Two dilemmas in the politics of ethnic federalism: Experimental evidence from Ethiopia*

March 14, 2025

Ethnic federalism, a system that devolves power to subnational states drawn along ethnic lines, is a widely debated approach to managing ethnic conflict. While scholars have studied its macro-level consequences, little is known about micro-level preferences within these countries. We examine two key dilemmas of ethnic federalism: (1) the "minorities within minorities dilemma", where many ethnic group members live outside their designated state, and (2) the "devolution dilemma," which concerns which powers should be held by the central versus state governments. Using survey experiments among Ethiopian university students, we find that support for ethnic federalism varies based on expectations of power distribution, but only among politically and ethnically intolerant respondents. Security policy is the primary concern in debates over devolution, followed by cultural policies. Our findings highlight the importance of micro-level perspectives in understanding the stability of ethnofederal systems and the political consequences of their reform.

Keywords: ethnic federalism, ethnic conflict, survey experiments, Ethiopia

*The results presented here combine two survey experiments, each with its own pre-analysis plan (PAP). The PAP for the "minorities within minorities" vignette can be found here. The PAP for the "devolution of powers conjoint" can be found here.

Introduction

Conflicts between ethnic groups account for a majority of all civil wars since 1945 (Denny and Walter, 2014). A broader set of countries have experienced conflict between ethnic groups that fall short of war yet impose substantial costs on society (Birnir et al., 2015). One proposed solution to these conflicts is the adoption of *ethnic federalism*, a system of government that: (1) devolves power to subnational units (we will call these *states*) and (2) draws the boundaries around those states so that they "conform to the territorial distribution of ethnic groups" in the country (Anderson, 2014). By allocating more power to the states than to the central government, and by drawing state boundaries so that each ethnic group comprises a majority in their respective state, ethnic federalism grants ethnic groups more autonomy and purports to protect them from other groups. Whether ethnic federalism "works" has been the subject of extensive debate, with some arguing that the system generates incentives for secession (Roeder, 1991) and others arguing that it is the lesser evil among alternative solutions (Anderson, 2014).

These are *macro-level* debates that hinge on what countries like the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Ethiopia might have looked like had they not adopted (to varying degrees) systems of ethnic federalism. Putting aside what *could* or *should* have happened in these countries, hundreds of millions of people *have* now lived for decades under ethnic federalist systems. In these countries, ethnic federalism is not a settled question but a fulcrum for domestic politics as citizens debate whether the system should be deepened, reversed, or otherwise reformed. And yet, we know almost nothing about citizens' preferences over these debates. To what extent do citizens in these countries support deepening or reversing ethnofederal arrangements? And how might these preferences vary depending on how the system benefits some groups at the expense of others? The answers to these questions matter because they can provide clues on the durability of these systems and the political repercussions of altering them (Anderson, 2014). These questions also speak to a democratization literature that examines the extent to which institutions actively shape, rather than simply reflect, citizens' preferences (Mattes and Bratton, 2007; Kim et al., 2017; Gerber and Jackson, 1993).

We explore how two core *dilemmas* of ethnic federalist systems influence citizen preferences. The first, which we refer to as the "minorities within minorities" dilemma (Eisenberg and Spinner-Halev, 2005), arises from the inherent challenge of drawing state boundaries that perfectly align

with the territorial distribution of ethnic groups. Even assuming the best efforts of planners at the time of adoption, ethnic federalism rarely ensures that all members of an ethnic group reside within their designated home state. Many instead find themselves living as minorities in states that are designed to represent a majority ethnic group different from their own[1]. This dynamic affects millions of Ethiopians, as we will demonstrate, and has also been evident in other systems. For instance, approximately one in five residents of the Serbian republic in 2002 were non-Serbs[2].

This dilemma has important consequences for citizens' relationship to the state, depending on their ethnicity and where they live. We argue the dilemma should influence both citizens' *egotropic* and *sociotropic* reasoning (Mansfield and Mutz, 2009; Autor, Dorn and Hanson, 2013), which have been studied extensively with respect to welfare and trade but to our knowledge unstudied in relation to ethnic federalism. With respect to *egotropic* preferences, self-interested citizens should want power to be devolved to the states when they anticipate living in a state in which they are members of the *majority*. They should instead want power to be outside of state hands (that is, centralized) if they expect to live as *minorities*, especially if a coethnic occupies the executive. Finally, we expect that *sociotropic* considerations should moderate the value citizens place on living in states where they belong to the majority: concern for the fate of co-ethnics should decrease support for state power in situations where most of a citizen's co-ethnics live as minorities elsewhere even if the citizen in question belongs to the ethnic majority in their home state.

A second core dilemma of ethnic federalist systems is that while they *broadly* devolve power to the states, especially concerning policies bearing on ethnic politics, there is no obvious guideline as to which functions should be devolved to the states or retained by the central government. We call this the "devolution" dilemma of ethnofederal systems. Federal systems (ethnic or otherwise) differ in how powers are distributed between the central and the state governments. We focus on three key classes of powers in ethnofederal systems: the government's role in providing security, control over cultural policies such as education and language, and public employment. How do citizens believe these powers should be allocated in ethnofederal

[1]While global data on this phenomenon is not available, consider for instance, the Oromo people of Ethiopia, the largest ethnic group in the country. Of the roughly 25 million Oromo registered at the *woreda* level by the most recent, 2007 census, a full 1.6 million live outside of the ethnically designated state of Oromia.

[2]Data derived from the 2002 census of Statistics (2002).

systems? And which powers do they consider most important to be held by ethnically defined states as opposed to the center? Answering these questions can provide insights into broader debates in the literature, such as whether ethnic tensions are primarily driven by material or symbolic concerns (Manekin, Grossman and Mitts, 2017). Our results can also speak to debates about decentralization that have rarely considered ethnic federalism (Prud'Homme, 1995). We thus "unbundle" ethnic federalism and examine how public opinion responds to the distribution of specific powers between the states and the central government.

We study these two dilemmas of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, a highly diverse country where a deep form of ethnic federalism has been in place since 1991. Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia was, partly, a solution to ongoing conflict: the system was adopted after a coalition of ethnically-defined organizations (The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front or EPRDF) overthrew a military dictatorship in 1991. The most powerful group in the coalition, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), adopted ethnic federalism in part to keep the coalition (and country) intact (Lyons, 2019). Ethiopian states (referred to as *regions* in Ethiopia) thus have substantial powers, at least on paper, including the right to self-determination and control over the teaching of history and language. Question on the effects of ethnic federalism have been systematically studied in Ethiopia (Yimenu, 2023, 2024; Ayele, Fuller and Raleigh, 2023), including how the system has shaped people's sense of ethnic and national identities (Ishiyama and Basnet, 2022; Ishiyama, 2023). Yet, as with other cases of ethnic federalism, we have scant evidence on how citizens perceive their system and the extent to which they believe it should change.

To explore both dilemmas of ethnic federalist systems we fielded survey experiments in the summer and fall of 2022 on a sample of over 900 Ethiopians enrolled at a local university. Our data are unique both in terms of their composition and timing. By focusing on students, we trade-off national generalizability for a population that is primed to think about governance and more likely to end up working in government than the average Ethiopian citizen[3]. Moreover, the political socialization and beliefs of young people are also increasingly of interest to political scientists, on the basis that early experiences, habits, and worldviews can shape long-run participation (Coppock and Green, 2016; Holbein and Hillygus, 2016). Finally, the timing of our survey also coincides with the Tigray War (November 2020–November 2022), a destabilizing,

[3]We draw on nationally representative data to discuss our population and sample at length in Appendix A.

ethnically-charged conflict between the central government and separatist forces in the state of Tigray. The war and subsequent negotiations generated substantial discourse about the future of Ethiopia and its ethnic federalist system, lending more plausibility to the idea that Ethiopia's system could be dramatically redesigned at some point.

Our results on the "minorities within minorities" dilemma are, in some respects, surprising. Using a vignette experiment that manipulates a respondent's majority / minority status and the fate of their co-ethnics, we find no evidence for our pre-registered hypotheses that being in the demographic majority or minority affects citizens' preferences for devolving state power (i.e., *egotropic* considerations). These findings, moreover, do not depend on whether the respondent shares an ethnic identity with the country's leader. We similarly find that the fate of co-ethnics does not meaningfully moderate preferences for devolving power (i.e., *sociotropic* considerations). We do, however, find evidence in exploratory analyses that a subset of respondents – those who are broadly more politically and ethnically intolerant – *do* exhibit *egotropic* thinking, preferring to vest greater power in state governments when they expect to be in the demographic majority. These findings – even among a sample as homogenous and skewed towards higher levels of tolerance as ours – suggest that while the "minorities within minorities" problem may not universally shape preferences for ethnic federalism along egotropic or sociotropic lines, it could move important subsets of the population.

With respect to the delegation dilemma, we find a number of interesting patterns. We use a discrete choice conjoint experimental design (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014) that randomly varies whether policing, cultural policies, and public employment are the purview of the state or central governments, while also crucially varying whether states are defined along ethnic lines or not. Our approach thus allows us to estimate the effects of centralizing or devolving state power while holding the "ethnic" dimension of ethnic federalism constant. Broadly, we find that control over policing and cultural policies drives public debate, but not control over public employment. As in our first experiment, these patterns vary across respondents: in exploratory analysis, we find some evidence that more chauvinistic respondents favor ethnic federalism at higher rates and control over cultural policy. We further find some interesting differences between respondents from Ethiopia's historically dominant ethnic group (Amhara) and those who identify with the ascendant group in recent history (Oromo).

We highlight four contributions from our study to research agendas bearing on ethnic conflict and peace-building in societies divided along ethnic or identitarian lines. First, we call attention to the necessity of moving from macro- to micro-level studies of ethnic federalism. We need to take the domestic politics of ethnic federalism seriously, and conceptualize two "fulcrums" along which the politics of ethnic federalism can be studied: the minorities within minorities and devolution dilemmas. We expect these have bearing outside of Ethiopia and that they can speak to systems that fall short of full ethnofederalism but share some of its constituent motivations, such as with the "two schools under one roof" system in Bosnia that has similarly animated debates (Jimenez, 2023). They also have bearing for otherwise peaceful democracies that have analogous systems of devolved rule for ethnic communities, such as in Canada, the UK, and Brazil.

Second, the fact that we observe variation in egotropic reasoning across respondents who vary in, broadly speaking, political and ethnic intolerance raises complex normative questions. That a person would want to deepen ethnic federalism when they expect to live in their ethnic homeland is not necessarily troubling; one could argue that, in fact, this is a central selling point of ethnic federalism. However, our suggestive evidence that politically and ethnically intolerant respondents are especially invested in deepening ethnic federalism *is* troubling. There are interesting parallels here to the literature on democratic erosion: some forms of erosion could, in theory, be considered neutral democratic reforms, making democratic erosion difficult to identify and conceptualize (Svolik, 2019). Yet the fact that support for such norms is often strategic and rooted in a form of "democratic hypocrisy" among those who expect to be in power raises normative concerns (Simonovits, McCoy and Littvay, 2022).

Third, by untangling the three forms of power often correlated in ethnic federalism, we glean insights into what matters most to citizens living within these systems. Among our young and highly educated sample – who skew skeptical of ethnic federalism – what matters most is modifying (centralizing) state control over security forces and cultural policy. We expect this speaks to the importance of the broader security environment, which varies across countries. For example, during the Tigray War, the central government first relied on ethnically defined regional militias (the *Fano*) as proxies but later struggled to rein them in (Dagnew Mr, 2024).

Finally, the results also contribute to the ongoing debate over the relative importance of

symbolic versus material concerns in identity-based conflicts (Manekin, Grossman and Mitts, 2017). While security (a material concern) emerges as a key priority, public sector hiring has little impact on attitudes across most subsets of respondents. This suggests that not all material benefits hold equal weight in shaping political preferences. Future research should further explore which issues citizens perceive as primarily symbolic versus material and how these perceptions influence their political attitudes.

What we (don't) know about ethnic federalism

We follow Anderson (2014) in defining ethnic federalism as a form of government in which "subunit boundaries conform to the territorial distribution of ethnic groups". These are thus political systems that, as with all federal systems, devolve some amount of power to regional governments (*states*), but that crucially also link state governments to ethnic groups in some capacity. Political systems that fall (to some extent) within this broad umbrella are not uncommon.[4] Hundreds of millions of people have lived under these systems, in many cases for decades.

At the macro-level, research suggests that ethnic federalism can fuel political divisions and ethnic tensions. For instance, some scholars argue that while ethnofederalism can improve an ethnic group's control over cultural matters in their home state, it is the ruling party at the center that ultimately dominates political life (Yimenu, 2023, 2024). This dynamic may lead members of the group to view "actually existing" ethnic federalism as hollow or weaker than its promises on paper. Scholars have also pointed to instances of political conflict that, at least on the surface, appear fueled by ethnofederal systems.[5] The Qimant community's demands for formal recognition *within* the state of Amhara, is one example from Ethiopia (Ayele, Fuller and Raleigh, 2023). This work provides insights into the broad contours of public debates over these systems, but gives us little in the way of detail as to the nature of these debates.

Broadening our scope beyond research on ethnic federalism as such, we also find consistent

[4] Anderson (2014) distinguishes between 'full' ethnofederalist countries that have linked all of their states to ethnic communities, such as in Ethiopia, Czechoslovakia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Soviet Union (Wilson and Fondahl, 2024). "Partial" ethnofederal countries contain some ethnically-defined states, such as in post-Saddam Iraq, contemporary Russia, India, and Spain (Adeney, 2018; Mistaffa, 2016). Finally, "ethnic federacies" grant lower forms of autonomy to ethnic groups that fall short of ethnically-defined states, such as with Wales and Scotland in the United Kingdom, the indigenous inhabitants of Greenland in Denmark, and the Corsicans in France.

[5] These conjectures are supported by prior work showing that group-based conflict weakens national identity while strengthening ethnic identity (Ishiyama, 2021; Jeong and Gentry, 2024), and that group identities tend to solidify during periods of conflict (Canavan and Turkoglu, 2023; Nair and Sambanis, 2019).

evidence of policies *associated* with ethnic federalism leading to public division. For example, Iraq's *muhasasa* system – an ethnic quota system, instituted after the 2003 US invasion, designed to ensure proportional representation of Iraq's diverse ethnic and sectarian communities – has been deeply unpopular, fueling protests against the system's perceived sectarianism, corruption, and propensity for patronage (Ibrahim, 2019). Similarly, Bosnia and Herzegovina's "Two Schools Under One Roof" system – a post-Bosnian War policy that devolves control over curricula to ethnic groups and physically separates students of those ethnic groups in ethnically divided areas – has also proven controversial (Jimenez, 2023).

While the literature on ethnic federalism and related systems suggests increased division and conflict at the macro level, we know much less about the micro level preferences of citizens living in these systems. We have some empirical evidence that ethnic federalism may change citizen's national identification given the system's emphasis on ethnic *homelands* and on the representation of citizens as members of ethnic *groups*. In Ethiopia for example, researchers have identified decreased identification with the Ethiopian nation in favor of stronger identification with distinct, ethnic identities (Ishiyama and Basnet, 2022; Ishiyama, 2023). But we have no research to date systematically analyzing how citizens feel about ethnic federalism itself, and how they think powers should be distributed between the central government and the constituent units.

Finally, while it is true that the literature on public preferences over *non-ethnic* federalism is vast and mature (Jacobs, 2021; Wolak, 2016; Schneider and Jacoby, 2013; Schakel and Brown, 2022),[6] it is unclear which insights will travel to *ethnic* federalism, given that in the former, subnational administrative units are typically delineated by characteristics (e.g., geography) that are, at most, partially correlated with ethnicity or other demographics. The fact that ethnic federalism implies the potential for distributional conflicts *across groups* is a unique feature of the system that research on non-ethnic federalism can only partially speak to.

We thus contribute to the literature by exploring public preferences over ethnic federalism as such. In particular, we focus on two dilemmas that ethnic federalism introduces into political

[6]There is a well-established body of evidence showing that opinions over federal systems are driven by ideology and evaluations of government performance (Rendleman and Rogowski, 2024), state economic conditions and other state-level characteristics (Wolak, 2020), partisanship and partisan cues (Jacobs, 2021; Wolak, 2016; Dinan and Heckelman, 2020), and the policy area under consideration for state versus centralized control (Schneider and Jacoby, 2013; Schneider, Jacoby and Lewis, 2011). Much of this work looks at the US, but see Schakel and Brown (2022) and Cole, Kincaid and Rodriguez (2004) for examples from other settings.

life: the dilemma of "minorities within minorities" in ethnofederal states, and the dilemma that results from the devolution of powers between the center and the states. We describe these and generate observable expectations in the following section.

Ethnic federalism's dilemmas

Ethnofederal systems are ostensibly designed to reduce conflict between ethnic groups, yet the system itself may generate tensions over its implementation (Anderson, 2015; Roeder, 1991). We focus on two key points of tension in these systems, which we term *dilemmas*, as at their core they concern irresolvable trade-offs that policymakers face in designing the institutions of these systems.

The first dilemma pertains to the drawing of ethnically defined states, one of the key features of ethnofederal systems. How should these be drawn? How concentrated or historically rooted must an ethnic group be to a state, for that state to be considered its homeland? These questions have no obvious answers, and whatever choices policymakers make at inception are likely to result in significant numbers of citizens living in states in which they are not members of the demographic majority. These tendencies are likely to compound over time, as cross-state migration and cross-group family formation can increase the heterogeneity of the ethnically defined states. Systematic data on the evolution of these systems is scarce; yet the 1991 census of Yugoslavia, for instance, shows that large ethnic minorities lived in each of the constituent republics and autonomous provinces (Federal Statistical Office of Yugoslavia, 1992). Moreover, as we show in the following section using Ethiopian census data from 2007, large numbers of Ethiopians live in states in which they are ethnic minorities ({Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia}, 2010).

We argue that the status of minorities in ethnically defined states constitutes a key dilemma in ethnic federalism. We draw on a large literature in political theory and law that has identified a generalized "minorities within minorities" problem in policy aimed at promoting multiculturalism in diverse societies (Eisenberg and Spinner-Halev, 2005; Spinner-Halev, 2001; Eisenberg, 1994). In short, scholars note that policies aimed at redressing minoritized communities' historical exclusion by defining distinct, group-based rights – for instance, by granting an ethnic community more political autonomy – may perversely imperil the rights of minorities within

those communities, or otherwise generate tensions between individual and group-based rights (Eisenberg and Spinner-Halev, 2005). Controversies surrounding the rights of women and sexual minorities in religious communities is one prominent example of this dynamic (Spinner-Halev, 2001). Similar tensions are at play in controversies in Brazil over indigenous practices concerning the treatment of disabled children (de Oliveira, 2018). There is thus reason to expect that, in defining rights and powers at the level of groups, minorities within those groups will find themselves in positions of vulnerability.

Building on this work, we argue that in ethnofederal states, the *minorities within minorities dilemma* arises from a dual tension: that on the one hand, one's group may be empowered through the devolution of state power and, on the other, the possibility of being governed by states linked to non-coethnic groups with substantial powers over key public policy levers. How does this dilemma shape citizens' preferences regarding the design of ethnic federalism?

Our preregistered hypotheses distinguish between two kinds of considerations that shape citizens' preferences in politics: *egotroic* and *sociotropic* considerations. Citizens motivated by *egotropic* considerations evaluate political questions on the basis of self-interest: how policies along a wide array of dimensions – taxation, immigration, trade liberalization – will impact them individually (Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979; Mansfield and Mutz, 2009; Margalit, 2011). Attitudes towards policies are not about abstract political commitments or values but simply a function of whether the policy benefits or harms them as individuals, and are thus often highly contextual: changing depending on where the person lives, their income, their occupation, and other factors.

Following this logic, egotropic considerations should push citizens in opposite directions depending on their status in the ethnically defined states. Citizens who anticipate living in a state in which they are members of the dominant ethnic group should favor granting more rights to states (relative to the central government). To the extent that devolved power benefits them as members of the dominant ethnic group – with respect to hiring, language policies, education, and so on – egotropic citizens should favor decentralizing power. Our first expectation is thus:

> **H1 (Majority Status):** Respondents will support *less* centralized power when their ethnic group is in the majority in their state.[7]

[7] In the original PAP language we use the term "federal" power throughout to refer to the central government's

By contrast, citizens who anticipate living in a state in which they are minorities – that is, not members of the dominant ethnic group – should oppose devolving more power to ethnically defined states. The reasoning is that as minorities in ethnically defined states they are vulnerable to the dominant group using the levers of state power to discriminate against them in political, social, and economic life. Our second expectation is thus:

> **H2 (Minority Status):** Respondents will support *more* centralized power when their ethnic group is in the minority in their state.

H2 is not necessarily the mirror of **H1**: the second hinges on the degree to which people evaluate their relative well-being as minorities under devolved rule versus more centralized rule. Citizens living as minorities under ethnic federalism may especially prefer the centralization of power if the central government is controlled by coethnics, whom they expect will use their power to protect them from discriminatory state governments. On the other hand, if the central government is controlled by a different ethnic group, one that might be indifferent to the plight of non-coethnic minorities, then citizens might expect similar outcomes whether power is devolved to the states or concentrated at the center. In other words, the effect of minority on egotropic concerns should be moderated by whether or not the executive is a co-ethnic or not:

> **H2a (Conditional Minority Status):** The effect of being a minority on support for centralized power should depend on whether the executive is controlled by coethnics or not.[8]

Citizens can also (or primarily) be motivated by *sociotropic* considerations independent of self-interest. Sociotropic considerations are ones in which people evaluate policy on the basis of how it impacts the groups they belong to (Mansfield and Mutz, 2009; Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979). While often explored in terms of how people evaluate the impact of policies on their country, in our argument the relevant group is the ethnic group. A large body of evidence shows that ethnic identity shapes political preferences and that people are willing to prioritize their ethnic group's status, even when it diverges from their personal interest (Dawson, 1995; Habyarimana et al.,

power (relative to the states). We change to "centralized" power for clarity, though our hypothesis remains fundamentally unchanged.

[8]The original hypothesis language, which we adjusted for clarity, is the following: "Respondents that share an ethnic identity with the current president will be more likely to support more federal power when their ethnic group is the minority in their state."

2007). Citizens motivated by sociotropic concerns should thus evaluate policy on the extent to which it benefits or harms their ethnic groups' status, whether materially or symbolically.

We are particularly interested in the extent to which people are willing to trade off self-interest for sociotropic concerns[9], arguably the strongest form of sociotropic preferences. The minorities within minorities dilemma presents one such scenario: individuals may find themselves empowered as members of demographic majorities in ethnically defined states but where many of their co-ethnics are left vulnerable as minorities in other states. As previously argued, this is a common scenario given that ethnic homelands are unlikely to fully contain all of the members of some ethnic group: almost by definition, some members will live as minorities elsewhere. If people are motivated by sociotropic concerns for their ethnic group, the knowledge that their co-ethnics will be left at the mercy of other ethnic groups should dampen the value individuals place on majority status. We thus test the following expectation:

> **H3 (Majority-Minority):** Respondents prompted with majority status in their state *but minority status for co-ethnics in other states* will prefer *more* centralized power than respondents that are only prompted with majority status in their own state.

Importantly, while we expect different concerns to motivate the patterns we theorize in Hypotheses 1-3 (sociotropic and egotropic concerns) we do not necessarily see these as competing. We expect that respondents will be motivated by egotropic concerns when thinking about their own position in society (Hypotheses 1, 2, and 2a) and sociotropic concerns when thinking about the position of their co-ethnics (Hypothesis 3). For this reason, as discussed below, we do compare the preferences of each treated group to each other, only to the control group.

The second dilemma we study focuses on how to *devolve* powers in ethnofederal systems. Powers should be devolved from the center to the states in ethnofederal systems, but which powers? And to what extent? There are longstanding debates in the decentralization literature concerning which functions should be devolved or kept at the center, but these debates are primarily about which forms of decentralization produce better development outcomes or lead to more state capacity (Prud'Homme, 1995). In ethnofederal systems, the devolution of powers has implications not just for state capacity but also for the distribution of powers across ethnic

[9] In other words, whether individuals are willing to take personal losses in exchange for group-level gains.

groups. Which powers are devolved or centralized is thus likely to influence how citizens perceive the quality of ethnic federalism. Here, we distinguish between three key classes of powers that can be devolved from the center to the states: cultural policies, public employment, and public security.

Cultural policies concern the state's promotion of a common culture within its territory, for instance, through the teaching of history, language policies, and museums. National governments may coordinate these policies entirely from the center (e.g., by having one, national school curriculum) or devolve them to subnational units who can tailor cultural policies to ethnic communities. Indeed, cultural policies are often devolved to lower administrative units to accommodate ethnic minorities or distinct cultural groups (Renko et al., 2022). Control over cultural policies is substantively important, particularly for groups that have experienced cultural marginalization, as with indigenous communities in parts of Latin America (Becker, 2011).

Control over public employment concerns the hiring of public workers, including the civil service, staffing of the bureaucracy, and other important roles in public service delivery. In centralized systems, central governments may be in charge of all hiring in the public service whereas in decentralized systems subnational units have local authority over hiring decisions, what standards to use in selecting among candidates, and other considerations (Nieminen, Kanninen and Karhunen, 2023). As with cultural policies, decentralization of public employment rests on the argument that states have better information about local economic conditions and local needs (relative to the central government) (Faguet, 2004). In the context of ethnic federalism, control over public hiring can represent an important point of access to employment for an ethnic group, particularly if the public sector is large.

Finally, the devolution of public security concerns the degree to which the control and administration of security forces – primarily the police – are in the hands of central government or subnational states. Police centralization varies substantially across states, from the highly centralized French police system to the extremely decentralized police system in the US comprised of over 18,000 local police agencies (Lowatcharin and Stallmann, 2020). A growing literature on policing suggests the extent to which policing is centralized has consequences for the quality of policing that citizens experience (Revkin, 2020; Greitens, 2016; Arriola et al., 2021). In ethnofederal systems, whether the police are most directly responsive to the central government

or to the state is likely to matter to citizens who fear persecution (often, on the basis of prior experience) at the hands of the state security forces.

For our last set of pre-registered hypotheses, we thus test the extent to which citizens prefer that each of these three classes of power are devolved to the states or relegated to the center. Our interest is twofold: first, we want to examine whether each of these powers, *independent* of other aspects of ethnic federalism, shape citizen support for ethnofederal systems. Second, we want to see which among these is most *decisive* in shaping attitudes over ethnic federalism. In one sense, ethnofederal systems are a 'bundle' of these policies, and citizens' attitudes over ethnic federalism reflect their views on the devolution of power over these policies as a whole. Which of these policies, however, is most decisive in shaping support or opposition to ethnic federalism? We provide these questions in our results section.

> **H4 (Devolution of powers):** Respondents' support for ethnofederal arrangements will depend on whether policing, employment, and cultural policy powers are devolved to the states or centralized.[10]

Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa and has experienced substantial economic growth in recent decades, despite prolonged periods of economic underdevelopment. The country is also remarkably diverse, home to (by some counts) over 80 distinct ethnic groups. However, Ethiopia has also been marked by high levels of violence: localized, inter-communal violence between ethnic communities as well as large-scale political violence, such as in the Ethiopian Civil War (1974-1991) and the more recent Tigray War (2020-2022) (Lyons, 2019). We focus on Ethiopia, in part, because of its distinctive and controversial ethnic federalist system, which has governed the country since the establishment of the 1995 Constitution.

Ethiopia's ethnofederal system divides the country into ethnically defined states (referred to as *regions* in Ethiopia), each with a significant level of autonomy, including a right to secede en-

[10] In the original PAP, we use the language of conjoint experiment designs, where each power described above is an attribute in the design and whether the states or the federal government holds that power are the two possible levels in each attribute (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014). Our preregistered expectation is thus that we expect the probability of profile selection to vary significantly depending on the attribute level: "To estimate the impact of each characteristic on the probability of selection, we will estimate Marginal Means and Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) for each attribute level". We use more generalizable language here for the purposes of exposition.

shrined in the constitution (Lyons, 2019). The ethnically defined states have substantial control over cultural policies, language policies, education, and security, with their own constitutions and regional police forces. With some exceptions, each state is considered the ethnic homeland of a particular group (e.g., the state of Tigray is the home of the Tigrayans), and is meant to be governed by them. As with other cases of ethnic federalism, these choices were motivated in part by the view that Ethiopia's ethnic diversity had to be accommodated to avoid further conflict, particularly since the victors of the 1991 civil war were comprised of a coalition of ethnically defined armed groups. As Meles Zenawi, one of the central architects of the system argued: "We cannot ignore that Ethiopia is a diverse country. Previous attempts to do that have led to wars, to fueling nationalistic tendencies" (Lyons, 1996).

We highlight two important dynamics in Ethiopia's politics for the purposes of our study. The first is that, as a result of wars and other changes to the country's political system, the balance of power across ethnic groups has changed over time, even very recently. Figure 1(A) visualizes these changes over time according to the Ethnic Power Relations Dataset (Cederman, Wimmer and Min, 2010). As the graph demonstrates, power relations have changed dramatically since the end of the second World War. While Amhara held a dominant status in Ethiopian politics for decades, this changed with the end of the Ethiopian Civil War in 1991 that saw Tigrayans ascend from a discriminated group to a leading force ("senior partner") in the coalition of ethnic groups that governed Ethiopia. This pattern sustained until 2019, when Abiy Ahmed rose to prominence as the country's first Oromo prime minister and effectively sidelined the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) through the creation of a new governing party, the Prosperity Party. In power, Ahmed prosecuted the brutal war in Tigray (2020-2022) that resulted in a return to discriminated status for Tigrayans. Crucial for our purposes, then, is the idea that ethnic power relations have changed substantially over time in Ethiopia and that the real or prospective possibility of a change in status is a possibility for many in the country.

The second dynamic pertains to the *minorities within minorities* dilemma at the heart of ethnic federalism. As previously discussed, this dilemma arises from the fact that even in a world where each ethnic group has their own state, many people will find themselves living in states where they are not members of the ethnic community that governs the state. Figure 1(B) shows that this is true in Ethiopia: each point depicts a *woreda* (analogous to a US district) and describes the

percent of residents in that *woreda* who belong to one of three largest ethnic groups in Ethiopia (Amhara, Oromo, and Tigrayan). In the far left panel, we can see that while there are many Amhara-dominant woredas within the state of Amhara, there are also many woredas outside of Amhara where Amharas constitute large portions of the population. Tigrayans (far right panel) are at the other extreme, largely concentrated in woredas within Tigray. Still, even for this group, there are non-trivial numbers of woredas for which they constitute a significant percent of the population outside of Tigray. The result is that, in Ethiopia, many Tigrayans, Amhara, and Oromo citizens live in and are governed as *minorities* by states empowered to represent ethnic groups that are not their own.

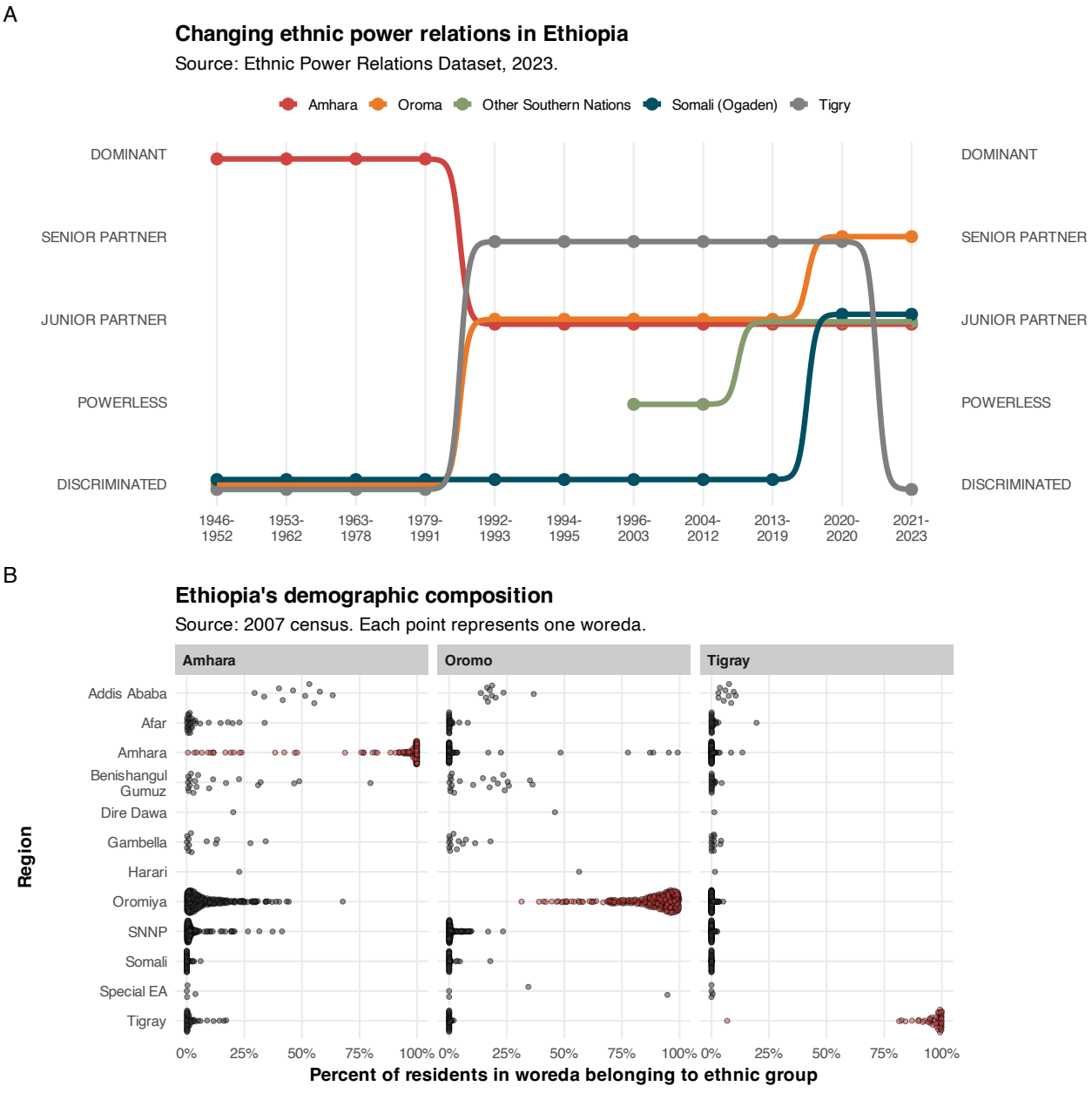


Figure 1: A: Changing power relations in Ethiopia for five major ethnic groups. Source: Ethnic Power Relations Database. B: Distribution of Amhara, Oromo, and Tigray people across country's regions. Each point represent one *woreda* (analogous to a district in the United States). Source: Ethiopia 2007 census.

Research design

Data

The data for our study comes from a sample of over 900 university students at Addis Ababa University in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The survey experiments we present here were embedded in surveys that were part of a larger project to evaluate the impact of a youth-based intervention in Ethiopia. Participants were recruited during the baseline survey conducted in May–June 2022. To recruit participants, the research team in conjunction with a local survey firm contacted all AAU students in years 1-3 via email or phone with an invitation to complete a voluntary, self-administered online survey available in 4 major languages: English, Amharic, Oromo, and Somali. Students were also told they would have the opportunity to participate in a follow-up endline survey. Respondents who completed each survey received $5 USD. [11]

Our use of a university student sample presents advantages and limitations. Conceptualized as a convenience sample (Krupnikov, Nam and Style, 2021), the student sample provides cost-effective access at a time in the country when – given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the recent Tigray War – access to the broader population was very difficult. Moreover, to the extent that the treatment effect estimates are relatively homogeneous across samples – which some prior work suggests is often the case (Krupnikov, Nam and Style, 2021; Coppock, Leeper and Mullinix, 2018) – our student-based estimates can still be useful even if our student sample does not reflect to broader population in its baseline characteristics or views.

We also argue that there are grounds for focusing on highly educated youth as a population of interest, not just as a convenience sample. Youth, and especially those at universities, can often play an important role in political mobilization (Fluckiger and Ludwig, 2018; Yair and Miodownik, 2016). Ethiopia's universities in particular have historically been hot-spots for contentious politics; students played a critical role in the protest movements that sparked regime change in 2018 (Adamu, 2019). In many developing countries, youth also face political exclusion (Gupta, 2014; Lin, 2011) and are often targeted for recruitment into violent conflict (Rink and Sharma, 2018; Beber and Blattman, 2013). Finally, young people are a historically large and rapidly growing share of the population in many developing countries, making them an

[11] This was roughly 5.9% of mean gross monthly income which in 2024 was $85 (WorldBank, 2024)

important population of interest (Gupta, 2014).

Nonetheless, a student sample will differ in marked ways from the general population. To the best extent possible, we characterize these differences by comparing responses to items in our sample that are either identical or similarly phrased to demographic and attitudinal items in the nationally representative Afrobarometer Survey Data from Ethiopia (Wave 8). We also compare the views and characteristics in the Afrobarometer data of college-educated youth to the average Ethiopian respondent. We discuss this at length in Appendix A. In short, we find that university-educated youth are more likely to be employed by the government and to engage in community organizing and protests, though young people overall participate less. While our sample was slightly less active in both protests and community meetings than the general population, they were no more or less likely to vote. In terms of political views, our sample respondents were more ambivalent about diversity, strongly opposed ethnic federalism, and had similar pro-compromise attitudes as the general population.

Experiments

Minorities within Minorities Vignette

We present the results of two survey experiments. The first experiment is used to test hypotheses 1 to 3 bearing on the *minorities within minorities* dilemma. We present respondents with the following prompt:

> Now, we would like you to take part in a small "thought experiment". Imagine that, hypothetically speaking, the borders of the states within Ethiopia were to be redrawn and the balance of power between the states and the federal government were to change. Again, this is purely a hypothetical.

Respondents then saw one of four randomly assigned prompts that described how new state borders would shape the ethnic composition of the states that respondents (and their co-ethnics) would live in.

- **Control:** no additional text
- **T1 (Majority):** "According to the new state borders, the majority of citizens in the state where you live are members of your ethnic group."

- **T2 (Minority):** "According to the new state borders, the majority of citizens in the state where you live are members of a different ethnic group than you."
- **T3 (Majority-Minority):** "According to the new state borders, the majority of citizens in the state where you live are members of your ethnic group. However, most people from your ethnic group will live in other states where they are a minority."

Following this exposition, we measure attitudes towards devolving state power with the following question:

> Under the new system, how do you think that power should be divided between the states and the central government? On a scale from 0 to 10, how much power do you think should go to the federal government?

Unless otherwise stated, we estimate simple difference in means between the control condition and each of the experimental conditions with the following specification:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Centralize} = \alpha &+ \beta_1(\text{federalism\_treat}_{\text{R is in majority}}) && (1)\\ &+ \beta_2(\text{federalism\_treat}_{\text{R is in minority}}) && (2)\\ &+ \beta_3(\text{federalism\_treat}_{\text{most co-ethnics in minority}}) + \epsilon && (3) \end{aligned}$$

Each experimental condition speaks to a separate hypothesis: β_1 tests H1; β_2 tests H2; β_3 tests H3. H2a is a *conditional* hypothesis: it implies that the effect of $\text{federalism\_treat}_{\text{R is in minority}}$ should depend on whether the respondent is a co-ethnic of the current government. To test H2a, we thus interact this term with an indicator of whether the respondent listed "Oromo" as one of their ethnic identities (Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is of Oromo descent).

Devolution of powers conjoint experiment

Our second experiment is a discrete choice conjoint design (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014). Participants begin by reading the following prompt:

> Now, we would like you to take part in a small "thought experiment". Imagine that, hypothetically speaking, the federal system of Ethiopia were to be redesigned from

scratch, and public responsibilities had to be assigned either to the central government or to the states. Again, this is purely a hypothetical.

Consider two hypothetical proposals for how the federal government should be designed, below. If you had to live in one of these two hypothetical governments, which would you choose? Even if you are not sure, please make your best guess.

Participants were then presented side-by-side tables of two hypothetical federal systems to choose from, a task they completed twice. In each table, the responsibilities for the three key classes of powers discussed earlier – cultural policy, public hiring, and security – were randomly assigned to either the states or the central government. We also include an attribute for whether the resulting states are drawn according to ethnic homelands or not, to effectively hold constant in respondent's minds whether the new system is an ethnofederal state. Table 1 presents each attribute and the possible values.

Attribute	Levels
Public employment	Central government hires all civil servants; Each state hires own civil servants
Security forces	One national police force; Each state has own police force
Cultural policy history	The central government decides official language, teaching of history; Each state decides official language, teaching of history
State borders the area	State borders are drawn according to majority ethnic group in the area; State borders are drawn according to geography

Table 1: Conjoint attributes and their possible values

Unless otherwise specified, we follow our pre-registered analysis and test the extent to which respondents prefer the states control a specific attribute relative to the central government. To this end, we estimate average marginal component effects (AMCEs), or the difference in probability that a profile is chosen if the state is given the responsibility versus the government (Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley, 2020). We also estimate marginal means for each attribute level (MMs), or the probability that a profile with the given attribute level was chosen in the experiment tasks. Across all results, we cluster standard errors at the respondent level.

Results

The minorities within minorities dilemma

We find no evidence of either egotropic or sociotropic reasoning in support for ethnic federalism in the overall sample. Figure 2 displays the predicted levels of support for the vesting of power in the central government (higher values) or state governments (lower values) across the four experimental conditions. Differences across conditions are substantively small and not statistically significant by conventional standards. In other words: respondents in our sample do not appear to meaningfully evaluate the prospect of centralized (or devolved) power differently based on their status, or status of their coethnics, in the new system. Post-hoc power analysis indicates our experiment was powered to detect small effect sizes (Cohen's D $\approx$ .25 for most tests in Appendix Table A1). While it is possible that there are egotropic and sociotropic effects of smaller magnitudes that we are not powered to detect, it is not clear that these would be substantively meaningful.

As specified in H2a, we also test whether the effect of minority status might instead be conditional on whether an individual is a coethnic of the ethnic group holding power in the central government. We similarly find no evidence that those who share an ethnic identity with the Prime Minister (Abiy Ahmed, of Oromo descent) respond differently to the experimental conditions (Appendix Table A4).

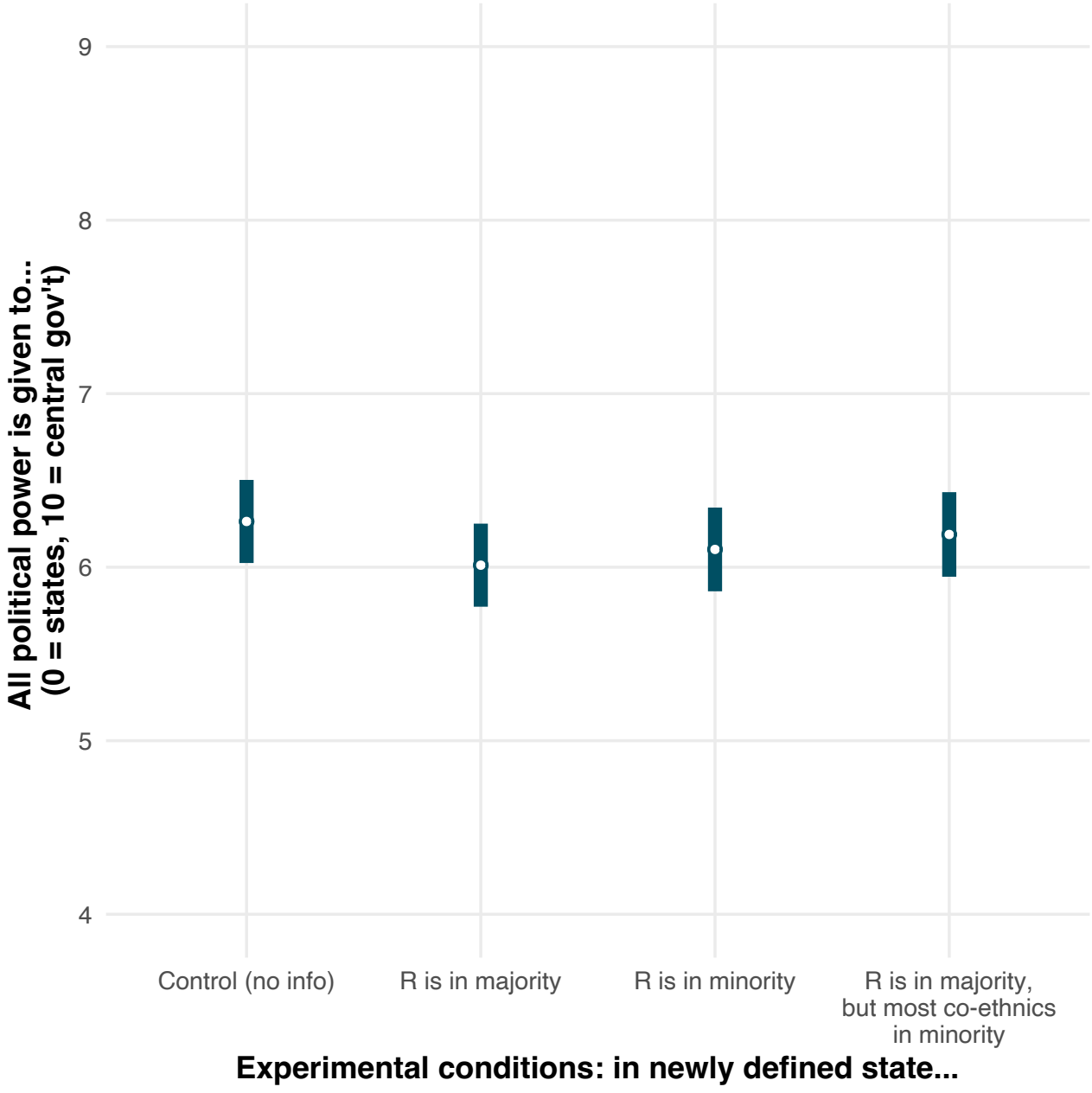


Figure 2: See Appendix Table A3 for full regression results.

Our primary results concern average effects across the whole sample. Yet, there is reason to expect that treatment effects might vary substantially across respondents of varying characteristics, especially given that our sample skews towards skepticism of ethnic federalism. In the following section, we thus conduct exploratory analysis by interacting the experimental treatment conditions with key respondent characteristics.

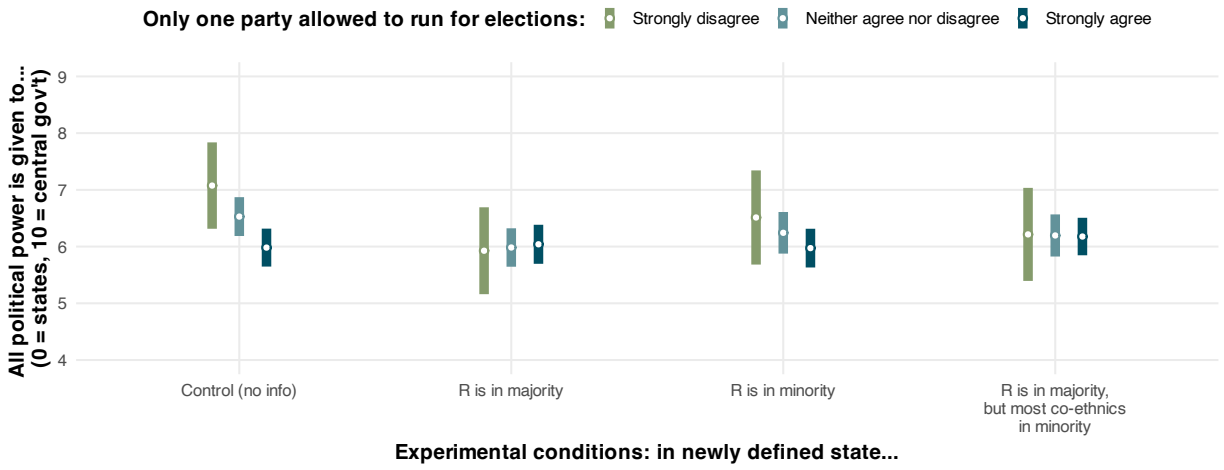
Exploratory analysis

While we do not find evidence of egotropic and sociotropic reasoning on average across the sample, we do find interesting changes among subsets of respondents.

The first is among respondents who hold illiberal or antidemocratic values, measured by a LIKERT survey item asking respondents their level of agreement with the notion that only one political party should be allowed to stand for election and hold office[12]. As we can see in Figure 3A, those who strongly agree with one-party rule tend to support centralizing power at higher rates than those who strongly disagree. Yet when supporters of one-party rule are told they will be in the majority of the newly formed states, they significantly increase their level of support for the devolution of power to the states. Substantively, respondents who support one party rule drop from an average level of support for centralized power of 7.48 (6.70 - 8.25) down to 5.72 (4.83 - 6.60), a 23% decrease. By contrast, those who oppose or strongly oppose one-party rule ('low') do not change their preferences regardless of whether they are in the majority or minoritiy of the new state.

[12]This item was adapted from Afrobarometer.

(A)



(B)

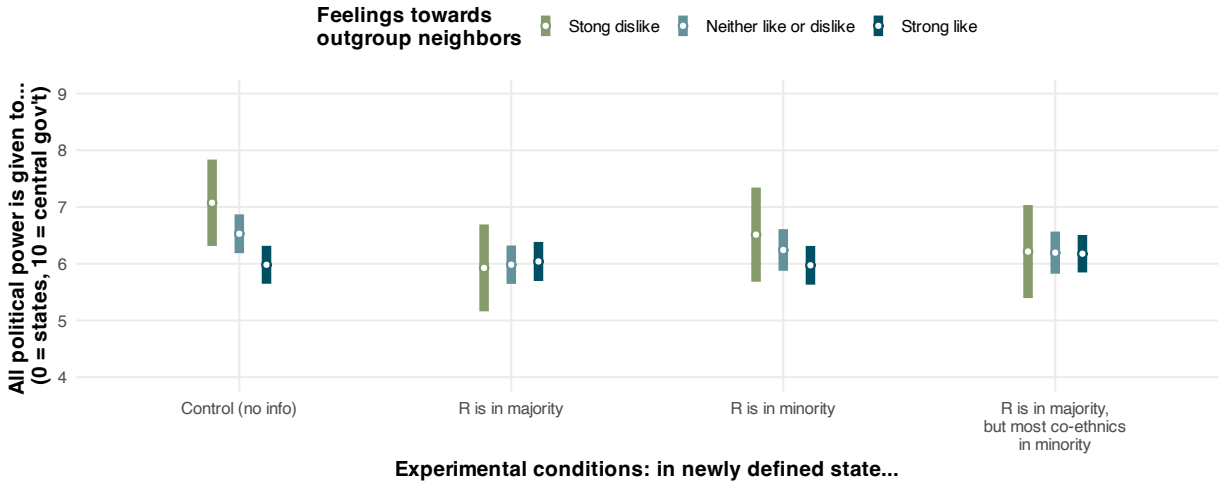


Figure 3: A) Support for one-party rule measured by agreement with the following statement: "Only one political party should be allowed to stand for election and hold office." See Ap- pendix Table A5 for full regression results. B) Ethnic tolerance measured by asking respondents how much they would like having a member of another ethnic group as a neighbor. See Appendix Table A6 for full regression results.

We find similar patterns when we look at respondents' baseline levels of ethnic tolerance, measured by an item asking how much they would like having a member of a different ethnic group as a neighbor (see Figure 3B). In the control condition, those with low pre-existing levels of ethnic tolerance tend to support centralizing power at higher rates than their more tolerant counterparts. However, when low-tolerance respondents are told they will be in the majority of the new state their preferences swing towards devolution of powers ($p < .10$).

The picture that emerges is thus one where respondents with more illiberal and intolerant views do exhibit egotropic reasoning with respect to ethnic federalism: they wish for power to be devolved to the states when they expect to be numerical majorities in those states. As exploratory analysis, these findings should be interpreted with caution, yet they are suggestive of broader patterns we will return to in the conclusion.

The devolution of powers dilemma

Here, we begin by presenting marginal mean estimates (Figure 4), which describe the probability a respondent chose a profile based on whether the state or the central government was delegated one of the three key powers in our study: cultural policy, public hiring, and security. As a reminder, we also include whether state borders are drawn according to ethnic homelands or not (i.e., on the basis of geography) to hold fixed in respondent's evaluations whether or not the resulting system is an ethnofederal system.

First, a finding that quickly stands out is how strong preferences are *against* ethnic federalism in our sample. Profiles where state borders are drawn according to non-ethnic features (geography) were chosen 61% (59% - 71%) of the time, whereas when respondents were shown profiles with ethnically-defined state borders that support drops down to 40% (38% - 41%). This is not so surprising: while Ethiopians are divided in important ways over ethnic federalism, opposition tends to be higher than support[13].

[13] Approximately 52% of Ethiopians would prefer a transition to geographically defined borders, according to Afrobarometer. See Figure A6.

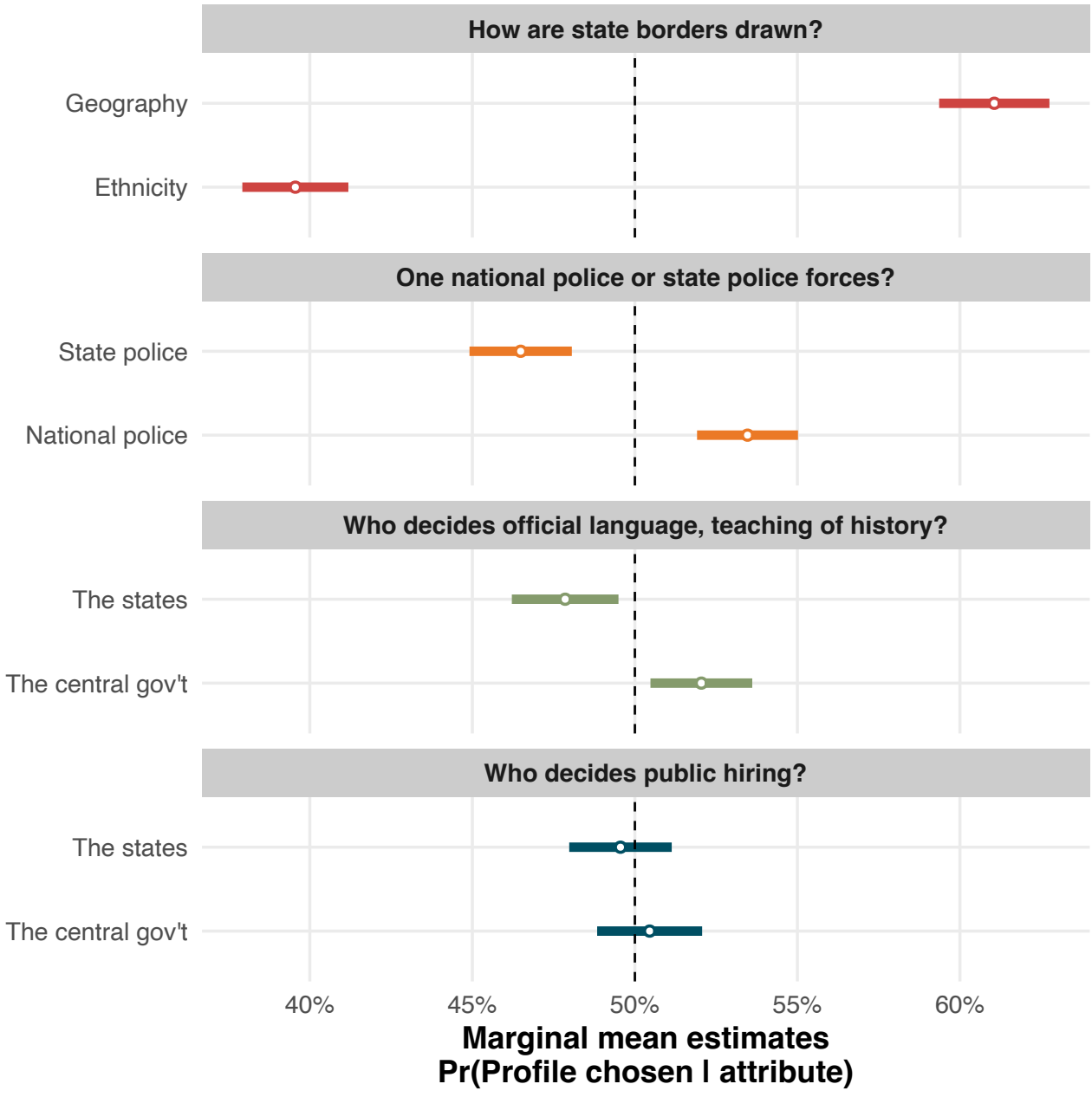


Figure 4: See Appendix Table A2 for full regression results.

Second, with respect to our three key classes of powers, the pattern that emerges is one of opposition to devolving powers to the states and where the most decisive factor is control over security, followed by cultural policy, and finally with control over public hiring producing no change in probability. The change in support for a profile is on the order of 7 percentage points for policing when centralized (a decrease in marginal means from 53% (52% - 55%) for national police to 46% (45% - 48%) for state police forces). The effect of cultural policy is smaller, on the order of 4 percentage points: a drop from 52% (50% - 54%) when the central government controls cultural policy down to 48% (46% - 49%) when the states control cultural policy. Interestingly, we find no statistically significant effects with respect to control over public hiring.

Third, given that we include how borders are drawn as a varying attribute, we can also compare what happens when we hold the drawing of borders fixed and allow the other attributes to vary. In other words, how do preferences over these powers change depending on whether the states are ethnically defined or not? We visualize differences in marginal means for each attribute level in Appendix Figure A9. What we see is that the effects of centralizing (or devolving) state power are more or less similar whether the resulting state is ethnically defined or not.

The picture that emerges is thus one of dissatisfaction with ethnic federalism that is likely rooted in Ethiopia's recent experiences with conflict. The fact that effects are consistent regardless of whether state borders are ethnically defined or not further suggests respondents are largely evaluating these questions as debates about decentralization more broadly. We return to these findings in the conclusion.

Exploratory analysis

The results so far reflect the views of the sample as a whole, but there is reason to expect that preferences will vary across subsets of respondents; we highlight some of these, below.

First, we see some differences in how respondents react to profile attributes depending on their pre-existing support for the use of violence to advance group goals (Figure 5). Those who advocate for any level of ethnic violence to advance their ethnic group's goals tended to favor ethnically defined borders at higher rates, and were especially likely to choose arrangements where the states had control over cultural policy (an increase in marginal means of 6.9%). As with the vignette experiment, this is suggestive evidence of more ethnically chauvinistic respondents

having different preferences over ethnic federalism than those who express higher levels of tolerance.

We also test whether preferences varied by ethnic identity, comparing across Amhara, Oromo, and grouping the remaining, less common categories in our sample as "Other" (see Figure A7). Of particular interest here is the difference between Oromos – who, in some respects, are "ascendant" at this time with Abiy Ahmed's rise to power – Amharas – the "traditionally" dominant group in the country – and the smaller ethnic categories.

We see some differences in attribute effects: Amhara and the smaller ethnic categories strongly oppose ethnically defined borders, whereas the Oromo are closer to indifferent about centralization. There is also a large difference in cultural policy effects across the ethnic groups: centralizing cultural policy decreases support among Oromos yet increases support among Amharas and the other relevant groups. This distinction between the two groups potentially ties back to the political history of Ethiopia, in which Amhara nationalism has been associated with the centralizing tendency of the Ethiopian empire under Amhara rule until its fall in 1974 (Tazebew, 2021).

Conclusion

Ethnic federalism, with its promises and pitfalls, is often studied as a question of whether societies should adopt it or not. Yet once adopted, ethnic federalism is not a settled question: instead, domestic politics in ethnofederal states continues, with debates turning on whether ethnic federalism as implemented serves the interests of its citizens (and which citizens), whether it should be deepened, reversed, or reformed in particular ways. We have characterized two central dilemmas to the politics of ethnic federalism and presented results from original survey experiments fielded in Ethiopia bearing on these dilemmas. Our work provides insight into how citizens think about these systems: how they believe the system should be structured, what worries the system elicits, and especially that there is variation *among* citizens in these questions that connects to beliefs about political and ethnic tolerance.

Our study points to at least two avenues for future research. First, our suggestive exploratory evidence points to important variation in preferences that's contingent on citizens' normative commitments to political and ethnic tolerance. Beyond replicating these results in other settings

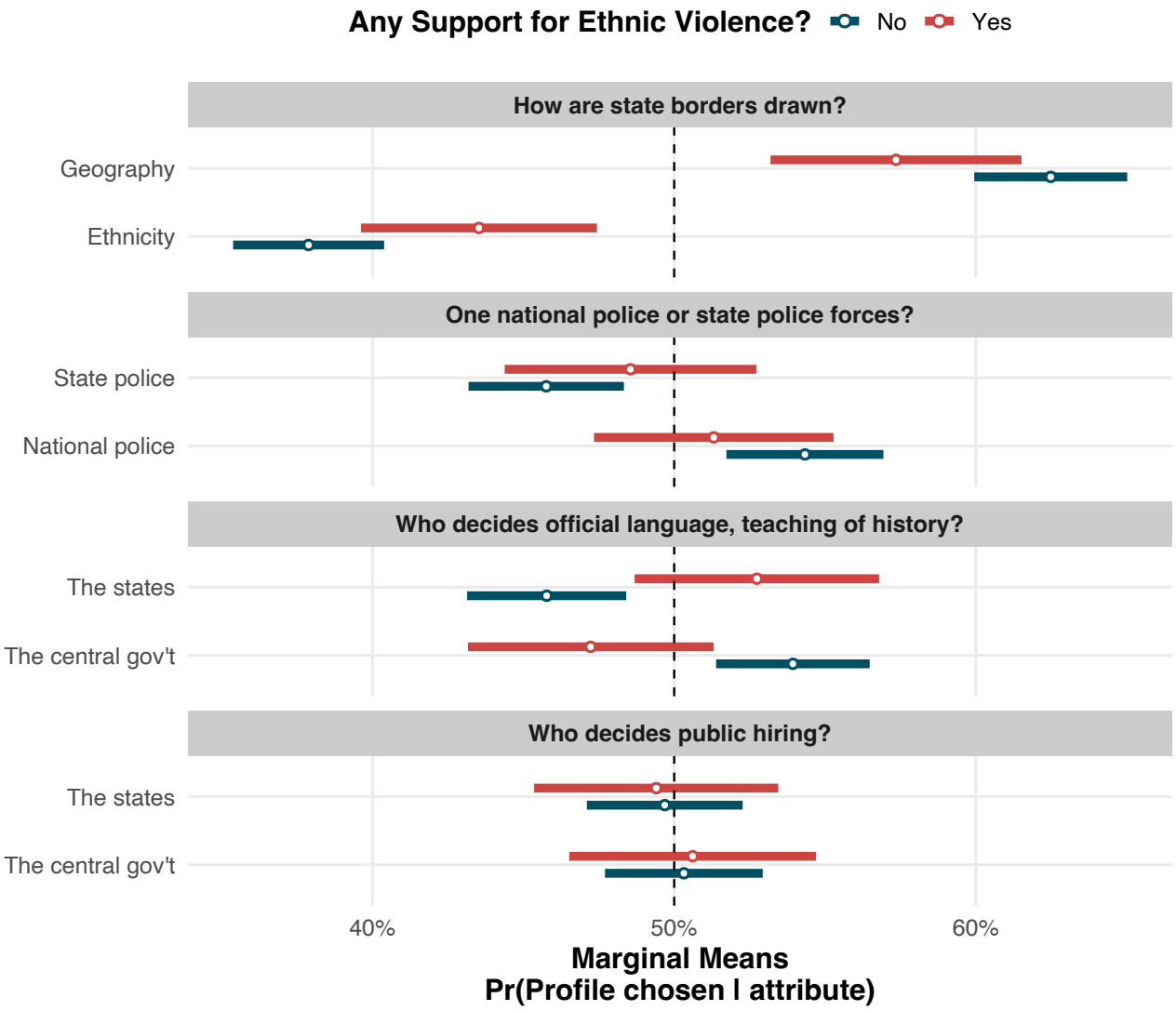


Figure 5: Respondents were categorized as having any support for ethnic violence if they gave any response other than "not at all" to the following question: "How much do you feel it is justified for members of your ETHNIC GROUP to use violence in advancing their political goals these days?" See Appendix Table A7 for full results.

(valuable, in and of itself), one question that arises is whether these normative commitments are exogenous or endogenous to the institutions of ethnic federalism (Mattes and Bratton, 2007; Kim et al., 2017). In other words, do experiences under ethnofederal rule increase political and ethnic intolerance among (at least some) citizens (Ishiyama and Basnet, 2022), and does this in turn shape support for accelerating or reversing ethnic federalism?

Second, while we deliberately conceive of ethnic federalism broadly, actual ethnofederal arrangements can vary dramatically from case to case (Anderson, 2015). Ethiopia is arguably one of the deeper forms of ethnic federalism on record, and it is likely that shallower forms – or forms that focus on specific forms of devolution of powers to ethnic groups – would shape preferences differently. More limited forms, that grant autonomy to particular, minoritized groups, for instance, might be less threatening to the average citizen in the country. Such structural variation could be explored in future work, either through cross-country comparisons, or in the laboratory, by incorporating different forms of ethnic federalism into experimental designs.

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