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## **Electoral Systems for Divided Societies**

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### Abstract

Political scientists have long theorized that the use of preferential election systems can help promote successful conflict management in divided societies. As it turns out, evidence from five real-world cases supports this conclusion.

## ELECTORAL SYSTEMS FOR DIVIDED SOCIETIES

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*Benjamin Reilly is a research fellow at the National Centre for Development Studies, Australian National University. He is the author of several books, including Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral Engineering for Conflict Management (2001), which treats in greater detail some of the issues discussed in this essay. He also consults widely on issues of electoral-system design and reform. Funding from the United States Institute of Peace supported the research for this essay.*

What kinds of electoral systems can help democracy survive in countries split by deep cleavages of race, religion, language, or ethnicity? As is well-known, politicians in such “divided societies” often have strong incentives to “play the ethnic card” at election time, using communal appeals to mobilize voters. “Outbidding”—increasingly extreme rhetoric and demands—can offer rewards greater than those of moderation. In such circumstances, politics can quickly turn centrifugal, as the center is pulled apart by extremist forces and “winner-take-all” rules the day. The failure of democracy is often the result.<sup>1</sup>

Any strategy for building sustainable democracy in divided societies must place a premium on avoiding this depressingly familiar pattern and must instead find ways to promote interethnic accommodation, multiethnic political parties, and moderate, centrist politics. Because elections help shape broader norms of political behavior, scholars and practitioners alike agree that electoral systems can play a powerful role in promoting both democracy and successful conflict management. For example, by changing the incentives and payoffs available to political actors in their search for electoral victory, astutely crafted electoral rules can make some types of behavior more politically rewarding than others. Over the past two decades, such “electoral engineering” has become increasingly attractive for those attempting to build democracy in divided societies.<sup>2</sup>

While political scientists agree broadly that electoral systems do much

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