

Non-sectarian parties improve democracy and social stability, study says

January 16 2024



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Non-sectarian political parties help to make divided societies more stable and improve the quality of the democratic process, a new study says.

"Cross-segmental" politicians encourage moderation and cooperation between other more single-issue political parties.

This power to prevent polarization means the success of these [political parties](#) should be judged beyond just electoral success, according to the research. A better way to judge their achievements would be to measure how much their core electoral promises "seep" into the programs of other parties, into legislative activism on the parliamentary floor and into government policy-making.

The focus of non-sectarian parties on "bread and butter" social issues that affect people from different groups helps make power-sharing work and encourages other parties to also focus on these issues. This helps to represent the concerns of voters in divided societies.

Timofey Agarin from Queen's University Belfast and Henry Jarrett from the University of Exeter have [examined](#) recent political events in Northern Ireland, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Lebanon and South Tyrol, countries with ethnically-divided societies and political power-sharing systems in place. Their work is published in *Swiss Political Science Review*.

Dr. Jarrett said, "Cross-segmental parties often receive comparatively limited electoral support but they have the ability to make politics work. They can successfully represent the interests of different groups and encourage governments to focus on a wider range of [social issues](#) than their competitors. They have had an impact in electoral dynamics and legislation and help make representation work.

"They have a [positive influence](#) and helps to get things done when others can't agree. The opportunities for representatives running on cross-segmental party platforms and representing—rather than protecting—their electorate's interests should not be perceived as a

weakness of non-segmental parties in a polarized political climate. Votes received has little bearing on the relevance of cross-segmental parties for the voter. The message to the voter should be clear: A vote for cross-segmental parties is never a lost vote."

The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland became the third largest party in the regional Assembly following the election in 2022. The study says its success is reflected not only in electoral results but also in its impact on politics in Northern Ireland, playing the role of a facilitator for unionist and nationalist parties to work better together. The party has had an influence in issues including reproductive rights.

Dr. Agarín said, "Cross-segmental parties need not appeal to several communities nor to the whole community of citizens affected. They encourage segmental parties to engage with issues of democratic representation underpinning the political process and impacting all in a divided society.

"The commitment of cross-segmental parties to represent the individual preferences of voters, rather than pursuing the ethno-national claims of segmental parties, adds substance to political agendas concerned with the protection of segmental interests.

"The presence of cross-segmental parties on the ballot is an important gateway for interests that are not clearly attributable to one group or another to be mainstreamed and eventually gain salience in the political process."

More information: Timofey Agarín et al, Making Representative Politics Work: Cross-Segmental Parties in Consociations, *Swiss Political Science Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/spsr.12585](https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12585)

Provided by University of Exeter

Citation: Non-sectarian parties improve democracy and social stability, study says (2024, January 16) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-01-sectarian-parties-democracy-social-stability.html>

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