

Is Consociational Democracy Undemocratic?

Europe is the continent of old democracies, and at the end of the twentieth century, democracy is still the form of government which prevails¹. When one examines contemporary theories of democracy, one may note that although there is a shared belief in the basic idea of ‘government by people’, there is still a controversy on ‘who’ the people are and ‘how’ they rule². The answers to these questions have been different for different countries according to their size, societal cleavages, historical political cultures and key political actors; thus, a wide variety of democratic theories that have brought about unique political institutions has emerged. One basic idea, as famously put forward by Almond, in the first democratic viability theory was that separate subcultures and segmentation are conducive to unstable, ineffective and hence undemocratic government³. A counter-argument by Lijphart suggested that a democracy could work even under adverse conditions by having recourse to what he called ‘consociational democracy’. However, this original opposition between the two schools of thought has expanded, and a large literature has emerged against ‘consociational democracies’. Similarly, this essay will argue that consociational democracies are undemocratic. It will measure the degree of democratic responsiveness in regimes with plural societies on the basis of an understanding of democracy as “a set of rules and institutions which permit the broadest participation of the majority of citizens in the selection of representatives (political parties and leaders) who alone can make political decisions. Moreover, it includes elected government which is accountable and stable; free and fair elections in which every citizen’s vote has an equal weight; a suffrage which comprehends all

¹ Political Institutions in Europe, Josep M. Colomer, p. 1

² Representation, David Judge, p.3

³ Politics and Society in Western Europe, Lane + Ersson, p.155

citizens irrespective of distinctions of race, religion, class, sex and so on; freedom of conscience, information and expression on all public matters broadly defined; the right of all adults to oppose their government and stand for office; and associational autonomy- the right to form independent associations including social movements, interest groups and political parties⁴. First, the theory of consociational democracy and its key devices which include: grand coalition, mutual veto, proportionality and segmental autonomy⁵ will be introduced, and then an account of the weaknesses of the so-called ‘incipient school of consociational analysis’ will be given by referring to patterns of decision-making in the consociational democracies of Belgium, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

First, Lijphart’s theory comprised the following four devices: grand coalition, mutual veto, proportionality and segmental autonomy⁵. At the core of his theory is the necessary condition of elite accommodation institutionalized in “grand coalitions” that can produce stability and democratic decision-making. In contrast to the majoritarian model of democracy which concentrates executive power in one-party and bare-majority cabinets, in consociational democracies, grand coalitions let all of the major parties share executive power in a broad coalition⁶. This embraces the theory’s key idea that the leaders of the rival subcultures are expected to counteract the immobilizing and unstabilizing effects of cultural fragmentation through bargaining and negotiation among them⁷. And, subcultures can be better understood as “distinctive sets of attitudes, opinions, and values that persist for relatively long periods of time in the life of country and give individuals in a particular subculture a sense of identity that distinguishes them from individuals in other subcultures”. Moreover, the official regime in the consociational system must translate the compromises reached between sub-unit elites

⁴ Contemporary Political Philosophy , Robert E. Goodin, p. 82-83

⁵ Democracy in Plural Societies: Comparative Exploration, Arend Lijphart, p.25- 52

⁶ Democracy and its Critics, Robert A. Dahl, p 256.

⁷ Arend Lijphart, “Consociational Democracy”, *World Politics*, p.211.

into appropriate legislation and effective administrative procedure and enforce these rules without discriminating⁸.

Although consociational school has argued that the idea of grand coalition is democratic, for it gives all the major segments of a society the right to influence policy outcomes, the next part will present a strong case against this claim by referring to a number of democracies across Western Europe. First, Lijphart uses the seven-member national executive, Federal Council in Switzerland representing the three major parties; Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and Free Democrats as an example to a grand coalition. These parties together with the Swiss People's Party share the seven executive positions proportionately⁹. Furthermore, the linguistic groups are also represented in rough proportion to their sizes. However, the fact that these political leaders representing their parties in the Federal Council "may not always be those nominated by the parties" is against the 'rule by people' principle that is at the heart of democracy¹⁰. Thus, it is appropriate to ask if people are really free to choose who governs them and similarly, whether the electoral process in consociational democracy is just a formality that covers the elitist nature of the government?

Furthermore, in consociational democracies' parties do not function as a direct channel between the voters and the decision-making grand coalitions through accountability. In contrast to the majoritarian democracies, the voters can not reward or punish the political parties and their leaders in the subsequent elections according to how they perform in bringing about the policies they promised to deliver before the elections. The reason for this is because the decisions are taken collectively by bargaining and negotiations which change the original policies that are promised by particular parties. For example, in Switzerland, the fact

⁸ Stability in Deeply Divided Societies: Consociationalism versus Control, Lustick; p.331

⁹ Lijphart; Democracies, p24.

¹⁰ Brian Barry, review article, p.483

that parties may vote against the proposals put forward by the Federal Council makes this governmental body even less accountable to the voters as they can not punish or reward anyone with their votes. This is a clear example to how grand coalitions bring about undemocratic results, as accountability is a crucial part of the definition of democracy¹¹.

Moreover, consociational democracy is not democratic because while consociational settings undoubtedly further a consensus style of decision making, they rely too much on the behaviour of the elites and do not necessarily make actors to comply with the principles of democracy. Since most theorists of consociational democracy stress the voluntaristic character of a reasonable discourse by these political leaders, a constructive theory of the state needs to question why presumably rational actors, who “take actions not for their own sake, but only insofar as they secure desired typically private ends”¹², would take the trouble to engage in constructive negotiation and bargaining. Potential participants know that politics is about “who gets what, when, how” and that “different policy choices will have different distributive consequences, and they know that there is no preexisting rule that would neutralize unequal allocations of costs and benefits”¹³. In addition, the necessity to include the preferences of other actors and reach unanimous consent can also be achieved by bargaining techniques such as log-rolling, pork-barreling, or buying-off groups; furthermore, bargaining is a purely strategic, voting-centric mode of decision making which falls short from the communicative ideal of democracy.

Next, the emphasis that consociational theory places on deferential attitudes toward elites and the secretive nature of elite decision making seem to be at odds with normative democratic theory. Certain critics have even referred to consociational democracy as "consociational

¹¹ Brian Barry, review article, p.483

¹² S. Tormey, from Approaches to Political Studies Lecture on 21.02.2000

¹³ Economic integration, democracy and the welfare state, F. W Scharpf, p. 164, (photocopy, in the short loan section of the library)

oligarchy" or "elite conspiracy"¹⁴. Many of these critics dislike the lack of openness and lack of opposition in consociational democracies. This elitist character of the consociational democracies decrease the level of legitimacy of the decision process. Hence, Barry argues that although an 'amicable agreement' among the elite can be reached, these binding collective decisions may be taken on very small popular majorities. For example, in Switzerland, a constitutional amendment was promoted by Schwarzenbach to limit the number of foreigners in any given canton (except Geneva) to 10 percent of the population, and it was opposed by all the formal institutions of power. However, the proposal was carried when in a national referendum, only 46 per cent turnout (over 74 per cent of the electorate) voted yes on it. For example, party elites' decision to create a university in the Aargau canton in spite of a 48 per cent of the Swiss population in opposition is another clear example of undemocratic political decision-making¹⁵.

Moreover, according to Lijphart's consociational democracy theory, a minority veto must exist, allowing elites of each group to challenge decisions detrimental to their particular groups. Thus, this consociational device aims to protect minorities from a tyrannical majority by providing their representatives setting out a mechanism of checks and balances. In Belgium, the 1970 constitutional reforms introduced a minority veto on non-constitutional matters for the purpose of protecting the French-speaking minority against the Dutch-speaking majority. Also the bicameral legislatures both in Switzerland and Belgium aim to give special representation to the minorities by giving both houses equal power¹⁶

Yet, very often this principle is exploited by the minorities and causes deadlocks in governments; thus, the level of effectiveness, which is one of the fundamental principles of democracy, decreases. As Sartori says, "to admit the minority veto as a major and normal

¹⁴ Comparative Constitutional Engineering, Sartori.

¹⁵ Brian Barry, review article, p.483

¹⁶ Democracies, Lijphart, p.25.

means of limiting power is to admit a shuddering principle”, and he adds that minority veto power increases the divisions and divisiveness¹⁷.

The third aspect of Lijphart’s consociational democracy theory is the principle of proportionality which aims to provide a fair distribution of power. Furthermore, it provides for the equal representation and participation of all segmental groups. In plural societies, which are divided along many cleavages, Proportional Representation system guarantees representation to minorities too and give them an opportunity to shape policies at both the national and segmental level. More specifically, this principle suggests that proportionality must be the standard principle of political representation, civil service appointments, and the allocation of public funds¹⁸.

Although this may be regarded as democratic, there are problems related to it because as Sartori says, the extreme form of PR recommended by Lijphart, which includes proporz, quota-type allocations and duplications across the civil service and in public funding heightens divisiveness. And a further sign of this is seen in the fragmentation of the party system. Both Swiss and Belgium party systems are further evidence to this fragmented nature of the political market. Sartori sums up this situation by saying that dispersal of power across several minority parties adds profusion and confusion to the political system, and the result is ineffective and unstable government which runs counter to the fundamental principles of democracy¹⁹. Moreover, although elections may be democratic and based on proportional representation at the national level, it is not the case in most cases at the subculture level regarding the election of the leaders. Therefore, it is open to debate to what extent those party elites represent their groups.

¹⁷ Comparative Constitutional Engineering, Sartori, p.72

¹⁸ Politics and Society in Western Europe, Lane + Ersson, p157

¹⁹ Comparative Constitutional Engineering, Sartori, p.71

The fourth characteristic of consociational democracies is that each segmental group must be allowed to run its own internal affairs reflecting power dispersal to various levels of government. Although Lijphart's consociational theory of democracy does not require federalism, it is seen as a promising method for implementing consociationalism as suggested by the Swiss example. In Belgium, too, Lijphart suggests, non-territorial federalism arrangement transformed it from a unitary state into a "communal state"²⁰. Although Tocqueville famously defended this as highly democratic, it is ambiguous when one looks at the issue of overrepresentation of minorities in the context of Swiss federation where two representatives are elected to the Council of States regardless of the size of their cantons. As a result of this, minorities have a greater say in the government which violates the equal representation of people principle. Moreover, The Dutch state which allocates considerable authority on the basis of functions, has seen a decline in consociationalism over the last decade²¹. And depillarization has decreased the level of representation of the different subcultures, causing it to be less democratic.

Furthermore, over the last decades, already few in number, consociational democracies have either withered away or become weaker with the general trend of disillusionment with politics and secularization." Therefore, consociational democracy runs counter to Held's description of a successful theory of democracy which must offer "an account both of the changing meaning of democracy within the global order and of the impact of the global order on the development of democratic associations"²² And some of the former consociational democracies have turned away to more majoritarian solutions which did not result in inter subcultural conflicts as predicted by the consociationalists. For example, Andeweg explains this case in Netherlands by saying that this weakening in consociationalism

²⁰ Consociation and Federation, Arend Lijphart, p. 514

²¹ Politics and Society in Western Europe, Lane + Ersson, p. 185

²² Democracy: From City-states to a Cosmopolitan Order? ,' D. Held, in R. E. Goodin and P. Pettit (eds.) *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, p.79

“deprived the parties of members and loyal supporters, but it also freed the parties from subcultural obligation, and made them into independent political actors at last. Because the parties are weak, they have not evoked the kind of anti-party sentiment and political cynicism that we see elsewhere, at least not to the same degree. The parties’ weaknesses also allowed relatively easy access to new competitors, that were assimilated before they could become a threat to the politics of accommodation”²³

A number of social scientists; moreover, assert that consociational devices increase friction in plural societies, because many socioeconomic problems are ignored to avoid intersectorian conflicts. The depoliticization of serious problems renders the decision-making apparatus virtually immobile--an important problem that even Lijphart addresses. When serious policy problems are ignored and therefore unresolved by the bureaucratic machinery, citizens desiring changes or reforms become increasingly frustrated, resulting in protests and in some cases violence. Representing a parallel line of criticism, political scientists have emphasized that power-sharing devices have not consistently yielded peace and stable democracy, and that the connection between consociational democracy and stability has not been sufficiently demonstrated. All one has to do is glance at the list of consociational failures (Lebanon, Cyprus, Nigeria) to see that consociational devices cannot always prevent intercommunal conflict, especially in the developing world.

Consequently, this essay has argued that the theory of consociational democracy has not been successful in bringing about a democratic system of government. The evidence from across Western Europe has shown that consociational democracies are characterized by a lack of legitimacy in the policy-making process, low level of stability, low level of

²³ Parties, pillars and the politics of accommodation, Andeweg, p 109.

representativeness, and therefore; on the basis of the definition presented in the introduction part they should not be considered democratic. And the fact that recently, there has been a clear decrease in the number of consociational democracies around the world further points to the inappropriateness of the theory for the twenty first century politics.