Political affiliation and ethnic categorization in the Malay identity

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April 25, 2017 draft

Abstract:

Intersubjective ethnic categorization is typically treated as obvious and stable, under the assumption that it is a function of matching sticky descent-based attributes to ethnic categories. This paper presents evidence that political affiliation, which is not descent-based, can alter intersubjective ethnic categorization: under some circumstances, individuals deny the (self-professed) ethnic identity of political adversaries to delegitimize and punish them, while endorsing the ethnic identity of political allies. This is illustrated through the Malay ethnic identity in Malaysia, which has highly ambiguous boundaries and is strongly politicized. The findings have several implications: they demonstrate the complexity of intersubjective ethnic categorization, which challenges parsimonious conceptualizations of ethnic identity. They also illuminate a channel through which politicizing ethnic identity increases the risk of ethnic unrest: the vulnerability to attacks on their ethnic identity by political adversaries can create an ethnic outbidding dynamic in which political leaders compete to demonstrate their ethnic credentials.

Keywords: ethnic categorization; political affiliation; Malay; ethnic outbidding

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1. Introduction:

With few exceptions, social science research is in agreement on the basic parameters of ethnic identity: it is generally recognized as a socially and politically constructed identity that is comprised of (real or perceived) descent-based attributes.[2] This lends it two fundamental properties: it is "visible", meaning "information about an individual's ethnic identity… can be obtained through superficial observation"; and it is "sticky", in that "attributes associated… with descent are difficult to change…"[3] In a great many contexts, this makes ethnic identity intersubjectively obvious and stable. That is, an individual from ethnic group *X* will consistently be recognized as *X*, and would have difficulties passing as a member of ethnic group *Y*. It is precisely this feature that makes ethnicity useful as a foundation for political mobilization or distribution of patronage.[4]

In practice, however, the process of intersubjective ethnic categorization is often more complex. A small but growing literature has demonstrated that factors like an individual's own ethnicity, gender, and familiarity with other ethnic groups influence how they categorize the ethnic identity of others.[5] Furthermore, accurate intersubjective ethnic identification is conditional on the amount of information available: the probability of correctly identifying the ethnicity of a target increases as a greater range of cues, including name, speech, and place of origin, are made available.[6] Even the motivation to accurately classify the ethnicity of others is variable, as suggested by the

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[2] Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); James Fearon and David Laitin, "Explaining inter-ethnic cooperation", *Americal Political Science Review*, 90 (1996), 715-735; Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

[3] Kanchan Chandra, "What is Ethnic Identity and Does it Matter?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (2006), 399.

[4] Kanchan Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[5] David Harris, "In the eye of the beholder: Observed race and observer characteristics", *Population Studies Center Research Report* (2002).

[6] James Habyarimana, Macartan Humphreys, Daniel N. Posner, and Jeremy M. Weinstein. "Why does ethnic diversity undermine public goods provision?." *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 04 (2007): 709-725.

positive correlation between the strength of ethnic *self*-identification and the importance attached to the ethnic categorization of others.[7]

Existing research has largely focused how individuals categorize the ethnicity of a given target when they *do not know* how that target self-identifies. That is, individuals are asked to guess the ethnicity of a target that has not revealed his or her "true" identity (understood as the ethnic group with which they identify). Guesses are deemed correct when they align with the target's self-professed identity, and incorrect when they do not. There is, however, an additional dimension of intersubjective ethnic categorization: *even when* an individual knows how a target self-identifies, there is still a "choice" between affirming or denying the target's self-professed identity.

This paper examines intersubjective ethnic categorization when individuals know how a target self-identifies. This has been under-studied largely because it appears unexceptional: in a great many contexts, the "choice" between affirming or denying a target's self-professed identity occurs subconsciously and defaults to accept, provided that the target's descent-based attributes fit the generally recognized criteria of their self-professed ethnic category. I present evidence from Malaysia's unique Malay ethnic identity that suggests this process can, in fact, be more complex: under certain circumstances, *political affiliation* can motivate individuals to affirm the ethnic identity of political allies but deny the ethnic identity of political adversaries, *largely independent* of how well the ally or adversary fits the recognized criteria of their chosen ethnic group.

Why would a non-descent-based attribute like political affiliation impact the process of ethnic categorization? I focus on two reasons. First, ethnic identity can be deeply emotive, as humans derive significant self worth from their group memberships. Influential theorists like Charles Taylor[8] have argued that this makes positive external recognition of ethnic identity a fundamental need and right. Intentionally denying recognition of ethnic identity, then, can be used to discredit or even punish a political adversary. Second, in contexts where one ethnic group is recognized as having a rightful

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[7] Adam Harris and Michael Findley, "Is Ethnicity Identifiable? Lessons from an Experiment in South Africa", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 58 (2014), 4-33.
[8] Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

monopoly on political power, actors may be especially inclined to affirm the ethnic identity of a political ally from that group, even if there are ambiguities in their identity.

Mahathir Mohamad provides a clear example. Mahathir was Malaysia's prime minister from 1981 to 2003, during which time he led the dominant United Malay National Organization (UMNO), an ethnic party founded to advance the interests of ethnic Malays. Mahathir self-identifies as Malay and belongs to the Malay category by nearly all recognized criteria, but has partial South Asian heritage. To his political supporters, Mahathir was typically seen as a defender of the Malay "race" and a champion of *ketuanan Melayu* (dominance of the Malay ethnic group), and thus unquestionably categorized as Malay. By contrast, many of his political adversaries labeled him a *mamak*—the pejorative term for a Muslim *Indian*—thereby implicitly denying his Malay identity. The categorization of Mahathir's ethnic identity, in short, was contingent upon whether he was seen as a political ally or adversary.

This paper presents evidence from several additional cases and from a survey experiment to demonstrate that this type of explicitly *political affiliation-driven* ethnic categorization, in which selective affirmation or denial of the ethnic identity of others is based explicitly on their political affiliation, occurs widely in Malaysia. Two conditions facilitate this phenomenon: first, the membership criteria of an ethnic identity must have enough intrinsic ambiguity that the rightful belonging of a given individual can be credibly challenged. Second, ethnic identity must be sufficiently politicized so that selective affirmation or denial has meaningful political consequences. In other words, ambiguities in membership criteria create the opportunity to affirm or deny full membership, while politicization of ethnicity creates the motivation to do so selectively based on political affiliation.

Both of these conditions are strongly met in Malaysia, given the unique features of the Malay identity. To a far greater extent than in most other contexts, the contemporary Malay identity is a political construct that creates a majority political bloc *vis-à-vis* the country's ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities. The parameters of Malay membership are constitutionally defined with the purpose of facilitating entry into the group but prohibiting exit. In this way, the Malay identity blurs the distinction between an ethnic group and a political group, with the effect that boundaries are more ambiguous than for typical descent-based groups. The Malay identity is kept highly

politicized in Malaysia by reserving dominance of the political sphere for Malays and granting Malays, as well as a small number of other indigenous groups, a wide range of affirmative action-like benefits.

Affiliation-driven categorization has substantial consequences in the Malaysian context, as Malay political actors frequently find core elements of their ethnic identity challenged by political adversaries. In the most overt form—as with the Mahathir example—self-identifying Malays are denied recognition of their Malay identity by political adversaries. The effects of this can be political damaging and personally injurious, given the psychological importance of recognition.[9] In more subtle forms, political actors are called traitors to their race and are castigated for not conforming to the ideals of "Malayness". This inherent vulnerability contributes towards the ethnic—and closely related Islamic—outbidding that has become increasingly commonplace in Malaysian politics, as political actors showcase their ethnic credentials either as a response to challenges or to preempt them.

More broadly, affiliation-driven categorization has implications for the general conceptualization of ethnicity. Constructivists have long maintained that ethnic group boundaries—and the salience of those boundaries—are a function of political contestation in one form or another. Given this, politics play a foundational, albeit abstract and distant, role in the ethnic categorization process by determining the boundaries of ethnic categories and the attributes that comprise them. The constructivist literature widely implies, however, that the *immediate* process of intersubjective ethnic categorization relies solely on descent-based attributes like physical appearance, mother tongue, tribe, or religion: individual A classifies the ethnicity of individual B based on how closely individual B's descent-based ethnic attributes match the ideal types of the available ethnic categories. According to this conceptualization, political affiliation—which has neither the sticky nor highly visible characteristics of descent-based attributes—should not factor in to the ethnic categorization calculus. The evidence from this paper contradicts this assumption. It suggests that political affiliation, which is clearly non-descent-based, can consciously or unconsciously cause some individuals to miscategorize the ethnicity of others, either by including them in groups in which their

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[9] Taylor.

belonging could be contested to according to strict descent-based criteria, or denying them from groups that they do belong to according to those same criteria. This underscores the complexity of ethnic identity and demonstrates the powerful role that psychological forces play in shaping the boundaries of social groupings, which consequently increases the situational fluidity of those boundaries and challenges attempts to converge on narrower and universally applicable conceptualization of ethnic identity.

This paper proceeds as follows: the second section reviews the dominant conceptualization of ethnic identity, focusing particularly on the process of intersubjective ethnic categorization. It also examines the motivations that give rise to affiliation-driven ethnic categorization. The third section discusses the Malay identity and examines the political environment in which it is embedded in Malaysia, highlighting the identity's inherent ambiguities and politicized nature. The forth section presents the case studies and survey experiment. The fifth section presents comparative data from neighboring Singapore, which has an ethnoculturally similar Malay group but does not politicize ethnicity to the same degree as Malaysia. The sixth section discusses the consequences of the findings and concludes the paper.

Section Two: What is ethnic identity and how does it function?

Ethnic difference has long been viewed as a self-evident fact of social organization and has consequently provided structure to political organization in many parts of the world. As is common with "self-evident" truths, however, the concept of ethnicity has been treated with a significant degree of ambiguity. In the simplest terms, ethnic groups have been distinguished from other social groups in that they are typically perceived by constituent members to be basic, natural, and fixed. Underscoring this are the perceived kinships, "shared memories", and myths of common ancestry that ethnic groups generally possess. While there are minor divergences in how scholars within the ethnic politics literature conceptualize ethnic identity, all maintain that they are constructed of attributes—like mother tongue, physical characteristics, or religion—that are ultimately descent-based in nature.

Despite the convergence on what ethnicity is, large areas of how it functions remain under-examined. Intersubjective categorization—i.e., how individuals categorize the ethnicity of others—is an example of this. With few early exceptions like Pettigrew *et al*,[10] it was uncritically assumed that categorizing the ethnicity of others was a natural and automatic function of identifying which ethnic group corresponds to a given individual's descent-based ethnic attributes. More recent scholarship has demonstrated, to the contrary, that ethnic categorization is a complex process. Blascovich *et al* measure the speed with which respondents categorize photos of white, black, and ambiguous faces, finding that prejudiced respondents take longer to categorize photos, because their racial prejudice places higher value on "correct" categorizations.[11] Harris and Findley add to this through evidence of a positive correlation between the strength of ethnic (self)identification and the ability to correctly identify the ethnicity of others, suggesting again a discomfort with ambiguity for those that identify strong with their own ethnic category.[12] More generally, other work shows that individual factors like the observers' own ethnicity, gender, and familiarity with other ethnic groups influences their categorization of others' ethnicity.[13] This has a political dimension as well: political conservatism predicts a greater tendency to categorize racially ambiguous faces as black in the United States.[14] Further research shows that categorization of multiracial individuals is slower and less accurate than monoracial individuals.[15] Given this complexity, it should not be surprising that the rate at which individuals correctly identify the ethnicity of others is often low, though it grows as information about the other increases.[16]

In the above research, participants are asked to categorize the ethnicity of a target individual *without* knowing how that target self-identities. The underlying assumption is

[10] Thomas Pettigrew, Gordon Allport, and Eric Barnett, "Binocular resolution and perception of race in South Africa", *British Journal of Psychology*, 49 (1958), 265-278.
[11] Jim Blascovich, Natalie Wyer, Laura Swart, Jeffrey Kibler, Jeffrey. "Racism and racial categorization" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72 (1997), 1364-1372.
[12] Adam Harris and Michael Findley.
[13] Harris 2002.
[14] Amy Krosch, Leslie Berntsen, David Amodia, John Jost, and Jay Van Bavel. "On the ideology of hypodescent: Political conservatism predicts categorization of racially ambiguous faces as Black", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49 (2013), 1196-1203.
[15] Jacqueline Chen and David Hamilton. "Natural ambiguities: Racial categorization of multiracial individuals", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48 (2011), 152-164.
[16] Habyarimana *et al*.

that participants categorize the target based on how closely the target's ethnic attributes (skin color, language, etc.) match the criteria of the relevant likely ethnic categories (Caucasian, African American, etc.). As noted earlier, this disregards the "categorization" that occurs *even when* it is known how a target individual self-identifies. In this case, categorization takes the form of either affirming the target's self-professed identity, or denying it by categorizing the target as something else. While the target's descent-based attributes generally remain relevant in this categorization process, this paper demonstrates that political affiliation can play a direct role as well. Stated differently, even when intersubjective ethnic categorization appears obvious based on descent-based attributes, political affiliation can override the clear descent-based conclusion.

Two motivations are responsible for injecting political affiliation into the process of intersubjective ethnic categorization. The first occurs at the individual level and arises from the conscious or subconscious desire to delegitimize and punish political adversaries. As has been forcefully argued in seminal works by Taylor and Lijphart[17], receiving recognition of one's identity is a fundamental human need that carries significant psychological importance. This creates the opportunity to cause direct personal harm to a political adversary by refusing to recognize them as legitimate members of the ethnic group with which they identify.

A second and related motivation arises when the support of a particular ethnic group is necessary for a political movement to be seen as legitimate. In the case of Malaysia, as argued in the next section, the Malay ethnic group is widely seen as holding a rightful claim to political sovereignty. This creates a need for political movements to capture the support of that ethnic group. That, in turn, can lead individuals—whether knowingly or not—to view political allies with ambiguous identities as legitimate members of the sovereign ethnic group, thereby bringing greater legitimacy to the political movement they support. Conversely, denying the legitimacy of a political adversary's membership in the sovereign ethnic group by extension calls into question the legitimacy of their political movement.

Clearly, the greater the degree of ambiguity in the boundaries of a particular ethnic group, the easier it is contest whether a given member rightfully belongs in that

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[17] Arendt Lijphart, *Democracies in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

group. Similarly, the greater the political consequences of ethnic group membership, the greater the motivation to endorse political allies and deny political adversaries. The next section examines the Malay ethnic identity in detail, establishing first its inherent ambiguity before discussing the extent of its politicization.

Section Three: The Malay Identity in Malaysia

The population of Peninsular Malaysia is often described as being comprised of three main ethnic groups.[18] These are the Malays (60%), Chinese (23%), and Indians (9%). The diverse non-Malay indigenous (1%), the ignominiously-labeled 'others' (<1%), and non-citizens (6%) comprise the remainder.[19] This categorization system is legally codified and has origins in the colonial-era. The Malays are recognized as the indigenous population, while the Chinese and Indian populations have roots in a period of large-scale immigration between 1850 and 1930. British administrators coupled ethnicity and economic activity, as well as instituted a *de facto* policy of geographic segregation. The result was a solidification of ethnic boundaries and the emergence of what Furnivall termed a "plural society" in which constituent groups had little meaningful interaction outside of the marketplace.[20]

The typical highly stylized account of Malaysia's ethnic diversity describes clear boundaries delineating group difference. Malays are Muslim, speak Malay as a mother tongue, and practice a rural, village-based traditional culture. Chinese are Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, or Christian, speak a Chinese dialect as mother tongue, are involved in commerce, and are typically urban dwellers. Indians are Hindu or Muslim, speak Tamil or another South Asian language as mother tongue, and are likewise predominantly urban. All three are phenotypically distinct. This stylized account, however, betrays a remarkable degree of intra-group diversity and the frequent

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[18] Malaysia is divided between Peninsular Malaysia (on the Malay Peninsula) and East Malaysia (on the island of Borneo). As the two areas are culturally, socially, and historically distinct, I limit my focus to Peninsular Malaysia where roughly 80% of the population resides.

[19] 2010 household proportions reported. Note that a citizen of Malaysia is referred to as "Malaysian", irrespective of ethnicity; Malay, Chinese, and Indian are used strictly as ethnic labels.

[20] John S. Furnivall, *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944).

ambiguity at the fringes of group boundaries. This is particularly the case for the Malay ethnicity.

The Malay label has multiple connotations. In the broadest sense, it refers to the indigenous inhabitants of the Malay archipelago—which includes the thousands of islands that today form Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines—most of whom speak an Austronesian language. In a narrower sense, it refers to the coastal inhabitants on either side of the Strait of Malacca in east Sumatra and the western Malay Peninsula whose ancestors spoke the Malay language. Given the importance of the Strait of Malacca to the trade-based ancient empires of Srivijaya and Majapahit, as well as the city-state of Melaka, this population had extensive contact with outsiders from the Indian subcontinent, China, and the Middle East prior to the arrival of the colonial powers.[21] Through a period of over one thousand years, significant numbers of Bugis (from Sulawesi), Minangkabau (west Sumatra), Javanese, Acehnese (north Sumatra), Arabs, and South Asians settled in the Malay Peninsula. A significant rate of intermarriage brought some integration with the local Malay population, though the assimilation was incomplete.[22]

The contemporary connotation of the Malay identity derives from the narrower conceptualization, has colonial origins, and is a product of an attempt to retrospectively nationalize history. Colonial British administrators in Malaya imported an essentialized paradigm of racial categorization, clearly distinguishing the migrants from China and the Indian subcontinent from the (still very diverse) peninsular Malay-speaking population. Over time, that indigenous population was homogenized into a single identity, as reflected by the continuous broadening of the Malay category in colonial censuses.[23] As colonial Malaya moved towards independence following the Second World War, Malay elites mobilized the "indigenous" Malay populations under the

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[21] Barbara Andaya and Leonard Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (second edition), (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

[22] Andaya and Andaya.

[23] The 1871 and 1881 censuses had separate categories for the various populations from the Malay Archipelago. By 1891, the census had a macro-category termed 'Malays and other Natives of the Archipelago'. By 1911, the macro-category was called 'Malay population', which was then disaggregated 'by Race', completing the evolution towards a unitary group, albeit with diverse origins. See: Charles Hirschman, "The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classifications." *The Journal of Asian Studies,* 46 (1987), 555-582.

umbrella term *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) in order to secure special privileges *vis-à-vis* the "immigrant" Chinese and Indian populations. This was most immediately manifested in the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), the ethnic-based political party that coordinated Malaysia's independence in 1957 and remains in power through this day.[24] The post-colonial leadership institutionalized the colonial racial categories in part for political gain, as they provided a potentially durable minimum winning coalition with the Malay population constituting just over 50% of the electorate.[25] In this way, the contemporary Malay identity is a construction that reflects the historical, cultural, and especially political evolution of modern Malaysia.[26]

Two characteristics of the contemporary Malay identity require additional examination. The first is its inherent degree of ambiguity, particularly at the fringes of the group boundary. This is a function of the Malay identity blurring the line between an ethnic group and a political group. At the ethnocultural level, the boundary ambiguity results from the incomplete homogenization of the Malay identity, particularly in regards to migrants from other parts of the Malay Archipelago, and to a lesser extent from the Middle East, China, and the Indian subcontinent. While these constituent components of the Malay group can seamlessly coalesce into a unitary entity in response to perceived external challenges—whether European or non-indigenous Asian in nature—the internal divisions remain extant and are frequently activated.[27]

The legal/political criteria for inclusion into the Malay category add an additional layer of ambiguity. The early Malay nationalist efforts to expand and institutionalize the Malay identity as a unitary voting block required reducing the barriers to entry into the

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[24] Malaysia has been ruled by an UMNO-led coalition since independence, known as the Alliance prior to 1973 and as *Barisan Nasional* since then. While the coalition is ostensible multiethnic—the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) have been the principle junior partners—UMNO has set the terms of the agreement and has largely advanced a Malay-centric agenda.

[25] Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth Shepsle, *Politics in Plural Societies*, (Columbus: Merrill, 1972).

[26] Shamsul A.B., "A History of an Identity, and Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 32 (2001), 355-366.

[27] In a study of Penang's Malays, for example, Judith Nagata identifies four Malay subgroups: *Melayu jati* (pure Malays), *Jawi Peranakan* (Malays with partial Tamil heritage), Malays with partial Arab heritage, and Malays with Indonesian heritage. These groups acted in unitary manner under some circumstances, but readily drew internal distinctions in others. See: Judith Nagata, "What is a Malay? Situational selection of ethnic identity in a plural society", *American Ethnologist*, 1 (1974), 331-350.

group while restricting exit options. Constitutional provisions achieve both aims. The criteria for legal recognition as a Malay are lax, defining a Malay as "a person who professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks Malay, [and] conforms to Malay custom" (Article 160). Mahathir notes in his autobiography "In Malaysia today, being Malay is not a question of descent... 'Malayness' is a legal construct.[28] One is a Malay if one satisfies certain legal conditions," making the identity as much a political/legal construct as a descent-based one. Ultimately, the ambiguities of the legal criteria stem not only from the lack of clearly defined thresholds for what are in reality continuous categories, but also because is it increasingly unclear what constitutes the requisite "Malay custom" that must be practiced, since many facets of the traditional rural Malay culture are hardly compatible with contemporary Malaysia's urban environments.[29]

In practice, the semblance of a "racial" category is maintained by a *de facto* expectation that those who become Malay (*masok Melayu*, literally "to enter Malay") fulfill both the legal criteria *and* have an additional claim to inclusion through familial proximity in the form of intermarriage or adoption. Thus while a Chinese convert to Islam who speaks Malay and follows Malay custom will generally not be recognized as Malay, his children would be. Importantly, the constitution also stipulates that all Malays must by law be Muslim, and further legally forbids Muslims from renouncing their faith. This has the effect of occluding exit from the group, thereby creating a *de facto* open door policy with no exit options.

The legally codified "open door" into the Malay ethnicity has significantly increased the diversity of the Malay group while making fundamentally unclear what constitutes a "typical" Malay. While no systematic data exists, a large proportion of Malaysia's *indigenous* Malays undoubtedly have some roots—even if distant—in the lands and cultures away from the Malay Peninsula. Nowhere is this clearer than in Malaysia's six post-independence prime ministers, each of whom identified as Malay (and as leaders of the—indigenous—Malay community) while having family roots in places as far away as Turkey, China, India, and the eastern reaches of the Indonesian

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[28] Mahathir Mohamad, *A Doctor in the House: The Memoirs of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad*, (MPH Group Publishing Sdn Bhd, 2011, 25).

[29] Syed Husin Ali, *The Malays: Their Problems and Future*. (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 2008).

archipelago.[30] Again quoting from Mahathir's autobiography, "Nearly every Malay in Malaysia has some non-Malay blood. But this fact doesn't make them any less Malay."[31]

It is important to be clear about the nature of this ambiguity: the essentialized Malay identity is seen as mutually exclusive from Chinese and Indian identities, which generally precludes those with mixed heritage from claiming—or practicing—membership of *both* Malay and another ethnicity simultaneously. In other words, someone with Chinese roots who becomes Malay can no longer openly claim Chinese membership or practice Chinese custom; their right to claim Chinese group membership ends upon being recognized as Malay.[32] While no data is available to provide a precise estimate, the essentialized nature of ethnic group identities leads to high coethnic identification rates: whether through appearance, norms, or even name—the vast majority of surnames clearly indicate ethnicity[33]—it is rare that one cannot accurately identify to which group an individual "belongs". Rather, the main effect of the ambiguity is that it provides an avenue to contest the authenticity or legitimacy of an individual's membership in the Malay group, since on one dimension or another of the ambiguous and complex Malay identity, a significant portion of self-identifying Malays could be accused of falling short of the ideal type, and thus of not being full and legitimate members of the community.

This "vulnerability" has been amplified by the growing emphasis on the Muslim dimension of the Malay identity. As has been widely noted, Islamic elites in Malaysia have increasingly oriented themselves towards the Middle East, particularly towards the

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[30] The diverse genealogical roots of Malaysia's prime ministers (PM) are widely discussed but seldom publicized. Malaysia's first PM, Tunku Abdul Rahman, was half Thai and at least three of his four marriages were to non-Malays. The second PM Abdul Razah Hussein—and his son Najib Razak, the current and sixth PM—have strong Bugis ancestry from (Indonesian) Sulawesi. The third PM Hussein Onn had partial Turkish roots, while the fourth PM Mahathir Mohamad has familial connections to India. The fifth PM, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, has both Arab and Chinese roots.

[31] Mahathir, 25.

[32] Interestingly, the hard line against hybrid identities pertains mainly to the Malay identity, as those with mixed Chinese-Indian heritage are more able to activate and openly practice *both* identities. See Claire Adida, "Do African Voters Favor Co-Ethnics? A New Identification Strategy." *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 2 (2015), for a more comprehensive study of hybrid identities in the African context.

[33] A study in Singapore, which practices similar naming conventions, found that surnames accurately identified the ethnicity of households at a rate of greater than 95%. See: Loo Lee Sim, Shi Ming Yu, and Sun Sheng Han, "Public housing and ethnic integration in Singapore". *Habitat International*, 27 (2002), 293-307.

more puritan Wahhabi and Salafi interpretations of Islam.[34] These important ideals of religious practice have subsequently become the standard against which many Malay political actors are judged, at least by the country's socially conservative Muslims. Denouncing political opponents through religiously charged calls of *munafik* (hypocrite), *murtad* (apostate), or *kafir* (infidel) has become commonplace in the more base forms of political discourse. Insofar as the Muslim identity is an intrinsic and legally grounded component of the Malay identity, these religious attacks are inherently also a form of denying ethnic recognition.

The second noteworthy element of the contemporary Malay identity is its highly politicized nature. This is manifested in the concept of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy), which sees the Malay Peninsula as *Tanah Melayu* (Malay land) with Malays as the rightful rulers *vis-à-vis* the "immigrant" Chinese and Indian populations. The roots of this lie in the colonial era. Led by the ethnic Malay UMNO party, Malay elites pressed for recognition of the "special position" of the Malays during independence negotiations. Motivated largely by a desire to avoid unrest that would threaten their extensive economic assets, British administrators conceded to the Federation of Malaysia under the current Constitution of Malaysia, which codified a wide range of Malay privileges.[35]

Among other things, the constitution recognizes Islam as the official religion of the Federation (Article 3), elevates the Malay sultan to head of state (Article 32), designates Malay as official language (Article 152), and empowers the state to "protect the special position of the *bumiputera*", of which Malays make up the large majority (Article 153). In conjunction, these provisions entrench the ethnic differentiation of colonial administrators, facilitate mobilization along ethnic lines, and create a political hierarchy in which—whether realized or not—Malays occupy the top rung. The

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[34] Norshahril Saat, "Exclusivist Attitudes in Malaysian Islam have Multifarious Roots", *ISEAS Perspective*, 2016, no. 39.
[35] Following the close of the Second World War, British administrators initially proposed the creation of the Malayan Union in 1946, which was to grant equal rights to the Malay, Chinese, and Indian populations residing on the peninsula.

organization of political parties along ethnic lines reinforces the politicization of ethnicity.[36]

This ostensible political superiority was not reflected in the economic position of Malays prior to and in the years following independence. Under British rule, the vast majority of Malays were locked into a rural subsistence economy, and hence were excluded from commercial activity and economic modernization. Following ethnic riots between Malays and Chinese in 1969 that were framed as resulting from the economic marginalization of the Malays, UMNO introduced an extensive set of affirmative action policies under the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970.[37]

The NEP provided Malays and other *bumiputera* with advantages *vis-à-vis* the Chinese and Indian communities in a range of areas, including facilitated access to the civil service and education, advantages in private and public sector commerce, and a range of other privileges like preferential pricing for property and access to licensing.[38] While the NEP clearly delivered some positive outcomes, for example the dramatic rise in Malay educational attainment in the 1970s and 1980s[39], other outcomes have been less positive and have contributed to substantial intra-ethnic wealth inequality, as well as deep structural distortions in the private and public sectors due to widespread patronage and rent-seeking.[40] Most importantly, the NEP entrenched ethnic

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[36] The core parties of the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) ruling coalition (United Malays National Organization—UMNO; Malaysian Chinese Association—MCA; Malaysian Indian Congress— MIC) restrict membership along ethnic lines. *Gerakan*, a BN component party, is nominally multiethnic, but is in practice overwhelmingly Chinese. The core opposition parties (the Islamic *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS); the Democratic Action Party (DAP); *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR)) are all nominally multiethnic, but in practice tend also to be structured largely along ethnic lines as well.

[37] The NEP formally expired in 1990. It was replaced by the National Development Policy (NDP) in 1991, which largely carried forward its predecessor's policies, and the New Economic Model (NEM) in 2010. The NEM was initially intended to scale back pro-*bumiputera* policies, but the Bumiputera Economic Empowerment policies, announced in the wake of Malaysia's 13th General Election in 2013, extended NEP-like advantages in the areas of education, equity, non-financial assets, entrepreneurship and government delivery.

[38] Terence Gomez and Johan Saravanamuttu (eds), *The New Economic Policy in Malaysia: Affirmative Action, Ethnic Inequalities, and Social Justice*, (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2013).

[39] Hwok-Aun Lee, "Affirmative Action in Malaysia: Education and Employment Outcomes since the 1990s." *Journal of Contemporary Asia,* 42 (2012), 230-254.

[40] Terence Gomez and K.S. Jomo, *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics, Patronage and Profits*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

differentiation and a *de facto* ethnic hierarchy in broad swathes of Malaysia's economic and social sectors.

Section Four: Cases and Tests

The broader argument of this paper is that ambiguities in ethnic identity can be leveraged to discredit political adversaries or reward political allies by selectively denying or affirming their identities. The Malay identity in Malaysia, being both inherently ambiguous and highly politicized, facilitates this phenomenon. In this section I examine several relevant cases in detail. I then introduce a survey experiment designed to test whether the phenomenon extends to categorization of non-elite ethnic identities as well.

Mahathir Mohamad, prime minister of Malaysia between 1981 and 2003, provides the clearest starting point. As previously noted, Mahathir identifies and is legally recognized as Malay, but has partial South Asian heritage. Mahathir writes in his autobiography: "I am well aware that my ethnic origin has been the subject of much animated debate... I admit that some Indian, or more accurately South Asian, blood flows in my veins... [But] I am a Malay and am proud of it."[41] "I am a Malay not just on paper. I am also a Malay in sentiment and in spirit."[42] As a self-professed champion of Malay rights, his tenure as PM is associated with the entrenchment of the NEP's affirmative action policies that conferred significant advantages to Malays and a general solidification of ethnic divisions, at least in terms of political organization. In short, Mahathir was the very face of and force behind Malay political dominance for a period of over two decades.

While Mahathir's mixed heritage was widely recognized, there is no indication that it was seen as an issue among his UMNO supporters during his tenure. To the contrary, Mahathir's Malay credentials were often trumpeted by political allies. In 2009, for example, Mahathir was invited to become advisor to the far-right Malay chauvinist organization PERKASA, which views itself as protecting Malays and their constitutional rights against encroachment by Malaysia's Chinese and Indian minorities.

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[41] Mahathir, 24.
[42] Mahathir, 26.

For some of Mahathir's political adversaries, however, his mixed identity has presented an opportunity to inflict political damage and challenge his legitimacy. In conversations with UMNO detractors, some iteration of "You know, Mahathir is actually part Indian" (implying that he is an imposter and inherently lacking credibility) was commonplace. Countless further examples can be identified of Mahathir's political adversaries referencing his mixed identity to attack him. To cite one example, in 2013, the special assistant to opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim publicly suggested that Mahathir's citizenship should be probed, alleging that Mahathir's full name is "Mahathir Mohd Iskandar Kutty. The word Kutty suggests that his dad was an Indian Muslim", and further suggests that Mahathir may have obtained his citizenship through illegal means.[43] Google searches of "Mahathir Kutty" and "Mamakutty" reveal hundreds of stories and threads, nearly all of which—typically using highly derogatory language— attack Mahathir's background as a way to delegitimize him politically. A search for *mamak*, the Malay term for an Indian Muslim, likewise produces a near endless list of racially charged attacks against Mahathir by his political detractors.

UMNO has been significantly destabilized by the massive 1MDB financial scandal that first began to unravel in early 2015.[44] This saw Mahathir, who remains influential in Malaysian politics, turn against current PM Najib Razak. Mahathir announced his departure from UMNO in February 2016 after he proved unsuccessful in orchestrating Najib's removal from power. This has catalyzed a flood of attacks against Mahathir by UMNO loyalists, many of whom now frequently label him a "traitor to Malays" while describing him as a mamak and referencing his mixed heritage. Though a faction of PERKASA has remained loyal to Mahathir, a significant portion of the organization has likewise turned on him, using the same racially charged language.

This dynamic affects opposition politicians as well. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, the wife of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim and leader of the PKR party during stretches of his imprisonment, presents an insightful case. Azizah was raised Malay and continues to identify as Malay—including by wearing a *tudung* (local Muslim headscarf)—though her grandfather was a *peranakan* (Straits Chinese). At an UMNO meeting in 1999, then

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[43] Levin Woon, "Probe Mahathir's citizenship", In *Free Malaysia Today*, Feb. 2, 2013.
[44] William Case, "Stress testing leadership in Malayia: the 1MDB scandal and Najib Tun Razak", *The Pacific Review*, Online First 1-22, 2017.

Information Minister Mohamed Rahmat stated that her *"cap naga"* (dragon brand, i.e., Chinese) roots make her unfit to lead the Malays, as she is "without a Malay soul".[45] That this attack—as with many others like it—was ultimately politically motivated rather than stemming from a commitment to clearly delineating group boundaries is made clear by the fact that both Rahmat and his wife are thought to have Chinese heritage.

Clearer yet are the attacks levied against young Malay members of the opposition DAP party, which—while secular and nominally multiethnic—is seen by many as a predominantly ethnic Chinese party. Dyana Sofya and Syefura Othman, two such young female candidates, have consistently been confronted with taunts of being a *"pengkhianat bangsa"* (race traitor) by UMNO and supporting organizations.[46] This is especially the case for Dyana Sofya, whose decision not to wear the *tudung* headscarf attracts further attacks of her Muslim beliefs, again indirectly attacking the legitimacy of her Malay identity. It is noteworthy that these attacks are not just about the characters of the candidates, but specifically about failure to conform to a given ethnic ideal. Unsurprisingly, both candidates have become significant public figures for the DAP, which is keen to demonstrate that it is ethnically inclusive and able to attract support from progressive Malays.

Section 4.1 – experimental test

In each of these examples, political affiliation has a clear and discernable effect on the affirmation or denial of a political actor's ethnic identity: political allies typically endorse the (self-professed) ethnic identity of the political actor, while political adversaries leverage ethnic ambiguities to deny recognition of ethnic identity and thereby delegitimize or punish the actor. I use a survey experiment to assess how prevalent this phenomenon is at the mass level. The sample consists of respondents in the urban portion of Penang, a highly developed island on the west coast of peninsular Malaysia. The survey team followed a random walk strategy to produce a roughly representative sample, though ethnic Malay and Indian respondents were oversampled. The survey was

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[45] See: http://aliran.com/oldsite/ms990508.html
[46] See: http://thestar.com.my/news/nation/2014/09/23/going-gaga-over-rara/

conducted in 2013 and was available in Malay, Chinese, and English. Where possible, it was administered by co-ethnic enumerators.

The experiment functions as follows: Respondents are shown a vignette describing a male individual that self-identifies as Malay, but has a degree of ambiguity in his identity that is sufficient to contest the authenticity of his group membership. Two components of the individual's description are randomly varied: First, his degree of ethnic ambiguity is varied between being ¾ Malay and ½ Malay by parentage. Second, his political affiliation (government or opposition supporter) is randomly varied. Additional filler details are included to make the description more natural and to better integrate the treatments. The description is as follows:

> Hazlan Ismail is a 39 year old man from Johor. He grew up as a Malay, even though his **[grandmother/mother]** is Chinese and he can understand some Chinese. He lives in a mixed neighborhood in JB and he is raising his two children as Malays. He works as an accounts executive in an office and is a **[Barisan Nasional/Pakatan Rakyat]** supporter.
>
> Would you think of Hazlan Ismail as a Malay or as something else (mixed, Chinese, other, etc)?

In other words, roughly half of respondents see Hazlan Ismail described as having a Chinese grandmother, while for the other half he is described as having a Chinese mother. Conventional conceptualizations of ethnic identity, in which ethnic categorization is determined solely by ascriptive attributes, would predict that those respondents who see the *less* ambiguous description (¾ Malay by parentage) would categorize Hazlan Ismail as Malay more frequently than those that see the *more* ambiguous description (½ Malay). The same process occurs with political affiliation: roughly half of respondents see Hazlan Ismail described as a pro-government (Barisan Nasional) supporter, while for the other half he is described as a pro-opposition (Pakatan Rakyat) supporter. If political affiliation impacts ethnic categorization, respondents will be more likely to categorize Hazlan Ismail as Malay when he is a political ally (when he supports the same political party as the respondent) than when he

is a political adversary (when he supports a different political party than the respondent). Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of respondents in Malaysia (with 90% confidence intervals) that categorize Hazlan Ismail as Malay across the four iterations of the survey experiment.

Figure 1: Percentage who categorize target as Malay (in Malaysia)
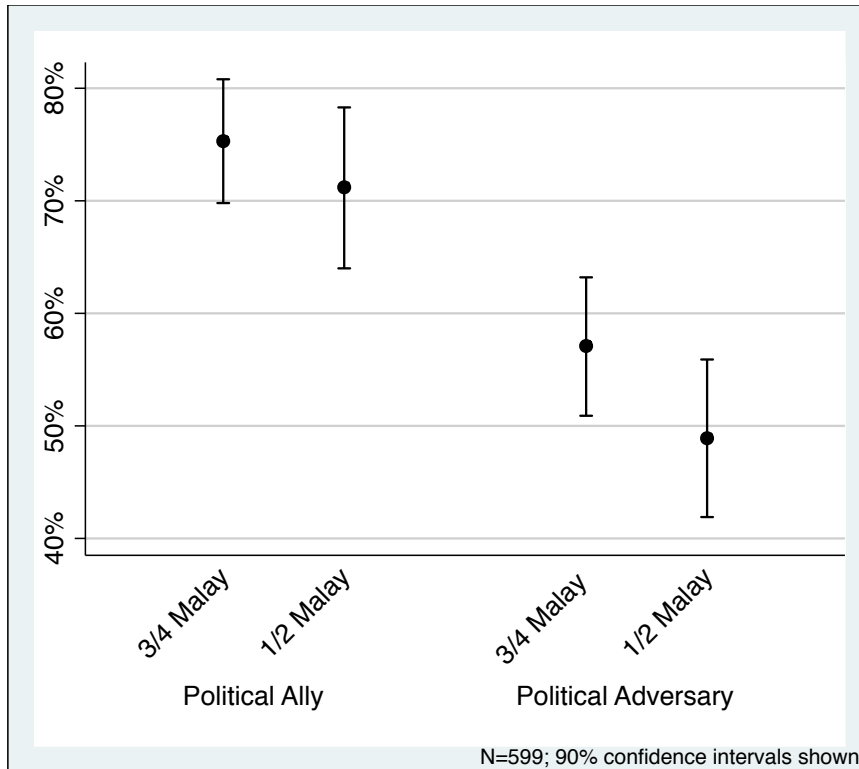
The responses make immediately apparent that Hazlan is categorized as Malay more frequently when he is presented as a political ally than when he is presented as a political adversary: across the two parentage iterations, over 70% of respondents call Hazlan Malay when he is a political ally, relative to roughly half of respondents when he is an adversary. While the less ambiguous Hazlan (¾ Malay by parentage) appears more likely to be categorized as Malay than the more ambiguous Hazlan (½ Malay by parentage), the difference is less pronounced. This lends support to the notion that political affiliation plays an active role in the process of ethnic categorization, at least when the target's ethnicity has significant ambiguity.

I conduct an additional series of tests to describe the findings in more precise terms. I code the dependent variable *Recognized as Malay* [is Hazlan Ismail a Malay?] '1' when the response is yes and '0' when the response is no. I code *Less Ambiguous* '1' when Hazlan is ¾ Malay and '0' when he is ½ Malay. I code *Political Ally* '1' when respondent and Hazlan share a political affiliation and '0' when they have opposing political affiliations. While the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable would generally call for a non-linear maximum likelihood estimation (MLE), I opt for the simpler ordinary least squares (OLS) approach in order to facilitate interpretation of interaction effects.[47] The findings are substantively identical. Model 1 in Table 1 below captures the findings of the experimental variables.

I also introduce a series of observational variables in model 2. *Age* is captured in five-year increments. *Education* is years of formal education. *Income* is total household income in seven increments. *Malay* and *Indian* are dummy variables, leaving Chinese and others as the reference category. *Barisan Nasional* (the ruling coalition) is a dummy variable for BN supporters, leaving opposition *Pakatan Rakyat* supporters as the reference category. All observational variables are self-reported.

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[47] See: Ai Chunrong and Edward Norton, "Interaction terms in logit and probit models", *Economics Letters*, 80 (2003), 123-129.

Table 1:
Probability of identifying target as Malay: Malaysia

Model number:	(1)	(2)
- Less Ambiguous (3/4 Malay)	**.062**	**.059**
	(.039)	**(.038)**
- Political Ally	**.199*****	**.183*****
	(.038)	**(.038)**
- Age (5 yrs)		-.001
		(.007)
- Education (yrs)		.016**
		(.008)
- Income		.007
		(.014)
- Malay		.069
		(.051)
- Indian		-.015
		(.057)
- *Barisan Nasional*		.223***
		(.046)
- Constant	.500	.206
	(.036)	(.119)
Percent classifying as Malay	63.6%	64.7%
Observations	599	583
R^2	.047	.108

OLS model, robust standard errors in parentheses
*$p < .1$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$

Model 1 illustrates the strong role of political affiliation in ethnic categorization: *Political Ally* is statistically significant and shows that respondents are roughly 20% more likely to consider Hazlan as Malay when he is a political ally relative to when he is a political adversary. While the coefficient for the degree of ambiguity—*Less Ambiguous*—is positive, it narrowly misses conventional levels of significance (p-value = .11). In other words, we see support for the proposition that political affiliation can affect whether a respondent affirms or denies the (self-identified) ethnic identity of another individual, at least in the case where there is substantial ambiguity in that individual's identity. Variation in that ambiguity, by contrast, has a far less substantial effect.

Model 2 introduces a series of observational covariates that capture variation in the overall propensity of respondents to view Hazlan as Malay *independent of the experimental*

treatments. These observational relationships yield several interesting insights. *Age*, *Income*, and the ethnic identity of respondents (when controlling for political affiliation) have no discernable effect. Relative to opposition PR supporters, however, pro-government *Barisan Nasional* supporters are 23% more likely to recognize Hazlan as Malay. This likely reflects the conviction among a contingency of PR supporters that rigid ethnic differentiation in the political sphere should be dismantled. In other words, the choice by some PR supporters to reject Hazlan's Malay self-identification may be driven by a principled rejection of ethnic categorization in general, rather than Hazlan's degree of ambiguity or political affiliation. In addition, *Education* attainment is statistically significant and has a positive coefficient: for every additional year of formal education, respondents are on average 1.6% more likely to recognize Hazlan as Malay. This amounts to a 16% difference when moving from primary education to university education, and appears to reflect greater levels of support for social choice and self-determination in ethnic identity with rising educational attainment.

While the observational covariates from *model 2* capture the independent effect of each variable on the probability that respondents categorize Hazlan as Malay, they do not capture potential variation in the strength of the *Political Ally* effect across the subgroups. I test for heterogeneous treatment effects through a series of interaction terms in *models 3 to 8* (see Table 3 in the appendix). I begin by interacting the two experimental treatments, *Less Ambiguous* and *Political Ally*. With a p-value of .61, the interaction term is not significant, indicating that the political ally effect occurs independent of the degree of ambiguity. Only the *Political Ally* and *Barisan Nasional* interaction approaches conventional levels of statistical significance with a .174 p-value and a negative coefficient. This suggests that while BN supporters are generally more likely to consider Hazlan as Malay, their decision may be marginally less conditional on the political affiliation of Hazlan *vis-à-vis* PR supporters. The tests for interaction effects suggest that the phenomenon of affiliation-driven ethnic categorization is widespread and not limited to a subgroup of respondents.

The survey experiment has both inherent strengths and weaknesses. The experimental nature of it facilitates making robust causal inferences about the independent effects of political affiliation and identity ambiguity. It also mitigates the social desirability bias that may affect more direct measurement approaches, whether qualitative or quantitative in nature. On the other hand, the design has two inherent weaknesses. The first is that it relies on very limited

information. More extensive information, including visuals or patterns of speech, would almost certainly produce different findings. Likewise, the effect likely reflects only a first impression, which may not survive sustained interactions.

The second potential concern is that the test addresses someone with a particularly high degree of ethnic ambiguity, and that a self-identifying Malay who has no obvious connection to a non-Malay identity might not be subject to the same scrutiny. The available data cannot provide any insights on these concerns. However, I contend that while a greater volume of information or a lesser degree of ethnic ambiguity could reduce the magnitude of the effects, the underlying phenomenon itself is likely to remain. Regarding the amount of information, for example, we see the phenomenon play out in attacks on political elites about whom a vast amount of information is available and "contact" extends over a long time period. And while a Malay political adversary with less obvious ethnic ambiguity might not be labeled a Chinese or Indian, they could be cast as an illegitimate Malay who has betrayed their brethren of "true" Malays.

The timing of the data collection, which was conducted in the months after Malaysia's 13th general election in mid-2013, may also impact the magnitude of the effects. Due to high levels of malapportionment, the incumbent *Barisan Nasional* coalition secured 60% of parliamentary seats despite losing the popular vote to the opposition *Pakatan Rakyat* coalition by 4%.[48] This contentious result, which followed a heated campaign period, amplified political and ethnic polarization in Malaysia. We might expect that this climate increased the tendency to delegitimize political adversaries by denying them their chosen identity, given findings like those by Posner, Eifert, and Miguel that the salience of ethnic identity increases with exposure to the intense political competition of elections.[49] Since examples of affiliation-driven ethnic categorization can be found outside of the election period, however, there is strong reason to assume that the phenomenon is not exclusive to electoral periods. Unfortunately, with only one wave of data available, it is not possible to estimate how significantly the election impacted the magnitude of affiliation-driven ethnic categorization.

Given these constraints, the survey experiment should not be seen as a precise measure of the magnitude of the affiliation-driven ethnic categorization in quotidian life. It is, however,

[48] Kai Ostwald, "How to Win a Lost Election: Malapportionment and Malaysia's 2013 General Election", *The Round Table*, 102 (2013), 521-532.
[49] Daniel Posner, Benn Eifert, and Ted Miguel, "Political Competition and Ethnic Identification in Africa." *American Journal of Political Science* 54 (2010), 494-510.

strong evidence that political affiliation *can* play a role in intersubjective ethnic categorization, and it strongly suggests the presence of reflexive tendencies to punish political adversaries through ethnic categorization.

Section Five: Singapore

In order to provide additional insights on the role of ambiguity and politicization in affiliation-driven classification, I repeated the survey experiment on a smaller scale in Singapore. Malaysia's southern neighbor makes a particularly compelling comparison, as Singapore has an ethnoculturally similar Malay group, but constrains the politicization of ethnicity. The former stems from the joint history of the two territories: Singapore was part of colonial British Malaya and briefly belonged to the Federation of Malaysia between 1963 and 1965.[50] In analyzing the long history of population exchange between Singapore and the Malay Peninsula prior to independence, Lily Zubaidah Rahim writes that Malays were "merely changing rooms and not changing houses".[51]

In ethnocultural terms, the Malay identity is highly similar, if not identical for all intents and purposes, in the two countries (Roff 1967). Yet while Singapore's state maintains the same colonial ethnic categories that Malaysia does, the two states differ in important ways. Singapore does not, for example, strongly differentiate public policies along ethnic lines, though it has tangential consequences for housing and education.[52] The Singaporean identity is based more strongly on a modern concept of citizenship, making it more civic in nature and leaving it without the explicit and state-sanctioned ethnocultural elements of Malaysia's national identity (Brown 2005). Political competition in Singapore is also not structured along ethnic lines to the extent of Malaysia's system. While strong social pressures regulate the Malay identity in Singapore, the legal codification of group boundaries is less rigid than in Malaysia, and there is no prohibition

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[50] Singapore, Penang, and Malacca comprised the Straits Settlements, which was an administratively distinct but otherwise integral part of British Malaya.
[51] *Orang Melayu hanya tukar bilik dan bukan tukar rumah...* See: Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore dilemma: The political and educational marginality of the Malay community*, (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996).
[52] Kai Ostwald, Elvin Ong, and Dimitar Gueorguiev, "Language politics, education, and ethnic integration: the pluralist dilemma in Singapore." *Groups, Politics, and Identities* (2017).

on renouncing Islam.[53] In conjunction, these factors lead the Malay identity to be less explicitly politicized in Singapore *vis-à-vis* Malaysia. Given this, we would expect a reduced tendency towards affiliation-driven ethnic categorization in Singapore.

The survey experiment in Singapore gives the same description of Hazlan Ismail, changing only his location to Singapore. Hazlan's degree of ambiguity (¾ Malay or ½ Malay) and political affiliation (pro-government or pro-opposition) are again randomized. Given that this test is only a supplement to the Malaysian test, the sample size is considerably smaller. The 142 respondents are a mixture of randomly selected adults (52) from three neighborhoods and university students (90). As before, I opt for a simple ordinary least squares analysis. **Table 2** below reports results.

Table 2:
Probability of identifying target as Malay: Singapore

- Less Ambiguous (3/4 Malay)	.137*
	(.069)
- Political Ally	.074
	(.069)
- Random	-.073
	(.075)
- Constant	.709
	(.076)
Percent classifying as Malay	78.2%
Observations	142
R^2	.036

OLS model, robust standard errors in parentheses
*$p < .1$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$

We must be cautious in interpreting these results, as we cannot exclude the possibility of bias arising from the largely non-representative sample. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that the categorization of Malays in Singapore may, as anticipated, be distinct from Malaysia. First, a higher percentage of respondents (78% in the full sample, 73% in random sample) categorize

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[53] Inclusion in Singapore's Malay community is intrinsically more voluntaristic. Legal recognition for inclusion in the category is based on the principle that any person—regardless of ethnic origin—can be considered Malay so long as they consider themselves Malay and are generally considered Malay by the Malay community. See especially: Seong Chee Tham, "Defining Malay." (National University of Singapore, Dept. of Malay Studies [Working Paper 6], 1993).

Hazlan as Malay, compared to only 63% in Malaysia, possibly reflecting the marginally more voluntaristic nature of the Malay identity in Singapore. Second, while it is a relatively weak effect and not statistically significant in the random sample, there appears to be more descent-driven categorization in Singapore: Hazlan is more likely to be recognized as Malay when he is ¾ Malay relative to ½ Malay by heritage. Importantly, there is little indication of affiliation-driven categorization, as is present in Malaysia. In other words, categorization of the Malay identity in Singapore appears to conform to the prevalent conceptions of ethnic identity, suggesting that politicization and boundary ambiguities are both necessary but not sufficient conditions for the emergence of affiliation-driven ethnic categorization.

Section Six: Conclusions

Intersubjective ethnic categorization has generally been treated as obvious and stable in the ethnic politics literature. This paper adds a complicating dimension by demonstrating that political affiliation can impact ethnic categorization in two distinct ways: individuals may deny recognition of a political adversary's ethnic identity in order to delegitimize or punish them (and their political movement), or they may affirm the ethnic identity of a political ally in order to support them and their political movement. This affiliation-driven ethnic categorization can occur when two necessary conditions are present: the first is that the boundaries of the ethnic identity itself must have sufficient ambiguity to contest the legitimate membership of individuals who self-identify with the group. The second is that ethnicity must be sufficiently politicized to create clear motivations for affirming or denying the ethnic identity of others. The Malay identity in Malaysia meets both of these conditions. The case studies and survey experiment provide clear evidence that political affiliation does play a role in intersubjective ethnic categorization.

These findings provide insights into how politicizing ethnic identity can increase the salience of ethnic cleavages. The politicized Malay identity in Malaysia leaves Malay political actors vulnerable to attacks on their identity, as the ambiguities in membership criteria leave their Malay credentials vulnerable to attack from political adversaries. Consequently, and under threat of being deemed traitorous or illegitimate, Malay political actors are frequently and disproportionality challenged to demonstrate that they are sufficiently pious, or loyal to their culture, or appreciative of the previous political efforts made on their behalf. The perpetual need

to fend off challenges of this type fosters an outbidding dynamic that can lead to a grossly exaggerated hyper-Malay version of the identity, as well as the rise of chauvinist "Malay rights" groups like Perkasa and ISMA.[54] These latter groups, whose stated purpose it is to defend the Malays against vaguely defined threats, have acted as provocateurs in the political system by making highly divisive statements about race and religion, frequently challenging the rights of non-Malays.

More generally, the notion that political affiliation—a non-descent-based attribute—is sometimes used in the process of intersubjective ethnic categorization has important implications for the general conceptualization of ethnic identity. It adds to evidence that ethnic categorization can, under certain conditions, be far from an automatic and simple matter of determining which ethnic category best aligns with a target's ethnic attributes. Rather, it demonstrates that *in practice* both emotional and strategic considerations factor in to whether an individual affirms or denies recognition of a target's (self-professed) ethnic identity, particularly in environments where ethnicity is highly politicized. In other words, while the foundation of ethnic identity is clearly descent-based, non-ascriptive attributes can enter the intersubjective ethnic categorization process. This complicates efforts to converge upon a narrow conceptualization of ethnic identity that clearly differentiates it from other identities, including political.[55] Given that the Malay identity is universally thought of as ethnic in Malaysia, and has been treated as such by a range of prominent scholars including Lijphart, Horowitz, and Hirschman, dismissing it as a political rather than ethnic identity will rob narrow conceptualization of their analytic value.

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[54] Perkasa is an NGO that was founded in the wake of the 2008 general election. It sees itself as dedicated to advancing the supremacy of the Malay race. ISMA was founded in 1997 and is ostensibly committed to unifying Malays and advancing Islam.
[55] Chandra 2006.

Appendix:

Table 3:
Interaction Effects: Probability of identifying target as Malay

Model number:	1	2	3	4	5	6
- Less Ambiguous (3/4 Malay)	.081	.058	.064	.052	.054	.071*
	(.056)	(.039)	(.038)	(.040)	(.038)	(.038)
- Political Ally	.222***	.116*	.217	.205**	.174***	.201***
	(.060)	(.067)	(.242)	(.073)	(.046)	(.046)
- Age (5 yrs)		-.013				
		(.009)				
- Education (yrs)			.014			
			(.009)			
- Income				-.005		
				(.018)		
- Malay					.116*	
					(.063)	
- Barisan Nasional						.291***
						(.061)
- Less Amb * Pol Ally	-.040					
	(.078)					
- Age * Pol Ally		.019				
		(.013)				
- Edu * Pol Ally			-.001			
			(.013)			
- Inc * Pol Ally				.000		
				(.025)		
- Malay * Pol Ally					.073	
					(.081)	
- BN * Pol Ally						-.107
						(.079)
- Constant	.489	.556	.320	.512	0.473	.435
	(.042)	(.054)	(.133)	(.057)	(.039)	(.038)
Observations	599	599	593	588	599	599
R^2	.048	.052	.054	.049	0.068	0.094

OLS model, robust std errors in parentheses
*$p < .1$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$