Minorities In Consociational Power-Sharing

Abstract

Consociational power-sharing requires representation of politically relevant groups' in halls of government to stop violence and place checks on the rule by a single group. But regardless of the admirable aspiration for inclusive government and politics, who is to be represented and whose participation counts is based exclusively on all-around identities (such as ethnicity, denomination), leaving the interests of non-dominant groups' open for co-optation into ethnic blocs of those guaranteed the right to veto political dynamics. Mandated cooperation between elites of only selected groups challenges equitable representation of all segments of the electorate in equal measure to undermining consociations' ability to respond to concerns of the general public. More often than not, non-dominant, minority groups in consociations are accommodated only pro forma as the elites of dominant groups are expected to cooperate regardless of the input from elites of minorities, who at will can be co-opted by the dominant groups to attain their own particular ends. The representation of the interests of members of the non-dominant, minority, and 'other' groups thus follows from, rather than accompanies, the consolidation of dominant groups' political identities in the otherwise shared power-sharing polity.

Introduction

At the end of violent civic conflicts, the establishment of political order liberal enough to allow accommodation of groups formerly involved in conflict is paramount for endurance of peace and for successful democratic transition. Yet, postconflict transitions, first and foremost, aim to ensure peace, and only secondarily, to sketch political futures for the postconflict society. And as such, at the end of conflict reforms are essential to establish institutions that encourage some to lay down arms and others, to accept former rebels as partners in government. But distributing the 'peace dividend' across the entire society encompasses distinct trade-offs: Reshaping political institutions allows for a rare opportunity to revisit the constitution of political societies tackling the question of who are 'the people', who is encouraged to participate in governing 'the people', and what these 'people' – as a whole and individually – are to expect from the postconflict polity. Unsurprisingly, groups not centrally involved in conflicts – micro-minorities, 'others', or non-dominant communities (Agarin, McCulloch, and Murtagh 2018; Wise 2018; Potter 2018) – are granted scant attention in the circumstances when overall peace is at stake. But the opportunities afforded to them to engage with and input political process shed some considerable light on challenges of institutional designs for diverse societies.

Constituent Groups in Consociations

Among other options, consociational power sharing has often been a go-to institutional mechanism to usher in peace after violence and lock formerly conflicting parties into the offices of government, preventing relapse of conflict and creating 'democratic stability where previously all hope for it was absent' (Taylor 2009, 4). Over the past three decades, consociations have often been portrayed as the effective mechanism for peace and democracy building in deeply divided places, emerging from the violent conflict (Noel 2005; McGarry and O'Leary 2009). With considerable variation in the scope of conflicts thus mitigated, consociations are equally a diverse bunch. Arend Lijphart originally coined the concept for analysis of politics and elites' behaviour in societies that evolved consociational modes of power-sharing over time (Lijphart 1977). On the other hand, the contemporary discussion builds upon John McGarry's and Brendan O'Leary's (O'Leary 2005; McGarry 2017; McCulloch 2014b) view of consociations as tools for political practice, bringing peace to societies affected by violent conflict . In all cases, however, in theory and in practice, consociations are uniquely focussed on the accommodation of groups involved in conflict, and not of all citizens.

As a result, consociational institutions merit attention to the non-dominant groups for pragmatic, less so for principled reasons. Here, accommodation of groups emerging out of conflict takes the views of these groups' representatives as a starting point for negotiation of peace and the end of violence. In the process, the notions about what is important for peace are not solicited form all citizens affected by the conflict, but only from those actively involved in, or threatening recourse to violence (McCulloch 2012). Naturally, agreement to lay down arms needs to – at least notionally – mean that these groups' grievances underpinning violence have been addressed, and hence all conflicting parties can ultimately portray themselves as winners (Hartzell and Hoddie 2003). Non-dominant groups would find it immeasurably harder to frame the end of violence as 'their' achievement.

The commitment to accommodate conflicting groups in government implicitly makes all other groups less politically relevant (Stojanović 2017; McCulloch 2020). This lack of guaranteed group-based representation can be seen as consociations' failure to see non-dominant *groups* as actors in their own right in the context of political institutions (Agarin and McCulloch 2020). Accepting that not all socially relevant identities are politically salient represents a particular challenge for open and accountable government focussing on identities rather than on interests and issues of public concern (Wisthaler 2016).

At the same time, opportunities for controlling the process of agenda setting by those included in consociations and marginalising the input, i.e. effective participation, of non-dominant communities in decision making, does not mean that the individual *members* of non-dominant groups do not equally benefit from peace (Agarin 2020). Alongside all other citizens,

they too collect the 'peace dividend' from the institutional engineering for and by the groups in conflict, and are as free as other fellow citizens to pursue their interests under conditions of peace rather than under threat of violence (Bogaards 1998). Indeed, consociations deal with the select *identities* rather than with *issues* as foundational principle of 'normal' politics, but this allows non-dominant groups a wider margin of discretion in social undertakings, though notably shorter leg-up in political ones.

If anything, in reasoning that guaranteed representation is allocated to only the selected group is pragmatic in the context of societies that showcase entrenched divisions along identity lines (Garry, Matthews, and Wheatley 2017). Furthermore, as long as representation of all interest and issues is impossible, and possibly even undesired, accommodation of those that can thwart democratic political process is second to none. In short, transition from conflict to peace is a de facto negotiated transfer of power from a single plurality to several groups, including at least one of those which perceived earlier arrangement as an oppression by an ethnic hegemon (McCulloch 2014a, 502). This is not an insignificant caveat of consociational politics, given the warning that majority rule risks turning into majority dictatorship (Lijphart 2012). Group identities, however, are all-encompassing and tend to shape individual perspectives on a range of social, cultural and political issues. Once the political groupings coalescing around identities and not interests, are accepted as the main constituencies of political representatives, they invite the zero-sum politicking, particularly between ethnic groups with history of violent competition (Sisk 2008).

Representation and Participation in Consociations

In a trade-off, consociations facilitate individual access to political participation for all, including all those affected by the decision making process about the staffing of political offices. To enable citizens to govern democratically and to decrease insecurity perceptions in communities previously at logger heads with one another, liberal democratic guarantees of individual equality form a centre piece of consociational peace building. Inevitably, even as the democratic political process emphasizes the value of pluralism. Yet, the individuals belonging to groups and field numbers sufficient to challenge their (under-)representation can expect to be either neglected or marginalised in postconflict societies managed by consociational institutions that put premium on group based representations. For these non-dominant groups, participation and representation in democratic politics will remain a token of recognition of their *rights as citizens*, being policy-takers, rather than policy-makers in democracies for and of the groups forming a veto-holding majority. Only members of the groups whose identities are deemed politically relevant retain a reserved place in democratic representation, and only their members can be certain that their group-related interests will be protected (Lemarchand 2006; Hooghe and Deschouwer 2011).

The overriding commitment to democracy, however, is rarely more than a concession to majoritarian decision-making in government that takes on board some and values selective individual participation to enhance democratic representation of all (Lustick 1979; Aboultaif 2019). In the same fashion, consociations extend citizenship to all and guarantee all individuals, regardless of their primary *social* identities, benefits of political participation. Consociations thus operate following 'the liberal democratic principle' guaranteeing equal rights and treatment. However, by privileging the designated (ethnic) identity groups to look after their own, reaching out to members of other groups only occurs at will. The order of representation of individuals in societies emerging from the identity-based conflicts, therefore, only further props-up the majoritarian decision making: As the polity is fashioned out of multiple nationally conceived societies, these can jointly dominate as a democratic super-majority and are endowed with rights to protect their own group interest via community veto mechanisms (McCulloch 2017; Raffoul 2018).

Consociational institutions therefore pay hue to individualism of liberal democracies, following the 'one person one vote', but operationalise representation mainly as corporate regimes that serve democracy to designated communities in the majority of society. In following the ethnic principle consociations can duly resemble ethnic democracies that make participation of all

important in principle, but, are in practice decisive only for the members of pre-defined groups. Consociations encourage citizens to see one another as members of citizenry despite the earlier, oftentimes violent division alongside the existing ethnic cleavage (Lijphart, 1977, 223). Yet, the difference in the status and in representation of dominant and non-dominant groups in postconflict politics point to the narrow horizon of those identified beneficiaries from liberal democratic norms after violence.

The Paradox of Minority Participation

Hence, lies the paradox of minorities' democratic participation in divided societies: Dynamics of political decision-making presume the existence of opinion diversity on the ground, part of which becomes irrelevant at the stage of political representation and particularly in the collective decision-making. Yet 'if democracy is conceived of as a continuum and in light of the diverse forms democratization takes' (Smooha 1990) then so should be the rights for representation of those who do not form a majority. Consociations, for better or worse, present a clear alternative to the tyranny of the single numerical majority for some, but not for all citizens of postconflict societies. They do so, however, by establishing a new narrative of political community made of several ethnic groups, communities or societies to ensure everyone participates in and (can) be represented in political decision making. But the groups who do not form the majority are only served peace, not democracy. At the heart of this sits the view that sovereign polities cannot cater equally to all their constituencies, hence they ought to serve best the largest possible of their numbers. The view that these constituents are territorially defined as populations residing in distinct geographic areas, allows political leaders and institutions to engage with and to deliver fair governance to 'their' people. It is widely acknowledged that states serve their people best not via the direct participation in democratic process, but via representatives, elected by their constituents. And as long as consociations recognise that some individuals should enjoy wider autonomy as part of the group allocated rights of guaranteed representation in government, while others do not, puts particularly the non-dominant groups at a considerable disadvantage in enjoying the 'democratic dividend' of peace.

Consociational democracies are therefore severely 'group biased': They bring about stability by elevating representatives of groups with the numerical strength to destabilise (nominally democratic) politics into positions of power and ensure their elected representatives' participation in decision-making affecting all. But this focus on the inclusion of representatives of the formerly conflicting groups that mars conceptual view of consociations' ability to successfully move from peace to democracy: The double exclusion of numerically smaller, politically less mobilised, and societally less vocal groups – non-dominant groups in consociations – not only makes their representation in consociations fall behind that of the groups in the majority; individuals of these groups appear less relevant as actors *on their own right* in the peace and democracy building consociations seek to kick-start.

In practice, where issues and interests of non-dominant groups overlap with concerns of dominant groups, there is plenty of space for all to engage in issue-based consociational politics (Larin and Röggla 2019; Murtagh 2015). Yet this happens, only once the relevance of conflict identities withers away and, as is widely observed today, identity politics yields space to an inclusive perception of interest based representation across the political community. Additionally, non-dominant groups can and do play a significant role in civil society and in private (Kennedy, Pierson, and Thomson 2016; Nagle and Fakhoury 2018).

As is abundantly clear, in deeply divided societies, representation is far more than just a token of recognition of individual membership in the democratic political community as citizens: Representation of dominant groups' identities in consociations offers *individuals* as well as *groups* an opportunity to impact political outcomes. The same opportunities are not available for the members of non-dominant groups; as such their underrepresentation remains a valuable avenue for challenging the very rationale of political participation in consociations and invites institutional reform for greater accommodation of issues and interests, rather than identities.

Conclusion

Scholars concerned with institutional reforms initiated as a response to previous (under-) representation and conflict underline the success of conflicting groups' accommodation that ensures stability of the polity as a whole and peaceful coexistence between formerly conflicting groups. Indeed, consociations are widely accepted as go-to institutional solutions for divided societies in general and particularly those emerging from ethnicity based conflicts because of consociations' inclusive nature of executive decision-making, as well as its legislative guarantees for the main societal groups. In the words of one of its prominent advocates, consociationalism 'is the only sort of democracy that can win general acceptance in deeply divided societies' (McGarry 2002, 297); yet it is democracy for the majorities, and not for all citizens of postconflict societies. These are encouraged to participate and elect their representatives regardless of their individual identities, that are no doubt as salient as those of the majorities, but are rendered negligible during representation.

Consociations benefit most the citizens who are members of groups acknowledged explicitly in re-balancing of political institutions; re-balancing politicking from identities to issues would contribute to the evolution of a shared vision of societal diversity and bring further benefits of democracy more accountable to all. This would showcase whether as Sid Noel claims, power-sharing mechanisms are 'intended to serve the dual purpose of promoting post-conflict peace building and serving as a foundation for the future growth of democratic institutions' (Noel 2005, 1).

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