Recoding and Reassessing the Ethnicity of Elites –A Reply to Harff (2003)[1]

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[1]We are grateful that Barbara Harff made the dataset used in her article publically available, as this allowed us to conduct the analyses on which this response is based.

Harff (2003) analyzes the relationship between several risk factors and the incidence of genocide/political mass murder. One of the factors examined by Harff is a measure which assesses whether elites are ethnically polarized and (if so) whether the ruling elite is a minority or majority group. This note focuses on a narrow aspect of Harff's analysis – the coding choices made in constructing this *elite ethnicity* variable, and the conclusions that follow from those choices.

The *elite ethnicity* variable was coded as follows:

> "0 = elite ethnicity is not salient; 1 = elite ethnicity is salient – the political leadership is representative of the largest communal group or a coalition of several groups that together constitute a majority; and 2 = elite ethnicity is salient – the political leadership is representative of a minority communal group or a coalition of small groups that together constitute less than a majority." (Harff 2003, 64)

The resulting variable was then included as a linear term in the model reported in Table 2 of the paper.

The potentially tricky aspect of this variable is that it has three categories, but the order of the second and third categories is contestable. A theory that suggested ethnic minority regimes would commit fewer genocides (e.g. because the risks of majority-group retribution are greater) would suggest that the categories coded 1 and 2 should be reversed, with the most extreme category being ethnicity is salient, majority elite in control. On the other hand, a theory that suggested minority regimes would find it necessary to exercise more brutality because of the inherent instability of minority rule might imply more frequent genocide by minority regimes, and the coding used by Harff. Since theory might imply either relationship, recourse to data is an appropriate response.

The simple cross-tabulation analysis reported in Figure 1 of all country years with at least a minimal level of political conflict (sftpuhv3 >0) suggests that genocide is if anything more common among majority rule regimes. We confine our analysis to countries experiencing political conflict because Harff appears to do so as well. Harff does employ a much more complex case selection protocol, however, one that we have not (yet) attempted to reproduce.

Figure 1 indicates that the frequency of genocides among countries experiencing political conflict was 36.3 percent of the cases with salient ethnic majority rule, but only 27.5 percent of the cases with ethnic minority rule. A chi-square test reveals that this difference is statistically significant ($X2 = 6.47$, $p < 0.011$).

Figure 1. Crosstabulation Analysis

			Ethnic character of the ruling elites			
			not salient	salient majority rule	salient minority	Total
Geno/Politicides score(Problem Set)	0	Count	**539**	**341**	**206**	**1086**
		% within Ethnic character of the ruling elites	**83.3%**	**63.7%**	**72.5%**	**74.1%**
	1	Count	**108**	**194**	**78**	**380**
		% within Ethnic character of the ruling elites	**16.7%**	**36.3%**	**27.5%**	**25.9%**
	Total	Count	**647**	**535**	**284**	**1466**
		% within Ethnic character of the ruling elites	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

It therefore seems plausible that switching the values of this variable will improve the predictive accuracy of the model. We therefore recode, setting majority rule with elite ethnicity salient to the value of 2 and minority rule with elite ethnicity salient to the value of 1. This would be consistent with a theory that minorities are particularly vulnerable to genocide because their minority status makes them vulnerable. Salient examples of majorities conducting genocide against minorities would include the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide. Although we have not attempted to reproduce the multiple variable structural model examined by Hariff, a simple bivariate analysis using logit does suggest that the predictive accuracy is improved. As with the previous analysis, the focus is on countries with at least a minimal level of political conflict.

Table 1. Model Fit Statistics Using Two Variable Specifications

Variable	-2 Log likelihood	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square
Original Elite Ethnicity Measure	1652.68	.017	.025
Revised Elite Ethnicity Measure	1618.78	.039	.058

In Table 1 the Cox and Snell R Square and Nagelkerke R Square measures both indicate a substantial increase in predictive accuracy with the revised variable. Indeed, the revised variable performs more than twice as well.

Harff concludes her analysis of the elite ethnicity variable by asserting that "The risks of geno-/politicide were two and a half times more likely in countries where the political elite was based mainly or entirely on an ethnic minority " (2003, 66-67). Although it is possible that this conclusion is correct in the context of the more elaborate structural models estimated by Harff, the simple bivariate results we analyze suggest that the fit of Harff's models might well be improved if the elite ethnicity variable was recoded along the lines we propose. At minimum, any conclusion that ethnic minorities are more likely to engage in genocide should be qualified that the caveat that this conclusion is inconsistent with the bi-variate analysis.

Works Cited:

Harff, Barbara. 2003. "No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder since 1955." *American Political Science Review*. 97 (1): 57-73.