over the role of parties and institutions in mobilizing ethnic identities and cooperation among diverse groups. Lijphart (1986, 1995) advocates proportional representation and institutions that promote power sharing. Horowitz (1985, 1993), on the other hand favors
majoritarian electoral arrangements that demand parties make appeals across ethnic lines in order to have electoral success.

According to Lijphart (1986, 1995), consociational democracies, which are characterized by institutions that demand compromise among political parties, minimize conflict and allow diverse groups to exist within the same state. In particular, proportional electoral systems (PR) foster the representation of smaller parties in parliament which is assumed to lead to the representation of minority interests. In turn, representation of ethnic minorities in parliament increases support for the political system among members of these groups. Put another way, part of the consociational account suggests that descriptive representation is an important way of fostering support for the political system.

An important assumption within Lijphart’s account is that PR leads to the representation of minority interests through the representation of members of minority groups in parliament. PR is assumed to increase the representation of ethnic minorities because it accommodates smaller parties. Where ethnic cleavages are politically salient, ethnic parties are more likely to emerge when proportional electoral formulas are used (Ordeshook and Shvetsova 1994) and parties will tend to develop around these cleavages (Shugart 1994). In contrast, when single member districts (SMD) exist as in the United States (i.e. when the district magnitude is one), an ethnic minority group that is not geographically concentrated is better off working with one of the major parties in order to win concession rather than forming its own party (Taagepera 1994). Nevertheless ethnic parties can emerge in countries where minority populations are regionally concentrated and vote in a bloc such as in India and Canada (Rae 1971).
One of the understudied aspects in the accounts of electoral systems is the degree to which proportional electoral systems actually facilitate the election of representatives from minority groups.² There is clear evidence that PR enhances the representation of women in national legislatures and Lijphart (1999), Taagepera (1994) and Shugart (1994) use this evidence to generalize to ethnic minorities. However, it is not at all clear that the same mechanisms that increase the representation of women will also enhance the representation of racial and ethnic minorities.³ Perhaps the strongest empirical evidence for the impact of electoral systems on ethnic minority representation is based on a few cases where there have been changes in electoral rules. In the United States, for example, adoption of multi-member districts and cumulative voting (a “halfway point” between SMD and PR) increased the representation of Latino and African-Americans on town and city councils and school boards that had previously used single member districts and plurality rules (Bowler, Donovan and Brockington 2003).⁴ In New Zealand, the adoption of a Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) electoral system enhanced the representation of Maori in parliament beyond proportionality (Banducci and Karp 1998).

Those that advocate majoritarian electoral systems for managing ethnic conflict suggest that using rules that encourage parties to compete for votes across groups will enhance representation through policy responsiveness (Horowitz 1993, Reilly 2001, 2002).⁵ Rather than encouraging the creation of ethnic parties that reconstruct the divisions within society, majoritarian rules require that parties bargain, pool votes and accommodate policy preferences of other groups in order to appeal to a majority (or a minimum winning coalition) of voters. The focus on bargaining and accommodation by all political parties, rather than on the election of ethnic parties and coalition formation,
forces parties and candidates to broaden their appeals to ethnic groups in order to build winning coalitions. Therefore, according to this account, perceived system legitimacy would result from policy responsiveness to ethnic interests rather than from minorities sharing power as in the consociational account.

**Minority Representation and Political Support**

Underlying the arguments about the effects of institutional arrangements on representation is the link between exclusion from the political process and the attitudes and behaviors of ethnic minority groups. It has long been suggested that citizen attitudes about the political system can be linked to either a democracy characterized by stability or by protest, riots and terrorism. One potential cause of instability of democratic political systems is when citizens feel disconnected or alienated from the political process (Citrin et al. 1975). In some instances, the disconnection from politics may result in citizens opting out of the political process but in other instances it may lead to rebellious behavior (Muller, Jukam and Seligson 1982). In the literature on ethnic diversity and rebellion, claims have been made that more ethnically diverse societies are more likely to suffer from civil war (Smith 1986, Huntington 1996, for contrary evidence see Laitin and Fearon 2003). Anderson and Paskevicuīte (2006) find that there are lower levels of interpersonal trust in ethnically diverse societies in established democracies. This result taken with Laitin and Fearon’s (2003) conclusion that greater degrees of ethnic and religious diversity in societies are not necessarily prone to conflict suggests that, at least in some diverse societies, features such as institutional arrangements may serve to promote greater stability.
Institutional arrangements and, in particular, electoral systems can alter the levels of political support. Furthermore, arrangements that tend to facilitate the incorporation of minority group interests through representation or power sharing tend to increase support among those groups that benefit from the institutional arrangements. Anderson and Guillory (1997) show that those who tend to be on the losing side of electoral contests are more satisfied under consensual systems rather than majoritarian systems. Banducci, Donovan and Karp (1999) find that the level of political efficacy for minor party supporters in New Zealand increased following a transition from a plurality system to proportional representation.

Further evidence shows that outside of electoral arrangements, descriptive representation enhances political attitudes and can even influence political participation. While most of the research in this area is based largely on evidence from the U.S. it shows that having a representative of “one’s own” can, reduce alienation (Pantoja and Segura 2003), increase political efficacy (Banducci, Donovan and Karp 2005; Banducci, Donovan and Karp 2004) and trust in government (Howell and Fagan 1988) and increase participation (Barreto, Segura and Woods 2004; Gay 2001). This line of research has relied on the political “empowerment model” (Bobo and Gilliam 1990). The argument behind this “empowerment model” is that those minority groups that are excluded from positions of political power are aware that they are politically disadvantaged (one of the most visible signs being the lack of elected representatives from the group).

Awareness of being politically disadvantaged may lead to distrust and disengagement in the political process. This distrust as suggested above, can also lead to rebellious behavior and instability. In a cross national analysis, Alonso and Ruiz-Rufino
(2007) find that protest by ethnic minorities is likely to be moderated when minorities achieve greater representation, particularly in parliamentary systems. While much of our preceding discussion of the literature assumes that electoral systems are fixed, we do take note that these institutions are embedded in the wider cultural and social context (see Grofman et al. 1999). Ethnic and social cleavages shape party systems (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) which condition the influence of electoral systems; therefore, the structure of the electoral system can be endogenous particularly in newly developed democracies.

**Expectations**

So far we have outlined the links between electoral systems, descriptive representation, ethnic minorities and citizen’s political support and engagement. From this outline, we can then build several expectations about how representation will influence the attitudes and behavior of ethnic minorities. Based on Lijphart’s theory of consociational democracy and subsequent research on the effects of electoral systems, one would expect that the differences in political support between majority and minority populations will be smallest in proportional systems. A contrary view suggests that majoritarian systems will enhance engagement of minority groups because they encourage parties to mobilize support across different ethnic groups. Whether ethnic groups are proportionally represented may be important but having a representative of “one’s own” such as in a single member district system may also be desirable. Thus, the expectations for majoritarian systems are mixed; some theories lead one to expect ethnic group differences to be minimized under majoritarian systems while other theories predict the differences to be minimized under proportional systems.
Data and Methods

The following analysis relies on data from the European Social Survey (ESS) which includes a module on Citizenship, Involvement and Democracy that has been administered in over 30 countries. Along with a battery of questions that measure political engagement and attitudes, the ESS includes a unique question asking respondents whether they belong to a minority ethnic group. These data provide a unique opportunity to examine whether descriptive representation can serve to mobilize ethnic minorities and enhance political support across a diverse set of countries. Whereas the sample of ethnic minorities in most surveys is typically small (by definition) the pooling of data across a large number of countries provides one with a sufficient sample to draw inferences about their attitudes or behavior.

Any analysis of minority group attitudes or behavior suffers from the same problem. By definition, minority groups make up a smaller proportion of the population. Using survey data based on national probability samples presents researchers with the problem of having a very small number of minorities in the sample (if any). Furthermore, many of these minority populations may be underrepresented in the sample of survey respondents because they are more likely to have the characteristics of non-responders, e.g. socially and economically disadvantaged, living in a difficult to reach location and may be less interested in the subject of the survey (see Goyder 1987). One solution to these problems is to either limit the survey population to minorities or to over-sample the minority population. Another approach, which is used in this paper, is to increase the number of minorities in the sample by pooling across a large number of countries. Admittedly, this approach addresses the first concern but not the second.
Several measures are used to measure political involvement. These include (1) the respondent’s level of political interest (2) level of political engagement and (3) reported vote in previous national election. Political engagement is measured by responses to a series of questions on conventional political acts over the previous 12 months. Respondents were asked if they had participated in one of the following activities: attending a lawful demonstration, joining a boycott, working for a political party or action group, displaying a campaign badge or sticker, or contacting a politician or government official. We have given a score of 1 to any respondent who mentioned participating in one of these five political actions. Respondents who have not participated in any activities have been given a score of 0. The ESS also includes a question about whether the respondent voted in the previous election. Along with these indicators of engagement, we rely on satisfaction with democracy as an indicator of political support. For simplicity, the top four categories that form a ten point scale have been collapsed to 1 while the remaining categories have been recoded to 0.

Aside from ethnic minority status, the main independent variable of interest is the electoral system. While most of the countries in the sample use proportional representation, there is still a substantial variation in the degree to which votes are translated into seats. To capture these differences, a measure of disproportionality is used based on Gallagher’s least squares index. Of the countries in the sample, the Netherlands is the most proportional while France is the most disproportional. Unfortunately, data on the representation of ethnic minorities in national parliaments are difficult to obtain. Previous studies have used women serving in parliament as a proxy which could be problematic (see also Norris, 204. 212). Although we have reservations about using the
proportion of women in the parliament as a proxy for the degree of ethnic minority representation, we include the measure as a test of whether it has the expected effect on our dependent variables of interest. Four of the countries in the sample use compulsory voting. To control for these effects a dummy variable is used. Another dummy variable for new or emerging democracies is used to control for differences in democratization.

Our analysis proceeds by first examining bivariate differences in the attitudes and behavior of ethnic minorities and non-minorities. We then test for the conditioning effects of these different institutional conflicts on the degree of differentiation between ethnic minorities and non-minorities in multivariate models.

Results

The sample draws primarily from Round 3 of the ESS released in 2008. Eight additional countries have been merged from previous rounds bringing the total number of countries to 33. While most are European countries, the sample also includes Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, and Israel, as well as the United States, where the module was administered in 2002. Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents who claim to be a member of a minority group across the sample. Estonia, the United States, Bulgaria, Russia and Bulgaria are among the most diverse countries in the sample with minority populations that exceed 15 percent. Ten other countries have minority populations that are estimated between 5 and 10 percent while the remaining 19 countries have less than 5 percent.

(Figure 1 here)
Table 1 shows differences between ethnic minorities and non-minorities on the indicators of political engagement and satisfaction with democracy. On average, minorities are less likely to be engaged in the political process than non-minorities. These differences are greatest on voting and political engagement. In addition, just a quarter of minorities express satisfaction with democracy, compared to about a third for non-minorities.

(Table 1 here)

To further examine these differences, country specific models were estimated. Other factors known to influence political engagement and attitudes, such as age, education, and gender are used as controls. Because the dependent variables are either dichotomous or ordinal, logistic regression is used to estimate the models. Figure 2 illustrates the results for voter participation. The coefficient for minority, along with the confidence interval, is plotted across countries that are sorted from low to high disproportionality. In 17 of the cases, the confidence interval falls outside zero, indicating that the coefficient is statistically significant at p<.05. Positive differences in participation are only evident in Turkey, Bulgaria, and Slovakia, which are among the more diverse countries in the sample. On the other measures of political engagement and on satisfaction with democracy, significant differences appear in about a third of the countries and most are negative, indicating that where there is a difference minorities are less likely to be engaged even when controlling for other demographic characteristics.

(Figure 2 here)

To examine whether differences between minorities and non-minorities are influenced by institutional features such as the electoral system, another multivariate
model is estimated with pooled data. As in the country specific models discussed above, individual level characteristics such as age, education, and gender are included as controls. As a test of whether the electoral system minimizes the differences in political engagement between ethnic minority groups and non-minorities, an interaction term is included between minority status and disproportionality.

Given the multilevel structure of the data, most conventional methods of estimation will underestimate standard errors leading to a higher probability of rejection of a null hypothesis. Therefore, we proceed by estimating models using robust standard errors clustered by country. The procedure does not affect the coefficients, but it does estimate more consistent standard errors even when some of the assumptions about variance are violated. This means we can assume cases are independent across countries but not within. To consider how the results may vary across diverse and homogenous societies, the model is estimated with a split sample using a cutting point of more than five percent with minority populations (see Figure 1).11

Table 2 displays the results. As noted above, minorities are significantly less likely to be interested in politics, less satisfied with democracy (in diverse countries) and less likely to vote than non-minorities. However, as the positive interaction term reveals, these differences are minimized in systems that are more likely to produce disproportional results. The interaction term is significant on both political interest and satisfaction with democracy in both homogenous and diverse societies. It is also significant for voter participation in diverse societies. These results support our expectations that institutional arrangements not only serve to reduce differences in political engagement but can also reduce differences in political support between
minorities and non-minorities. These results run contrary to expectations based on a consociational model, which assumes that minorities are more likely to be mobilized in systems that promote the representation of diverse interests. Instead, the results suggest that minorities are more likely to be mobilized in systems where parties are encouraged to compete for votes across diverse groups.

We also tested interactions (not reported in the tables) between ethnic minority status and the proportion of women represented as women’s representation has been used as a proxy for ethnic representation. However, none of these interactions were significant in the expected direction cautioning against assuming ethnic representation and women’s representation have similar causes and consequences. We do see that women’s representation is related to both higher levels of political engagement in homogenous societies suggesting that visible diversity in national parliaments can enhance overall engagement but the sign reverses in diverse societies.

(Table 2 here)

Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper we have attempted to bridge the cross-national literature that focuses on the relationship between institutional arrangements and democratic stability with the “political empowerment” literature which suggests that choosing a representative of one’s own can alter attitudes and behavior.

Generally our results support expectations that differences in political engagement and political support between ethnic minorities and those in the majority can be minimized under certain institutional arrangements. The findings on the role of the electoral systems indicate that differences in both psychological engagement, voter
participation and satisfaction with democracy are more likely to be minimized under disproportional systems (ie. majoritarian). These results undermine the consosiational model which assumes that the representation of minority interests will lead to greater mobilization. These findings are similar to Norris (2004) who found no clear evidence that PR reduced differences in political support between minority and non-minority populations. Based on a country by country analysis, Norris concludes that ethnic differences were smallest in majoritarian systems. There are two possible conclusions to draw regarding the apparent advantage of majoritarian systems.

First, this finding suggests that mobilization of ethnic minorities is more likely to occur under systems that encourage catch-all parties to mobilize across the citizenry. Second, because the majoritarian systems are also candidate based systems there may be an appeal to having a representative who is directly selected by and accountable to a district. When an ethnic group is regionally concentrated, the representative is more likely to be a member of an ethnic group.

An understanding of the consequences of different arrangements to enhance ethnic representation is crucial for scholars and policymakers designing institutions. Demands for representation based on ethnicity can stem from a desire to be integrated in the political process or from a desire for access to political power in their own right (Htun 2004). Different institutional arrangements, whether majoritarian or proportional electoral rules are adopted or whether special arrangements are made, have consequences for how parties systems and, consequently, representatives and governments can respond to groups demands.
References


Endnotes

1 In this paper we use the terms “ethnic” and “ethnic minority” to refer to groups that are differentiated along racial, ethnic, religious, language, country of origin and status as “original peoples.” Our use of the term “ethnic” and “ethnic minority” to indicate these groups is a more inclusive use of the term “ethnic” than is usually used. However, ethnic identities can largely be seen as social constructs based on the divisions listed above and the more inclusive use of the term is increasing (see Htun 2003).

2 Based on case studies of France, Denmark and Canada, Bird (2005) identifies other factors in addition to the electoral system that influence the representation of ethnic minorities. These other factors include the size and spatial concentration of the ethnic group, openness of citizenship rules, degree of cultural assimilation, party competition and legislative turnover.

3 For example, in the United States, at large elections increase the proportion of women elected in municipalities while ward elections are better at electing African-Americans (Darcy, Welch and Clark 1994). In these cases, the effectiveness of different electoral systems at increasing minority representation is dependent on the geographic distribution of the minority population. From a global perspective, Htun (2003) suggests that ethnic groups are more likely to be aligned with political communities which is not the case with women: political parties in democracies are more likely to respond to demands for women’s representation with the use of party quotas but states are more likely to use reserved seats for ethnic minorities. Mechanisms such as party quotas are have shown to be more influential at increasing women’s representation than proportional representation (Caul 2001) and there are not noted cases of party quotas for ethnic minorities (Htun
Furthermore, the representation of women is more dependent on the responsiveness of parties to pressure to nominate women (both to appeal to voters and satisfy intra-party demands) while the representation of ethnic minorities depends on the formation of ethnic parties (see Taagepera 1994).

4 In the US, at-large districts tend to underrepresent black candidates though the evidence is less clear for Latino candidates (see Welch 1990). While some municipal governments have moved to cumulative voting or preference voting to increase minority representation, a countervailing trend has been to move from at-large elections to ward or district elections. Especially where minority populations tend to be geographically concentrated, district elections can serve to enhance representation as well.

5 Reilly proposes a system of preferential voting – either STV or AV. Therefore, he is not strictly advocating a majoritarian system though preference voting systems such as the AV are majoritarian.

6 In one exception to the U.S. focus, Fennema and Tillie (1999) find that increased representation of ethnic minorities on municipal councils and voter turnout are linked. However, they also find that ethnic minorities (with the exception of Turks) have lower rates of participation and trust than the majority population.

7http://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/staff/michael_gallagher/ElSystems/Docts/ElectionIndices.pdf

8 We obtained data on ethnic minority representation in 19 national parliaments. The correlation between minority and women’s representation is .30 which suggests a fairly weak relationship.

9 These countries are Belgium, Luxembourg, Greece and Cyprus.
Those who are very and quite interested in politics are combined into one category and those who are hardly or not at all interested are combined into the reference category.

This is an inefficient method that nonetheless provides a conservative test of the hypotheses.
Figure 1: Diversity Across Countries

Source: European Social Survey
Table 1: Differences in Attitudes and Engagement (%)

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Non-minority</th>
<th>Minority</th>
<th>Difference</th>
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<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>-3.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfied with democracy</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>-8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political engagement</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>-7.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voted in previous election</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>62.9</td>
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<td>n</td>
<td>56,254</td>
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Source: European Social Survey
Figure 2: Minority Differences in Voter Participation Across Countries

Note: Estimates derived from model controlling for age, gender, and education. Bars indicate 95% confidence interval. Countries are sorted from low (left) to high (right) disproportionality.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Political Interest</th>
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<th>Satisfaction with Democracy</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Robust</td>
<td>Robust</td>
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<td>-0.19 (0.12)</td>
<td>-0.43 ** (0.13)</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>0.43 ** (0.05)</td>
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<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-0.26 ** (0.05)</td>
<td>-0.28 ** (0.04)</td>
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<td>New Democracy</td>
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<td>-0.61 ** (0.16)</td>
<td>-0.90 ** (0.32)</td>
<td>-0.83 ** (0.27)</td>
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<td>0.01 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.01)</td>
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<td>Compulsory voting</td>
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<td>0.05 ** (0.02)</td>
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**p<.01; *p<.05**